

Management Plan For Mills Riverside Park

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Purpose

The management plan for Mills Riverside Park is a fluid document that takes a comprehensive look at the 216-acre property and provides direction for the immediate and long term operation of the park. The plan works within the framework of the conservation easement which is held by the Vermont Land Trust and the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board and establishes the manner in which the easement's goals and purposes will be implemented. This includes the balancing of recreational and educational activities with the protection of important natural resources and wildlife habitat.

The Jericho Underhill Park District's Board of Trustees is responsible for drafting the management plan and ensuring its implementation. The conservation easement's permitted uses and restrictions define a number of management decisions and allow for a more effective discussion between board members and the community. The initial Plan was approved on June 6, 2001 and is the basis for the current Plan. Significant revisions were approved on February 15, 2017 and are included in the Plan.

Balancing public demand for recreational opportunities along with the conservation of unique natural features and wildlife habitat requires a sensitive approach to park management that carefully listens to community sentiment and remains committed to the purposes of the conservation easement. Prudent stewardship is required in order to provide a high-quality, enjoyable experience for park visitors today as well as in the future.

In order to better document the park's special qualities and develop plans for the protection and possible enhancement of these features, professionals were consulted prior to June 2001. These individuals include Scott Moreau of Greenleaf Forestry who was hired to evaluate the forested and riparian portions of the property and submit a Forest Management Plan; Susan Morse of Morse and Morse Forestry who conducted a wildlife habitat inventory and provided recommendations concerning wildlife habitat management; and Nat Goodhue of Goodhue Land Design who coordinated with Susan Morse and offered professional recommendations concerning trail design and planning.

In 2016, Timber and Stone LLC provided a thorough Trail Assessment Plan which has been used to update trail management aspects of this Plan.

The purposes from the conservation easement are included as follows:

- 1. To contribute to the implementation of the policies of the State of Vermont designed to foster the conservation of the state's wildlife habitats, agricultural, forestry, and other natural resources through planning, regulation, land acquisition, and tax incentive programs.*
- 2. To conserve public, noncommercial recreational and educational opportunities, plant, aquatic and wildlife habitats, scenic resources and agricultural and forestry values associated with the Protected Property for present and future generations.*
- 3. These purposes will be advanced by conserving the Protected Property because it possesses the following attributes (without respect to the relative importance of the attributes):*

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- a. *is located adjacent to the Villages of Jericho and Underhill and is considered by residents of both Towns to be a critical scenic property in both Towns for maintaining the beauty, unique rural Vermont character and strong sense of place for community residents;*
- b. *exceptionally scenic views of Mount Mansfield from heavily traveled Vermont Route 15;*
- c. *52 acres of open meadow including a spring-fed pond providing the possibility for recreational, cultural and educational uses by the general public, both Towns, including the children attending the nearby Brown's River Middle School and the Underhill I. D. School and those using the Deborah Rawson Memorial Library;*
- d. *has opportunities for all-season, dispersed, low-impact recreation within the forested portion of the Protected Property;*
- e. *4,500 feet of frontage on the Browns River which River and the forested riparian areas provide habitat for aquatic species including three rare fish, Finescale dace (*Phoxinus neogaeus*), Rosyface shiner (*Notropis rubellus*) and Trout-perch (*Percopsis omiscomayeus*) and numerous other known species of fish, indicating a great diversity and extent of aquatic habitat characteristic of large streams and rivers;*
- f. *164 acres of forest containing an important hard mast stand of American beech with high use levels by bears evident from the recent and historical tree scarring;*
- g. *contains a portion of South Hill which is part of the Green Mountains and supports critical food habitat and travel corridor for black bear, moose, bobcat and many other mammals, and turkey, American woodcock and many other birds including songbirds;*
- h. *and approximately 750 feet of undeveloped frontage on Vermont Route 15 with unobstructed pastoral views across the Protected Property for the traveling public.*

Grantor and Grantees recognize these public noncommercial recreational and educational opportunities, plant, aquatic and wildlife habitats, scenic resources and agricultural and forestry values of the Protected Property, and share the common purpose of conserving these values by the conveyance of conservation restrictions development rights, public access easement and riparian and wildlife habitat easements to prevent the use or development of the Protected Property for any purpose or in any manner which would conflict with the maintenance of these public noncommercial recreational opportunities, plant, aquatic and wildlife habitats, scenic resources, agricultural and forestry values. Grantees accept the development rights, perpetual conservation easement restrictions, public access easement, riparian and wildlife habitat easements and right of entry in order to conserve these values for present and future generations.

