



## Maine Association of Conservation Commissions

# The Greening of Falmouth

Falmouth, Maine

## Home Rules, Home Tools: Locally Led Conservation Achievements

### Background

As a first-ring suburb of Portland, Falmouth has been under intense development pressure since the 1970s. Protecting the town's natural resources and preserving open space long has been important to town officials and residents. Voters approved open space spending initiatives three times between 1995 and 2003, and the town had very progressive development ordinances. Even so, Falmouth was constantly playing defense in its efforts to protect its natural resources and scenic character.

In 2004, the Town Council charged the Conservation Commission with updating the town's open-space plan. During the next 18-months, a special subcommittee of the commission worked under the auspices of the town's planning department to craft a plan the community would support.

That plan, known as *The Greening of Falmouth*, has been a springboard for an extraordinary effort that has made Falmouth a leader in municipal land conservation efforts.

### Planning

According to Bob Shafto, then-chairman of the Conservation Commission, who also chaired the newly formed Open Space Committee, "The success of this effort began with how we organized ourselves to do it."

He said the committee "purposely involved a diverse group of people, including Conservation Commission members, a local developer, several large landowners, and a Falmouth Land Trust representative – people who favored the concept of open space protection, but who also represented a wide range of opinion about how and to what extent that might be done."

The group took an inquiry approach to the task, rather than starting out by identifying high-value open space parcels in town. That approach had been tried before and created some landowner resentment. First, the group defined what it meant by "open space," and then generated a long list of questions it wanted answered. Those questions ranged from "How



*Falmouth has over 2,000 acres of designated conservation land, evenly split between the town and the Falmouth Land Trust, including this parcel that borders all three of the town's rivers.*

much open space do we already have?" and "What strategies do other towns use to protect high-value natural areas?" to "What do past voting patterns and citizen surveys tell us about support for open space in our town?"

According to Bob, "The process of answering these questions really gave us common ground for our discussions. If we hadn't focused on data, we would have been left fighting for our own individual points of view, and it would have been much harder to find agreement that way. Having the data put us on much firmer footing when it came time to propose and defend our plan to the community."

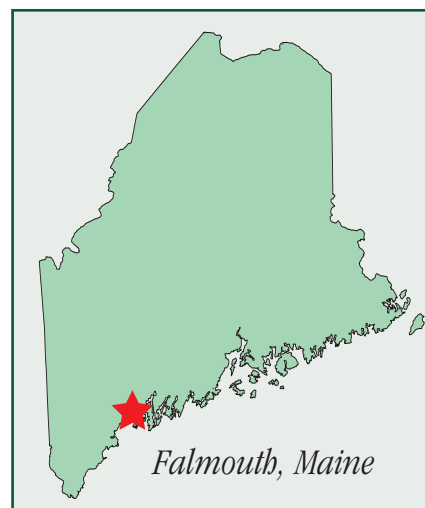
With a shared understanding of "what is," the next step was to create a shared vision. The group did that by framing the question in a future context: "If you came back in 100 years and knocked on the door of the house you're living in now, what do you hope the people living there will say when you asked them what decisions they were glad the town made in 2005 that resulted in the town they live in now?"

Framing the vision this way forced group members to look ahead, beyond their own time, and made the future easier to talk about. From there, it was relatively easy to formulate the goals, objectives and action steps that became the substance of the plan.

The committee then created a draft plan, with a consultant to do much of the research and

writing. Committee members took that draft plan to various constituent groups for their reaction, feedback and input. A final plan was then prepared, incorporating that feedback where appropriate. Five thousand full-color, tabloid-size copies of the plan were printed and distributed to every household, with extra copies in all public buildings.

In January 2006, the committee sponsored a community forum to explain the plan and get citizen reaction. Large landowners received written invitations and the event was widely



*Falmouth, Maine*

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advertised. From the information gathered at that evening, it was evident there was broad community support for the plan's vision, goals and objectives.

In June 2006, the Town Council voted to accept *The Greening of Falmouth* as the town's open space plan. The council also approved establishing a new sub-committee of the Conservation Commission to implement the plan, and authorized a town-funded open space ombudsman position to give staff support to the committee.

Like the planning committee, the implementation committee was broadly diverse, with landowners, real estate agents, a farmer, a trails committee member, the Falmouth Land Trust president, landscaper, and conservation commissioner constituting its membership (the latter as chairman).

