TOWN OF WILLISTON

M E M O R A N D U M

November 20, 2024

TO: Williston Selectboard

CC: Erik Wells, Matt Boulanger, Andrew Plumb, Shirley Goodell-Lackey

FROM: Williston Conservation Commission

RE: Town FY2026 Operating Budget and Environmental Reserve Fund (ERF)

The Williston Conservation Commission is advocating for ERF support in the proposed FY2026 operating budget. <u>The WCC requests an ERF appropriation of $150,000 when the Williston Selectboard considers the FY2026 budget.</u>

- **Williston Residents Support Conservation**: According to the 2050 Town Plan survey, the majority of Williston residents (approx. 70%) support land conservation in Williston.
- **The Value of Conservation**: Conserving land provides multiple ecological, economic and social benefits to the town.
- **The ERF is a powerful tool to leverage external funds:** The ERF has led to more than $2 in conserved land value for every $1 the town has funded.
- **The current ERF balance is $531,285:** This amount is insufficient to acquire the goal of an additional 2,500 acres of conservation land in Williston
- **A permanent funding mechanism:** ¾ of a penny on the tax rate would generate approximately $160,000 per year for land conservation.

Why 30 by 50? The Community Resilience and Biodiversity Protection Act of 2023 sets a goal for Vermont to protect 30% of all land by 2030 and 50% by 2050. The WCC has recommended a goal of Williston to achieve 30% of conserved land by 2050.

How much would $150,000 cost Williston residents? The WCC estimates the recommended contribution would cost $30/year for a $300,000 home, or $40/year for a $400,000 home. This is equivalent to $10-15 per tax payment. The WCC feels this budget recommendation is appropriate and is justified for the goal of conserving these lands for future Williston residents. If this goal is achieved, Williston will be providing a significant contribution to the State's goals while balancing the needs of Williston residents.

Is the ERF keeping up with the cost of conserving land in Williston? No. The WCC has tracked ERF contributions to the cost of conserving land in Williston, and the contributions are falling behind to the rising cost of land.