Seeking citizen input along with the careful documentation of the park's natural resources and wildlife habitat are important steps in developing this management plan. This document will be updated as needed and reviewed at least every five years by the Jericho Underhill Park District.

History

The Jericho Land Trust (JLT) recognized the significance of the Mills property and its vulnerability to development pressure during the summer of 1998. Following an appraisal, JLT began a fundraising and grant writing effort to obtain funds for \$300,000. A grant application to the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board was submitted for \$50,000 in January and a request for \$75,000 from the Freeman Foundation, with Vermont Land Trust's assistance, was also made.

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Both grant applications were successful and helped to encourage the Town of Jericho and the Town of Underhill to contribute, as the result of a Town Meeting vote in March, \$30,000 and \$20,000 respectively. Additional grant funding came from the Free Press Foundation (\$20,000), the William P. Wharton Foundation (\$5,000) and matching grants from IBM and IDX.

In April, JLT began a general appeal to local residents for additional capital to bridge the funding gap. The landowner had signed a purchase and sales agreement for \$300,000 but the timeline for acquisition expired at the end of June. To meet this deadline, JLT sent brochures to every household within the two towns and began an intense campaign. The total fundraising goal was \$375,000 including grants, which included \$300,000 to the landowner, \$30,000 for Vermont Land Trust's expenses and additional money for the start up costs of the park;

A sum of almost \$370,000 was successfully raised and Jericho Land Trust became the owner of the Mills property on July 14, 1999. Mills Riverside Park opened two weeks later and has been available for community enjoyment ever since. Jericho Land Trust transferred ownership of Mills Riverside Park on February 24, 2000 to the newly formed Jericho Underhill Park District. This two-town district was created for the purpose of owning and operating the Park; and Jericho Land Trust paid all park costs until August 15, 2000, at which time the Jericho Underhill Park District assumed financial responsibility for the Park. An additional \$15,000 was set aside for start up improvements of the Park by Jericho Land Trust.

General description of the property

A stunning view of Mt. Mansfield forms the background of Mills Riverside Park. This scenic vista is preceded by broad open meadow and is sharply defined by forested South Hill. The property consists of 216 acres of land with the majority in Jericho. Approximately 52 acres is open meadow and the remaining 164 acres is forested, steep terrain. The Browns River forms a natural boundary on the north side of the property. A covered bridge spans the river and helps create the entrance. A natural spring fed pond is centrally located in the meadow area. Park terrain begins as gentle to moderately sloping and graduates to steep and ledgy as it continues up South Hill. Important wildlife habitat has been documented at the higher elevations as well as along the Browns River.

Directly adjacent to Mills Riverside Park are two large community schools and a public library. As a result, this property is ideally located as a community resource for recreation, education and wildlife viewing. Park property also abuts privately owned, agricultural land to the east and west and unfragmented forest to the south. These large tracts of undeveloped land further support numerous species including black bear, moose, bobcat, and fisher and provides a wildlife corridor along the Green Mountain Range. Conserving this important habitat was a primary reason for acquiring the Mills property.

All recreational activities and land management decisions within Mills Riverside Park are based on the permitted uses and restrictions that are stated in the conservation easement held by VLT and VHCB. The 216-acre property is divided into four different management zones. These zones are delineated in the property map (Appendix A).

The Parking Zone - This zone is a triangular piece of land that is located in the northwest corner of the property and is designated for the parking of motorized vehicles. It is roughly five acres in size. Any improved parking area will remain unpaved and unlit.

The Scenic, Recreation, and Agricultural and Riparian Zone - This zone is mostly level meadowland that lies immediately south of the Brown's River. It comprises about 62 acres and includes a riparian buffer easement that represents a 50 foot buffer area along the Browns River. This buffer amounts to about five acres in size and includes both sides of the river at the northwestern end of the property. It has specific permitted uses and restrictions as stated in the conservation easement and a separate management plan that is included in the Forest Management Plan. Some management objectives for the riparian buffer are:

- Leave vegetation intact and restrict mowing of this area;
- Remove exotic and invasive plants;
- Plant additional vegetation in order to correct erosion problems;
- Establish specific trails to limit disturbance;
- Establish interpretive signs to explain the importance of this natural buffer and its unique importance to water quality and fish and animal habitat;
- Recreational activities include, but are not limited to; walking, cross country skiing, biking, horseback riding, snowshoeing, and picnicking.

