

# **Management Plan For Mills Riverside Park**

**ADOPTED June 6, 2001**

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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 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 Jericho Underhill Park District began the process of drafting the Mills Riverside Park Management Plan by engaging the two-town community and seeking citizen input. A questionnaire regarding desired park recreational activities, events and facilities was distributed within the area and at both Town Meetings. Questionnaire feedback was collected for several months and served as a foundation for two public input meetings that were held in April 2000. At these meetings, additional comments and feedback were recorded. Publicized bimonthly meetings and a web site also provide additional opportunities for community input. This series of interactions with local citizens has helped the Park District Board of Trustees clarify public expectations and prioritize projects for the park.

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 have been consulted. 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 will provide recommendations concerning wildlife habitat management; Nat Goodhue of Goodhue Land Design who is coordinating with Susan Morse and offering professional recommendations concerning trail design and planning; Mark Fasching of Vermont Land Trust and the Jericho Conservation Commission who assisted with the wildlife inventory and GPS mapping; Christa Alexander of the Department of Fish and Wildlife and Browns River Watershed Council who will be focusing on the riparian buffer zone and the water quality of the Browns River along with Bill Butler of River Watch; and Livy Strong, Donna Hamill, and John Merchant of Jericho Land Trust who helped with the wildlife habitat inventory. High school students have been offered a "for credit" curriculum that will give them the opportunity to learn how to take a comprehensive look at this property, document it and develop strategies to effectively manage it within the conservation easement guidelines.

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):*
  - 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; and*
  - h. *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*

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*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 were the first 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.

### **Background**

Jericho Land Trust (JLT) recognized the significance of the Mills property and its vulnerability to development pressure during the summer of 1998. This unique parcel of land was on the market for \$350,000. Following an appraisal, JLT began a fundraising and grant writing effort to obtain funds and negotiated with the landowner to lower her price to \$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. 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 in 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 Jericho Underhill Park District. This two-town district was formed for the purpose of owning and operating the Park. 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 67 acres is open meadow

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and the remaining 149 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. To the east and west lie privately owned parcels currently in agricultural use. Park property abuts privately owned, undeveloped land to the south which further supports numerous species including black bear, moose, bob cat, and fisher and provides a wildlife corridor along the Green Mountain Range. Conserving this important habitat was a primary reason for acquiring the 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. Currently the Park District mows a 20 car area in the summer. The Towns of Jericho and Underhill have agreed to plow a parking section each winter, alternating each year, at no cost to the Park District.

The Scenic, Recreation, and Agricultural and Riparian Zone - This zone is mostly level meadow land 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 state 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 to 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

These activities include, but are not limited to; walking, cross country skiing, biking, horseback riding, snowshoeing, ice skating, sledding and picnicking. Existing trails offer recreational use throughout the meadow area. The park is frequently used by the adjacent 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. Market Festival 2000 drew hundreds of area residents to the park for

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musical entertainment, children's games and local vendors this August. A gravel driveway creates a hardened surface that facilitates wheelchair access as well. Brush hogging has created additional trails that extend into the more eastern section on the property. Farmers hay some of the meadow area and this reduces the Park District's expenditure for mowing and maintaining public access.

Future plans for this zone include the development of trails to offer a more satisfying recreational experience, the creation of playing fields to accommodate a variety of team sports, and the construction of some structures. The Lions Club of Jericho-Underhill has begun a fundraising drive to build a multi-use pavilion for Mills Riverside Park. Eagle Scout candidates have also expressed an interest in building trail bridges and developing an over night campsite. 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 plan is for the agricultural section of the property to be returned to production by working with a local farmer through a long-term lease arrangement. 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.

The Forest, Wildlife & Trail Zone and Wildlife Habitat Area - 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 57 acres of forest, above elevation 1000, are designated as a Wildlife Habitat Area, and receive special attention because of habitat importance for numerous sensitive species. Two former logging trails currently serve a recreational purpose and may continue to do so. The Park District is undertaking a comprehensive evaluation and inventory of all trails (logging and sugaring) and conducting a wildlife habitat inventory in order to plan an improved trail system. This system will strive to satisfy the recreational needs of the community while protecting the more remote and fragile habitats. Trail design and planning will enhance multi-use compatibility, reduce erosion concerns and be esthetically pleasing. Professional consultants include landscape architect and planner Nat Goodhue, Scott Moreau of Greenleaf Forestry, Mark Fasching of Vermont Land Trust and Susan C. Morse of Morse and Morse Forestry. Interpretive signage will educate the trail user about his natural surroundings and include cultural/historical information. A forest management plan (see Appendix B) has been developed and these recommendations will be incorporated into all planning and operating decisions. Some of these recommendations include:

- Design trails that direct recreationists away from important wildlife areas
- 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

### **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

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bridge is restricted to handicap drop off, emergency service, maintenance and the set up and removal of temporary structures for community events. A parking sign establishes the parking area for cars before the bridge. Further delineation of the parking section is accomplished by mowing a sizable area during the summer months and snowplowing in the winter. A sign at the bridge states "No Motorized Vehicles". Two barriers placed in the center of the bridge effectively remind drivers not to cross. These can be removed when necessary. The current signage has been adequate and well respected, however, as park usage increases, the Park District may need to upgrade its park signage and install a gate.

