

## **Column #4 Celebrating Place: Anniversary Notes from BHHT**

### **Does Scenic Beauty Matter?**

**By Jim Dow, Executive Director, Blue Hill Heritage Trust**

Are the scenic views that are so readily available to us here on the Blue Hill Peninsula of value to us as a community? What would it mean if those public “scenic windows” that we all enjoy as we drive, walk or boat by were closed?

The founders of the Blue Hill Heritage Trust believed that scenic views had real public benefit. Some of the Trust’s earliest projects centered on preserving the Peninsula’s scenic character, particularly stretches of undeveloped shoreline. Conserving land and water of special scenic significance is still part of our mission and still part of our new project work.

Views across the landscape from public roads or other public vantage points, including from the water, provide aesthetic enjoyment. They can inspire us and comfort us. They also help define our sense of place. From sweeping open vistas - like those from the Cooper Farm at Caterpillar Hill - to quick glimpses between trees - like the one over the meadow on Main Street in Blue Hill - this collection of visual images paints our picture of home.

For those unable to or uninterested in walking a trail, the protection of publicly available scenic views is an especially important form of access to the landscape. Scenic beauty is also a vital economic asset in our local economy. It attracts people - for a visit, for a season, for a lifetime – who help fuel local businesses.

It is a challenge to identify what views are most important to us, but there are continuing attempts to do so. Maine’s government did an inventory of scenic assets in the Penobscot Bay region some years ago. (The view from our Caterpillar Hill property ranked high on that list.) Recently the Hancock County Planning Commission led an effort to inventory scenic viewsheds throughout coastal areas in Hancock and Washington County. (A report is on their website.) Although it is difficult to compare and rank the value of different views – we all have our own preferences – there are some that simply stand-out because of their dramatic quality or outstanding beauty or their rarity. The immediate challenge is to conserve some of these before they are lost, and that is what our Trust attempts to do.

As with all our projects, we work in partnership with willing landowners to conserve scenic public viewsheds. Sometimes this scenic protection occurs as a side benefit of projects done for other purposes. The “Farmland Forever” projects along Route 15 in Penobscot and North Blue Hill are examples of this - the goal is to protect the agricultural potential of the land but in doing so the scenic character of that land is also protected. Other times protecting a view is the primary purpose.

Commonly the tool of choice in conserving scenic resources is a conservation easement, a legal document in which the landowner conveys away certain development rights that would block or

diminish the view from a public vantage point. The landowner retains ownership of the land but with diminished ownership rights, while the land trust assumes responsibility for ensuring that the terms of the easement are adhered to.

One of our most recent projects placed conservation easements, donated by the landowners, on two adjoining parcels that provide scenic views along the Newbury Neck Road in Surry. Paralleling the waters of Union Bay, this public road offers up beautiful views across open fields to the water and the mountains of Acadia National Park. Some people drive the road ‘just for the view’, an increasing number enjoy the view as they walk, run or bike the road for recreation and of course the residents along that road have the luxury of enjoying the view each time they drive to and from home.. Like all the beautiful places in this area, however, Newbury Neck is under steady development pressure, reducing the number of “public windows” from the road to the magnificent mix of fields, water and mountains. Thanks to Peggy Smith and her brother Marshall, these easements will preserve one of those windows for generations to come.

The views across our landscape that we share are perhaps the ultimate community commons. Big or little, wide open or broken up, they are like a community photo album passed from one generation to the next. Each time the Trust protects one of the views in this album, it does so with enormous gratitude to the landowners, who in working with us recognized that scenic beauty does matter, to all of us.