
\$5 Million for Open Space...Are you Crazy???

by Caroline Robinson and Roger Stephenson

People attracted to our lovely seacoast town see that we live in an ideal setting. While only ten minutes from the ocean, we enjoy easy access to three major cities. New Hampshire's mountain ranges and clear deep lakes are close by. Stratham is an attractive place to call home. It is no wonder that people want to move here.

Our Conservation Commission has been trying for years to compete with local developers for the purchase of land and easements, with little success. Because Town Meeting comes only once a year and landowners cannot always delay sale of their property until that time, opportunities to protect land have been missed.

Fueled by the knowledge that other NH towns had funded major land conservation initiatives, the Conservation Commission decided in November to embark on a major campaign to permanently protect 750 acres, roughly 1/3 of our remaining buildable land. We named the campaign "Stratham, Our Town" and decided to ask the voters at Town Meeting to approve a \$5 million bond to be paid back over 15 years. The amount and term would keep the residential tax increase at or just under \$1 per \$1000 and would give Stratham the flexibility to save significant parcels of open space.

An eight-member subcommittee was appointed to carry out the major tasks of program design and public education. Three members were on the Conservation Commission, three grew up in Stratham and two were active farmers. The others brought vital skills to the team.

Perhaps the most significant strategic decision at the beginning was go around the media by communicating directly with the voters. We did not want to engage in a debate in the newspaper. We wanted to increase awareness about our land protection campaign, and did so through a series of five newsletters mailed to each Stratham household over a period of ten weeks. We drafted a list of people whose opinions we knew were trusted by fellow members of the Stratham community. We spoke with selectmen, members of the volunteer fire department, school board members, the Heritage Commission, librarians, Rotarians, retirees and farmers – testing our messages and listening for areas of concern, objections or questions. Among them:

- o Why do we need to conserve land?
- o Which parcels need protection?
- o What will it cost us?
- o How will it affect me?
- o Will this hurt our tax base?
- o Why is this good for Stratham?
- o Who will decide how the money is spent?
- o What does it mean for landowners?

The newsletters were funded by donations held by the local land trust. The Selectmen offered significant input into the formation of the plan. The Town Manager took full responsibility for the negotiation of the bonding and wording of the warrant article (these two tasks are monumental and require a thorough understanding of state law and bonding procedures).

Additional volunteers led a walking tour of protected land, wrote letters to the editor and tracked supporters. We held two public forums on opposite sides of town on two different nights. We communicated our proposal using Power Point and walked the audience through the tax implications of land protection. We incorporated financial data (from our 2001 Town

Report) and school census data into our illustrations. Early on, this presentation and its tax message was especially important to the Board of Selectmen – for their approval was required if the campaign was to move forward to Town Meeting.

The tax message – that residential development costs the town money – was presented in scrupulous fashion. We learned that many numbers and calculations can cause confusion, suspicion and loss of interest. Opponents questioned the accuracy of our numbers; we came close to losing control of the debate. Fortunately, the presentation also emphasized our main message: open space preserves rural character, conserves wildlife habitat and protects groundwater. "Figures may lie and liars figure", but few could dispute the ill effects of sprawl in our small rural town.

New Hampshire Public Radio sent a reporter to Stratham and produced a balanced story which aired a week before the vote. The Union Leader called for an interview as part of a larger statewide story. Fosters Daily Democrat covered our walking tour and the Exeter Newsletter reported on each public meeting. We did not solicit the media's attention but we managed our responses to media inquiries, making sure our message stayed clear and consistent.

On voting day, three days before Town Meeting, we stationed ourselves at the exit polls to speak with more residents and hand out flyers. We made telephone calls to remind supporters to attend Town Meeting. We canvassed targeted neighborhoods. E-mail proved very helpful.

It worked. On Town Meeting night, more than 600 people packed the Municipal Center, spilling over into two overflow rooms. Citizen debate lasted an hour. Supporters voiced the key messages we had delivered throughout the previous 3 months. 462 out of 525 registered voters – 88% -- voted YES. Conservation Commission Chairman Gordon Barker called the positive response a defining moment for Stratham, demonstrating that the town is deeply committed to preserving land and fulfilling the open space mission of our Master Plan.

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Actual documents available:

Newsletters: <http://www.WigginML.org/towngovt/conserves.htm>

This Case Study: <http://www.WigginML.org/towngovt/conserves.htm>

