

THE ORANGE COUNTY HEADWATERS PROJECT

~ AN ADMINISTRATIVE CASE HISTORY ~

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"The big challenge facing all of us today is to keep rural areas rural."

--Letter of support from Northern Woodlands

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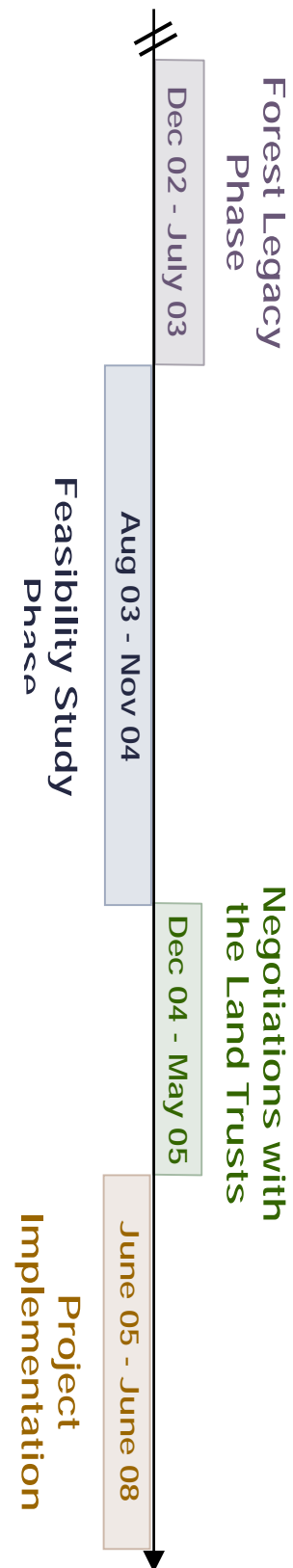
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I. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

A. Purpose

This paper documents the history of the Orange County Headwaters Project (OCHP), a grassroots land conservation effort in Corinth and Washington, Vermont. It was requested by project organizers interested in capturing the history of the project.

At the start of my research, I attended an OCHP Steering Committee meeting at which I invited members of the Committee to tell me what they wanted to know about OCHP. One Steering Committee member said, “We keep being told that what we’re doing is unique. To us it seems kind of like a ‘no-brainer,’ but if it is unique and there’s anything we can learn from it that will help other people to be successful in the same way, that should be discovered and documented.” This idea was raised again in a letter of support for the project from Vermont Coverts, which stated “...the idea of the voluntary donation of easements within the larger framework of a community is a new trend, demonstrating the power of a good idea whose time has come.” With an awareness that OCHP could provide a model for future private landowner conservation initiatives if it proved successful, the Steering Committee determined that it was important to document the process and outcomes, to identify what appear to be unique, successful, and possibly replicable elements.

The purpose of this administrative case history is two-fold. First, it documents a history of the project in story format, including the circumstances from which the project began and the course of its development. Second, it identifies and proposes a set of concepts that may explain how the project works so successfully. These concepts will aid in the design of future evaluation research that will explore the nature of community-level conservation projects. The intended audience for this paper is the society of conservation-minded leaders, policy makers, community members, academicians, funders, and organizations dedicated to the conservation and stewardship of the natural environment.

B. Methods and Study Area

This study was conducted through an internship at the Snelling Center for Government and with guidance from the National Park Service (NPS) Conservation Study Institute (CSI) and the University of Vermont’s Department of Education. Study data was gleaned from interviews with key participants and from project documents, including reports, minutes, and grant applications. Sampling for the interviews was purposeful: individuals were chosen for their intimate knowledge of the project and for their ability to represent stakeholder groups (e.g. partner organization, landowner, Steering Committee member). The study began in January 2006 and was concluded in January 2007.

The towns of Corinth and Washington, which contain the core project area, are located in the central part of Orange County, Vermont, in the rolling hills that lie to the east of the Green Mountains and to the west of the Connecticut River valley. A quick review of the history of the two towns reveals similarities to broader historical trends true of Vermont as a whole. The human population of Corinth and Washington peaked in the mid-1800s, during which time wool production was a major component of the economy. The opening of the Erie Canal in 1825 and the construction of railroads 25 years later opened the western United States to development, and Vermont’s population began to decline. Over the next 100 years, dairy farming dominated the landscape, and creameries were built in both towns to service local markets as well as urban markets made accessible by the newly developed railroad

systems. In Corinth, the Pike Hill copper mines were operated intermittently from 1853 to 1913, when the mines closed for good. A once-prosperous and self-sufficient mining village with twenty homes, a tenement building, and a nearby nightclub and bar is now completely gone, and this part of Corinth is occupied by an expanse of forestland.

By the mid-twentieth century, the dairy industry had declined substantially due to increasing competition from larger farms in other areas with more-productive agricultural soils. The small farms common in Washington and Corinth were no longer profitable, and the towns' populations declined, reaching their lowest levels since the early part of the eighteenth century. As marginally productive farms were closed, land prices fell steadily until the early 1970s, and much of the land that changed hands was purchased by non-residents moving from more-urbanized areas.^{1,2} Although both Corinth and Washington retain their rural character, use of land for primary and secondary residential homes is changing the face of both towns. A significant percentage of both land and houses is now owned by seasonal residents (e.g. 30 percent of houses in Corinth³).

Today, population levels are increasing and are currently at between two-thirds and three-quarters of their historical highs; at the time of the 2000 census, Corinth had a population of 1,461, and Washington had 950 residents. The OCHP project area, which includes the more-remote halves of both towns, was characterized in an OCHP letter of support as "the essence of rural working land." This area is currently being used for residences, small businesses, farming, and forestry.⁴ Following agricultural abandonment, the land regenerated into a vigorous and diverse second-growth forest which provides lumber, especially sugar maple. This maple was used in the manufacture of bobbins at two large mills in East Corinth into the 1960s, and now it is in great demand for use in cabinetry, flooring, and furniture. As a result of the active timber market for sugar maple and other tree species, forestry activities, including logging, are common and important in maintaining the working landscape and for providing jobs. There are also several working dairy farms in the project area, including one that processes milk into cheese on-site.

