

Friends of Morgan Bay and Blue Hill Heritage Trust – A Productive Partnership

by Jennifer Traub, Blue Hill Heritage Trust volunteer

As a Blue Hill Heritage Trust volunteer for several years, I've learned how this tiny organization accomplishes so much conservation work. BHHT's open approach to working with volunteers takes advantage of their energy and talents, while offering them a real opportunity to participate actively in BHHT's work and to see the impact of their contribution.

This partnership approach extends to community groups interested in protecting a local place of high conservation value.

BHHT Executive Director Jim Dow says partnerships with local community groups are “an ideal way for conservation to happen: people banding together can use the land trust as a vehicle to protect land of special importance.” A local land trust like BHHT can provide the technical expertise and staying power necessary to ensure that the land is conserved for public benefit in perpetuity.

The Friends of Morgan Bay is one example of a group that works in partnership with BHHT to protect a significant community resource: its watershed. Neighbors sharing an interest in the head of Morgan Bay—including Susan Hand Shetterly, Norman and Paula Mrozicki, and Hugh and Susan Curran—initially joined together as the Surry Wetlands Association around 1980, predating BHHT. Led by Shetterly, this initial group envisioned itself as a watchdog organization with a primarily educational mission.

In 1995, the group learned of an incredible watershed and shorefront protection opportunity: 23 acres at the head of the bay were up for sale. Property ownership was outside the scope of the association, so Hugh Curran approached BHHT (at the time an all-volunteer organization with no staff), which was interested in the significant conservation value of the land but did not have the capacity to purchase it.

With support from fellow association members, Curran founded the Friends of Morgan Bay (FOMB) as a new organization to undertake the daunting task of raising enough funds to purchase the property. What followed is an amazing story of a multi-faceted partnership—both among neighbors and between FOMB and BHHT—that over the course of a year enabled the protection of a vital community resource.

“We were just a bunch of amateurs acting in the best interest of the community at the right moment,” says Curran, describing FOMB as a catalyst that brought together all of the diverse resources within its reach. The community's financial support ranged from a number of \$5 to \$500 donations collected door-to-door to a couple of important major gifts.

The fundraising challenge continued right up to the BHHT Board meeting that Curran attended to report that FOMB had collected the needed funds except for \$50. According to Curran, the BHHT Board President swiftly passed a hat around the table to complete the amount.

Another form of support came from the two Carter sisters who owned the land and agreed to a reduced price for its conservation—the property is now named the Carter Nature Preserve in honor of their family. The nearby Furth family also played a major role both in their financial support and in granting a public right of way through their field to the property, which had no road access.

Even with all of the work FOMB accomplished with broad neighborhood support, the members emphasize that they couldn't have achieved their vision without Blue Hill Heritage Trust. "We aren't lawyers, and we don't have technical expertise in land conservation," says FOMB member Norm Mrozicki, who also serves on the BHHT Board. "It's great that there is an organization like the Trust in place with the tools and capacity to carry on this function."

The Carter Nature Preserve has inspired an expanded watershed protection effort in the neighborhood. "Because of our group being here," says Curran, "it gave the impetus to do more." Seven additional FOMB projects in partnership with BHHT have been completed, giving shape to a conservation corridor from Emerton Heath all the way to Morgan Bay.

FOMB also works closely with BHHT to help fulfill the stewardship responsibilities for these neighborhood lands, including trail development and maintenance. Nearly 3 miles of public walking trails now exist on these lands. This ongoing relationship is a core element of the FOMB/BHHT partnership.

"This is the essence of local land conservation: people who care the most about a place investing themselves in its protection and stewardship for the benefit of us all," says Jim Dow. "Their engagement builds a sense of community and demonstrates the power of place."