

Unpaved Paradise

Pondicherry Park Update

BY ROBERTA SCRUGGS

Go back 10 years and you could step out of your yard almost anywhere in town and get into the woods in no time," Becky Cook said. "But with the build-up of development in that period of time, a lot of people can't do that any more. So people love these places where they can have a wonderful, quiet, outdoor experience."

That's why Becky and her parents, Hazel and Enoch Cook, were determined to insure their 23.5 acres off South High Street would remain a place of peace and refuge for people and wildlife.

With the sale in late October, their property became the last major land purchase for Pondicherry Park. Nina Keene sold an adjacent 11.5 acres in late September and Eric and Kathleen Worthington sold 13.6 acres earlier. The Flint family is donating the final six acres of the 55-acre park. When the park is completed, it will be given to the citizens of Bridgton.

"Nina, the Cooks and the Worthingtons have done us a big favor and the town a big favor," said Peter Lowell, executive director of the Lakes Environmental Association (LEA). "This consolidates a major land holding for open space preservation and for public recreation."

LEA and Loon Echo Land Trust are leading the Pondicherry campaign, but the community spirit of donors and the landowners have made it possible to preserve this historic and beautiful area in downtown Bridgton, Lowell said. About \$325,000 of the \$570,000 needed has been raised so far. In addition to land, the funds will provide engineering, trail and bridge construction, an educational shelter and an endowment to maintain the park's conservation easement.

Lowell considers Pondicherry, along with other preservation projects such as the Holt Pond Preserve, Bald Pate Mountain and Pleasant Mountain, an important and overdue investment in Bridgton's future.

"We have not done a very good job in this area of balancing

open space preservation with development," he said. "Bridgton, for example, is 64 square miles and we probably have less than two miles under preservation."

Pondicherry Park also is an especially nice complement to the Pleasant Mountain preserve, says Connie Cross, Loon Echo president. Loon Echo has protected nearly 1,500 acres there and The

Nature Conservancy around 1,400 more. While Pleasant Mountain offers challenging climbing and hiking, Pondicherry provides a pleasant outdoor experience for those of any age or physical ability.

"It's for little kids, it's for older folks," Cross said. "It will be for people in wheel chairs. It will be for casual visitors to Bridgton in the summertime who want a cool, nice place to have a hike and for people working in Renys who want to get out on their lunch hour. It will be for everybody."

Offering diverse opportunities to connect with nature adds "a tremendous amount," Cross said, to the quality of life and to the economy.

"The environment and economics are really closely connected," she said. "Research shows that a river walk boosts the economy of the entire town. People will come because that's a destination, but along the way they're going to buy their lunch, go shopping and enjoy whatever else the town has to offer, not just the walk in the woods."

Change occurs in small increments, Lowell said, and sometimes people only realize their town is different when it's too late. But as development pressure has increased, Bridgton's year-round and summer residents have banded together to protect the open spaces that mean so much to them and to the character of the town.

"That's the nice thing especially about Pondicherry," he said. "The townspeople, businesses, foundations, conservation organizations and landowners created this park through mutual participation. That's really the way it should be."



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