Wolcott Creates 735-Acre Community Forest to Boost Trail Access, Support Biodiversity, and Strengthen Climate Defenses

(WOLCOTT, VERMONT) – A new 735-acre Community Forest within walking distance of the Wolcott town center has been permanently protected as of Sept. 5, 2024.

Conserved and created in partnership by the Town of Wolcott, Trust for Public Land, the Northern Rivers Land Trust, and the Vermont Housing & Conservation Board, the new public land is within walking distance of Wolcott Village and directly adjacent to the Wolcott Elementary School, Lamoille Valley Rail Trail, and the proposed Velomont Trail.

Containing 31 acres of wetlands, 5.5 miles of headwater streams and river frontage, and valuable wildlife corridors for moose, bobcat and other species, the forest will provide a natural link between the nearby Green River Reservoir State Park, Elmore State Forest, and East Hill Wildlife Management Area.

The property's conservation values will be permanently secured by a conservation easement co-held by Northern Rivers Land Trust (NRLT) and Vermont Housing & Conservation Board (VHCB).

"Congratulations to the Town of Wolcott on securing its Community Forest, a 735-acre paradise with unique ecological features, well managed forest and soon-to-be miles of hiking trails. Northern Rivers Land Trust is honored to co-hold the conservation easement with the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board and looks forward to a continuing engagement with the Wolcott community in stewardship of this property, the largest single addition to NRLT's portfolio of conserved properties," said Jack Travelstead, NRLT Board Chair.

"VHCB is grateful for the support and partnership of the Wolcott community, Trust for Public Land, and Northern Rivers Land Trust in creating the Wolcott Community Forest," said VHCB Executive Director Gus Seelig. "This project enhances local access to the outdoors for recreation and education, boosts the local economy through its connection to the Lamoille Valley Rail Trail, and conserves a large tract of forest and riparian areas, providing essential ecosystem services for climate resilience and stormwater management — key priorities for VHCB conservation funding. We are hopeful the project may also result in the donation of an affordable house lot to Green Mountain Habitat for Humanity that will provide another much-needed home at a time when Vermont has a great shortage of affordable homeownership opportunities. We thank all the partners who made this happen."

With support from a Vermont Outdoor Recreation Economic Collaborative (VOREC) Community Grant, the Wolcott Community Forest will be enhanced with a new professionally-built 5 mile trail network. The multi-use trails will provide a wide range of close-to-home outdoor opportunities including hiking,

backcountry skiing, mountain biking, areas for quiet natural contemplation, and a picturesque open field for educational gatherings and community events.

“The successful creation of this new Community Forest is a huge win for the residents of Wolcott, particularly students and families within the school community, future visitors, and downstream communities. We are particularly thrilled with how it advances the goal of Trust for Public Land to connect everyone to the outdoors, building healthy, equitable climate-ready communities in the process. Accessible outdoor places like the new Wolcott Community Forest, co-located with Wolcott Elementary, will help democratize access to the outdoors, building awareness and use of this remarkable place through an anchor institution in this community,” said Shelby Semmes, New England region Vice President for Trust for Public Land.

The original idea for the Wolcott Community Forest stemmed from conversations in 2020 as local school officials sought outdoor recreation and educational opportunities for their students, without having to take a bus to access public lands.

Following the overwhelming vote of support to move forward with the community forest during a special town meeting on November 3, 2021, the Wolcott Selectboard chartered the new Wolcott Stewardship Committee, a formal volunteer committee made up of Wolcott residents.

The Stewardship Committee invited input from throughout the community, and heard a clear desire for close-to-town recreation options and undisturbed natural areas that could benefit both residents and visitors. The group met monthly to learn about forest ecology and management, to understand the potential opportunities and benefits of a municipally-owned forest, and to develop priorities and processes for the forest’s creation and future management.

“Wolcott residents have enthusiastically embraced creating their own town forest. It brings so many benefits to our community; it is within walkable distance from our village center for easily accessible recreation, it is adjacent to our elementary school to expand outdoor education, it provides long-term protection to our river corridors, and it prevents future forest fragmentation. Wolcott could never have achieved this purchase without the help of Trust for Public Land. We are so grateful for their assistance in acquiring this land. A dream come true for Wolcott,” said Linda Martin, Selectboard Chair for the Town of Wolcott

As the process continued over those two years, the rising frequency of flood events in Wolcott and throughout Vermont elevated an additional goal of the community forest – to naturally hold and slow rising stormwater from the adjacent Elmore Branch and Lamoille River. In direct response to those events, the conservation easement includes expanded water protection areas around rivers, streams

and wetlands, and the management plan for the Wolcott Community Forest includes enhancing and restoring more than 80 acres of riparian area along the Elmore Branch, a Lamoille River tributary.

“For more than 20 years, Trust for Public Land has been the national leader in the Community Forest movement, which began in New England and has since expanded across the United States. But in recent years, the value of community forests in decreasing the potential impacts of flooding has understandably risen in importance as a key tool for rural communities,” added Semmes.

Trust for Public Land worked with the community to secure funds from private and grassroots entities, as well as multiple federal and state sources to deliver the property to the town. The project was funded by the federal Community Forest and Open Space Fund, Vermont Housing & Conservation Board, Town of Wolcott, NorthLight Foundation, Trust for Public Land’s Community Impact Fund, The Nature Conservancy’s Resilient and Connected Appalachians Program, the Bafflin Foundation, Davis Conservation Foundation, Vermont Community Foundation’s Green Mountain Fund, the Larsen Fund, Oakland Foundation, Bourne Family Association, LLC, an anonymous foundation, and many private donors.

ABOUT TRUST FOR PUBLIC LAND: Trust for Public Land (TPL) is a national nonprofit that works to connect everyone to the benefits and joys of the outdoors. As a leader in equitable access to the outdoors, TPL works with communities to create parks and protect public land where they are needed most, including sites that reconnect Indigenous and Tribal communities to their ancestral lands and outdoor spaces that honor Black history and culture. Since 1972, TPL has protected more than 4 million acres of land, created more than 5,420 parks, trails, schoolyards, and iconic outdoor places, raised $94 billion in public funding for parks and public lands, and connected nearly 9.7 million people to the outdoors. To learn more, visit tpl.org.

ABOUT NORTHERN RIVERS LAND TRUST: The Northern Rivers Land Trust was founded in 2006 by residents of Hardwick and six neighboring towns who were interested in preserving the area’s rural character by protecting farms, forestland, water, and wildlife habitat. NRLT is a private, nonprofit 501(c)3 land conservation organization supported by its membership and governed by a volunteer board of trustees. To learn more, visit northernriverslandtrust.org.

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