The OCHP project area is under pressure of becoming suburbanized due to the short (45 minutes) commuting distance from the Barre/Montpelier (VT) and Upper Valley (VT/NH) areas. The development of the interstate highway system in the 1950s and '60s has made commuting to distant jobs more common. Outside sources as well as individuals involved with OCHP report a rise in land prices and subdivision, and they state concern about potential impacts on the land base and its ecological and economic attributes. They also express concern over an increasing dependence on the service sector and the increasing conversion of a robust local economy into a "bedroom community."⁵ Finally, project participants point to the lack of local zoning and, correspondingly, little control over development trends. The Orange County Headwaters Project was developed as a response to these concerns, suggesting a confidence among its participants that active community engagement can preserve the desired aspects of the area and build a better future.

¹ McGrory Klyza, C. and Trombulak, S. *The Story of Vermont: A Natural and Cultural History*. Middlebury College Press: 1999.

² <http://www.central-vt.com/towns/history/HstWash.htm>

³ Personal communication, Corinth Town Lister, November 2006

⁴ Dorothy J. Allard, Ph.D. *Preliminary Environmental Assessment of the Orange County Headwaters Project Area*. Final Report. July 1, 2005.

⁵ A bedroom community is a community that is primarily residential in character, with most of its workers commuting to a nearby town or city to earn their livelihood (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bedroom_community)

II. THE OCHP STORY

A. Phase I – Forest Legacy Phase (December 2002-August 2003)

1. A Family Discussion: The Future of Gingerbrook Farm

“I don’t think we had really visualized the land as it exists, as a large undeveloped chunk, as something that could change, until the point when it did start to change.”

--Joann Liddell

The Orange County Headwaters Project began at Gingerbrook Farm, a 49-acre family homestead owned by Bob Machin and Joann Liddell in the hills of Washington. Bob and Joann established their homestead in the late 1970s as part of a move to a self-reliant lifestyle. They continue to operate it today, raising vegetables, animals, and fruit crops on the open land and harvesting maple syrup and wood for building material and firewood from the surrounding forest.

In the mid-1990s, Bob and Joann learned that the development rights on a neighboring 300-acre parcel had been donated to a land trust. Though this property does not directly abut the Machin-Liddell property, it was nearby and led them to see their parcel in a larger context.

“When I first heard that this land had been conserved, it registered strongly with me and I thought, ‘That’s a tremendous thing to do; why would somebody do that, and what does it mean?’ I started thinking about all the wild and open territory starting at our piece of land all the way into Corinth. That’s really when I began thinking what a great thing it would be if, starting with the 300-acre conserved parcel, we could extend and preserve the undeveloped aspect of that land.”

--Bob Machin

In December of 2002, Bob and Joann began thinking seriously about conserving their homestead. When asked what prompted this serious consideration, the couple spoke to me about recent changes in the area, including a dramatic rise in the cost of land, an increase in subdivisions, and an increase in housing development. Joann voiced a concern that potential purchasers of land would engage in large-scale development activities that would dramatically change the character of the landscape. Bob was concerned that pressure to clear-cut forests for financial gain would be greater on owners of smaller parcels, leading to widespread deforestation as land is subdivided into ever-smaller pieces.

One of Bob and Joann’s early steps in considering land conservation was to speak with their son Ben, who had recently been trained as a forester and was beginning to work with Redstart Forestry, a local consulting firm. Ben’s immediate reaction was one of concern. His parents wished to conserve their land in the same state as they had carefully and deliberately tended it over the years. What would they give up? What would they gain? How would it affect the next generation? Would land conservation prevent other uses of the land? To answer these questions and provide his parents with good information, Ben began researching land conservation options.

2. An Idea Forms

“OCHP just tapped in to something. It caught on like wildfire.”

--Area Resident

In the early months of 2003, as part of his investigation into land conservation options, Ben contacted Kate Willard, the Lands Administration Section Chief for the Vermont Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation and representative to the Vermont State Stewardship Committee of the Forest Legacy Program (FLP). A federal program of the U.S. Forest Service, FLP supports state efforts to protect privately owned forestlands through the acquisition of property and development rights. Ben spoke with Kate briefly on the phone and requested that she mail him additional information.

A few weeks later, Ben was in the process of reviewing this information when he received a phone call from Carl Demrow. A Washington resident working for The Conservation Fund (TCF)⁶, Carl had contacted Kate expressing interest in conserving a 1,500-acre tract of timberland in Washington. Around the same time, Dan Breslaw, a Corinth(?) resident, had also contacted Kate regarding the conservation of a 580-acre parcel in Corinth. Kate suggested to Carl, Dan, and Ben that they begin talking to one another about shared land conservation goals, and Carl called Ben to set up a meeting.

Kate, Ben, Carl, and Dan met in April 2003 and discussed the possibility of applying for Forest Legacy funding together. The Forest Legacy Program was attractive because it provides the opportunity to sell (as opposed to donate) the development rights of forestland at market value. However, the group recognized that the parcels represented by Ben, Carl, and Dan might be “long shots” for funding because of their relatively small size, the FLP’s requirements for public access, and the competitive nature of the program.

