

Catamount Community Forest Frequently Asked Questions

Compiled by Kate Wanner and Melinda Scott
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Introduction: In March of 2019 the Town of Williston acquired 393 acres - 376 acres from Jim and Lucy McCullough, with an additional 17 acres donated by Steve and Debbie Page - as the Catamount Community Forest.

Where is this property?

The Catamount Community Forest is located on Governor Chittenden Rd roughly ½ mile from the intersection with North Williston Rd and Mountain View Rd. It consists of two parcels: 92 acres south of Governor Chittenden Road and 301 acres north of Governor Chittenden Road. These parcels include an extensive trail system built and maintained by the former landowners Jim and Lucy McCullough and the Catamount Outdoor Family Center (COFC) over the last 40 years.

What is the Catamount Outdoor Family Center?

The Catamount Outdoor Family Center (COFC) is a 501(c) (3) non-profit organization dedicated to promoting family and community well-being through activity and education in a natural environment. The Center began as a cross-country ski center in 1978 as a way to utilize the unique 500-acre property. Since that time Catamount has grown to include summer season activities such as mountain biking, hiking, trail running and winter season activities of snowshoeing, fat biking and sledding. Catamount also produces numerous events, weekly races, outdoor education programs and an extensive summer camp program that currently serves over 400 campers each summer. Since 2005, Catamount has been operating as a 501(c) (3) non-profit and strives to offer opportunities for all ages and abilities. COFC continues to manage and maintain the trail network and provide high-quality programming.

How does the Catamount Community Forest benefit the town?

168 Vermont towns have town forests, some in existence for more than 100 years. Together, Vermont's town forests account for approximately 68,000 acres of public land. These areas are recreational, educational, open space, water source protection, and timber management assets for their communities, as well as habitat for fish and wildlife.

➤ ***Recreational Opportunities***

Catamount not only offers close-to-home recreation for thousands of people, but also a place to engage with their community, and connect with nature. The trail system at Catamount has been well-loved for nearly 40 years. The 20 miles of trails throughout the Catamount network connect people to the landscape, local history, and each other by providing a place for year-round recreation. Now that the property is a publicly owned town forest, pedestrian access (walking, running, snowshoeing and sledding) is free for everyone. Mountain biking and cross-country skiing are available through paid memberships or day use fees. Trails range from short, scenic hiking paths to technical mountain biking routes. In winter, up to 15 miles of groomed trails are open for cross-country skiing, snowshoeing and fatbiking. The Catamount Outdoor Family Center hosts popular summer children's camps, clinics, races and outdoor environmental education opportunities. The trail network also connects to the Cross Vermont Trail, and trails on the adjacent Talcott Forest owned by University of Vermont.

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➤ *Economic Development*

Recreation and tourism are recognized statewide as the fastest growing and cleanest forms of economic development. Outdoor recreation is an important industry in Vermont, annually generating \$5.5 billion in retail sales and services (accounting for 18% of gross state product), supporting 51,000 jobs, and creating \$505 million in state tax revenue.¹ Protection of the trail system located on this property, especially within ten minutes of the largest city in the State, supports this recreation and tourism economy. In addition to local users, CCF draws 7,400 visitors (or 37 percent) from outside Chittenden County. These visitors support the local economy by spending money locally on items like gas, groceries, food in restaurants, and lodging. This visitor spending cycles through the economy as vendors purchase supplies and employees spend their paychecks. Before CCF became a community forest, a study found that the average visitor to COFC spends \$70 per visit, which results in \$518,000 in direct spending each year, or \$875,000 in total sales, which generates \$70,600 in sales and income tax for the state and supports 14 jobs in Chittenden County, not including the five full-time positions created directly by the outdoor center.²

➤ *Timber Revenue*

Forest management is occurring on the property under the Town's ownership, which supports local resource-based jobs and provides periodic timber revenues to the Town. The Town worked with the Chittenden County Forester to create a forest management plan that achieves an appropriate balance between recreation, wildlife habitat, water quality protection and timber harvesting.

➤ *Health Benefits*

Protection of the property contributes to the health of local and regional residents by providing a close-to-home destination for outdoor recreation. This acquisition nearly doubles the amount of publicly owned forestland in Williston. As the largest trail network in town, the proposed Catamount Community Forest is essential to the long-term health of its residents. The property's trail network provides unique health-related values to the people of northern Vermont and visitors from all over New England, including opportunities for all ages and abilities. The trail network includes 2.5 miles open to wheelchairs in the summer and sit-skiing in the winter, offering opportunities to all abilities.

