

Column #7 Celebrating Place: 25th Anniversary Notes from BHHT

Who Donates Land, and Why?

By Jim Dow, Executive Director, Blue Hill Heritage Trust

“We hope that the land we have gifted for conservation will give others delight and solace for years to come.” – Paul Talalay, after he and his wife Pamela donated their 33 acre property in Surry to the Blue Hill Heritage Trust.

“We are very happy about this. We love Blue Hill and hope this will help protect the character of the town” – Nancy Butler, after she and husband Tony gave an easement on the meadow near the center of Blue Hill village

The Blue Hill Heritage Trust, like all non-profit community organizations, depends on the generosity of its members and supporters. Like other non-profits, that crucial support comes in the form of people’s time and money. But unlike most other non-profits, it also comes in the form of donations of land, either gifts of full ownership or gifts of a conservation easement (a partial, non-possessory legal interest that restricts future uses of the property for conservation purposes).

When the Trust was founded in 1985, its founders expected to rely solely on gifts of land to advance the organization’s mission. The Trust’s earliest projects in fact all involved gifts. The first land it acquired was a parcel on Toddy Pond in Penobscot donated by Jerry and Di Hinckley. The first conservation easement was donated by Lucy Chamberlain on her land in Brooklin. Gifts of land on Noyes Pond (from Wally Hinckley) and on Camp Stream (Ken and Marnie Crowell) followed, as did gifts of conservation easements in Brooksville (the Waterman family and Albert and Mary Dietrich) and on Caterpillar Hill in Sedgwick (Grace Dillon), to name a few.

By the early 1990’s, when the Trust was asked by the Town to solve a dispute about development on the shoulder of Blue Hill Mountain by buying the land for conservation (which we did), it became clear that the Trust would sometimes also need to purchase land of special significance. Yet gifts of land or easements continued to be the primary way the Trust advanced its local land conservation work. Gifts of land have been central to our efforts to conserve well-known places like Blue Hill Mountain (Louise Frederick and George and Arlene Stover) as well as lesser know places like the AB Herrick Memorial Landing (Lucy Ledien). Roughly 90% of the conservation easements that we hold and close to half of the lands we own have come to us as donations.

So who are these people who give away land to our Trust, and why do they do it? A commonly heard answer to that question, especially in the early days of the Trust, was this: “the rich, in order to get a tax break”. But that is not the real answer. The truth is that donors of land are not all rich and tax benefits are never the primary motivating factor. In fact in my 22 years of working in the land conservation business, I have rarely seen a land gift solely or primarily motivated by tax considerations. Usually the tax incentives provided by the IRS simply make the

decision to give away a sizable asset a little easier. Selling the land or leaving it unencumbered would always ultimately yield a better financial return than the tax benefits from a donation.

What donors of land do have in common is this: an emotional attachment to their land and a desire to see it conserved. Most donors, especially in this community, also share a belief in the importance of protecting some of our land resources for the common good.

For those of us directly involved in receiving a gift of land for conservation purposes, it is often the emotions expressed by the donors of land that are most striking. Comments like those of Paul Talalay and Nancy Butler evidence the pleasure that flows from making a gift of something of high personal value that will have lasting meaning to others. Sometimes those emotions go unspoken but are clear from the gift itself, as occurred last week when we were notified that we would be receiving a bequest of a parcel of land from a recently deceased landowner who we know cared deeply for his land and its natural values.

We as a community all benefit from these acts of exceptional generosity. Our land trust is the vehicle that helps make these good deeds possible.