

Best Practices for Local Land Conservation Efforts

Falmouth, Maine

Over the last several decades, Falmouth residents and town officials have successfully conserved roughly 15% of its land area to date. Some of the following lessons learned from Falmouth's efforts seem applicable to any community interested in land conservation.

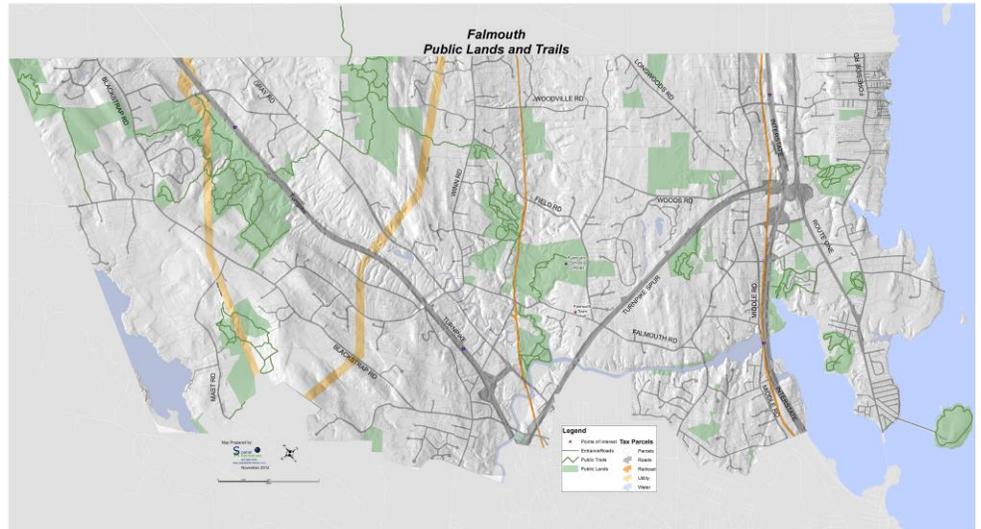
Take a Proactive Approach

Without specific strategies in place, conservation efforts will likely be reactive and fragmentary. In these instances, land acquisitions occur in response to development proposals and do not fit into a cohesive, community vision. Recognizing this tendency, the Falmouth Town Council approved its first open space plan in 1990.

Develop a Long-Term, Community-Supported Vision

Much of the conservation successes in Falmouth can be attributed to the town's forward-thinking open space plans, as well as the ability of community leaders to implement them. While the original 1990 Plan helped spearhead initial efforts, its focus centered on identifying natural and cultural resources that existed within the community. As part of the Plan, the town conducted its first extensive inventory of conserved lands. Many were surprised to discover a number of undeveloped parcels were already owned by the town. In this respect, the 1990 Plan helped community leaders establish a baseline of understanding from which to build future efforts.

In the more recent 2006 open space plan, [The Greening of Falmouth](#), the



Current conservation lands in Falmouth (2014, Courtesy of Falmouth Land Trust)

focus shifted to finding ways to unify the town around common conservation goals and practices. Since the Town Council adopted the Plan, it is now the blueprint for all town conservation efforts. Bob Shafto, Falmouth's Open Space Ombudsman, and Lucky D'Ascanio, Parks & Community Programs Director, attribute the success of the plan to a number of factors:

- **Diverse Stakeholder Group:** The report was prepared by a diverse group of people, including several Conservation Commission members, a local developer, large landowners, and a Falmouth Land Trust representative.
- **Long-Term Time Horizon:** To create a shared vision, the group framed the discussion around the question, "What would you like Falmouth to look like 100 years from now?" According to Shafto, "this forced group members to look ahead, beyond their own time,

and made the future easier to talk about."

- **Open Public Process:** The town informed residents on every aspect of the planning process. A draft version of the Plan was printed and distributed to every household in the community (with extra copies placed in all public buildings), and a large community forum was held to explain the Plan and get feedback from residents.
- **No Maps:** *The Greening of Falmouth* purposely did not include maps. As the group learned from previous efforts, maps can often stir up contention and distract people from the larger issues and priorities.

Create a Framework to Implement the Vision

Over and above adopting the plan, the Town Council voted to establish an open space plan implementation sub-committee, and authorized a town-funded Open Space

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Ombudsman contracted position (Bob Shafto) to give staff support to the committee. Shafto has played a key role in helping conservation efforts maintain their momentum and capacity. Furthermore, since he is not “official” town staff – merely an advocate for open space – he has been able to have conversations with landowners in a more neutral and informal way.

The Greening of Falmouth identified two key acquisition priorities:

1. Areas in which 250 acres or more of unfragmented habitat could be protected; and
2. Areas that contributed to the rural character of the town, usually roadside fields, orchards, and stone walls.

Focusing on these priorities, the committee identified eight areas in Falmouth that potentially met the 250-acre size goal. The group then sought out interested landowners and began working to build its capacity to acquire key parcels – activities included an informational forum to landowners, a voter approved \$5 million local appropriation over 10 years, and numerous grant awards.

The group developed a set of criteria to rate properties as they became available. These criteria helped town officials prioritize potential land acquisitions in a fair and deliberate way. The lack of such criteria in the past contributed to the reactive and fragmentary nature of many previous acquisitions.

Coordinate Similar Efforts

Falmouth is fortunate to have an active conservation community. Numerous town-appointed and non-profit groups are involved in land conservation efforts in various capacities. As such, an important goal of *The Greening of Falmouth* was to figure out how to coordinate these groups around a common vision.

To this end, the town established a formal Land Management and Acquisition Committee (LMAC) in 2013, composed of representatives of all major stakeholder groups, including a Town Council liaison, the Parks & Community Programs Director, the Falmouth Land Trust, the Conservation Commission, the Falmouth Conservation Corps, interested citizens, and the Ombudsman. The group has been instrumental in building consensus, coordinating efforts among like-minded groups, and managing Falmouth’s open spaces.

Engage the Community

Much of the town’s successes also stem from the ability of its conservation groups to effectively engage community members. Some key lessons for doing this include:

- **Awareness and Accessibility:** The town has made a concerted effort to promote recreational areas with maps, a website presence, special events, and volunteer activities. Here the maxim ‘*nothing succeeds like success*’ rings particularly true. As more land is conserved and made available to the public,

residents begin to appreciate the value of these areas and are more willing to support future conservation efforts.

- **Volunteers:** The town has built an extensive and reliable network of volunteers and advocates. The Falmouth Conservation Corps, a group of volunteers that build trails, fight invasive species, and management wildlife habitat, has a strong following and plays a large role in managing the town’s conserved lands.

Identify the Town’s Role

At the heart of any local land protection effort is the question, “What is the role of the municipality in preserving land?” While a number of policy tools are available (i.e., zoning, tax incentive programs, transfer of development rights, etc.), the most effective technique – at least in Falmouth’s case – has proven to be the town identifying and purchasing conservation lands, and coordinating with the Falmouth Land Trust and volunteer groups to manage them. Falmouth has had great success doing this and has attracted over \$2.3 million in outside financial support to date.

However, for this model to be effective, residents need to be able to trust local officials, understand and share their community’s conservation vision, and have the opportunity to access, enjoy – and in some cases improve – conserved lands within their community.