

**TOWN OF NEWFIELDS PUBLIC MEETING
POTENTIAL RUGG PROPERTY ACQUISITION
MEETING MINUTES
TUESDAY JULY 18, 2023**

Present: Moderator John Hayden; Trust for Public Land representative, Lynette Batt; SELT representative, Duane Hyde; Conservation Commission Co-Chair, Jeff Couture

Others Include: Town Residents

The Moderator, John Hayden called the meeting to order at 7:03 pm.

This Public Hearing is the first hearing to discuss the Rugg family's offer to sell their property to the Town for recreational purposes. Trust for Public Land and SELT is here to see if the Town would be interested in purchasing the property. If the Town is not interested, Derek Rugg will sell the property to a developer with the intention to build sixty homes.

Lynette Batt introduced herself and stated that it was an open meeting, not hosted by any board, to give residents information about the potential acquisition of the Rugg property, to receive feedback, and to answer residents' questions.

Lynette Batt is a Project Manager from Trust for Public Land (TPL), a national non-public organization that works in all fifty states to protect land for public use. This is the Trust's 50th anniversary. They have been working in NH for about 25 years. TPL works to protect & conserve land for public benefit. Their projects span from parks and school yards to large landscape projects protecting tens of thousands of acres. TPL has conserved 265k acres in NH through sixty-five projects as public lands. Lynette has worked in land conservation for approximately fifteen years. Her goal in this project, if the town moves forward, is to help manage the process and serve as the project lead and manager as a real estate transaction working with the town and local partners. Her organization works with local partners to facilitate projects of interest to communities. The last work TPL did in Newfields was the Piscassic Greenway in 2006.

Duane Hyde, the Conservation Director for Southeast Land Trust (SELT), introduced himself. He mentioned SELT's new location on Burley Farms in Epping and welcomed residents to visit. He explained that SELT, a local land trust, had been working with the Rugg family for quite some time. Knowing the project's complexity, and their limited staffing resources, they reached out to TPL with whom they have worked in the past on the Piscassic Greenway. Duane's role is a supporting local role for TPL, helping with getting the word out, mailings, and public meetings if the Town moves forward with this endeavor.

Jeff Couture introduced himself as the co-chair of the Conservation Commission (CC) in Newfields. Jeff informed the residents that the CC is accessible to the public at their monthly meetings. CC will be the conduit to get information to and from the community. Jeff said that conversations have been going on for a couple of years and he is excited to receive input from the Town and to answer any questions.

Lynette provided a map showing the land being discussed and how it connects to the existing town Forests and other conservation lands. The property consists of a network of trails currently being utilized by the public through the generosity of the Ruggs. The proposal is for the Town to own and manage this property as a community Forest & be open to the public for recreational uses. TPL is looking at the conservation of approximately 150 acres of the Rugg property, fifty of which are in Exeter. Lynette specified that it would not be a conservation easement but town owned land, unencumbered by conservation easement and for the purpose of public recreation and trail use. Her organization is looking at this as a community Forest or an addition to the Town Forest. The community Forest model has an added element which allows the community to have an input into decision making as to what type of recreation will be allowed, trail maintenance and future parking access. Conservation would protect the water supply, estuaries & protect a mature Forest. It is one of the top tiered wildlife habitats in the State.

An independent appraiser assessed the property at \$3,525,000 for the 101 acres in Newfields and \$1,642,000 for the land in Exeter. Lynn has completed a pre-grant application. She expects to receive State and Federal grants with awards totaling up to \$1.6 million. The remaining \$1.9 to \$2.4 million would come from a Town bond or loan. The current bond for Piscassic Greenway is ending next year which may work out well with the timing of the bond needed for this project. Private philanthropic fundraising will be done for any additional costs.

If the Town moves forward with this endeavor more meetings will be necessary over the next year or two to submit full grant applications, determine the use of the property and develop a management plan. A public vote will be required in March 2024 to pass a conservation bond or a loan and closing on the property the first half of 2025.

Questions brought up by residents and answered by the panel:

1. **What happens if Newfields approves the purchase, but Exeter does not?** The landowners are looking at it as a packaged project with both towns working together. Exeter land would be landlocked if Newfields goes through with the project and Exeter does not.
2. **Was the 2006 Piscassic Greenway (PG) project the same as this?** PG was a collaboration of SELT and another land trust. SELT owns and manages the project. In this scenario, the Town would own the land with no conservation easement and restrictions only from the funding source but managed by the Town. SELT will not have a long-term role in the project.
3. **Was the appraisal based on the commercial viability of the development?** To an extent – the sales method was used. The assessor looked at similar land and their sales price. Since very few had development plans, adjustments were made to make it comparable. This appraisal will need to meet Federal standards and therefore a conservative assessment method was used.
5. **What are the factors that go into the grant process?** It comes down to three things – how good of a fit the project is to what the grant is trying to accomplish; the readiness of the project; and the amount the grants have to expend. These are very competitive grants; one may award 20% of applicants whereas a prior may have awarded 75%.

