



“We had always felt like a forest lot for firewood was beyond our reach. I think it’s exciting that folks who aren’t in the upper-income spectrum can get involved in a project like this. There are a lot of people who grew up in Vermont who would love to have this opportunity.”

– Cory Malzac



LITTLE HOGBACK COMMUNITY FOREST:

Making Forestland Ownership Possible for All

Deb Brighton has long advocated for conservation in Vermont, but she had a nagging feeling that she could do more. “In Vermont, we conserve the land,” she explains, “but if we also want more people having connections to the land, we need to change things slightly to assure more people of average means can afford forestland ownership.”

On the subject of forestland conservation and equity, Deb is uniquely qualified. She has served on the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board as well as on the boards of VLT and Vermont Family Forests (VFF). She has a background in forestry and works primarily as a consultant on tax equity to the state legislature.

Wearing her VFF hat, she applied for a grant from the Ford Foundation for a “community-based forestry demonstration project.” Her goal was to provide Vermonters from across the socioeconomic spectrum the opportunity to own forestland and manage it in common. She received the grant and, after a few years

of navigating IRS red tape, successfully led the effort to create Little Hogback Community Forest on VLT-conserved land in Monkton.

In addition to the conservation easement, the land is bound by an “affordability covenant.” Should any of the 16 shares come up for sale, VFF has the right to purchase them at the appraised forest value, ensuring that they can be re-sold affordably to Vermonters who might not otherwise be able to afford forestland.

This interesting twist on conservation was made possible by a generous land gift to VLT from Charlie and Mima Tipper, long-time conservation supporters in Vermont. “Mima and I were pleased to give this land to VLT,” said Charlie. “It felt right when we made the gift simply in the name of conservation. And it feels even more right now that VLT and VFF have succeeded with such a cool collaboration. This project really expands on what it means to conserve a piece of land.”

Cory Malzac and his wife, Cindy Growney, are exactly the kind of shareholders that the affordability covenant is intended to benefit. Cory, a carpenter, had grown up in Bristol and heard about VFF’s effort. “It seemed like a great way to have ownership of forestland near where I grew up,” Cory explains. “We heat our home almost entirely with wood, but we had always felt like owning our own forest lot for firewood was beyond our reach.”

This fall, Cory and Cindy will cut their first round of firewood from their community forest. They will also get to put into practice what they learned in the “Game of Logging” course that the shareholders decided to require. “I’m glad they offered it, because it was a great course and I might have been one of those people who said they didn’t need it,” Cory says with a laugh.

Pastor Dick Hotchkin and his wife, Toni, who already owned 228 acres of forested land in Granville, decided to become Little Hogback shareholders as well. “What brought me to the meeting was the concept of a diverse group of people who don’t know each other very well being united by a cause,” Dick explains. “I’d say it’s working very well. We’re trying to build consensus instead of taking votes where someone wins and someone loses.”

While the group has only existed for about a year, it has already had the opportunity to put its consensus

“As a pastor, I’m seeing a loss of community. I was intrigued by the concept of people coming together to sustainably manage a forest. When you’re thrown into a common enterprise, you have to get to know each other to build trust, and that builds community.”

– Pastor Dick Hotchkin

approach to the test. One shareholder, a UVM Ph.D. candidate studying bobcats, pointed out that dogs tend to bother bobcats. So, even though most of the shareholders own dogs, they agreed not to bring them on the property until they know for sure whether there is indeed a breeding population of bobcats on the land.

Deb recently published a paper assessing the potential of replicating this project in other areas. “In New England, where land values are high and the ownership prospects for lower-income community members seem the least promising, there may be an advantage to creating this type of community forest,” she says.

“A lot of the groundwork has been done,” says Dick. “I see it as a model that can work—and should work—in a lot of places.”



Opposite: John McNeerney, Cory Malzac, Cindy Growney, Deb Brighton, Toni Hotchkin, Dick Hotchkin, Don Dewees (left to right).