The group believed that the most likely parcel to qualify was the largest of the three, although they weren’t sure if it was large enough to be competitive alone. It was clear that smaller parcels, like Gingerbrook Farm, would both benefit from and be beneficial to other applicants in the area. Indeed, any landowner's chances of acceptance would be strongly affected by links to adjacent or nearby parcels; a group application that included a significant number of parcels in the area, especially large ones contiguous to each other, would constitute a much stronger application. The group suspected that a greater interest in land conservation and, therefore, potential for a larger, more viable application, existed within the community.

To determine the extent of that interest, Ben, Carl, and Dan decided to engage the community in a dialogue regarding the requirements of the FLP. In order to inform this dialogue and begin gathering information for a 100-page FLP application, the group first needed to identify what was unique about the area. Work began almost immediately. The group researched the natural and cultural features of the area, collected or created geographic information system (GIS) spatial data layers, and sought support from environmental organizations. Some assets were quickly identified. First, there was the 1,526-acre tract owned by Meadowsend Timber Ltd., a company known for its sustainable timber management. Second, there were several larger parcels in the area that were already protected, including the Washington State Forest, the Washington Wildlife Management Area, and four privately owned parcels with conservation easements held by the Vermont Land Trust (VLT) and the Upper Valley

⁶ A national organization that pursues conservation and environmental protection by forging relationships between funders, landowners, and related services

Land Trust (UVLT). Finally, the area clearly possessed valuable natural resources and cultural traditions that were in danger of disappearing due to growing development pressure.

Concurrent with the work of compiling this information, the three collaborators began a community outreach effort that involved talking to neighbors and friends about the FLP. At the same time, Carl brought the effort to the attention of his employer, TCF, which agreed to assist the group with the FLP application and to serve as the applicant of record. The Conservation Fund's involvement in the FLP application would blossom into a strong partnership with OCHP.

3. Community Support

“OCHP really has shifted how the community relates... it brings people together and engages them in conversations that otherwise wouldn't happen.”

--Landowner

As they facilitated kitchen table discussion groups, it became clear to the three organizers that individuals in the community were very much aware of the assets in the area and had a significant interest in land conservation. Word spread quickly, and the three decided they needed a community meeting to answer questions, provide information on the FLP, and gain a real understanding of the level of commitment within the community. Carl organized a meeting in Chelsea in June 2003 that brought together about 40 individuals, far more than the organizers expected. It was at this meeting that the project became officially named the Orange County Headwaters Project, due to its location at the headwaters of the Waits, White, and Winooski rivers. Several key themes emerged from the meeting:

- **Diverse perspectives within the group:** Landowners expressed diverse, individualized needs and conservation goals, making it clear that a variety of conservation approaches would be necessary. Some were more interested in managing for timber production, some for recreational use, and some for other specific activities. A wide range of financial needs and expectations were voiced; some individuals were prepared to donate their development rights, if needed, while others wanted to sell their rights, and still others were undecided.
- **Strong interest in land conservation:** Attendees agreed that the largely undeveloped area between Corinth and Washington was an unusual asset, both to the private landowners within it as well as to the public at large. They expressed a desire to see it remain as it is now into the future: a combination of residences, working forest, recreational areas, and wildlife habitat. Attendees also recognized the threat that uncontrolled development could pose to the integrity of this area in coming years and expressed concern for what impact this development might have on their properties in the future.
- **Concern regarding public access:** The public access clause in FLP easements was a concern for many. In other FLP easements, activities like hunting, hiking, and bird watching had been allowed, while ATVs had often been banned, and snowmobiling and trapping had remained at the discretion of the landowner. There was some discussion regarding the nature of public access around residences, but because most previous FLP projects had occurred on large tracts of timberland with few structures, there was little precedent on which to base any predictions of how residential areas and FLP easements might interface. On this issue, one Steering Committee member recalls:

“Public access was a real big thing. I don’t think it ever was really clear precisely what that meant. I think some people got scared off unnecessarily because they assumed that there was going to be a kiosk on their corner and the world was going to know that this land was open. I don’t think people understood that it just basically meant that you couldn’t post your land against public access.”

- **Commitment to collaboration:** Attendees acknowledged that the collaboration of many individuals working together in a coordinated fashion toward the goals defined by the community would be far more effective than isolated, piecemeal efforts by individuals acting alone.
- **Interest beyond FLP:** At one point, an attending landowner asked for a show of hands from those landowners interested in conserving their land regardless of the availability of FLP funding to purchase development rights. More than half the attendees showed support for the idea of donating easements in this manner, planting a seed that would later grow.

4. The Forest Legacy Program Application

“The Forest Legacy Program application got people thinking and activated their interest in working together.”

--Steering Committee member

After the Chelsea meeting, Ben and Carl created a FAQ sheet and held a series of individual meetings with landowners to answer questions and address misconceptions. The FAQ sheet provided information on easements, land value, and tax implications, and included a description of how the FLP application process works. As a result of this effort, nine landowners, representing 3,000 acres, developed a joint FLP application. Ben and Carl worked with participating landowners to complete the application, which included descriptions and maps of each property, forest management plans, letters of support, and GIS-based maps showing some of the natural resources of the area. The purpose of the proposed project was to protect the traditional uses of the land base in the towns of Washington and Corinth, which would ultimately provide wildlife habitat benefits and keep working forests and the local forest products economy in business. The 1,500-acre Meadowsend parcel acted, in the words of one project organizer, as the “anchor piece.”

Participating landowners were informed that submitting an application was provisional and did not represent a legally binding commitment to enroll in the program. One landowner described joining despite her concern about public access on her land; she understood that many of her concerns could be addressed at a later stage. According to her description, she was one of several participating landowners whose commitment to land conservation was strong enough to compel them to proceed despite some uncertainty.

