

# River Point Management Plan

## Introduction

The 41-acre, town-owned River Point property, also known as Three Rivers Farm or the Walker Farm, has been identified by the Conservation Commission (2004), the Open Space Planning sub-committee (2005) and the Open Space Implementation Sub-Committee (2007) as a high priority for open space protection due to its unique historic, habitat, recreational and agricultural values. The recommendation of the Open Space Sub-Committee regarding this property reads as follows:

*The town-owned River Point property should be preserved as a natural area, protected from development in perpetuity by a conservation easement. A comprehensive plan for the use of the property should be developed. At a minimum, allowable uses should include:*

- *Active wildlife management to retain the diverse habitat found on the property;*
- *Passive recreation, including trails, wildlife observation and other non-consumptive outdoor pursuits consistent with the features and character of the property.*
- *Outdoor and historical education activities, including limited archeological study.*
- *Agricultural practice, including farming and/or community gardening.*

*An active stewardship program should be implemented and the fate of the buildings evaluated in terms of the comprehensive property plan.*

This report summarizes the findings, conclusions and recommendations of the Open Space Sub-Committee and its River Point working group regarding the future use of the property. It proposes a comprehensive plan for this property that the committee believes offers the most value to the community now and into the future. The report consists of four sections, each of which addresses one key aspect of the plan.

## I. Recreation

River Point offers outstanding opportunities for outdoor recreation, including hiking, birding, wildlife observation, picnicking, fishing, snowshoeing and cross-country skiing. To facilitate these uses, we recommend that:

- a. Trails be established around the perimeter of the property, and in areas not slated for agricultural or residential use. By bridging the West Branch of the Piscataqua River, this trail can be extended over to the Adam property (under easement protection, with full public access authorized) and through Falmouth Land Trust property all the way up the East Branch to Community Park and eventually the Town Forest. Care will be taken to route these trails away from extensive patches of poison ivy that are found on the property and away from critical wildlife habitat, including habitat for the endangered New England cottontail rabbit and nesting birds. These trails would be laid out, constructed and maintained by the Falmouth Conservation Corps, with portions needing mowing maintained by the resident farmer as a condition of his/her contract with the town. A boardwalk trail extending to the pond in the northwest corner of the property might also be constructed, along with a wildlife observation platform.
- b. Groomed cross-country ski trails could be established on the property as part of the farming agreement. In return for doing the grooming, the farmer could charge people a fee for use of the trails and perhaps operate a small-scale ski-touring center.
- c. Canoe access to the property could be provided by establishing a landing for that purpose at the point where the East Branch meets the Presumpscot River. People launching canoes from the Blackstrap Road put-in point would thus have easy access to the property.
- d. Snowmobiles and ATVs will not be allowed on the property given its relatively small size, the availability of other locations for these activities and the intrusion they would create for a resident farmer. However, a snowmobile could be used for xc ski trail grooming and ATV for any related farm use.
- e. Interpretative signs should be constructed at key points in the trail – starting with an information kiosk at the entrance – pointing out key historical, geological and biological features.

Establishing trails would be the easiest part of this plan to implement and could be done immediately (summer 2008). Challenges would include:

- Routing the trails away from the house and surrounding property.
- Constructing a bridge over the West Branch (which could be done at a later date).
- Creating interpretive signs.
- Educating trail users about the dangers of deer ticks and poison ivy.

Volunteers would provide the labor needed for this aspect of the plan. Funds would be needed to construct the bridge (wood, cables, etc.) and for signage. It is difficult to know how much these would cost until an actual design was in hand.

## II. Wildlife Management

River Point contains significant diverse wildlife habitat and that is in many regards an oasis for wildlife in the middle of what is otherwise a highly developed area. Two endangered species are known to live on the property, New England cottontail rabbits and the wood turtle. Many birds use the property during migration and as breeding habitat. Several things need to be done to protect this habitat.

