

ASHLEY COMMUNITY FOREST Q&A

DRAFT #6 (Paganelli)

What is the Alliance for Vermont Communities?

The Alliance for Vermont Communities (AVC) is a non-profit conservation group formed in August 2016, with the mission to protect working farms, forests and communities of central Vermont and to promote responsible development that will sustain the rural heritage and values for present and future generations.

What is the proposed Ashley Community Forest?

An approximately 218-acre parcel of forest land located along the boundary between Sharon and Strafford, acquired in June of 2018 by the Alliance for Vermont Communities (AVC) in an effort to block the expansion of the New Vistas project. The land was purchased from the Ashley family using private donations and help from the Vermont Land Trust (VLT) and the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board (VHCB). AVC would like to gift the land to both towns, for use as a shared community forest. In addition, AVC would like to provide the towns with \$20,000 cash to seed a management fund, and assist the towns to develop a comprehensive forest management plan.

Where is the Ashley Community Forest?

The Ashley parcel is located in both Sharon and Strafford and is accessed from the end of Nutting Road in Strafford. It is just south of the Manning Farm and just west of the Robinson Farm. The land has a number of well-constructed farm and logging roads that could easily be developed into recreational trails and there are long-range views from the height of land. The Ashley Community Forest would be a working forest, open to the public for hiking, skiing, hunting and other appropriate recreational uses.

Who would manage and maintain the Ashley Community Forest?

At present the land is owned and managed by AVC. If the towns accept the gift of this land, the Ashley Community Forest would be owned jointly by both towns. A forest management plan would be developed with public input and the approval of both towns, the Vermont Land Trust and the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board. Management activities on the Ashley Community Forest would be initiated and overseen by a Board of local citizens appointed by both towns. The Ashley Community Forest Board would be charged with the responsibility to manage and maintain the forest in accordance with the approved forest management plan. Initial thinking is that an Ashley Community Forest Fund would be established with the \$20,000 cash gift provided by AVC and managed jointly by both towns to fund activities at the forest. Future contributions to the Fund would come from timber sale revenue on the forest, private donations or other sources. In the long-term the Ashley Community Forest is expected to be financially self-sustaining.

If the towns accept the gift of this forest, will there be a cost in forgone property taxes?

Yes, based on 2018 property tax rates, it is estimated that each town would forgo \$1,000-1,100 per year in property tax if this parcel was owned by the towns and is therefore tax exempt.

Is there enough value to the towns in the land and forest to compensate for forgone taxes?

AVC and many members of the two communities think so, but that will be up to the select boards of both towns to ultimately decide. The land is currently valued at approximately \$325,000 and would be gifted to the towns. A cash gift of \$20,000 would be provided by AVC to seed the Ashley Community Forest Fund. A 2016 timber assessment placed timber value at \$36,675 and estimated annual growth of \$1,044/year over the next two decades. It is expected that the Ashley Community Forest would have an extensive recreational trail system that would connect with trails on the neighboring conserved properties, creating a recreational attraction that would draw visitors to the area and benefit local businesses. In addition, the citizens of both towns, and their visitors, would have full recreational use of a 268-acre forest in perpetuity.

Would accepting the forest cost taxpayers more for liability insurance?

No, the towns' current liability insurance is adequate.

What is a conservation easement, and would there be an easement on the Ashley Community Forest?

A conservation easement is a legally binding agreement that clearly defines what uses of land are allowed or not allowed. The easement is monitored annually by the easement holder. AVC would place a conservation easement on the Ashley Community Forest before passing ownership to the towns. The easement would allow forestry, agriculture and most outdoor recreational activities and would prohibit subdivision, commercial or recreational development and mining. The easement would be held jointly by VLT and VHCB, and would be monitored by VLT.

Who would build and maintain the recreational trails in the Ashley Community Forest?

The Ashley Community Forest Board would be responsible for building and maintaining trails, but the Board could employ a third party, such as the Upper Valley Trails Alliance or other trail-building organization, as well as volunteer workers and stewards. The forest would be part of the community, and state and federal grants are available for trail building and recreational purposes.

If the Ashley Community Forest is to remain a working forest, who will organize and supervise forest management activities?

These duties would likely be shared by the Orange and Windsor County Foresters, at no direct cost to the towns. County Foresters are employed by the Vermont Department of Forests, Parks & Recreation and part of their duties include management of community forests upon

request. The towns could also hire a private consulting forester.

How would the funds generated from timber sales, and other revenue be used?

All of the revenue from the Ashley Community Forest would be placed in the Ashley Community Forest Fund for use to maintain and improve the property. Allocation of funds would be under the jurisdiction of the appointed Ashley Community Forest Board in accordance with the management plan approved by the two towns.

How will the parking areas be maintained?

Once parking areas are established, the towns may be asked to plow and maintain the parking areas and road access, as they might do for other town owned facilities.



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