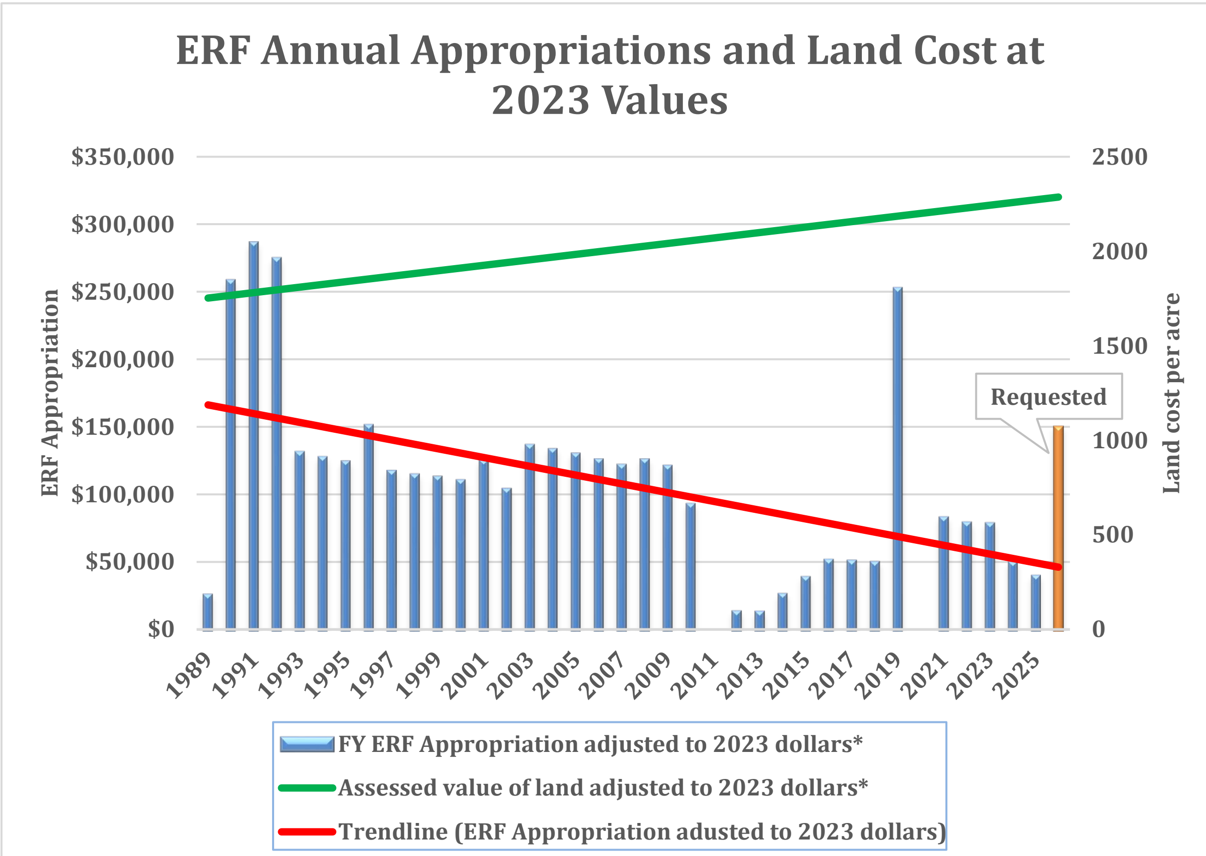

Figure 1. ERF Annual Appropriations and Land Cost at 2023 Values

What is the History of the ERF in Williston? The WCC firmly believes that one of the key services the town provides to its residents is the conservation of land. This is a service that should be growing as the town grows, **and it is critical to maintain an appropriate working balance in the ERF to ensure funds are available for future acquisitions of priority parcels.**

The ERF program directly supports Town Plan goals to sustain our agricultural community and working lands, protect wildlife habitat and scenic views, host recreation, improve water quality and maintain the sense of place that Williston residents value. The ERF has conserved numerous high-profile parcels, including the Isham farm, Sucker Brook Hollow Country Park and Mud Pond. Another recent example is the Catamount Community Forest project, where the town's ERF contribution of $400,000 was only 20% of the total conservation cost. The Town ERF contribution leveraged funds from the Community Forest Program, VHCB, the Land and Conservation Fund and many private donors to complete the funding package needed for this project.

Funds in the ERF are a powerful leveraging tool to help secure grants and donations. Since its inception, the ERF has been used to conserve 2,252 acres, or a little more than 12% of the land area of Williston. A further 2% of Williston has been conserved privately. This is an impressive value, as for every $1 allocated to the ERF, $2 of land has been conserved.

Funding for the ERF has varied since its inception in 1989. We have compared the annual allocations (at 2023 values) against the average assessed value of the 20 highest priority parcels for conservation, as selected by the WCC. The graph above shows that the cost to conserve has increased while the average appropriation has decreased.

How did the WCC determine the cost of conserving land? In 2020, the Commission completed an analysis to identify high priority parcels to conserve, totaling approximately 2,560 acres. This would bring the percentage of conserved lands to 30% in Williston.

The WCC then examined the funding required to conserve equivalent parcels, which collectively have a current grand list value of $9.1 million. Over a 30-year horizon, conserving this acreage would require the ERF to be funded at a minimum of $150,000 per year, assuming a 50% match from outside partners.

The Williston community values conserving land; a well-funded ERF enables the town to respond to development pressures. Opportunities for conservation are unpredictable. We recommend the Town strive to maintain a working balance in the ERF for the Town to work on high priority parcels as they become available.

NOTES: Penny on the tax rate calculation:

The WCC has calculated that $0.0075 assessed on the tax rate, calculated per $100 grand list value would generate revenue sufficient to meet the long term funding needs of the Environmental Reserve Fund. ¾ of a 'penny' added to the tax rate would generate ~$161,000 per year and provide assurance that as land values increase due to growth of the town, the fund's purchasing power is not diminished. The WCC requests the selectboard propose a vote for the March 2025 Town Meeting to fund a long-term mechanism for conservation funding; the WCC recommends an amount equal to $0.0075 per $100 on assessed land value in the town be proposed for long-term ERF Funding.

Grand list value = $2.15 Billion

$2.15 Billion / $100 assessed value = $21,500,000

$21,500,000 x $0.0075 = $161,250