- a. The area in the northwest corner of the property, between the house to the south, the river to the north, and a ridge of land to the east is prime habitat for the cottontail rabbits. It also contains an active vernal pool and other productive wetlands. Other than a short boardwalk trail that might extend from the end of the easterly ridge into that wetland, no other human disturbance should be allowed in this area. In time, this area may need brush hogging or logging to keep the vegetation in the early successional stage needed by cottontails.
- b. The area in the northeast corner of the property is particularly good nesting habitat for migratory birds. This area too ought to be off limits to visitors and trails routed away from this part of the property.
- c. A  $\pm 60$  ft. vegetative buffer should be allowed to grow up along the edge of the Presumpscot River. Such a buffer would provide a needed protective corridor for wildlife and act as a buffer between the agricultural area and the river. To speed up this process, the Casco Bay Conservation Corps might be available to replant this corridor with native trees and shrubs. Any replanting should be done without disturbing or impacting present or future archeological sites in the area.
- d. Invasive species are not a big problem on the River Point property, but they do exist. An eradication effort should be undertaken by the Falmouth Conservation Corps in the coming year, then sustained by them and the farmer (if any) in the future.
- e. A policy regarding dogs on the property will have to be adopted, since dogs are highly disturbing to wildlife, particularly nesting birds, and potentially farm animals.
- f. Given the size of the property, its proximity to developed areas, and the recreational opportunities it will provide, hunting and trapping should be prohibited on River Point. An exception to this provision would be varmint control measures the farmer may need to implement. Fishing will be allowed.
- g. The Conservation Corps should erect nesting boxes on the property, such as wood duck boxes along the riverfront, or an osprey nesting platform to encourage wildlife.

An inventory of indigenous plants and animals should be done on this property, including some base-line data regarding population levels. This too would be done by the Falmouth Conservation Corps. There should be little or no cost to the town for the establishment of these management practices on the property.

### III. Historical Significance

The property is the location of one or more Native American archaeological sites of pre-Columbian age, and one or more sites dating just after European contact (17th century). The Town of Falmouth should manage the property to preserve and protect these sites and to utilize them for archaeological/scientific and educational purposes.

In general, these principals mean that there will be no sub-surface disturbance without prior consultation with the Maine Historic Preservation Commission, except for possible agricultural use of the land for which tillage of the soil will be limited to areas that had been previously tilled and limited to a depth of less than 8 inches.

The archaeological sites on the property are known primarily through avocational archaeologists' activities. Professional archaeological work has been limited to a small area associated with a water line that crosses the property. Based on the avocational archaeological work on the property, archaeological material may be localized within multiple areas of a few acres or less. These archaeological areas may be focused on or constrained by topography and/or changes in soils. Based on the avocational archaeological work so far, we know that the river floodplain contains archaeological material from about 2,800 years in age to 17th century A.D., buried in levels from the plow zone to a depth of over a meter. Individual hills on the property north of the floodplain contain material that is about 3,500 years of age, and possibly much older (about 7,000 years). These are shallowly buried (top few feet).

The primary management approach to these archaeological materials shall be a long-term program of archaeological testing and mapping, with several goals. One goal would be a map of areas that contain significant archaeological deposits and areas that do not. Restrictions on land use, and depth of disturbance could therefore be relaxed in areas that are proven not to contain significant archaeological material. Another goal will be to work with the Maine Historic Preservation Commission to prepare National Register of Historic Places nomination forms for the archaeological sites on the property, as they become better known, and to develop an archaeological monitoring plan to protect the site(s) on the property from looting.

#### IV. Agriculture

River Point has been a farm for the better part of the last 240 years. A survey of the property by the Cooperative Extension Service and the Maine Farmland Trust confirms the high agricultural value of this land and the high potential it holds for becoming a viable agricultural operation again. With increasing concern about the quality of our food supply, a desire for locally grown food and a growing number of people interested in farming as an occupation, we believe there is a unique opportunity to restore portions of River Point to agricultural use.

Our vision is for an organic, community supported agriculture (CSA) operation on the site, producing high quality food for Falmouth residents and other markets in the greater Portland area. Given the access issues and the condition of the buildings on site – especially the house – this is admittedly an ambitious vision. After careful thought, we believe it is a vision worth pursuing, a vision that can be realized and which will result in significant benefit to the community.

