

Goat Hill Recreational Area Project

Town of Acton, York County, Maine



Environmental Assessment

MARCH 2020

*For the funding of property acquisition and trail development through the
Land and Water Conservation Fund*

Environmental Assessment of the Goat Hill Recreational Area Project Town of Acton, York County, Maine

Submitted to:

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The proposed project includes the purchase for outdoor recreation, scenic enjoyment, and education of a 25-acre parcel that contains woods and a park-like summit and the develop of a gravel parking lot and three-quarter mile long trail that will be designed for future development to meet handicapped accessibility standards. The new park will be protected under Section 6(f)(3) of the Land and Water Conservation Funs Act, Public Law 108-198.

The Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), Stateside Assistance Grant Program, provides funds to states, and through states to local agencies, for the acquisition and development of outdoor recreation resources. Lands that have received funding through LWCF are protected by section 6(f)3 of the Act unless a conversion is approved by the Secretary of the Interior as delegated to the National Park Service.

CONTENTS

1.0	Purpose and Need	1
1.1	Introduction.....	1
1.2	Need for Project.....	2
	Valued Open Space	2
	Recreational Needs.....	2
1.3	Purpose Statement.....	5
2.0	Alternatives	5
2.1	Range of Alternatives	5
2.2	Preferred Alternative.....	6
3.0	Environmental Impacts	7
3.1	Land Use and Land Cover.....	7
	Land Use Planning	7
	Land Cover	7
	Conclusion.....	7
3.2	SocioEconomics	7
	Local Population	8
	Conclusion.....	10
3.3	Environmental Justice	10
3.4	Pedestrian and Bicyclist Facilities	10
3.5	Hazardous Materials.....	10
3.6	Historic and Archaeological Resources	10
3.7	Surface Waters and Floodplains	11
3.8	Threatened and Endangered Species.....	11
3.9	Air Quality	11
3.10	Noise	11
3.11	Visual and Aesthetic Impacts	11
4.0	Coordination and Consultation	12
4.1	Public Involvement	12
4.2	Agency Coordination	13
5.0	Conclusion	14
6.0	References	14

FIGURES

Figure 1: Project Location.....page 1

Figure 2: Distant views from top of Goat Hill.....page 3

Figure 3: Existing facilities on Goat Hill.....page 4

Figure 4: Planned path of trail from parking area to top of Goat Hill.....page 6

Figure 5: Income across southern Maine by US Census Tract areapage 10

APPENDICES

Appendix A - Cultural Resources Agency Consultation

Appendix B - Protected Species Agency Coordination

1.0 PURPOSE AND NEED

1.1 Introduction

The Town of Acton proposes to purchase for outdoor recreation, scenic enjoyment, and education a 25-acre parcel that contains woods and a park-like summit that offers a 360-degree view of the White Mountains and surrounding landscape. Following purchase, the Town of Acton and partner Three Rivers Land Trust will jointly develop a gravel parking lot and a three-quarter mile-long gravel trail to the summit. The trail will be designed in a sustainable manner so that it can eventually meet handicapped accessibility standards. The goal of the project is to preserve an iconic property for the public's enjoyment, and to provide a setting for spontaneous gathering, community events, and school field trips. The location of the project is shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1: Project Location

With approval from the National Park Service, the new park will be protected under Section 6(f)(3) of the Land and Water Conservation Fund Act, Public Law 108-198. The project involves federally sourced funding and approval; therefore, this assessment is being prepared in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and related guidance and regulations, including the U.S. Department of Interior (DOI) NEPA regulations (43 CFR Part 46). It includes an assessment of the existing setting, anticipated impacts, and mitigation for unavoidable impacts associated with the proposed project, as appropriate. Project development and assessment has included coordination with federal, state, and local agencies and officials as well as the general public. The goal of this Environmental

Assessment is to determine whether or not the proposed project will have significant impacts that require preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement.

