

# QUODDY

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was during the community Christmas party at the Peavey Memorial Library in Eastport on for an article on Christmas giving programs in the area. (Don Dunbar photo)

## Group tackles land conservation programs' impact on local taxes

by Lora Whelan

No one dislikes conserved lands, or at least it's a rare bird who outright rejects the concept. Wildlife thrives, ecosystems are preserved, hiking trails are developed and, on the coast, valuable access to the shore and islands is maintained for the public and fishermen. In the forests, hunting, logging and traditional activities enjoyed by the public are often preserved as well. Despite the obvious benefits, it's the theory in practice that causes problems of acceptance, primarily in regions like Downeast Maine that have a wealth of land but a scarcity of tax base to pay municipal bills. Lands in conservation programs are generally assessed at lower values, which translates into significantly less tax revenue for stressed Downeast

communities.

To discuss the issues associated with conserved lands and open space and tree growth programs about 25 municipal officials and employees and staff from conservation and other organizations gathered for the annual meeting of the Washington County Council of Governments (WCCOG) held in Machias on December 3. After a dinner and short annual meeting, the discussion got under way, led by WCCOG Executive Director Judy East, University of Maine at Machias Professor Tora Johnson and Maine Sea Grant facilitator Natalie Springuel.

The conversation was lively and based on the premise that the fiscal impacts of conservation programs on Downeast com-

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## LAND CONSERVATION (from page 1)

munities are real but solvable through gaining a better understanding about impacts on municipal budgets, the economic benefits as illustrated by a new report and the role conserved lands can play in addressing community needs. Johnson presented a summary of findings from the report "Valuing the Economic Benefits of Conservation Land in Downeast Maine." The report finds that just under 20% of Downeast is conserved land, with about 58% of that land in Washington County. Almost three-quarters of the conserved land is in forestland with easements, about 18% is wetlands, with the rest in very small percentages of shrub, open water, grassland and blueberry barrens.

The report quantified economic benefits, including recreation valued at \$58 million per year, with most of that value found in hunting, fishing and boating opportunities. Carbon sequestration is estimated to provide about \$42 million per year in value; employment directly associated with managing conservation land is valued at \$14 million per year, at a minimum; and the commercial harvest of timber and blueberries from conserved land is estimated to be \$17.5 and \$4.4 million per year, respectively. Clean water and drinking water supplies are also tied to conserved land, with a value of \$17 million per year. The report estimates that the total ecosystem benefits of conserved land equates to about \$206 per acre per year.

### Policy change is top concern

The number one concern to percolate to the top of the discussion was the need for policy change at the state level. Lubec's assessor, Jim Clark, pointed out, "The open space bar of \$5 million for public town vote is too high for Washington County." About 25% of Lubec is in conservation programs. He added that as far as he knew there had never been an open space project costing over \$1.3 million in the county. "They'll never have to go before citizens" for public input on a program that has direct consequences for taxpayers, he added.

At a separate selectmen's meeting, Clark explained that unless the open space application exceeds 8% of the state's valuation for the town, it doesn't come up for public comment. Clark pointed out that Lubec has the second highest valuation in Washington County, which means the valuation of the property must be at least \$5 million for citizens to have the right to vote on the proposal. Depending on which set of rules a property owner chooses to apply, according to Clark, the abatement can range from 20% to 95%. The town has lost about \$180,000 in collectible real estate taxes, East pointed out at the annual meeting.

East explained that in her research on the open space and tree growth programs, both of which lower property valuations and thus real estate taxes, while municipalities still receive some reimbursement

from the state for tree growth, with the open space program "the town takes the whole hit." She noted, "So there's a local cost but state benefit" that's unequal. She suggested that if enough municipalities and organizations came together on policy change that pushed for local compensation, they might just get the policy changed.

Land placed in conservation easements is another issue, with the assessed value after being placed in conserved status being much lower than its prior valuation. Milbridge Town Manager and Washington County Budget Committee Chair Lewis Pinkham has seen how the decrease in property taxes has hit municipalities twice: in their own budgets and in their share of the county's budget. "I believe nonprofits need to pay at least 50% of the property taxes." He clarified a moment later by stating, "I'm talking 50% of the valuation taxed at before transfer to non-profit status" that results in a significantly lower valuation.

Tree growth lands are mostly utilized by corporations and private landowners. Maine Coast Heritage Trust (MCHT) staff member Jacob van de Sande noted that the incentive has gone down in value, "but it's the reason why we still have a forest economy." He added, "It's unfortunate that the payments [by the state] have gone down." Clearly, East noted, it was important to have at the table representatives from public agencies, corporations, family businesses and private landowners at the next round of discussions.

### Goodwill is not enough

"Not all conservation groups are created equal in how they work with communities," said Johnson, to murmurs of agreement. So while some conservation nonprofits have worked hard to keep the lines of communication open and have often worked with municipalities on arrangements for payment in lieu of taxes, without policy about taxable valuation, communities are at the mercy of goodwill. Representatives from MCHT, Downeast Coastal Conservancy (DCC) and Downeast Salmon Federation were present, with DCC's Kyle Winslow commenting, "The lines of communication need to be better fostered and need to continue."

While municipalities cannot dictate how private land is enrolled in programs for which it qualifies, towns and cities can use comprehensive plans to stress that certain lands are seen by citizens as important for protection and enrollment and others designated for other uses. East said that comprehensive plans "can certainly have a seat at the table."

Harry Fish of Jonesport explained that locals are feeling powerless to control how wealthy outsiders buy and use valuable coastal lands. "Locals feel overwhelmed by outsiders saying 'this is what you should do.' A lot of us locals who have worked on the land have hardly any say." He added, "Usually they put land in conservation easements to save on taxes."

Van de Sande replied, "Over time, the policy shifts at the state and federal level have shifted taxes to property taxes." He added, "We are in an untenable situation." East explained, "In the last 10 years the loss of revenue sharing has been huge." She stressed the need for many "bedfellows" if success is to be achieved by going before legislative committees with policy change recommendations.

The group identified next steps and during the closing round robin, comments were positive, with MCHT land steward Melissa Lee saying, "I've been involved in this for 20 years, and this is the most positive conversation" she'd participated in about the subject. For more information about the report on economic benefits of conservation land Downeast, visit <[www.downeastconservationnetwork.org](http://www.downeastconservationnetwork.org)>.

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