The Orange County Headwaters Project submitted the FLP application on July 11, 2003, with TCF serving as the applicant of record. Once submitted, the State Stewardship Committee ranked the application as having the second highest priority in Vermont and recommended funding it in the amount of \$1.2 million dollars to the USDA Forest Service. Later that year, after strong support in Congress from Vermont’s Senator Patrick Leahy, the President signed a bill that included an allocation of \$455,000 for use in conserving the 1,526-acre Meadowsend tract (approximately two-thirds of the

necessary funds). While it is unclear to the project organizers what specific factors went into the U.S. government's decision, they believe that the majority of landowners were too small to be competitive; one individual remarked that the "FLP was not prepared to deal with a group of small landowners as opposed to a single landowner of a large tract."

The fact that the entire project was not funded was, as one individual phrased it, "a bit of a reality check." At this point the organizers re-evaluated their options. They could reapply to FLP every year in the hopes that the project would move higher on the priority list; they could seek other options for the smaller landowners and continue to seek FLP funding for the larger parcels; or they could give up entirely. The organizers chose to continue seeking FLP funds for the larger parcels; in 2004, the application was pared down to two of the three largest of the original applicants, and in 2005, it was ranked as the highest-priority project for Vermont. Concurrent with the completion of this report, the 2005 recommendations were under negotiation within the Congress: the President allocated a zero-dollar amount to Vermont for the Forest Legacy Program's FY2006 budget, and the Senate and House were in conference to determine what they would present to the President for signing. At this time (January 2007), the details of this funding are still under negotiation within the Congress.

5. Beyond the Forest Legacy Program

"There were times where we thought, well, there don't seem to be enough people or the land trusts are not responding or it seems like an awful lot of money to raise in this area. Charlie continued to think it could happen and be willing to support it, and that was good medicine."

--Steering Committee member

During the FLP application process, the founders of OCHP considered ways to advance their goals should FLP funding be declined. A portion of the community was interested in moving ahead with or without FLP funding, raising the question of whether there was potential for a larger, related project. Though exciting, this prospect was daunting to project founders, who had little experience with community organizing, land conservation, or complicated easement transactions.

Joining and fueling the discussions on these topics was Charles Cherington. Charles is a landowner who was described by another founder as "a major visionary, a major supporter, and a major funder of the project." Charles currently resides in Boston, where he owns and operates a private equity fund. He grew up in Calais, about 45 miles northwest of the project area. A few years before the inception of OCHP, Charles began a search for land to purchase in Calais in pursuit of a long-time desire to return. He found that the character of Calais had changed from a local farming community to a more populated bedroom community, and so he spent several years looking elsewhere before purchasing a parcel of land in Corinth.

Interviewees expressed several ways in which Charles influenced the project:

Vision - Charles was described as someone who "got the big picture." His belief in OCHP was evident from the beginning, and his encouragement was unflinching throughout.

Business Savvy - One participating landowner pointed out an interesting combination present in Charles – that of a successful businessman firmly grounded in economics who is also “into conservation.”

Leadership - Charles’s entrepreneurial spirit was contagious and empowered the project:

“He asks questions until he gets all the pieces he needs, and he’s decisive. That also affected the whole tone of the project, especially the part of being fearless about asking questions. If you don’t understand what this group is doing, you ask them. And how all the groups work with each other, well, that’s not exactly available on paper. Charlie has empowered other people to ask questions and speak for the individuality of the group and the area.” (Steering Committee member)

“He’s driven in terms of business and he’s driven in terms of his feeling that the working landscape of Vermont is going to hell in a hand basket. And he happens to have landed in a part of Vermont where it’s still relatively intact. That push, plus the commitment and drive that the Redstart folks have, has been the thing that makes this project unusual.” (Advisor/funder)

Funding – Charles was one of the project’s first financial supporters and has been one of its largest. Though finite, his ability to put resources toward the project was, as one participant put it, “probably the difference between this group and other groups with the same goals.”

Charles joined the conservation effort as soon as he became aware of it. After being contacted by Ben during the FLP stage, he attended the first community meeting in Chelsea and joined the FLP application. He quickly understood that the FLP looks for larger, single tracts, and hence his wasn’t likely to meet the conservation objectives of the group. Charles also recognized the potential for a larger project; together, he and the project organizers began to discuss the region’s existing assets and possible next steps.

These discussions highlighted three key attributes possessed by the nascent group. First, the FLP effort had identified a dedicated group of landowners from the community large enough to collectively accomplish landscape-scale conservation, protecting broader cultural, ecological, and economic values. Second, this group of landowners was willing to lead by example and donate their development rights, thereby making a larger project economically feasible. Finally, the FLP effort had also identified individuals from the community willing to support the project, as participating landowners, organizers, and funders.

Even with the community’s willingness to donate easements, the project would still cost something,⁷ and most of the landowners interested in land conservation didn’t have the financial resources to

⁷ The process of placing an easement on a property involves two categories of cost. First, there’s the cost of purchasing the value of the forfeited development rights. This category only applies to the sale of development right and does not apply when rights are donated. The second category applies in both instances, and these costs are typically paid for by the landowner (\$5-\$10,000/parcel):

- Landowner’s legal fees
- Land Trust staff wages for time spent to prepare the Baseline Documentation Report (BDR), conduct GIS mapping, work with landowner to draft the easement language, and coordinate all aspects of the easement
- Stewardship endowment to monitor the easement once in place
- Appraisal of the property

support either the costs associated with conservation easements or the coordination necessary to bring people together. As Charles put it:

“The Forest Legacy application had been done by Ben and Carl as sort of a gesture of enthusiasm. But in order to get 30 or 40 or 50 people involved in something bigger, it was going to take funding for coordination, because they couldn’t volunteer forever.”