The park is frequently used by the local schools for student field trips and physical exercise. The middle school cross-country running team, for example, trains on the lower park property and hosts a regional competition there. Nature walks and community events are also scheduled at the park. A gravel driveway creates a hardened surface that facilitates wheelchair access as well. Mowing has created additional paths that extend into the more eastern section on the property. Eagle Scout candidates have enhanced the park trail system by adding signs, benches, a bridge and other improvements. Any structure or playing field development must meet the approval of VLT and be sited in such a way that it does not impair the scenic vista or compromise the riparian buffer. The Jericho Underhill Park District will continue to encourage community use of the park by working closely with recreation committees, conservation commissions, local schools and other organizations.

In addition to the riparian buffer, this zone also includes three athletic fields, a pond, and “Off Leash” dog area. These areas are mowed or brush hogged to maintain the open feel and scenic views. Athletic fields are used by local youth athletic organizations for football, soccer and lacrosse. The open areas near the pond and pavilion are used for the popular summer concerts. The “Off Leash” dog area is one of the most well used areas in the park.

This area includes the Meadow Trail. This trail begins near the pavilion and heads out towards the area where dogs are allowed to roam leash free. Timber and Stone reports that this trail is the most visited trail in the park. This is likely due to the proximity of the trail to the parking area and the ability for dogs to play. The trail tread is mowed and is the appropriate width for the intended use. There are some locations, particularly near the pond, where water pools after heavy rains and should be monitored for the suggested maintenance tasks outlined in the trail log.

The Forest, Wildlife & Trail Zone and Wildlife Habitat Zone - The Forest, Wildlife and Trail Zone is located in the southern portion of the property and comprises about 92 acres of forested land up to elevation of 1000 feet. The southernmost 62 acres of forest, above elevation 1000, are

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designated as a Wildlife Habitat Area. There are no trails or other improvements that could draw park visitors to this zone because of habitat importance.

The Board will:

- Encourage the public to stay on trails and keep dogs on leashes;
- Use existing trails when possible and include aesthetic features (natural and cultural) when possible;
- Limit trail access (horseback riding, mountain bikes) while trails are soft;
- “Release” existing mast production shrubs and trees that are food resources for wildlife;
- Perpetuate Quaking Aspen groves for ruffed grouse.

Trail system at Mills Riverside Park

The park’s vast trail network plays host to a variety of users ranging from walkers to equestrians. At any one point of the day one may encounter dog walkers, bikers, runners, baby strollers, or a class of local students. Due to its convenient location, the park is visited either on the way to work or a visit on the way home. In short, the Mills Riverside Park is a reliable part of the community’s daily schedule.

This consistent use leads to heavy impact on the trail system. The trails make full use of the property, allowing users to explore every corner of the acreage. They wind up one side of the hillside and then meander back down the other side. The trails are wide enough to provide ample room for all users to recreate without interfering with each other. Heavy trail use combined with localized seeps and clay soils has resulted in standing water, erosion, and tread widening throughout the trail system. These conditions led the Jericho Underhill Park District to initiate an assessment of the trails.

During the spring and summer of 2016, Timber & Stone, LLC thoroughly explored the trails of the Mills Riverside Park. The goal was to assess the property with an eye towards maintaining and/or upgrading the trails to prevent erosion and provide safe passage for users. Thorough trail logs and photo pages were created to track where priority work zones are located. Each work zone is linked to a map that indicates their location and has a construction specification that explains how to install the structure.

Trail Descriptions

The trails of Mills Riverside Park are varied both in their individual character as well as the topography they explore. Visitors are able to choose between short trails that are located near the parking lot and fields or long trails that allow for a ramble up forested South Hill. Existing trails within Mills Riverside Park were examined with an eye towards sustainability and user safety. Trail logs and photo pages are attached that provide a linear measurement of each trail and specify the locations of unique features. A brief summary of each trail is found below:

Connector Trail – This trail starts at the Covered Bridge and extends up through the center of the Park. As the name implies, the trail provides connection to the ball fields, pavilion, other trails, and ultimately the Wildlife Habitat Zone. The trail is straight in its alignment, which has led to some

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erosion on the lower portion of the trail. The upper zone is quite steep and narrow. Due to the other trail options, it is recommended to consider closing the upper section of the Connector Trail during summer and opening it in the winter. This would limit the need for constant management of the grade reversals that are necessary to make the trail sustainable.

