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COOPERATIVE EXTENSION

## Land Conservation: Getting Our Money's Worth

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Municipal funding for land conservation in New Hampshire has grown extremely rapidly in the past three years. In 2003, more than \$40 million is proposed at town meetings and meetings of city and town councils for appropriation of land conservation. This is about double last year's figure of more than \$21 million.

In 2001, the number was almost \$15 million. The vast majority of these measures were approved by voters, often by large majorities. This clearly represents a willingness by citizens to invest in land conservation at the local level. Rapid growth with no end in sight has stimulated much of this activity, so it's no surprise to find much of the money raised by communities in the southern part of the state, especially the southeast.

When residents work to raise funds to conserve land, sometimes through multi-million dollar bonds, they often realize rather quickly that even very large appropriations may not be enough to protect all the land they would like to protect.

The resources available may simply not be enough to enable the community to take advantage of all conservation opportunities that arise. Local boards and commissions responsible for coordinating the acquisition of land and development rights may want tools to help them make decisions when this is the case. Those in this position of responsibility also want to be sure they will spend their own and their fellow taxpayers' money wisely, getting the most conservation value for the dollar. Land trusts, private non-profit organizations dedicated to conserving land, face similar situations.

In response to these circumstances, many communities that have appropriated money for conservation, and those proposing such funding, have developed methods to identify their highest priority conservation objectives. These range from simple lists of the most valued features in a community to relatively sophisticated tools involving databases and geographic information system mapping projects. Whether simple or complex, these methods share some common features.

First, answer the question "why?" Why invest in conservation? What's at stake? The answer is the list of things the community values enough to invest its money. This suggests that as an initial step, placing priorities on certain conservation objectives requires public involvement to identify the values behind the commitment.

Communities may have recent information from surveys as part of a master plan update or Community Profile event. If not, information on *what* people want to protect can be gathered from new surveys, responses to articles in community newsletters or through public meetings. Using such information starts a community on the right track to using conservation funding to accomplish what the voters want. Many communities find people are supportive of land conservation that protects items such as water resources, wildlife habitats, biodiversity and scenic and cultural features that contribute to the elusive but cherished "community character." Townspeople often suggest the location of land they feel will protect these resources if conserved.

For some features, such as significant farmlands, their locations are obvious and easily identifiable by most town or city residents. In other cases, such as groundwater deposits, or aquifers, it won't be. Decision-makers may want to use a *natural resources inventory* to identify features of priority value in their communities.

A natural resources inventory is a compilation of maps and other documents and an interpretation and analysis of them. It can form the basis of many land use planning decisions, including setting land conservation priorities.

Most natural resources inventory mapping today employs geographic information system technology (GIS). In GIS, information is mapped in varying combinations, allowing maps to be produced that can answer specific questions such as, "where in our community are concentrations of wetlands, surface waters and groundwater?" Most natural resource inventory GIS mapping uses data from GRANIT, New Hampshire's statewide source of more than 40 different items that can be mapped using GIS.

Many, but not all things, a community might identify as values to be protected through land conservation can be mapped using GIS data. Locally collected, information can be added to the GIS to supplement the available GRANIT data. An example of this would be scenic vistas identified through a community survey. Some communities have the capacity to generate GIS natural resources" inventories themselves, but most do not. Regional planning commissions and private groups and consultants currently do much of the GIS work for New Hampshire conservation groups.

Once a community has identified its priority conservation values and conducted a natural resources inventory, the next step is usually to decide on factors used to choose conservation projects. There are some considerations that may end up on a community's list of project selection criteria that weren't able to be mapped because they're not land or natural resource based. Examples include:

- *The cost effectiveness of conserving the land.* For example, most conservation groups would not want to pay more than an appraised value if purchasing land or development rights and many seek "bargain sales" at less than market value.
- *Degree of development threat.* This may be difficult to determine, but sometimes it's obvious.- *Potential problems with the property.* Does the land have buildings that would be a maintenance responsibility? Is there any chance that hazardous materials were used on the land that could raise liability issues?
- *Could the property produce any income?* Land acquired for a town or city forest, for example, can generate income from forestry activities, which can offset the loss of property tax from such an acquisition.
- *Stewardship responsibilities.* A municipality or conservation group that acquires land for conservation purposes necessarily assumes a responsibility for managing the land for that purpose for the indefinite future. Acquisition of development rights through conservation easements similarly requires a long term, in fact permanent, commitment to monitor the terms of the easement (usually annually) and to take legal action to enforce those terms if they are violated. These "stewardship" responsibilities and their costs are a serious consideration for any group engaged in land conservation.

Once a public board or commission or private conservation group has its values clearly stated, a natural resources completed and criteria for project selection identified, it's ready to apply these to the decisions at hand.

But, this is where an additional factor may enter the picture - timing. A group can never know for certain if the opportunity before them now is better than one that may come along next week or next month. As thorough as the identification of values and the natural resources inventory may be, they can't answer this question. So, at any given time, a group may need to decide on the merits of a project at that time, with little or no ability to compare it with opportunities that may come later. However, they can compare any project at any time with a set of criteria they've established and, by doing so, determine the degree to which the project meets those criteria.

Although following the steps suggested here doesn't guarantee every decision will be perfect, conservation groups will do a better job of investing in conservation if they have a plan. Keys to a good plan are public participation, identifying values, identifying and locating features of interest, defining selection criteria and establishing a process for making decisions. As communities and conservation groups grapple with important decisions about land conservation, preserving community character and financial responsibility, many are getting help from public agencies and land trusts.