

Why Conserve Land?

BY THE GUILFORD CONSERVATION COMMISSION

Driving along Guilford's country roads through fields and forests, it is easy to think that there is plenty of undeveloped land in our town and to imagine there always will be. So why do we need to conserve land here?

Scientists have understood for decades that the natural world functions as a whole, with every part dependent on every other part. We have learned that all living beings—human and otherwise—need air, water, food, and shelter to survive. But we also need each other, and our surrounding environments, to maintain the ecological balance that guarantees the survival of all. That ecological balance depends on diversity—of climates, landscapes, waterways, plant and animal habitats, and life forms of all kinds and sizes.

The only way to maintain this essential diversity is to make sure that all these habitats continue to exist—unbroken forest tracts, ponds and lakes, rivers and streams, wild mountaintops, rich bottom land, wetlands, working forests, farmland—all of them working together, none of them overwhelming the rest. Ecologists believe that at least 40 percent of land in any region needs to be conserved for mutual sustainability of the earth's organisms. The only way to ensure that all of these environments continue to exist is to protect them—i.e., conserve them—for ourselves now, and for future generations.

Conserving land does not mean removing it from human access or use; in fact, it is a way to guarantee that land will always be there to use and enjoy, and to retain its ecological value to the

surrounding environment and all its inhabitants. Land can be conserved in many different ways: by outright sale or donation to a land trust; through conservation easements; through partnerships between groups with different but complementary goals working together.

Conservation easements can be as flexible as a landowner wishes. For example, a family needing to sell its farm could reach a partnership agreement with a land trust wherein they retain a parcel for future family members to use while conserving the rest under an agricultural easement that would allow another farmer to buy that land at an affordable rate. The land trust would cover the difference in cost between the

“Forests clean our air, enhance water security, support critical biodiversity, and serve as the world’s oldest and most proven carbon storage technology.” [from “Conservation in a Changing Climate” at climatehge.Ita.org/forest-carbon]

conserved farmland's value and the original appraised value, allowing the family to benefit from the sale. Conserving land through agricultural easements in Guilford could help support the development of local CSAs and guarantee future food sources for our town, while also providing tax benefits for landowners. Similarly, easements can be used to preserve working forests, which are essential for Guilford's ecological future.

Public and conserved lands currently make up only 6.2 percent (1581 acres) of Guilford, according to the Windham Regional Commission. Conservation areas in Guilford are predominantly large

undeveloped, mostly forested areas with shallow soils, bedrock, wetlands, and steep slopes. They include land owned publicly (by town or state) and private lands with conservation easements that permanently restrict development and protect natural features.

While rocky land with steep slopes and ridgelines are unsuited for development, they need to be protected because they provide critical habitats and wildlife corridors for many species. Just as humans need roads to get from one place to another, animals need corridors that link habitats together so they can migrate, find new populations for breeding and continuous food sources throughout the seasons. A current focus of the Guilford Conservation Commission is to pinpoint critical corridors for all wildlife—from salamanders and turtles to large mammal crossings—and make sure that through signage and conservation efforts these corridors remain viable.

Conserved land provides space for low-impact recreation such as hunting, fishing, and hiking, as well as scenic backdrops to enjoy in every season, thus preserving the beauty and rural character of our town.

If you are interested in exploring agricultural or trail easements, or conservation of larger tracts of land, please don't hesitate to contact members of the Conservation Commission (listed on the Guilford town website). We are gathering resources about land conservation and planning a community forum to provide more information and answer questions you may have. Stay tuned!

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