Meadow Trail – See above.

Fieldstone Loop East / West Trail – The Fieldstone Loop East and West Trails combine to form a large loop worthy of exploring, especially when it is dry. The trail is wide enough to accommodate a variety of year round uses. A vista overlooking a neighboring farm field is available for viewing as is a bench that overlooks old growth maple trees. This trail needs significant attention and should be the priority for the Park District as we move forward with trail upgrades. Multiple locations and long stretches of the trail have naturally widened to an unsustainable level. This is due to standing water, erosion, and the deep mud. The trail log and map contained in the Timber and Stone Assessment highlight specific locations that should be the main priority and focus. By elevating the tread and enhancing drainage, this trail could become the crown jewel of the Mills Riverside Park.

South Hill Loop East / West Trail – Beyond the Fieldstone Loop Trail lies the South Hill Loop Trail. This trail accesses the upper reaches of the property and provides a more intimate and remote recreational experience. The trail corridor is narrower than the other trails of the park. The multiple intersections allows for some fun exploring with the option to include other parts of the Connector Trail and/or the Fieldstone Loop Trail. Similar to the other trails, this trail could benefit from drainage structures and tread elevation. Because this trail does not appear to be as well trodden as the Fieldstone Loop Trail, its repair should be less of a priority. That said, by enhancing drainage the tread will be less likely to widen to an unsustainable state.

Gates and Boundary Marking and Posting

Vehicular access to Mills Riverside Park is limited to the covered bridge that spans the Browns River and creates the only entrance. As specified in the conservation easement, motorized travel across the bridge is restricted to handicap drop off, emergency service, maintenance and the set up and removal of temporary structures for community events. A deeded, gated right-of-way from River Road to the Park property exists east of the Browns River Middle School but the physical condition of this potential access is so poor that its use does not fit into Park planning at this time. Currently the perimeter of the park is established by almost 100 signs on trees that state "No Hunting, Shooting or Trapping" and the Park District's name and telephone number. Additional methods of marking the park's perimeter may include the blazing of trees.

Management of property

It is the responsibility of the Jericho Underhill Park District to encourage public enjoyment of Mills Riverside Park while ensuring its protection.

Uses Permitted - activities permitted in the Park without specific permission from the Board of Trustees can be generalized as public, outdoor, non-motorized recreational and educational activities, which support the Park purposes as defined in the Conservation Easement. Specifically, they include:

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- Walking, hiking, jogging, cross-country skiing and snowshoeing and fishing, either in the pond or in the Browns River;
- Bicycling and horseback riding when trail conditions are dry enough to preclude surface damage;
- Exercising dogs, on leash unless in the off-leash dog area;
- Group activities for 25 people or fewer;
- Picnicking.

Uses requiring specific permission - certain activities within the Park are appropriate, but may result in significant environmental or social impact and; therefore, require specific permission from the Jericho Underhill Park District. Completion of an application form is required. These activities include:

- Reservation of the pavilion
- Scheduled organized sports on a suitable athletic field.
- Group activities for more than 25 people.
- Overnight camping for organizations only
- Any open fire.
- Solicitation or vending.

Uses not permitted - the following activities are not permitted in the Park, except as noted below:

- Possession or use of firearms, including bows and arrows;
- Hunting or trapping, except by directive from the Park District;
- Use of motorized vehicles south of the Browns River, including but not limited to registered vehicles, snowmobiles, ATVs and motorcycles. The exceptions to this requirement include vehicles used for repair or maintenance, emergency, handicapped drop-off and event setup and teardown;
- Any other activity deemed by the Park District to be in conflict with the Conservation Easement;
- Commercial activities unless approved by the board.

Permitted management activities - certain activities which can be classified as functions of Park management are permitted and are listed as follows:

- Management of forest and riparian buffer zones in accordance with the Forest Management Plan and the Conservation Easement. This may include timber harvesting and periodic removal of nonnative, invasive plant species;
- Management of the scenic, recreation and agricultural zones will be done in a manner consistent with the Forest Management Plan and the Conservation Easement. Specifically, this may include mowing or brush hogging of grass areas; tilling, mowing or of agricultural areas; reduction or elimination of forest encroachment into open areas; practices which minimize the use of pesticides and fertilizers; and cover management to enhance wildlife habitat.

