

LaPlatte Headwaters Initiative: Uniting Community, Non-Profits and Government to Conserve Former Bissonette Farm

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Located just south of Hinesburg Village, the Bissonette Farm is a classic Vermont landscape of open fields, rolling wooded hills, and stunning Green Mountain views. As the largest farm in this part of town, it provides a pastoral gateway to the more densely settled village district. In addition to its beautiful scenery, the farm's unique combination of cultural, ecological, and agricultural values make it a highly significant landscape for the people of Hinesburg and neighboring communities.

The Hinesburg Land Trust, in partnership with the Trust for Public Land, the Vermont Land Trust and the Agency of Natural Resources, conserved the Bissonette Farm in 2007. Almost a decade later, this multi-faceted project is worth recognizing because of its significance to the area and because it



touches on so many of the priorities of the Agency of Natural Resources – clean water, forest connectivity and endangered species conservation. This project conserved approximately 600 acres of prime farmland, forest, and drinking water resources in an area just minutes from Interstate 89 and the City of Burlington. Previously threatened by intensifying development pressures, the land is now protected in perpetuity for the benefit of future generations through a combination of town forest and conservation easements. These lands also link other conserved lands both to the north and south, and east and west, creating significant wildlife travel corridors in an otherwise increasingly fragmented landscape.

Working Farmland ~ A Vermont Way of Life

While Hinesburg is still defined by its rural landscape, local farms are struggling to survive. Many young and aspiring farmers are finding the area's rising land prices too costly. The Bissonette Farm was at particular risk for development because of its well-drained soils, scenic value, and proximity to high population centers. Through this project, more than 160

acres of highly productive farmland was conserved as a working farm, helping to strengthen Hinesburg's farm economy and increasing residents' access to locally grown food.

Drinking Water Resources ~ Birthplace of the LaPlatte

The headwaters of the LaPlatte River emerge from a series of hillside springs and low-lying wetlands within the Bissonette Farm. More than five miles of the river and its tributaries are located on the parcel, flowing 14 miles into Shelburne Bay in Lake

Champlain, a source of drinking water for 68,000 people in Chittenden County. This project provided a unique opportunity to prevent development along

the headwaters of a significant river, and to restore a wetland system degraded by decades of ditching and channelization.



Plants and Wildlife ~ Diverse Natural Communities

The Bissonette Farm encompassed several hundred acres of lowland forest, an important habitat type rapidly being lost to development in the Champlain Valley. According to the Vermont Fish & Wildlife Department's (VFWD) Natural Heritage Program, the property also hosts two natural communities of statewide significance: Transition Hardwood Limestone Talus Woodland and Valley Clayplain Forest. Among the area's woods and waters—which include 212 acres of deer



wintering yards and 46 acres of wetlands—wildlife abounds, including moose, bobcat, fox, a myriad of birds and amphibians, and the federally endangered Indiana bat.

Community Recreation ~ Trails for Local Use

For decades, Hinesburg residents have valued the Bissonette Farm as a place to enjoy the outdoors. An established network of trails provides abundant opportunity for four-season recreation, such as hiking, hunting, snowshoeing, cross-country skiing, and snowmobiling. Gilman Road, which bisects the project area in a north-to-south route, is a favorite dirt road for bicycle touring, running, and horseback riding.

Local Heritage and Identity

As stated in their recently revised town plan, a primary objective of Hinesburg residents is to “maintain and enhance the rural small town character and environment of Hinesburg.” The LaPlatte Headwaters/Bissonette Farm Conservation Initiative honors this goal by protecting a landscape that is not only beautiful and environmentally significant, but also central to the town’s rural identity and agricultural heritage. As farms, natural areas, and rural lifestyles are lost across Vermont, this project tells an inspiring story of conservation that happens when residents work together to steward their local landscape and protect what defines them as a community.

Project Structure

After months of negotiation, the Trust for Public Land reached agreement with the landowner, and acquired the property in November 2007. The total project cost was \$3,675,000. Reaching this ambitious goal required a significant amount of public and private fundraising, multiple conservation easements and conservation sales (i.e. sale of a portion of the property to a farm buyer), combined with some limited development in areas which will impact the project goals the least. Had the project not been successful, development was likely to occur to a much greater degree, and without concern for the restoration and conservation of these important natural resources and processes. Agency of Natural Resources funding included \$650,000 through two grants from the USFWS through the VFWD for conservation of the federally-endangered Indiana bat and the state-significant natural communities on the property. This funding went towards the town forest and a conservation easement which the VFWD holds in partnership with VLT. The “Clean & Clear” program granted \$220,000 directed towards wetland restoration and river corridor protection on the town forest and the VFWD and VLT conservation easement.