



Stewarding Community Forests

Community forests bring tremendous benefits to communities: permanent protection of open space and wildlife habitat, opportunities for experiential educational and recreation, income from timber harvests, and others. In November 2022, the Northern Forest Center gathered three experts to discuss the value of community-owned and -managed forests as well as tools and strategies for developing them.

Town-owned forests are a strong tradition in New England dating back to colonial settlement patterns. The Community Forest model was developed 20 years ago by the Northern Forest Center, Trust for Public Land, and Quebec Labrador Foundation. It expands and strengthens the town forest model by placing community participation at the heart of creating and managing the property.

Community Forests are owned by a municipality or by an interested non-profit in partnership with the municipality. A community working group sets priorities for management of the parcel so that benefits from the forest are tied to community values. The parcel is permanently protected, often through a conservation easement or deed restriction.

Community leaders **Gabe Perkins**, representing the 1,500-acre [Bethel Community Forest, Maine](#), **John Scarinza**, representing the 10,600-acre [Randolph Community Forest, New Hampshire](#), and **Ted Siegler**, representing the 1,700-acre [West Windsor Community Forest, Vermont](#), shared that persistence and community input are critical for successfully create a Community Forest.

They explained that each Community Forest is unique to its location and community, reflecting individual town priorities – whether conservation, water supply, recreation, habitat protection, education, investment, or other goals. Funding often comes from a combination of sources, including the U.S. Forest Service’s Forest Legacy and Community Forest programs, state programs, and local sources such as Land Use Change Tax, private campaigns, and timber harvest revenue.



“We believe that Community Forests are a valuable asset for rural communities, an old model that has significant relevance today.”

Julie Renaud Evans, Program Director, Northern Forest Center

Community Forests often take several years to develop and require buy-in from the community and continued input for long-term stewardship. The community leaders emphasized the importance of never accepting the word “no,” asking for help from others who have knowledge, experience, and resources to share, leaning on volunteers, and centering the existing community vision at the heart of the project.

Regardless of how a town decides to use its Community Forest – whether it prioritizes recreation, education, timber harvesting, wetland protection, or any other use – it’s heartening to see people come together around land protection and create an invaluable local asset.

Review the recording of the webinar to learn more. To learn more about Community Forests, visit the Northern Forest Center’s website.



The Community Learning Briefs summarize the Northern Forest Center’s 2021-2023 “Building the New Forest Future” webinar series. The Stewarding Community Forests webinar and others in this series are available [here](#). This project has been supported in part by USDA Rural Development.