Here are the challenges we see and the solutions we suggest:

1. Access: A farming operation will require access to the property by heavy machinery. The viable access option is to replace the existing 150 year-old wooden bridge. The cost of replacing that bridge with a comparable steel structure was estimated to be \$145,000 in 2003. The cost is now much higher, in 2009 dollars that cost will be approximately \$225,000. Step one in this process will be the replacement of that bridge. The existing agreement with the railroad allows for this work. Parking for visitors to the property will also have to be provided.

Solution: The sale of mitigation rights on 20-25 acres of the flood plain and wetland portion of the property will generate an estimated \$200,000 in revenue to the town. That revenue should be applied to the cost of a new bridge and accompanying parking area. There appears to be room for a parking lot next to the bridge access. It would have to be developed with the approval of the shopping center owners.

2. The House: The existing house is in poor condition, but an assessment of the structure by an experienced house restorer indicates that it is basically sound and could be restored to livable condition. An estimate by the same restorer is that a \$60-70,000 investment would get the house back into solid livable condition, with major systems replaced (heating, septic, water) or upgraded (electrical) and structural and cosmetic work completed. This work would be done by a combination of volunteer and hired labor. Interior finish work would be done by the resident farmer, and at their cost. An alternative, better in many respects, would be to build a new structure and sell it to the farmer under the same kinds of terms that workforce housing is considering for their properties.

Solution: The town should dedicate the capital reserves needed to renovate the house, or to build a new house, plus other improvements that will be needed on the property. Once completed and a farmer selected to manage the property, the house, and outbuildings will be sold outright to the farmer for the cost involved. The land under the buildings, and surrounding farmland, will be leased to the farmer. Deed provisions will restrict the resale of the property only to someone who will also operate a farm on the land. This will accomplish several things:

- The town will not be a landlord, or be responsible for continuing maintenance.
- The farmer will be able to build equity in the property, strengthening his/her commitment to the land.

- The property will be added to the tax rolls, generating income to the town each and every year.
3. The Outbuildings: The one remaining outbuilding, though full of trash, is in sound usable condition. The makeshift structure attached to the rear of that building would be removed and the interior cleaned out. This would require little money to accomplish and would leave the building in good condition for hay storage, as an animal shelter and/or for equipment storage. Additional outbuildings could be built by the farmer at his/her cost, and be resold with other buildings.
  4. The Land: The agricultural land needed to make the farm viable will be leased to the farmer on a long-term basis at a low rate. Specific responsibilities and restrictions central to the guiding mission of the farm will be incorporated into that lease, such as it be managed as an organic farm, that public access be provided, and the like.
  5. The Farmer(s): The reality is that it is often harder to save the farmer than it is to save a farm, particularly in southern Maine. However, the Maine Farmland Trust and its Farm Link program has a list of 150+ people who are eager to obtain land to farm. Many of these people have served apprenticeships through MOFGA and are well qualified to take on their own farm.

We will develop a Request for Proposals from Farm Link participants interested in farming the River Point land. In addition to the usual background and experience information, we will also ask them to develop a detailed business plan for their intended enterprise. That plan will include information on the crops/products they will produce, soil management strategies, outbuildings and equipment, proposed ancillary activities (e.g. - xc trails, summer camp for kids, corn maze, etc.) and financial projections. Top applicants will be interviewed and a finalist chosen by the open space committee, with input from the Maine Farmland Trust, MOFGA and the Cooperative Extension service.

The approach has been used successfully in other communities, such as with Scarborough's Broadturn Farm. We are confident it will work for Falmouth.

A key component of any final agreement will include a long-term commitment on the part of both parties. Farming is a very labor-intensive enterprise, involving a great deal of "sweat equity." Thus, farmers need to know they will be able to occupy the property long-term, assuming they meet our performance criteria. Selling the house and allowing the farmer to build equity in the property is one way of fostering this long-term relationship; a long-term lease on the farmland is another.