1.2 Need for Project

This project addresses two principle needs: preserving valued open space, and providing an easily accessible recreational opportunity.

Valued Open Space

The Goat Hill property has been a valued space for recreation for generations. Apples have been produced by Romac Orchard on the slopes of Goat Hill for 80 years, and owners have welcomed visitors to use their property for outings. The Goat Hill summit affords grand views of lakes and the White Mountains in the distance. Beneath towering pine trees, the summit's grassy area still has picnic tables that were used by past orchard visitors (Figure 2 and Figure 3).

The Goat Hill area is identified as a priority project in the 2005 Acton Comprehensive Plan Update. Romac Orchard is listed among the "Lands Not Readily Available for Development," and is identified as laying outside the town's designated growth area. Additional detail on how the project is in line with land use plans is provided in Section 3.1.

In 2011, the pick-your-own operation of Romac Orchard closed, and in 2014, the 332-acre orchard, fields and woodland were put up for sale. Almost immediately, 80 acres were sold to a neighbor. With the history and local plan in mind, residents and land trusts banded together to help raise funds and find new farming residents to continue stewarding the land as undeveloped property. By excluding the valuable summit property, project proponents were able to find new farmers who could afford to purchase all of the orchards and fields in addition to part of the woodlands. The remaining 25 acres that comprise the Goat Hill Recreational Area will provide access to the stunning summit views, continuing the local tradition and serving as an attraction for new visitors.

Recreational Needs

Surveys conducted for the Maine State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) have found that Maine residents participate in outdoor recreation activities at higher rates than national and regional averages. Of the 3,289 residents surveyed, the three preferred activities that were listed most often were trekking/hiking (69%), bicycling (37%), and walking (29%). Also, based on SCORP survey data, the most needed non-motorized trail opportunities are easy trails in natural settings. Handicapped accessible trails were listed as the 5th most needed category of trail by the general state population and the 4th most needed by recreationists specifically. The proposed Goat Hill Recreation Area will have all of these popular characteristics identified in the SCORP. (Maine BPL, 2014, and 2019)

While York County Maine is generally rich with outdoor recreation opportunities, two particular features are uncommon among existing recreational options in York County: views from a high vantage point, and accessibility. Both these features can be offered with a new trail to the Goat Hill summit.

1.3 Purpose Statement

The purpose of the project is to create a public park and trail with year-round, non-motorized public access to people of all abilities while conserving a 25-acre iconic property with scenic, recreational, educational, forestry, and water quality protection values.

2.0 ALTERNATIVES

2.1 Range of Alternatives

Alternatives considered for the project included the No Action Alternative and variations of an Action Alternative. To fulfill the purpose and need for the project, the Action Alternative requires an access point along the H Road at a location suitable for a parking lot and a trail connecting to the summit of Goat Hill. The location of these features is limited by the following factors:

- The parking lot location along the H Road must meet minimum sight distances of 100 feet in both directions;
- The trail must maintain a maximum overall grade of five percent (5%) to enable handicap accessibility;
- Construction must avoid a pond in the middle of the project area; and
- Construction must avoid a rock ledge in the project area.

Knowing these constraints, Ms. Sara Knowles of the Maine Conservation Corps laid out a trail route using a hand-held GPS device in October of 2016. The route has been laid out according to sustainable design principles that limit soil erosion by following the contours of the landscape as much as possible, by limiting running slopes to less than five percent, and by avoiding wetlands. With preliminary design complete, the trail is anticipated to be approximately 4,000 feet long, with an elevation change of approximately 200 feet. During construction, refined design may take place as necessary to further reduce impacts.

As stated in DOI NEPA regulations, "When the Responsible Official determines that there are no unresolved conflicts about the proposed action with respect to alternative uses of available resources, the environmental assessment need only consider the proposed action and does not need to consider additional alternatives, including the no action alternative." (43 CFR 46.310) Through public outreach (see Section 4.0), no public controversy was revealed during project development. On the contrary, the citizens of Acton had to approve use of the town's funds for the project to move forward and many citizens of the region personally contributed financially to the project. Therefore, just the Preferred Alternative is carried through for detailed analysis in this environmental assessment.

