

Somerset land trust buys Weston woodland in Madison

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By Taylor Abbott

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MADISON — The Somerset Woods Trustees, with significant funding from the local community, completed its purchase of the woodlands at the Weston Farm in September, preserving more recreational access to the woods and the river, wildlife habitat and the potential for economic growth, according to the land trust’s officers.

The 275-acre parcel with a mile of frontage on the Kennebec River, called Weston Woods and Waters, joins more than 30 other pieces of land owned by the trustees and for public use and perpetual preservation. Holdings in Somerset County are in Canaan, Cornville, Madison, Embden, Skowhegan, Solon, Norridgewock and Starks.

The parcel also has a small amount of frontage on Route 43 to the east and at the end of Weston Avenue, which runs from downtown Madison and dead-ends at the farm.

According to Somerset Woods Trustees President Jack Gibson, the purchase of the land from Weston Homestead Farm Corp. has been in the works for about six years.

“It didn’t come to fruition right away for various reasons,” Gibson said Wednesday. “Mainly because Gov. LePage at that time would not release the Land for Maine’s Future funds that they allocated to us purchasing the property.”

Land for Maine’s Future is a program administered by the state’s Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry. Established in 1987, the program is the state’s primary funding vehicle for conserving and protecting Maine’s land for natural and recreational value.



Ernest W. Hilton, left, an engineering and legal consultant, Jack Gibson of Somerset Woods Trustees and Peter Weston talk Wednesday about Weston Woods and Waters in Madison. Morning Sentinel photo by Rich Abrahamson

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The Weston Woods and Waters parcel is about 1.5 miles from downtown Madison and will be preserved for multiple trail use as well as a canoe and kayak stop on the Kennebec River from Solon and North Anson to the north.

Gibson said that the purchase process started up again in January 2018, when the board decided to go ahead and complete their fundraising goal of \$450,000.

“This was a huge undertaking for us,” Gibson said. “We have never done anything close to this before, and we were fortunate enough to have good community support.”

Fundraising efforts came from community members, private donors and a \$225,000 grant from the Community Forest Project of the United States Forest Service. Gibson said about 90% of the funding supplementing the grant came from people in the central Maine area.

“We were very fortunate to have that kind of support,” Gibson said.



The Kennebec River flows Wednesday near the the homestead of Deacon Benjamin Weston, pictured at right, in Madison. The homestead, built in 1817, is within Weston Woods and Waters.

As required by the United States Department of Agriculture, the Somerset Woods Trustees are required to submit a management plan by the middle of January 2020. To do this, the group meets on occasion and looks into critical natural area programs in the state to see what critical habitats exist.

In the spring, the group brought a wetland biologist in to asses the vernal pools on the property. Vernal pools are seasonal pools of water that provide habitat for plants and animals. The biologist found countless fairy shrimp living in these habitats, and according to

Ernest Hilton, vice president of Somerset Woods Trustees, only one fairy shrimp is enough to make a significant vernal pool.

“We’re working on developing and inventorying all of the resources that we have gathered to see which ones we need to protect, which ones we want to open to the public and how we want to open it to the public,” Hilton said on Wednesday.

HISTORY OF THE WESTONS

The Weston family has owned the land, which includes a peninsula, since Joseph Weston moved here from Massachusetts in 1771. Joseph Weston was the original settler of Skowhegan, when it was still Canaan.

“Canaan was a very large town. What was the western part of Canaan became Skowhegan,” said Peter Weston, a present-day descendant of the family. “At some point, part of it was Norridgewock and here was a small area called Bloomfield before it was consolidated to Skowhegan.”



The homestead of Deacon Benjamin Weston, built in 1817, stands Wednesday next to the Kennebec River within Weston Woods and Waters in Madison.

Joseph Weston was also the first casualty in Benedict Arnold’s march to Quebec City after he came down with pneumonia during the trek up through Skowhegan.

The Weston family homestead was built in 1790 and still stands today, but is only open on special occasions, according to Peter Weston. It was occupied until the 1980s. The land previously operated as a working forest with sustainable harvesting.

“Growing good trees is what our goal was,” said Weston, whose family established the first paper mill in Madison. “The deal is that with (Somerset Woods Trustees) we are able to continue operating this as a working forest along with recreation. It’s good for the state of Maine to have good quality working forests, and it gives them an opportunity for income while also maintaining jobs and the economy.”

Gibson said that the primary goals for now are recreation and wildlife habitat conservation.

“Harvesting and making income from that will be down the road, and any harvesting that we do will be with recreation and wildlife habitat in mind,” Gibson said.

COMMUNITY BENEFITS

“Every time you turn around, you find that there are more unique aspects of this property,” Hilton said. “It really is just an incredibly attractive situation.”

On a previous occasion, Hilton described the area upriver as a special focus area for the Audubon Society, adding, “Botanically, it’s a species area for unusual varieties.”

He also noted at the time that the public access aspect of the land is important to the trustees and to the Weston family, who traditionally allowed a lot of public access for hunting, fishing, camping and snowmobiling.

With the purchase, Somerset Woods Trustees now owns about two and a half miles of Kennebec River frontage. Another third of a mile of public access easement and a Federal Energy Regulatory Commission recreational set aside give the community about three and a half miles of river access.

“When you think about it, there are very few towns or cities of any size that have that much public access to a major river,” Hilton said on Wednesday. “Essentially, the people of this area now have public access to everything from about the railroad trestle all the way up to Big Brook.”



The American flag flies Wednesday off the homestead of Deacon Benjamin Weston, built in 1817. The homestead stands next to the Kennebec River, within Weston Woods and Waters in Madison.

Of particular note, the trails will be accessible to Madison Area Memorial High School students to host cross country and track meets, which they have not been able to do in years.

“Because Madison High School did not have a cross-country running course, we have established a 5k and 10k cross-country running course that they will be able to use,” Hilton said. “They will be able to have meets here on some pretty challenging terrain at a beautiful location.”

“(The property) has its ups and downs, but this trail system is fantastic, and I think that people will really like being able to go out and enjoy it,” Robert Abbott, steward of the property, said. Abbott, who used the property as a playground as a child, has used it for the last six decades for hunting and trapping.

The property is open to the public now, while the trustees are in the process of cutting trails and installing culverts.

“In general, Somerset Woods Trustees land is open to the public, with the exception of a few parcels,” Gibson said. “We have roughly 2,000 acres of land open for public use and we do not restrict hunting or fishing or even trapping, per se, but we hope people use common sense and don’t trap or hunt where they shouldn’t.”

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