Having public land close to population centers is important to the physical and mental health of the community. Having protected areas within walking or biking distance reduces car travel, air pollution, greenhouse gas emissions and the accidents and stress that are by-products of driving.

How is the property managed?

The Town of Williston acquired the property subject to a conservation easement co-held by the Vermont Land Trust (VLT) and Vermont Housing and Conservation Board (VHCB). This easement ensures that the property will never be developed, and that wildlife habitat, public access, and water quality are forever protected. Sustainable timber harvesting is allowed under a management plan

¹ Source: Outdoor Industry Association. 2017. The Active Outdoor Recreation Economy: Vermont.

² Walsh, Kyle, M.P.S. Candidate. "An Economic Impact Analysis of the Proposed Catamount Community Forest in Williston, Vermont, SUNY-School of Environmental Science & Forestry, 2017.

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reviewed and approved by the State, which will improve forest health and wildlife habitat and be a source of income for the town.

The Selectboard has the ultimate authority over the property and management decisions. A Management Plan was developed by a Committee through a public process and adopted by the Selectboard in September 2018. The Plan guides the property's management over the next ten years. The Catamount Community Forest is managed for multiple uses, including recreation, sustainable timber harvesting, watershed protection, education, and wildlife habitat. The property is open to free public access for hiking, birdwatching, snowshoeing and educational activities. The non-profit Catamount Outdoor Family Center maintains the trail system, manages visitation and trail usage, and operates programming, all under a license agreement with the town.

Can the town log the property?

Yes. Under the guidance of a State-approved forest management plan, periodic timber harvests provide the town with income, which is rolled back into a stewardship fund to pay for improvements on the property. Other towns that have acquired productive timberland find that the revenue from periodic harvests can be used to fund special projects after any debts have been satisfied. The terms of the conservation easement require the town to work with a professional forester to develop a 10-year forest management plan that ensures that forestry is done sustainably.

How much did this property cost and where did the funding come from?

The purchase price of \$1.6 million plus an additional \$320,000 in costs associated with the project (title, survey, appraisals, timber inventory, environmental investigation, legal costs, other closing costs and a stewardship fund) brought the total acquisition cost to \$1.92 million. The town contributed \$400,000 from the Environmental Reserve Fund towards the acquisition and the remaining \$1,520,000 was funded with a combination of federal, state, and private grants. The town's financial contribution represents roughly 21% of the total cost or about \$1,018/acre. The funding organizations include USFS Community Forest Program, Vermont Housing and Conservation Board, Open Space Institute's Community Forest Fund, Nature Conservancy/ Keurig Green Mountain, Land and Water Conservation Fund, and many individuals. Notably, the project could not have been possible without the leadership and project management of the Trust for Public Land.

How did this acquisition affect property taxes?

The property has been taken off the tax roles. The annual municipal tax loss resulting by the creation of this Town Forest is estimated by the town to be approximately \$2,500. This has a negligible effect on a property owner's taxes. The creation of open space has been clearly documented to increase resale values of homes adjacent to the conserved land³. Property owners will benefit from higher property values when they sell their homes and the town will benefit from an increased tax base, over time. According to a 2001 survey by the National Association of REALTORS® by Public Opinion Strategies, 50 percent of respondents said they would pay 10 percent more for a house located near a park or open space.

How about the long-term responsibility and cost of maintaining the trail network on this land?

The Town of Williston and Catamount Outdoor Family Center maintain the property under a collaborative agreement, whereby the COFC takes responsibility to maintain the trails and most

³ The Economic Benefits of Land Conservation by Constance deBrun. Available at www.tpl.org

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associated infrastructure (trail signage, the Hub, equipment storage and office space) and the town has agreed to pay for the upgrading of seven (7) trail bridges, maintenance of the parking lot (except for plowing), and possible renovation of the historic sheep barn for use as public space, if ever desired by the town. Thousands of hours of volunteer labor, memberships and day-use fees have funded the creation and maintenance of the current trail network, as well as all the programs offered by the COFC. The public grant sources require that the property and trail network will be free and open to all pedestrians.

For more information contact:

Melinda Scott
Conservation Planner
Town of Williston
msscott@willistonvt.org
802-878-6704 x 4