2.2 Preferred Alternative

This project will create a new public park, incorporating a scenic hilltop that was previously gathering space on the grounds of a pick-your-own apple orchard in Acton, ME. The Preferred Alternative includes the initial construction phase, which will create a 60-foot by 60-foot parking area at 1205 H Road in Acton and a 0.75-mile trail to the summit. Informative signage will be installed.

Construction of the trail includes clearing a 15-foot-wide corridor through a forested hillside to remove stumps and rocks, grading a five-foot wide walking path, and laying a gravel surface. The trail will follow gentle grades enabling it to be easily upgraded to handicapped accessibility standards when additional funding is secured (Figure 4). GPS data indicates the trail will have an overall grade of 4.6 percent, less than the maximum for handicapped accessibility. At the broad summit, the trail will loop around, providing easy access to existing picnic tables and a variety of views across mountain ranges and lakes. As additional funding is secured, stone dust or other fine material will be added to the trail to create a smooth, firm surface that will further the accessibility goals of the project.

The Town of Acton plans to hire a consulting forester to prepare a forest management plan and develop a demonstration forest on the 25-acre site as a showcase of sustainable forestry. The management plan will contain recommendations for improving forest health, maintaining summit views, improving wildlife habitat, and growing top-quality timber.



Figure 4: Planned path of trail from parking area to top of Goat Hill, taking circuitous route to provide gentle slope.

3.0 ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

3.1 Land Use and Land Cover

Land Use Planning

The project is consistent with the local comprehensive plan. The 2005 Town of Acton Comprehensive Plan Update was adopted following extensive public meetings and a town meeting vote. The plan identified nine commercial farms in town, with Romac Orchard being one of the largest operations, and noted the scenic views and character of the town's dwindling farms as "amongst the more valued resource in town." The plan recommended investments in conservation and outdoor recreation, such as "developing an open space acquisition fund," and "setting aside funding ... to enhance and/or encourage land conservation" and "investigate public access, trails and other recreational opportunities." (Acton Comprehensive Plan Committee, 2005)

The Goat Hill Recreational Area Project has called upon that local commitment to help fund the acquisition of the 25-acre parcel. See Section 4.1 for detail on public involvement for the proposed project.

Land Cover

The entire 25-acre project area is forested, with the exception of a small grassy portion that surrounds the summit. The project requires the conversion of forested land to gravel surfaced land. The parking lot will cover a 60-foot by 60-foot area, or 3,600 square feet. Trail construction will involve clearing a 15-foot wide corridor for a length of 4,000 feet, which totals 60,000 square feet. Together, the areas proposed for disturbance total 1.46 acres.

To mitigate for land disturbance, the project incorporates measures to reduce long-term effects from the trail. The trail route has been laid out according to sustainable design principles that limit soil erosion by following the contours of the landscape as much as possible, limiting running slopes to less than five percent, and by avoiding sensitive resources. Additionally, trail construction will include installation of water bars across the trail to slow runoff and reduce erosion.

Conclusion

With the project's alignment with local planning goals, the limited size of disturbed area, implementation of mitigation measures, and large areas of remaining forest surrounding the project, the 1.46 acres of disturbance do not represent a significant fragmentation or loss of habitat. Therefore, impact to land use and land cover does not warrant further study in an environmental impact statement.

3.2 SocioEconomics

This project is not likely to adversely affect the local economy and is expected to benefit the community in several ways discussed below. No residences or businesses will be displaced with the project and existing community facilities and traffic patterns will not be disrupted.

This project is likely to provide an economic boost for the area because it provides another reason for regional residents and visitors to come for an outing and even for retirees to relocate. As discussed in Section 1.2, hiking recreation is popular in Maine, and easy trails are particularly in demand, so this project will help meet the demand. The proposed project will provide Acton's only vertical ascent hiking opportunity on public land, and elevated views open to the public are not common throughout all of York County.