### Acquisition

After an initial organization phase, the Open Space Implementation Sub-Committee quickly got to work to identify its priorities. These priorities were identified in the plan and included:

1. Areas in which 250 acres or more of unfragmented habitat could be protected;
2. Areas that contributed to the rural character of the town, usually roadside fields, orchards and stone walls.

With a focus on those priorities, the committee identified eight areas of Falmouth that met the 250-acre size.

The group then identified interested landowners, and began working to build its capacity to acquire key parcels. Those activities included:

- An informational forum for landowners to review the various conservation options available to them, as well as ongoing conversations with people who owned land within the eight identified 250-plus acre priority areas.
- Creation of a \$16 million, 10-year financial plan for land acquisition that included town appropriations, grants, donations, mitigation payments and other revenue. As part of that plan, voters approved a \$5 million local appropriation over 10 years for land acquisition.
- Receipt of nearly \$385,000 in grants and donations to date for land acquisition and management, including a \$300,000 Land for Maine's Future grant.

- Legal protection of over 100 acres of existing town-owned land identified in *The Greening of Falmouth* as high-priority open space.

During this same period, as recommended in *The Greening of Falmouth*, the town enacted an innovative conservation zoning ordinance that eliminated traditional two-acre lot subdivisions. New subdivisions now need to preserve at least half of the property as open space. Developers must determine the area of non-developable land (steep slopes, wetlands), then preserve half of the remaining acreage according to a list of priority features. This ordinance alone ensures that much of Falmouth's undeveloped land will be protected.

*"Before The Greening of Falmouth, our land acquisition efforts were reactive, usually in response to a specific development proposal. Now we have a valuable framework and a set of priorities within which to evaluate potential purchases. As a result, the parcels we acquire fit into a set of shared goals and a vision that the community embraces."*

— **Cathy Breen, Chair,  
Falmouth Town Council**

### Management

"From the beginning," said Mel Dickenson, chairman of the Open Space Committee, "we have viewed our open space properties as community assets, assets that need to be managed for the benefit of the town."

To that end, Falmouth created the Falmouth Conservation Corps, an active volunteer group that builds trails, tackles invasive species, promotes wildlife management and otherwise manages the town's conservation lands.

Forest management plans for all town-owned conservation properties have also been created by a licensed professional forester. Each plan includes timber, wildlife management and recreational objectives. Revenue from timber sales will support additional land acquisition.

### Public Involvement

Keeping town residents informed about this work is a priority. In addition to excellent press coverage, the Open Space Committee sponsored a community-wide Falmouth Green Expo to showcase the open space work completed to date and the activities of other public and private organizations working to improve Falmouth's environment. The town

also created a Web page for the committee and produced a short film about one key property for viewing on the community access channel.

Finally, the Open Space Committee has worked hard to build relationships with a wide variety of public and private environmental organizations that are available to help with the acquisition and management of open space properties in the community.

### LESSONS LEARNED

Several lessons from Falmouth's approach to land protection seem applicable to any community working to preserve open space. Among them:

- Involve a diverse array of people and view points in the planning and implementation process to increase the likelihood of getting broad support for the final plan.
- Create a clear vision for the kind of community you want to be and how open space fits into that vision.
- Take a comprehensive approach to open space acquisition that includes planning, relationship building, financing, management and public involvement.
- Create a structure to follow through on the plan's implementation. Without someone or some group responsible for pursuing its objectives, the best of plans will likely languish.
- Be prepared to manage any lands that do get acquired for conservation purposes.

### Falmouth Land Trust

An important partner in this work is the local land trust. In addition to a seat on the implementation committee, the trust holds the easements on conservation lands acquired by the town and thus becomes a partner in their management. Trust members provide valuable public support for conservation, work with landowners who are more comfortable with dealing with a private group, and raise private funds.

### Falmouth at a Glance

	1978	2008
Population (est.)	5,000	11,000
Assessed Value (\$000)	\$112,846	\$2,173,792
# Property Parcels	2,800	5,204
# Acres Conservation	100	1,950

**For more information, please visit:**

[http://town.falmouth.me.us/Pages/FalmouthME\\_BComm/openspace](http://town.falmouth.me.us/Pages/FalmouthME_BComm/openspace)

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