A deeded, gated right-of-way from River Road to the Park property exists east of the Brown's 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. This gate remains locked. Adjacent to the covered bridge is a ford across the Brown's River that is suitable for agricultural equipment only and is discussed later.

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. Directional signs will be installed at key trail locations and also indicate the end of the trail. Interpretive signage will be created to explain the natural and cultural history of the park.

### **Current physical improvements to property**

The Mills property was operated as a seasonal campground for many years. An inventory of existing structures includes:

- covered bridge
- bath house/laundry room
- flag pole
- equipment shed
- children's playground (swings and slide)
- wood pole barn
- wood bin
- thirty picnic tables
- three benches

The Jericho Underhill Park District has concentrated its initial efforts on improving access, ensuring safety, and correcting erosion issues. The existing trails suffered from poor drainage due to wash outs and collapsed culverts. Trails were almost impassible because of deep gullies that were created around the defunct culverts and standing water. Three culverts were replaced and a footbridge was built as an Eagle Scout project to span the small stream over the fourth one.

Access was further enhanced by repairing an historic ford across the Browns River. The need for this became apparent when the Park District started interviewing local farmers to develop a hay cutting and mowing routine. Hay binding equipment was too wide to cross the covered bridge. Following a discussion with Vermont Land Trust and an on-site visit by the Non-game and Natural

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Heritage Program, approval was given for ford repair. This river crossing is used for agricultural equipment and not general public access.

The Park District has also been evaluating the current septic, water and electrical infrastructure on the property. A cursory inspection indicates that much of the septic and electrical systems will need to be removed, and in some cases, replaced. These projects will begin in the spring of 2001.

The trail system at Mills Riverside Park consists of former logging roads. With the expert advice of landscape architect Nat Goodhue and wildlife habitat specialist Susan Morse, these trails are being evaluated for future use. During the summer of 2000, Park District personnel, interested high school students and the two professional consultants inventoried the property. Factors included in this assessment were trail safety and multi-use compatibility, wildlife habitat protection and recreational enjoyment. A GPS unit was used to plot this information. Specific recommendations from the consultants will help direct Park District decisions regarding the continued use of existing trails, trail improvements and additional trail creation. By utilizing this expert knowledge, it is the Park District's desire to develop a coordinated plan to provide trail experiences that are diverse and satisfying without sacrificing sensitive wildlife habitat.

### **Proposed Physical Improvements to property**

The Jericho Underhill Park District has been addressing public safety and trail maintenance issues while balancing important wildlife habitat concerns since creation of the Park District in September 1999. The conservation easement provided the framework for many decisions. Community input has also been sought in order to establish priorities for park development. As mentioned earlier, a questionnaire was distributed at Town Meeting Day in Jericho and Underhill in March 2000. It queried residents regarding activities, facilities and events they would like to see take place at Mills Riverside Park. This questionnaire was also distributed at both Town Halls and other locations. Two public informational hearings were scheduled in April to discuss the results and accept additional input. This information was compiled and has given the Park District important community feedback, which assisted with setting priorities for park development. (See Appendix C). Based on this input and demonstrated needs, the Park District is focusing on trail arrangement and improvement, a defined parking area, and athletic playing field development. An upgraded septic and electrical infrastructure will also be accomplished. The Lions Club of Jericho/Underhill has committed to building a multi-use pavilion within the next several years. These plans are still in a preliminary stage and Vermont Land Trust will review final preparation.

### **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

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which support the Park purposes as defined in the Conservation Easement. Specifically, they include:

- Walking, jogging, cross-country skiing and snowshoeing, generally, but not exclusively, on the Park trail network.
- Swimming or ice skating at the pond. There are no provisions for lifeguards or other safety personnel; therefore, these activities are at one's own risk.
- 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 only.
- Group activities for 50 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 may or may not be required. These activities include:

- Scheduled organized sports on a suitable field.
- Group activities for more than 50 people.
- Overnight camping.
- 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 tear-down.
- Any other activity deemed by the Park District to be in conflict with the Conservation Easement.

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 in a manner consistent with the Forest Management Plan and the Conservation Easement. Specifically, this may include mowing or haying of grass areas; tilling, mowing or haying 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.

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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
- Trash - carry in, carry out
- Dogs - welcome - on leash only
- No hunting, trapping or firearms
- No fires except by special permit
- No camping except by special permit
- Remain on designated trails

### **Natural Features Inventory and Management Plan Update**

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 plan is underway. As additional information becomes available, adjustments to the management plan may occur.

Adoption of a final management plan for Mills Riverside Park was completed after allowing the community ample time to review it and offer suggestions and comments. The draft version was also distributed at the Jericho and Underhill Town Meetings on March 6, 2001, via our web site and copies were presented to both Selectboards and Jericho Land Trust for review. On May 16, 2001, there was a publicly warned meeting to discuss the plan further. Following this public comment period, the management plan was adopted by the Park District Board on June 6, 2001. Regularly scheduled biweekly meetings of the Park District are always open for public comment as well. This plan will be reviewed at least every five years and updated as necessary.