



Management Plan

2023

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Management Plan 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 and use 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. This document will be updated as needed and reviewed at least every five years by the Jericho Underhill Park District.

Park Management

The Jericho Underhill Park District is a separate municipal entity that is solely responsible for the ownership and management of Mills Riverside Park. The Board of Trustees is comprised of seven board members representing both towns. Four are from Jericho and three are from Underhill. This seven-member board handles the day-to-day affairs of the park along with land stewardship. A proposed budget is created every fall with a duly warned public hearing for citizen feedback. This budget is voted on at the Park District's Annual meeting in January. Once approved, the budget is sent to both towns with a percentage split of Underhill paying 38 percent and Jericho paying 62 percent. This split is based on the population of each town.

Park Governance

The Jericho Underhill Park District's Board of Trustees is responsible for drafting the management plan and ensuring its implementation. The conservation easement's (see Appendix A) 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 ***June 21, 2023***.

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.

Mills Riverside Park is an exceptional property that encompasses a diverse landscape, a scenic view, and opportunities for year-round recreation. The Vermont Land Trust (VLT) holds the conservation easement and is responsible for ensuring that the permitted uses and restrictions of this legal document are followed in perpetuity. VLT schedules annual visits of Mills Riverside Park to accomplish the required monitoring of the property.

Conservation easements are often constructed to protect the most important conservation values of the land as well as public access. These critical reasons for conserving the land are called "Purposes". The purposes listed in the conservation easement of Mills Riverside Park are a broad

mix of recreational, educational, scenic, wildlife habitat, riverbank protection and more. The entire conservation easement can be read by visiting the park's website at www.millsriversidepark.org.

History

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 (see Appendix B); Susan Morse of Morse and Morse Forestry who conducted a Wildlife Habitat Inventory (see Appendix C) 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.

The Jericho Underhill Land Trust (JULT) recognized the significance of the Mills property and its vulnerability to development pressure during the summer of 1998. Following an appraisal, JULT began a fundraising and grant writing effort. A sum of almost \$370,000 was successfully raised and JULT 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. The park was named after the Mills family and the property's location in Riverside. JULT transferred ownership of Mills Riverside Park on February 24, 2000 to the newly formed Jericho Underhill Park District. The district was created for the purpose of owning and operating the park which is located within the towns of Jericho and Underhill.

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 pedestrian 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 a large community school, a preschool 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 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 three different management zones. These zones are delineated in the property map (Appendix D).

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 adjacent to VT RT15. In addition to parking, this area is home to the Jericho Farmers' Market during the summer. Port-o-lets are located in this zone during late spring, summer and early fall. While the parking area is normally adequate, during well attended events and weekends with good weather, every bit of the parking area can be used. Drainage in the gravel and grass parking areas are an issue during wet weather. Any improved parking area will remain unpaved and unlit as specified in the conservation easement.

Management objectives for this zone include:

- Provide adequate entrance/exit and parking for all seasons and activities.

Management Actions:

- Expansion of the gravel parking area;
- Correction of drainage issues which, at times, limits available parking.

The Scenic, Recreation, Agricultural and Riparian Zone

This zone is mostly level meadowland that lies immediately south of the Browns River. It comprises about 62 acres and includes a riparian buffer easement that represents a 50 foot buffer area along the Browns River. 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. The open areas near the pond and pavilion are used for the popular summer concerts. The emergency and maintenance access point is located in this zone. Management objectives and challenges differ for each of the areas within this zone.

Agricultural and Riparian Buffer

The agricultural and riparian 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.

Management objectives for the riparian buffer include:

- Maintain the Agricultural and Riparian Buffer as directed by the Conservation Easement to support the health of the river and wildlife.

Management Actions:

- 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;

Recreation Fields

The recreation fields are comprised of three athletic fields that are currently used by youth soccer organizations. They have been mowed continuously but otherwise not improved for a number of years. Grass is mixed with weeds. Low spots collect water.

Management Objectives include:

- Consult with industry specialists to implement ongoing turf management practices that support good quality athletic fields for three season. use.

Management Actions:

- Continue regular warm weather mowing conducive to use by athletic teams.
- Upgrade maintenance of the three fields;
- Fill in low areas.

Scenic Area

The scenic area includes the Meadow Trail. This trail begins near the bridge 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. Recreational activities include, but are not limited to walking, cross country skiing, biking, horseback riding, snowshoeing, and picnicking.

Management objectives include:

- Maintain scenic views as per the Conservation Easement.

Management Actions:

- Mow area during warm weather months;
- Monitor pond drainage as needed;
- Monitor wildlife habitat and adapt as needed.

Off Leash Area

The “Off Leash” dog area is at the eastern part of this zone. It is very scenic, providing some of the best views of Mount Mansfield in the park. The “Off Leash” dog area is one of the most well used areas in the park.

Management objectives for this area include:

- Provide safe area for dogs to be “off leash: as long as they under control of the owner.

Management Actions:

- Include brush hogging and cutting paths in annual mowing contract;
- Maintain butterfly garden;
- Monitor use by patrons and their pets.

Emergency and Maintenance Access Point

The emergency and maintenance access point is located west of the athletic fields. Currently, there is limited park access for emergency, materials delivery and heavy maintenance vehicles due to the pedestrian bridge weight limit. There is a spot along the barbed wire fence to the east of the athletic fields that was occasionally used to deliver gravel, crushed rock, etc. Each use had to be specifically approved by the previous owner. Our easement allows continued access and use of this gate for maintenance and emergency purposes. Plans are being finalized to create such an emergency and maintenance access point in the near future. It includes a gate and will not be an entrance for the public. Parking in this area is prohibited.