6. **Where is Exeter in the process?** It has been in the works with Exeter for a couple of years but is still in the beginning stages. They are trying to clean up some issues first, property boundary discrepancy with Exeter. Jeff Couture added that the Conservation Commission will reach out to Exeter to try to collaborate on the project.
7. **How many grants will be awarded?** Four, one of which will be awarded to Exeter.
8. **What will be the size of the parking lot?** It has not been determined yet. This will take place later in discussions.
9. **What will be required by the Town as owners?** This will be determined during the community Forest planning process. A stewardship fund will need to be incorporated into the budget.
10. **Why is this project being proposed as a Town owned project vs how the Piscassic Greenway is managed?** Some of the grants will not allow conservation and will only be supported through a municipality.
11. **Will the two towns work together with the management of the property and how frequently do the Fort Rock Riders use the trail now and how much do they expect to use it once owned by the Town?** Toby from the Fort Rock Riders said they have about 800 riders and have become the unofficial stewards maintaining all the trails in Newfields & Exeter.
12. **How much usage would the mountain bike riders give to walkers on the trails?** Conversations as to how the property will be used will take place as the process proceeds and with the resident input.
13. **Will this be determined after the vote in March?** Yes, they will formally start the process in the Spring.

Michael Sununu said that it will be important for people to know how it will be managed prior to them spending \$2 million on it.

Lynette replied that they can address these questions in the fall.

Michael Sununu explained that a 20-year bond would probably be around \$100k a year. The Town will know more during the budget process.

14. **What is the approval process for the development of the community Forest if the Town goes that route?** The development must get approval from the Planning Board.
15. **What is the financial benefit to the Town in owning this parcel?** There are two sides – costs incurred to purchase and maintain the property and the benefit would be to have land for recreational purposes: quality of life. If the property is developed costs would be in alignment with other developments in town.

George Drinkwater mentioned that owning the land would conserve groundwater and that the Town needs land to be preserved. If a development goes in and the area is paved, we will not have rainwater going into the aquifer.

Lynette elaborated that two of the grants are Drinking Water/State Revolving Fund Grants which is why TPL are looking into these grants.

16. **How many abutters does the land have and what will their impact be?** There are sixteen abutters on the East & West side. The Town will need to ensure boundaries are posted so private owners will not be impacted.
17. **If the land is developed instead, where would the road be located?** The road will be located where the proposed parking lot is planned.
18. **What will happen to the trails if the property is developed?** The trails will be gone.

Resident comment - The trails are a resource you cannot get back. It is a great trail system and people should walk the property.

Jeff Couture stated the Greater Fort Trail is probably in the top five in terms of mileage and its quality of trail network. Jeff would be willing to walk anyone through the property.

Lynette advised residents that a public site walk would take place in the future.

Forrest Hayden echoed that it connects a vast amount of protected land given the amount of development on the Seacoast. The Town has an opportunity to explore this and build on an amazing wildlife and recreational corridor.

Lynette showed a map of the conserved land connecting to other surrounding town Forests to create a great wildlife corridor.

A resident mentioned delegation funding from 2006 as a resource but Lynette informed him that it is not in the fund's targeted area.

Duane added that SELT will be looking for delegation funding as well.

A resident commented that he has lived in Newfields for 23 years and it has been hospitable to wildlife and residents. He acknowledged the Rugg family for giving the Town the opportunity to purchase the property.

19. **Are there any boundary disputes in Newfields?** Other than the Exeter issue, no, it has been extensively surveyed.
20. **When did Lynette first start on this project?** Lynette replied that she first received a call from Duane last fall and was blown away by the trails and the property. It is a complicated project but impactful and TPL is thrilled to be involved.

Duane added that it is a special place, and they will have site walks for people to get out there to see for themselves.

Nancy Taylor asked to have more information available at the next meeting to discuss what would happen if it was sold for development.

Michael Sununu said that they will have two more meetings in the fall - one to discuss the fiscal impact which will be a work in progress and another meeting to discuss the management of the property. There will be some restrictions based upon the grants. He believes most of the things the Town would utilize the parcel for will be within the lines of the grants.

Nancy Taylor suggested involving the UNH Forestry department.

John, the moderator thanked everyone for their time and the meeting adjourned at 8:05pm.
Respectfully submitted,

Kisha Therrien