Acton's local restaurants and service providers rely on monies earned during the lake season to remain in business. While the apple orchard on Goat Hill is an attractive destination for approximately two months a year, the new recreational area will be more accessible because it will be available year-round and includes a wide gravel path that is planned for handicap-accessibility.

The project is also well-located for providing public benefits such as community gathering, education, and exercise. It is relatively close to the Town's center, being 2.2 miles from the Town Hall and 4.4 miles from the elementary school. There is already a history of groups using Goat Hill with past landowner permission. However, with public park status and the addition of parking spaces and informative signs, educational uses are likely to grow. Based on anecdotal evidence from community members, it is expected that the following groups will host activities at the Goat Hill Recreation Area on a regular basis:

- Acton Elementary School, a K-8 school located 4.9 miles away has an enrollment of 225 boys and girls. The school conducts regular field trips with educational goals.
- Boy Scout Troop 320, Scoutmaster David Wade, has an active Scout group. It organizes outings on a regular basis.
- Three Rivers Land Trust, with 150 members, primarily families, organizes regular walks to natural areas in the region. It also hosts kite-flying days and traditional woods skills events.
- Acton Recreation Program is a citizen's group that focuses on the development of the physical fitness, sportsmanship and team building for the children of Acton. It has a Facebook page with 480 followers.
- Geocachers. Dollie Hutchins of Sanford is the local coordinator of geocache events in the region and has expressed interest in setting out new caches.

Finally, it is anticipated that the new park will be an appreciated resource in the region because of the breadth of support the project has received. See Section 4.1 for a detailed discussion of public input and support, including the financial backing of local taxpayers.

Local Population

Although no residents and businesses will be directly impacted by the proposed project, the following data is provided as context for this document and the environmental justice assessment specifically.

The project area lies in Census Tract 235, which encompasses the towns of Acton, Shapleigh, and Newfield, Maine. The area's total population in the 2013-2017 5-year American Community Survey (US Census, 2018) was 6,698 people. Racially, like most of

Maine, the area lacks diversity. Over 98% of the population is White. The Census Tracts encompassing the City of Sanford, just to the south of Tract 235, are the most racially diverse in the region, and those range from 93 to 95% white.

The population is disproportionately older than 65 years of age as compared to York County and Maine as a whole. While this group makes up 18.8 and 18.6% of the Maine State and York County populations, nearly one fifth (19.9%) of the Census Tract 235 population is over 65 years old (US Census, 2018). With the easy grade and accessibility of the proposed Goat Hill trail, the project is likely to benefit this older regional population.

The project lies approximately 25 miles inland from the coast of Maine. Households along the coast are more likely to have high average income. According to most recent data available, Census Tract 235 has a median household income of \$61,933 (US Census, 2019). As shown in Figure 5, Census Tracts surrounding Tract 235 have median incomes ranging between \$40,000 and \$74,000, while the closest coastal Census Tracts (between the towns of York and Kennebunkport, Maine) have higher median incomes, ranging between \$58,000 and \$109,000. The project location is well-situated to provide lower income populations with free recreational opportunities.