Charles encouraged OCHP to evolve beyond volunteering and to consider seeking funding for project coordination and the costs of easement donations; the group agreed upon this tactic. They decided that the best way to go about this was to concentrate initially on finding “seed money” to conduct a feasibility study for a larger project. The product of this feasibility study, as the founders envisioned it, would be a “project proposal” that would summarize the project and would provide a medium for approaching partners (land trusts, appraisers, and lawyers), supporters (environmental NGOs, governmental agencies, community members), and philanthropic funding organizations. One Steering Committee member who was less interested in the FLP application recalls regarding those early discussions with enthusiasm:

“Instead of trying to sell the development rights, the conversation turned to getting a group effort going where people would donate their development rights. I got very interested in it as it turned in that direction, and downright excited when it became clear that those donations could be made without the landowners incurring any costs themselves.”

This enthusiasm for the new approach, as it turns out, was shared by other members of the land conservation community, and funding was not far off.

6. Giving the Project a Chance: The Conservation Fund

“Having something that is grassroots and something that could become a template for other people is the thing that philosophically or programmatically is exciting. And it’s something that’s easier to find financial support for.”

--Steering Committee member

Charles helped arrange a meeting between Davis Cherington (his father) and Ben during the spring of 2003. At this meeting, Davis and Ben discussed potential sources of seed funding. Davis, an independent land conservation consultant who worked for The Conservation Fund, recognized the potential of the project and decided to assist Carl and Ben in writing a challenge grant application to TCF for \$10,000 in seed money to conduct a \$20,000 feasibility study⁸. In July 2003, a few weeks after OCHP received news of the fate of the FLP application, TCF awarded \$10,000 contingent upon OCHP raising a matching \$10,000 from the community.

Individuals at TCF were drawn to OCHP’s grassroots nature and became advisors to project organizers. When asked what motivated him to support and later advise the project, Davis talked about the uniqueness of the area, the idea of the community-based project, and his confidence that the individuals most involved in the project could successfully bring the project to fruition. Another individual at TCF interested in supporting community-driven projects, Nancy Bell, also became an

⁸ A challenge grant is an arrangement wherein the grantor “matches” a community donation in a predetermined ratio, in this case 1:1.

advisor to the project. Nancy reports being motivated by the level of community engagement: “What inspires me is the possible future that’s generated out of people coming together and taking a stand.”

According to the founders of OCHP, the challenge grant constituted the real beginning of OCHP, because it supported dedicated, professional exploration of the potential for the project. In Phase II, project organizers would tackle the commitments of the challenge grant application in evaluating the potential for a full-blown conservation project.

B. Phase II – The Feasibility Study (July 2003- November 2004)

The primary tasks of the feasibility study phase were to 1) assemble a team and administrative structure capable of driving a feasibility study and any subsequent project, 2) secure the \$10,000 grant with a \$10,000 match of community funds, 3) initiate the feasibility study, including assessing landowner interest and creating a GIS map and database with landowner names and contact information, and 4) if warranted, create a concrete project proposal.

1. Relationships, Skills, and Trust: The Coordinators

“Landowners who are donating development rights have trust in the organizers and, through them, have trust in the land trusts.”

--Steering Committee member

In August of 2003, Ginny Barlow, who works at Redstart Forestry, hosted a gathering at which Ben, Carl, Ginny, and Charles discussed the need for an administrative structure capable of conducting the feasibility study and any subsequent project implementation. All agreed that this project management structure should include a steering committee to which the project coordinators would report. These coordinators would take responsibility for the day-to-day management of the project and they would also need to have GIS experience, strong community relationships, and fundraising skills. After this conversation and several more held with TCF, Ginny and Ben agreed to take on all these tasks as the coordinators of the project.

The role of the coordinators, as defined by the group at this stage, was to administer and conduct the feasibility study. There was some understanding that they might continue to function in a supportive role during project implementation, though the nature of that support would be defined at a later stage. At this point, their work involved the following:

- facilitating meetings that would engage partners and members of the community in discussing the mechanics of land conservation and developing a shared vision of the community’s future;
- creating the proposal, defining partnership roles (including their own), and applying for funding;
- writing reports, publicizing successes, and informing local and state governments about the project;
- ensuring that the cooperative spirit of the venture remained strong; and
- carrying out other miscellaneous assignments, such as record keeping for the project’s steering committee.

Funders, landowners, and partners repeatedly characterized Ben and Ginny as the hub and drive of the project. Their unique abilities to successfully build relationships and gain local trust were identified as important reasons why the project achieved early successes. In particular, interviewees identified two main reasons why the arrangement worked:

First, engaging Redstart Forestry as an organization to take on the work of coordination made sense. Redstart is a well-established, highly regarded local forestry consultancy through which Ginny and Ben are familiar with the area's natural resources and citizens. This is particularly true of Ginny, who has lived in the area since 1963 and owned and operated Redstart since 1993. Additionally, Ben has GIS mapping expertise, had been co-coordinating the FLP effort up until this point, and had helped identify the conservation values of the area for the FLP application and TCF challenge grant. Finally, Ginny is also co-founder and co-editor of *Northern Woodlands* magazine (for which another member of the Steering Committee, Steve Long, works), which has an excellent track record of building support for land stewardship through good information. Charles referred to the presence of Redstart Forestry and *Northern Woodlands* as "magical ingredients" well situated to bring the community together.

Second, Ginny and Ben's strengths as individuals are important. If you suggest to Ben that his energy is the reason OCHP exists, he'll shake his head and say there was no way he could have done it on his own. Ben used many people as sounding boards throughout the project: his parents, Davis Cherington and Nancy Bell at TCF, Charles, the Steering Committee, the land trusts, the many landowners involved, and Ginny. Ben is surrounded by a web of individuals who guide and support him; ask the individuals in this support system, and many of them will say his initiative keeps the project going. One funder/advisor of the project said:

"I think that from the start, one of the most important pieces to this was the leadership that Ben Machin provided. I mean just absolutely undaunted, remarkable leadership. He kept the torch lit and he kept saying, 'I don't know how to do this, but this is what we're committed to and we'll find a way,' over and over. The fact that there was one person who no matter what was going on, continued to carry the banner, was essential."

