

Four Towns' Land Trusts Announce Merger

BY JENNIFER OSBORN

BLUE HILL — The Conservation Trust of Brooksville, Castine and Penobscot (TCT) is merging with Blue Hill Heritage Trust (BHHT).

A shortage of volunteers and growing complexity in the land trust field have contributed to the merger.

"By joining forces, we will continue a legacy of thoughtful and effective land conservation by TCT and BHHT that provides enduring public benefits to the communities on the Blue Hill Peninsula," said Jim Dow, the Blue Hill Heritage Trust's executive director.

Half of The Conservation Trust's land and easements will be absorbed by Blue Hill Heritage Trust and the other half will go to Maine Coast Heritage Trust.

Maynard Forbes, president of The Conservation Trust Board of Directors, said the trust was started in 1978. It has been an all-volunteer organization since then.

"In the past 8 to 10 years, there's been a great deal of regulation established," Forbes said. "It means more paperwork, reports and intense work that a volunteer organization can do, but it's better to have somebody on a full-time basis dealing with it."

Maine Coast Heritage Trust has two roles, one of them being the acquisition of half of The Conservation Trust's land portfolio.

Maine Coast also is assisting the two trusts with the merger through Maine Coast's

Land Trust Network Program.

"We helped found both of the trusts," said Ciona Ulbrich, senior project manager at Maine Coast Heritage Trust. "In particular, we've helped bring in a lot of the properties The Conservation Trust holds."

"I think the pressure's being felt for local land trusts," Ulbrich said. "It's really hard to find volunteer board members who are able to dedicate the time this kind of work requires."

"The changes around how land trusts work have just grown steadily over time. They're increasingly complex. Those requirements have made it hard for small groups to keep up the pace."

Ulbrich said the consolidation is "a manifestation of national trends in the land trust movement, which has grown and evolved with success."

"In Maine alone, land trusts have together conserved more than 1.5 million acres," Ulbrich said. "The business of land conservation, historically often conducted by volunteers at kitchen tables, is now governed by complex laws, regulations and national standards for land trust operations."

"Conservation easement lands, protected in the movement's infancy, are rapidly changing hands — often from one generation to another — and creating complex legal and stewardship challenges that demand more time and expertise from land trust organizations."

"The local land trust movement is pretty neat. It has that grassroots component of local people caring about local places. We hope that won't get lost."

— *Ciona Ulbrich, Maine Coast Heritage Trust*

Ulbrich added that "there is broad recognition within the conservation community that community relevance is a strategic imperative and that traditional tools of permanent conservation will not be sufficient unless leveraged by broad public support. From guided hikes on conserved lands to school programming designed to engage the next generation, meaningful community engagement requires consistent outreach and follow-through."

The Conservation Trust owns or has easements on 34 properties totaling 983 acres.

Of those properties, 12 easements and seven parcels are willed to Maine Coast Heritage Trust. Of the remaining number, seven easements and eight parcels will go to Blue Hill Heritage Trust.

Blue Hill Heritage Trust was founded in 1985 and began as an all-volunteer organization. However, the trust became aware of the complexity of the growing land conservation

business, which resulted in the hiring of full-time staff in 2001. It has protected over 100 properties encompassing over 6,500 acres of land.

Dow said the merger is anticipated for completion by March 2014.

One task will be to raise additional stewardship funding to help cover the long-term responsibilities associated with The Conservation Trust lands that Blue Hill and Maine Coast are accepting. A campaign is under way.

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