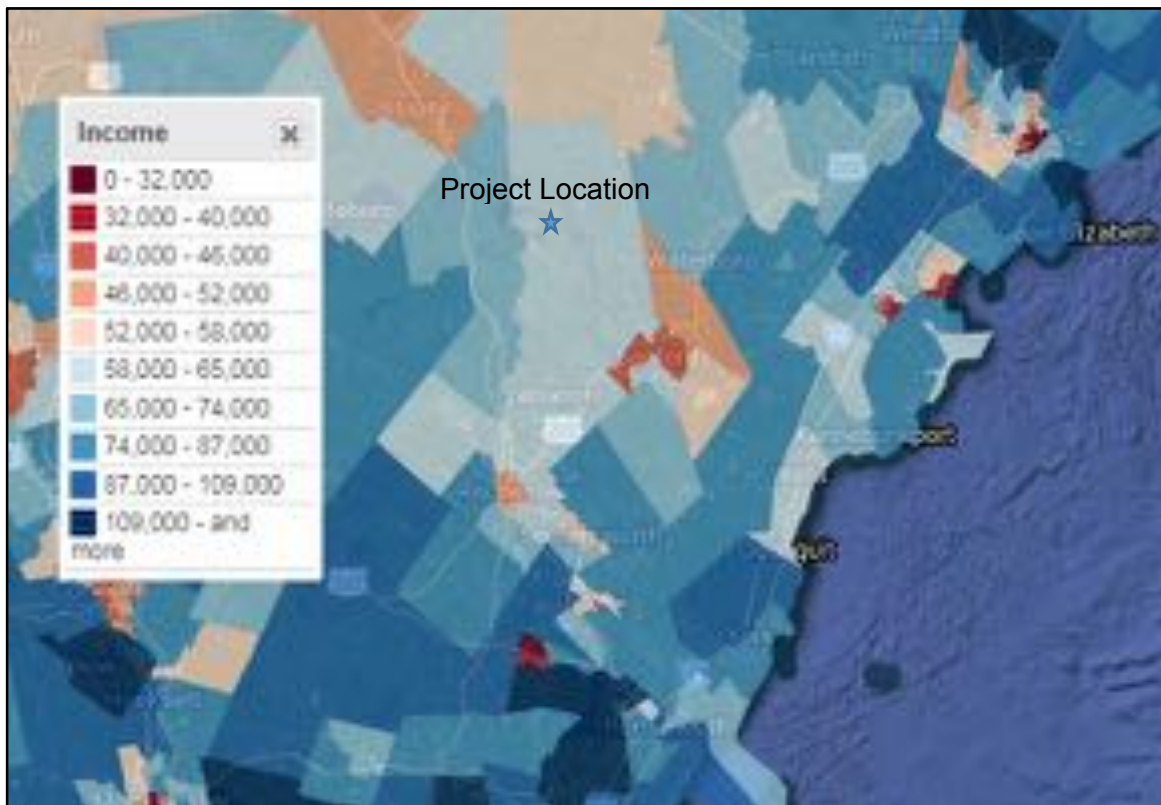


Figure 5: Income across southern Maine by US Census Tract area. (Source: <http://www.energyjustice.net/justice/index.php>, an online mapping service using data from the US Census.)

Conclusion

With the project's lack of direct impact to residences and businesses, potential for beneficial indirect impact to businesses, and expansion of free access to a limited resource (open space with grand views), the project will provide benefits to the local social and economic environments, and no further analysis is required.

3.3 Environmental Justice

Executive Order 12898, Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations (February 11, 1994), requires each federal agency to "make achieving environmental justice part of its mission by identifying and addressing, as appropriate, disproportionately high and adverse human health or environmental effects of its programs, policies, and activities on minority populations and low-income populations."

There will be no relocations of structures with the proposed project, and no other substantial impacts are anticipated to individuals near the project area (see Sections 3.10 and 3.11 for discussions of Noise and Visual Impacts). Especially considering the accessibility component of the Goat Hill Recreational Area Project, it is anticipated that the distribution of the benefits and risks of the project will be equitable. There will be no disproportionate impact to low-income or minority populations, and environmental justice concerns do not warrant further study in an environmental impact statement.

3.4 Pedestrian and Bicyclist Facilities

The project does not impact existing pedestrian and bicyclist facilities. The project will improve the availability of hiking and biking access, as it constructs a three-quarter mile trail that will be open to non-motorized traffic.

Trail maps will be made available on the websites of the Town of Acton and Maine Trail Finder. It will also be included in the next reprinting of Quiet Places, a map developed by Three Rivers Land Trust.