Ben's talents were described in terms of leadership qualities such as efficiency, tenacity, organization, and commitment, but also in terms of technical skills like grant writing and GIS mapping. Interviewees described Ginny differently, but with no less enthusiasm. Due to her longevity at Redstart, her work at *Northern Woodlands*, her experience as a forester, and her ability to diplomatically and fairly hear all sides of a story, Ginny has gained "an impeccable reputation" with members of the community irrespective of different backgrounds or political orientations. Ginny's skill with people and her belief in the project helped build momentum:

"First of all, you just can't help but love dealing with her. She's very responsive, and at the same time, she sees land conservation as an opportunity with many facets. There is the importance of keeping land open, there is the ecological aspect, and there is the forestry aspect. There are a lot of things that you can 'hook into.' And I think she has a vision that is well founded. It's not pie in the sky; it's doable." -Landowner

Finally, the coordinators' inclusive approach to outreach was effective: many project participants described how Ginny and Ben approached them respectfully, patiently, and supportively. One advisor stated that her advice to project founders was to be as inclusive as possible, and went on to say:

“Ben, consciously or not, was a master at this. No one was made to feel wrong for not supporting it. Folks were acknowledged regardless of their position.”

Ben and Ginny also provided landowners with simple and honest answers and facilitated an easygoing, ‘no-pressure,’ celebratory approach. By organizing social events at which ‘hard sell’ tactics were avoided, they promoted fun and education about ecology and land conservation, and provided a format for celebratory community involvement:

“They’ve really helped integrate me into the community, partly with land-conservation-oriented people, and partly with other people in the community. They have really reached out, and I think that social aspect has made a big difference.” (Landowner)

2. Directing OCHP through Community Participation: The Steering Committee

“I thought that if we conserved our land, it might help other people get interested. I wanted to be right up front as a lead person, to practice what I was preaching. I value this land tremendously, and I really wanted to do whatever I could to keep it wild and show others that they can also have an impact.”

--Steering Committee member

With the help of Carl, Ginny and Ben formed an OCHP Steering Committee and initiated monthly meetings. Ginny’s connections to the community were an integral part of the coordinators’ ability to set up a successful Steering Committee. The Steering Committee members were chosen to include a variety of complementary skills and backgrounds, and to represent both the towns of Corinth and Washington. Each Steering Committee member also was committed to conserving their land. As one founder put it, “we have people who are not only promoting the project in the community but are also putting their money where their mouth is.”

As soon as meetings commenced, the Steering Committee set about assembling the nuts and bolts of the project: logo, letterhead, banking, communication, organizational structure, etc. As early as December 2003, the group discussed how to approach donation tax status and considered the possibility of applying for nonprofit, 501(c)(3) tax-exempt status with the Internal Revenue Service. After much discussion, the Steering Committee decided that OCHP should focus efforts on accomplishing the goals of the project and partner with an existing 501(c)(3) that would act as fiscal agent⁹. One advisor to the project said:

“Oftentimes, a land trust will work so hard getting their 501(c)(3) they kind of run out of energy. These guys are the other way around. They basically said, ‘We don’t have time; we just need to get these things done while we have a window of opportunity.’” (Funder, advisor)

⁹ Though they opted out of being a 501(c)(3) entity, OCHP did register their name with the Vermont Secretary of State as a nonprofit and developed a fiscal agent relationship with the George D. Aiken Resource Conservation and Development Council (RC&D), which is a 501(c)(3) entity.

3. Community Support: Matching Funds

“I think a lot of people who live here do appreciate that it’s rural in a way that a lot of places used to be but are not anymore. And you certainly hear people say things like, ‘We have to slow or plan development before it’s too late.’ There is a fairly common opinion that at some point soon, it’ll be too late; the time to do it is now.”

--Project coordinator

This sentiment helped support the local fundraising effort to secure the \$10,000 TCF challenge grant. To begin with, the Steering Committee drafted a fundraising letter and brochure, made a list of approximately 150 potential donors (virtually all of whom were local landowners or residents), and mailed the materials in December 2003. Following the mailing, the Steering Committee and project coordinators called potential donors directly and in some cases held one-on-one meetings.

OCHP approached potential donors by framing the project as an opportunity for the community to shape its own future by embracing and protecting the existing conservation values:

The project is rooted in the belief that the farmland, woodland, and wildland in the towns of Washington and Corinth are special and worth protecting. Perhaps even more unusual than the natural resources are the cultural traditions in existence and the great interest in land conservation expressed by people in the community. This phenomenon is evidence of a real opportunity to collectively affect the way the landscape of the community will look, feel, and function far into the future. By working together, we can benefit our local recreation, wildlife, and forestry interests in ways that would be nearly impossible as individual landowners working in isolation. (Paraphrased from fundraising letter)

The letter also pointed out that, due to the matching grant and an initial generous private contribution of \$5,000, every dollar donated would, in effect, trigger a donation of three additional dollars. The letter also argued that even small donations would be extremely helpful in gaining support from foundations because the response rate would demonstrate the community’s level of commitment. In the end, 62 individuals donated over \$12,000, and OCHP successfully met the challenge grant.

4. Who’s Onboard?: The Feasibility Study

“When you actually have a visual of how things fit together using GIS and you can see where they are on the landscape, people begin to see themselves and they say, ‘Oh, so-and-so is thinking about this? I see how our parcel would fit in here.’”

--Funder/advisor

Having set up an administrative structure for the project and successfully raised the TCF challenge grant matching funds, OCHP embarked on the feasibility study in January 2004, which focused on the following tasks:

- Defining the project area and developing a GIS database, including each ownership of over 25 acres in the project area.
- Conducting a public outreach effort to determine the level of landowner commitment and intent.