Posted rules and regulations - certain of the rules and regulations of the Park are felt to be of enough significance to warrant posting in a prominent location. The posted rules and regulations will include, but may not be limited to, the following:

- Park hours - dawn to dusk;

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- Trash - carry in, carry out;
- Dogs - welcome - on leash only except in the off-leash area. Dog waste must be bagged and removed by dog owner. JUPD provides dog waste bags and disposal receptacles for this purpose.
- No hunting, trapping or firearms;
- No fires except by special permit;
- No camping except by special permit;
- Remain on designated trails;

Current structures on the property:

- Covered bridge (weight limit of 10,000 lbs. limits park access by emergency and maintenance vehicles);
- Pavilion with electrical access;
- Equipment shed;
- Bonfire pit with benches;
- Gazebo;
- Wood pole barn;
- Wood shed;
- Thirty picnic tables and benches;
- Ten tent platform;
- Four trail bridge;
- Trail signage;
- Information kiosk; and
- Stone memorial bench.

Proposed Long Range Physical Improvements

The Jericho Underhill Park District has been addressing public safety and trail maintenance issues while balancing important wildlife habitat concerns. Long range goals include:

- Add security cameras to parking areas and other high use areas of the park. Due to increases in vandalism, including destruction of park structures and car break-ins the Board is reluctantly considering this option;
- Add pedestrian counters in key locations to understand park usage. The board wants a better understanding of park usage;
- Refurbish trail system. Due to high use by the public and rain and snow effects on steep hillsides combined with clay soil and ledge, the trails are deteriorating rapidly;
- Pave a short portion of the parking exit to alleviate the need for frequent grading to fill potholes made by exiting traffic;
- Create a limited use, second entrance suitable for emergency vehicles and material delivery;
- Refurbish (level and reseed) athletic fields;
- Improve park signage;
- Replace the fence at the west end of the athletic fields; and

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- Upgrade settlement ponds and drainage from the fishing pond.
Create trail etiquette and supporting signage
-

Additional Considerations suggested by Timber and Stone, LLC

While exploring the trails of Mills Riverside Park, ideas came to mind that do not fit squarely within the content of this report or its attachments. That said, a list of these ideas and suggestions are described below:

- a. There are many hazard trees located along the trail corridor. It is suggested to consult with a local arborist to identify these trees and have them removed.
- b. Until the trails have been upgraded to a sustainable state, it is recommended to limit equestrian use to the dry times of the year. Specifically, the Fieldstone Loop trail is not equipped to handle horse traffic until the drainage issues have been resolved.
- c. As mentioned in the report, it is recommended to consider limiting use of the upper portion of the Connector Trail to winter. This trail is exceptionally steep and has multiple intersections with the South Loop Trail which appears to get more use. Winter specific trails are successful at making use of steep trails without the maintenance expense.
- d. A system of automated trail counters would help the district appreciate the true volume of users that visit each trail. This effort could be monitored by volunteers and could provide a unique perspective on the park's use and patterns of visitation; and
- e. As discussed in Section 2 of the Trail Aesthetics portion of this report, it is recommended to make more use of the historical significance of the park. By highlighting the signs of sugaring, farming, and logging visitors will be more connected with their local history. A natural history scavenger hunt could be developed that is self-guided and locally relevant.

Conclusion

The trails of the Mills Riverside Park provide a unique recreation experience to the Towns of Jericho and Underhill as well as its surrounding communities. Completing the maintenance outlined in this document will ensure that the trails will endure use and remain intact. Most importantly, the users will continue to enjoy the trails with little knowledge of the work that lies underfoot.

The Park District is working closely with professional consultants to establish a broad base of information regarding the natural resources of Mills Riverside Park. A Forest Management Plan and Wildlife Habitat Assessment have been developed and a Trails Assessment was completed in September 2016. As additional information becomes available, adjustments to the management plan may occur.

Adoption of a final management plan for Mills Riverside Park will be completed after allowing the public ample time to review it and offer suggestions and comments. The draft version will be posted on the park's website, Facebook page and Front Porch Forum. Hard copies will be made available at the Jericho and Underhill Town Halls. A public hearing to solicit feedback and answer questions will also be scheduled. Following this public comment period, the draft management plan will be adopted. Regularly scheduled biweekly meetings of the Park District are always open for

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public comment as well. This plan will be reviewed at least every five years and updated as necessary.