3.5 Hazardous Materials

The project area does not overlap any residential, commercial, or industrial areas. The Maine DEP's online databases were queried for the H Road in Acton, and no oil spills or underground storage tanks were found for the project area (Maine DEP, 2019). Additionally, throughout the several site visits to the project area, including the flagging of the proposed trail location, no sites were discovered. Should unforeseen sites be encountered during construction, the project will be paused to inform the DEP and handle the material in accordance with safety guidance and regulations. Concerns for hazardous materials do not warrant further study in an Environmental Impact Statement.

3.6 Historic and Archaeological Resources

In accordance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, and its implementing regulations, 36 CFR 800, the Town of Acton representatives coordinated with the Maine State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) at the Maine Historic Preservation Commission. In correspondence dated October 20, 2016, the SHPO provided concurrence that there will be no historic properties affected by the Goat Hill Recreational

Project. No further Section 106 consultation is required unless additional resources are discovered during project implementation (Appendix A).

3.7 Surface Waters and Floodplains

No streams, wetlands, or floodplains are crossed by the project. One pond in the project area is purposely avoided with the trail design. Also, the project includes culverts to direct surface runoff under the trail in lower lying areas of the trail, and intermittent water bars to control runoff atop the trail. The 25-acre park and the adjacent associated 218-acre conservation project will help protect water quality of the three overlapping watersheds (Square Pond, Wilson Lake and Great East Lake). No further analysis is warranted.

3.8 Threatened and Endangered Species

Two state agencies were consulted for information on protected species and essential habitat in the project area. Town of Acton representatives coordinated with the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife (MDIFW) and the Maine Natural Areas Program at the DEP (MANP). Letters were received from these agencies confirming that there are no known locations of threatened or endangered species or critical habitat in the project area (Appendix B); however, it was brought to the Town's attention that bats could inhabit the area. With the small amount of forest to be disturbed with the project (1.46 acres, see Section 3.1), no impact to bats is anticipated.

With the small amount of proposed disturbance and lack of previously known occurrences of protected species, further analysis in an Environmental Impact Statement is not warranted for threatened and endangered species.

3.9 Air Quality

Aside from minor localized and temporary effects during construction of the parking area and trail, no air quality impact is anticipated with the project.

3.10 Noise

Noise effects anticipated with this project include minor localized and temporary effects during construction of the parking area and trail and noise associated with the users of the new park. The latter is not likely to be significant because of the typically quiet nature of trail recreation. Occasional group gatherings may cause temporary noise, particularly in the parking lot and summit; however, the nearest sensitive noise receptor is a residence over 300 feet from the parking area. In summary, noise effects do not warrant analysis in an Environmental Impact Statement.

3.11 Visual and Aesthetic Impacts

Visual effects anticipated with this project include minor localized and temporary effects during construction of the parking area and trail. In the long term, views of the project area will not be greatly affected, as the parking lot is set back from the edge of the road, the summit gathering space was already a gathering space, and the trail will be nestled under tree cover. Views from the project area will remain the same, as no additional clearing, aside from the trail itself, is planned for the summit. However, more people will likely be able to

enjoy the view because of the added trail access. In summary, impacts to views do not warrant analysis in an Environmental Impact Statement.

4.0 COORDINATION AND CONSULTATION

4.1 Public Involvement

Throughout development of the Goat Hill Recreational Area project, there has been extensive coordination with the Town of Acton. There has been broad community support for this project as detailed below.

The planning that led to this project proposal began with the 2005 Comprehensive Plan Update for the Town of Acton (Acton Comprehensive Plan Committee, 2005), which was adopted following extensive public meetings and a town meeting vote. The plan identified Romac Orchards as a location for conservation efforts because of the scenic views and contribution to the town's character. The plan also recommended investments in outdoor recreation.