- Preparing a project proposal, timeline, and budget for full project implementation.

GIS Mapping and Defining the Project Area

Boundaries and ownership information were identified for over 500 parcels in the project area. Spatial data about soils, wetlands and waterways, watershed boundaries, and topography were also gathered and analyzed. Focusing on the less-developed, wilder areas and using town boundaries and major roads as guidelines, the Steering Committee defined a 30,000-acre project area. The Orange County Headwaters Project found that interest lay outside the project area as well, but maintained its focus with the idea that the project area could expand later if initial success was achieved.

Landowner Outreach

The Steering Committee conducted landowner outreach from April-August 2004 to evaluate the community's level of interest in conservation. More specifically, they and project coordinators:

- Developed a network of outreach volunteers, provided them with specific talking points, and directed them to call all the landowners in the project area with more than 30 acres.
- Directed volunteers to rate each landowner in the project area for their level of interest, using a 1-4 system, with 1 being very interested and 4 being opposed.
- Arranged face-to-face meetings between project organizers and those rated "1." (The Steering Committee determined that OCHP should keep in touch with "2s" but should not meet with them, in order to save time.)
- Hosted an educational meeting with strongly interested landowners and staff from the Vermont Land Trust and the Upper Valley Land Trust.
- Asked committed landowners to sign a letter of intent (a document that was not legally binding but that stated a commitment to donate an easement should funding be available to cover costs).

The volunteers were advised against trying to sell the project's mission or provide expert advice on easements. Rather, they were asked to simply provide basic information and assess interest. This was accomplished by providing general information on the nature of easements, particularly the difference between sale and donation, and informing those interested in selling development rights that, though very competitive and mandating public access, FLP funding might be available to landowners with larger tracts. The volunteers emphasized that the limited funding (TCF challenge grant) acquired thus far provided the community with an opportunity, but that community members must act quickly to secure actual funding for project implementation. In the process, volunteers were able to educate landowners regarding the transaction costs of easement donations and the possibility of working together to defray these costs.

After the outreach process, Ginny and Ben contacted those individuals who'd been assigned to the first category to determine who was fully committed to the idea of donating easements in the near term. Many were very interested but still had reservations. Ben and Ginny recognized that reaching the point of a signed easement would be a long process for most; however, by October 2004, OCHP had determined that a sufficient number of landowners (21 signed letters of intent) were willing to donate easements to warrant a full-blown conservation project. In these meetings, OCHP learned how important funding for the transaction costs associated with easement donations was going to be; most, if not all, landowners were not willing or able to pay these costs. One participating landowner said:

"For people like us who are on the edge of whether or not they could afford to do it, this was the deciding factor. It makes the difference between doing it and not doing it."

This outreach approach allowed OCHP to assess the feasibility of the project, accomplish a tremendous amount of education and outreach, and concentrate its initial efforts on those landowners who were most likely to donate an easement. By identifying the people most committed, OCHP made the best use of the funds invested in the feasibility study and increased the likelihood that the project would have real accomplishments as soon as possible.

5. Confidence Builds: Seed Grants and Letters of Support

“The small seed grants were like venture capital. They let us know that we weren’t just out on a limb by ourselves.”

--OCHP founder

As soon as Steering Committee meetings began, OCHP started the search for funding and partner organizations. In 2004, five grant applications were submitted, only two of which were awarded small grants. However, OCHP was undaunted and continued the search. The Steering Committee researched a list of potential funding organizations and successfully reapplied to two of the three organizations that had originally declined their application. When I asked Ben to reflect on the search for support and funding, he recalled being discouraged by rejection letters from early potential funders, and he suspected these rejections were related to the fact that other similar community projects have often fallen short of their goals. Despite these challenges, several small grants were approved, which helped reinforce the merit of the project, according to Ben:

“More importantly it’s just the recognition that you are doing something worthwhile and that your project has potential. A couple of good things happen and you start to feel like you can do it.”

At the same time that the small grants were approved, letters of support from 15 organizations were obtained. The existing relationships of project organizers were essential in gathering these support letters; most connections were made through Redstart Forestry, Northern Woodlands, or one of the Steering Committee members.

6. Defining OCHP: The Proposal

“We were very unsure about how we would relate to the land trusts, given that this was a new dynamic with a group of people actively trying to stick together and work together. The proposal was our way of explaining where we were coming from and how we wanted to partner with the land trusts.”

--OCHP founder

By August 2004, OCHP had mapped the area and developed a GIS database with landowner contact information, met with the two area land trusts, developed an administrative framework, collected donations and letters of support, and conducted an outreach campaign that resulted in 21 letters signed by landowners pledging to donate easements on their properties. The next task was to synthesize the information gathered into a coherent, written proposal that could be used to engage the both the land trusts and philanthropic foundations.

The proposal was finalized and presented to VLT and UVLT in November 2004. The proposal described the community's vision for the region and served several important functions, including:

- 1) outlining the project goals, budget, and timeline;
- 2) providing a brief project history; and
- 3) specifying parcels to be conserved (including GIS-based maps and letters of intent). The following text is paraphrased from the proposal.

VISION

The OCHP region is an area where many families heat their homes with wood, where sugarmakers are still found in abundance, and where enterprising people can still make a good living working in local forest-based sectors as loggers, foresters, and craftsmen.¹⁰ The proposal stated that OCHP's vision is not aimed at stopping development, but rather at helping landowners "enhance the ecological integrity of the area and its working landscape." It stated that OCHP's vision was to help landowners maintain the working landscape by "combining the strong grassroots commitment to conservation with the experience, knowledge, and leadership of respected partner organizations so that landowners can conserve their lands more cost-effectively and create large contiguous areas with long-term ecological, forestry, wildlife, and recreational value."