Management objectives for the emergency and maintenance access point include:

- Provide secondary park access for emergency and maintenance vehicles only.

Management Actions:

- Install limited entrance/exit site;
- Monitor use to determine if further development is needed to support heavy vehicles;
- Monitor to insure that only intended vehicles use this access point.

The Forest, Wildlife and Trail 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.

Forest and Wildlife Area

The Forest and Wildlife Zone is comprised of the southernmost 62 acres of forest above an elevation of 1,000 feet. This area is designated as a Wildlife Habitat Area. 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. The JUPD makes regular efforts to inspect and maintain perimeter signs.

Management objectives:

- Maintain a natural habitat for wildlife as per the Conservation Easement.

Management Actions:

- Maintain condition of park boundary and "No Hunting" signs;
- Renew signage in this area as needed.

Trail System

The park's vast trail network plays host to a variety of users ranging from walkers to equestrians. At any time 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 nearly 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. 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 remediate the trails. Plans for additional trail remediation follow.

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. The trails on South Hill have brightly colored trail markers. A brief summary of each trail is found below:

Connector Trail This trail starts at the park entrance 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 erosion on the lower portion of the trail. The upper zone is quite steep and narrow. The Connector Trail will need major improvements in the near future.

Meadow Trail Reference the Scenic, Recreation, Agriculture and Riparian Zone on page 5 for discussion.

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. An eastern vista overlooking a neighboring farm field is available for viewing from 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. Sections of the Fieldstone East Loop were repaired in 2015 but will need upgrades in the near future. About half of the Fieldstone West Loop was rebuilt in 2017. The remaining Fieldstone West Loop trail needs major upgrades. Some of the earlier upgrades have not lasted well and are in need of frequent maintenance. Trail log and maps

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 Trails 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 trails on South Hill have brightly colored trail markers. 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.

The trail system is well developed but in constant need of attention. Trails are very well used by hikers, bikers and occasional horseback riders. They are frequently undermined by water and/or blocked by fallen trees and limbs. Culverts fill with debris frequently.

Management objectives include:

- Provide trail network for accepted usages.

Management Actions:

- Monitor trails for safety issues;
- Provide annual maintenance on trails;
- Upgrade and rebuild trails as needed;
- Monitor and clear culverts and drainage ditches as needed.

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.

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 non-native, 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 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.

Current Structures on the Property

- Pedestrian bridge;
- Pavilion with electrical access;
- Equipment shed;
- Bonfire pit with benches;
- Gazebo;
- Wood pole barn;
- Two trail gazebos
- Wood shed;
- Thirty picnic tables and benches;
- Ten tent platforms;
- Four trail bridges;
- Trail signage;
- Trail benches
- Memorial benches.

Proposed Long Range Park 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 pedestrian counters in key locations to understand park usage;
- Restore and improve trail system;
- Upgrade and improve parking areas;
- Enhance emergency and maintenance access point;
- Implement recreational fields multi-year maintenance plan;
- Improve and maintain park signage;
- Add information kiosk and restricted use signage;
- Improve drainage of fishing and holding ponds;
- Improve and maintain website including integration with social media and the addition of electronic payment platform.

Conclusions

Mills Riverside Park provides a unique recreation experience to the Towns of Jericho and Underhill as well as its surrounding communities. Completing the maintenance and improvements outlined in this document will ensure that the fields, natural areas and 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 recreation areas will be maintained to withstand the heavy use by local athletes. Structures will be maintained to continue to support activities and public use. Communication with the public will be improved to enhance public participation.

Adoption of Management Plan

Adoption of a final management plan for Mills Riverside Park was approved after allowing the public ample time to review it and offer suggestions and comments. The draft version was posted on the park's website, Facebook page and Front Porch Forum. A public hearing to solicit feedback and answer questions was scheduled on 10/18/23. Following this public comment period, the draft management plan was adopted on 10/18/23. This plan will be reviewed at least every five years and updated as necessary.

Appendix

All files listed in the appendix are located on the Mills Riverside Park website.

Appendix A Conservation Easement

The Conservation Easement is the legal document that outlines requirements of the Vermont Land Trust upon transfer of ownership of the Mills Riverside Park property to the Jericho Underhill Park District in 1999.

<https://www.millsriversidepark.org/fileadmin/files/Legal/JUPD1999conservationeasement.pdf?7df1f131054f0caecf769fd85d7613f9dde83ce9>

Appendix B Forest Management Plan, Greenleaf Forestry

In order to identify the important natural resources of Mills Riverside Park, a Forest Management Plan was created in 2000 which informed the Conservation Easement language.

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Appendix C Wildlife Habitat Inventory, Morse & Morse Forestry

In order to identify the important natural resources of Mills Riverside Park a Wildlife Habitat Inventory was conducted in 2000 which informed the Conservation Easement language.

https://www.millsriversidepark.org/fileadmin/files/Legal/Wildlife_Plan.pdf?767b37aee8d997cca7cb45e495e2f96809574ff6

Appendix D Mills Riverside Park Map, July 1999, Vermont Land Trust

This map was part of the documentation provided in support of the JUPD acquisition of the Mills Riverside Park property in 1999. It shows boundary details of the three park zones.

https://www.millsriversidepark.org/fileadmin/files/Maps/MRP_Mgm_t_Plan_Map_2.jpeg?3cbf4fa9090d3d6fa8265c5afac234de59cdc91b