The listing of the Romac Orchard property for sale mobilized the local land trust that has Acton in its area of focus – the Three Rivers Land Trust (3RLT). Several members of the Board of Directors for 3RLT are also residents of Acton and serve on community committees as well. The land trust was already working on a larger conservation initiative with four other landowners in the area and the addition of the farm property enhanced the overall 2,000-acre project. Following extensive landowner meetings and an investigation of funding options, 3RLT concluded there was sufficient interest in a multi-parcel conservation project on the Romac property. Professional assistance was retained to negotiate terms, pursue grants and develop a community fundraising campaign. Because of the high development potential of Romac Orchard, the asking price was high. That necessitated creative approaches and the participation of multiple partners. Ultimately, 3RLT facilitated a deal that involved participation of: a new farm buyer interested in continuing farming, the Maine Outdoor Heritage Fund, the Maine Farmland Trust, the Maine Coast Heritage Trust, the 1771 Foundation, private fundraising by 3RLT, and the taxpayers of Acton.

The 3RLT approached the Town of Acton with a proposal to contribute \$100,000 toward the 25-acre hilltop, the most valuable part of the remaining 240 acres. The public had six formal opportunities during the spring of 2016 to shape the project as proposed. During a three-month period from February through April, the Select Board met five times to discuss and/or take action on a referendum question seeking financial support from Acton taxpayers. Select board meetings were advertised through the Town of Acton's website, local newspapers and Acton Public Access Television. Meetings were open to the public and comments and questions were encouraged.

Following that vetting process, Acton voters considered the following referendum ballot question on June 14, 2016:

“Shall the Town vote to allow the Treasurer to execute a bond in the Town of Acton's name in the amount of \$75,527 for a 5 year term with an interest rate of (up to) 6%,

to raise and appropriate (up to) \$17,522 for the payments of the loan; and appropriate a total of \$100,000 for the purpose of purchasing a +/- 25 acre parcel of land, which is a portion of Map 220, Lot 002, known as Romac Orchards including the summit of Goat Hill. The balance of funds, \$24,473 shall come from the Forestry Committee Reserve Fund. Said purchase is contingent upon fundraising efforts of the Three River Land Trust to contribute an additional \$75,000 prior to June 30, 2017.”

The ballot question passed 326-257 with 88 blanks, according to Acton Town Clerk Jennifer Roux.

In addition, dozens of Acton residents have contributed financially to the project, and a dozen letters of support were received from local officials and NGOs. Letters expressed specific benefits anticipated with the project, including recreational opportunities, educational opportunities, water quality protection, landscape level conservation, community well-being and event space, and scenic value. No concerns were raised that warrant further analysis in an Environmental Impact Statement.

4.2 Agency Coordination

The following outreach has taken place with resource agencies for assistance in developing the project and for assessing potential impacts. No issues were raised that would warrant evaluation in an Environmental Impact Statement.

- Coordination with the Maine Historic Preservation Commission for historic properties. Results are discussed in Section 3.6, and a letter of concurrence is presented in Appendix A.
- Coordination with MDIFW and MNAP for protected species. Results are discussed in Section 3.8, and a copy of correspondence is provided in Appendix B.
- Coordination with the Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry, Bureau of Parks and Lands for the Land and Water Conservation Fund application and input on project design.
- Coordination with the Maine Outdoor Heritage Fund Board.
- Coordination with Land Trusts for project development and implementation: Three Rivers Land Trust of Alfred, ME, Maine Farmland Trust of Belfast and Portland, ME, and Maine Coast Heritage Trust of Topsham, ME.

This EA is being made available for comment for a 30-day period. Websites of both the Town of Acton and the Three Rivers Land Trust will post the document. Comments received during this period will be considered with finalization of the NEPA process and project plans.

5.0 CONCLUSION

As presented in this Environmental Assessment, the Preferred Alternative fulfills the project's purpose and need. Project stakeholders and the public have been involved in project planning, and environmental impacts will be reduced through the use of best management practices and sustainable design. The project is not anticipated to have significant impacts, and preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement is not required.

6.0 REFERENCES

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