MISSION

The proposal stated that there were significant obstacles to community-based land conservation in the project area, including a lack of coordination to help people work collaboratively, a lack of accurate ecological and parcel ownership data, and a lack of funding to support the costs of easement donation (e.g. stewardship endowments, appraisals, legal advice). To address these challenges, OCHP developed a mission statement focused on providing funding, information, contacts, and leverage to all the landowners in the project area interested in conserving their land:

"Before proceeding, these landowners need to be assured that financial assistance is available to cover costs of conservation that they cannot afford, and that this financial assistance is made available to all landowners who have signed letters of intent, regardless of their acreage or relative value of their parcels. This will be done so that the group has the opportunity to move forward together, thus accomplishing the broader goals that are at the heart of the project."
(Paraphrased from proposal)

CONSERVATION VALUES

The conservation values highlighted in the proposal fell into three categories: natural resources, economic considerations, and social capital. The natural resource category addressed the following elements:

- Water resources: The project area is at the headwaters of the Winooski (in the St. Lawrence watershed), White, and Waits (both in the Connecticut River watershed) rivers, and some of the largest mapped wetlands in Orange County exist here. Corinth and Washington are rural towns with no municipal water supply, and groundwater generated by the headwaters provides much of the drinking water for area residents while also providing clean water to the St. Lawrence River and Connecticut River watersheds.

¹⁰ Demrow, C., and Ben Machin. Orange County Headwaters Conservation Project Abstract for The Conservation Fund. July 2003.

- Wildlife: The area's relatively small population and sparse development provides largely unfragmented wildlife habitat that supports species including black bear, moose, deer, fisher, wild turkey, ruffed grouse, and bobcat. The mosaic of private ownerships with different management strategies provides diverse habitat.
- Rich soils and healthy forests: The region features calcium- and nutrient-rich, productive soils that support healthy forests and fast-growing trees.
- Existing conserved lands: Existing state-owned and privately owned conserved lands (totaling 1,458 acres or 5.3 percent of the total acreage) serve to anchor the effort.

The economic considerations included:

- A working landscape of forests and farms: The forests in the headwaters region produce what is arguably the best sugar maple in the world, as well as other excellent northern hardwood and softwood timber species. The region sustains a stable forest products economy that supports logging, trucking, milling, and woodworking businesses. It also features working dairy farms and active sugaring operations.
- Recreation: Because of a culture of open access to private land, the area is generally available for recreational opportunities including fishing, hunting, birding, and hiking. There are also many scenic driving and biking routes with striking views of Camel's Hump, Killington, the Northfield Range, Franconia Ridge in the White Mountains, Mount Moosilauke, and the mountains of Groton State Forest.

The social capital elements included:

- Strong interest in conservation: Twenty-one landowners, owning 25 parcels, have shown a strong commitment to working collaboratively towards land protection.
- Strong interest in stewardship: Landowners see easement donations as one component of long-term stewardship of forest and farm land. Many have shown a commitment to good forest management practices by enrolling their properties in Vermont's Use Value Assessment Program and/or by seeking Forest Stewardship Council certification of their forest management practices.
- Interest in ecology: During outreach campaigns, landowners expressed an interest in learning more about the ecology of the region in order to maintain existing biodiversity and protect fragile habitats and/or uncommon species.
- Opportunities for research: The Vermont Institute of Natural Science and the University of Vermont own or have an interest in property in the project area, and representatives from both organizations have expressed an interest in landscape-level conservation, research, and education.

THE OPPORTUNITY FOR ACTION

The OCHP area has so far escaped the fragmentation that has taken place in nearby towns. Its large, contiguous tracts of open land are a rarity for this part of the state. If development pressures are unchecked, they will severely fragment the area's resources, undermining both the local economy and culture that has grown up with it. With the owners of 25 parcels committed to donating their development rights, and development pressure from the Upper Valley and Barre/Montpelier areas increasing, there is now significant opportunity for action.

7. Beyond Conservation Easements: Related Efforts

“I want to walk on other people’s land, to see what brings them pleasure and what’s exciting, to see the plants that are growing. In a way, we’re honoring each others easement donations by visiting these little pockets of our amazing landscape together.”

--Landowner

The proposal outlined additional ways in which OCHP would engage the community to complement land conservation efforts.

Ecology and Land Conservation Series

The New Hampshire Charitable Foundation-Upper Valley Region’s Wellborn Ecology Fund funded OCHP to begin a series of speakers and workshops designed to help residents and landowners in Corinth and Washington learn more about the land: the wildlife, plant communities, forestry practices, and opportunities for conservation. On February 26th, OCHP hosted a walk with ecologist/naturalist Alcott Smith, followed by a potluck dinner and a talk by Darby Bradley, the president of Vermont Land Trust. One participant said this event also provided the opportunity for community members to talk about other important issues, such as jobs and housing. Since this early gathering, OCHP, in conjunction with a host of partners including the Corinth Conservation Commission and Audubon Vermont, has continued to conduct outreach and provide educational and social forums.

Third-Party Green Certification

The National Wildlife Federation, Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund, and the Davis Conservation Foundation are bringing Forest Stewardship Council certification to owners of forestland through Redstart Forestry. Forest Stewardship Council certification is awarded to those organizations complying with a rigorous set of environmental, social, and economic standards.¹¹

Natural Resource Inventory

The Orange County Headwaters Project collaborated with The Nature Conservancy to conduct a preliminary natural resource inventory from October 2004 to July 2005. The inventory gathered and synthesized data concerning the forest condition, distribution of natural communities, presence of rare species, geology and soils, land ownership, and demographics.

C. Phase III – Negotiations With the Land Trusts (December 2004-May 2005)

During this phase, the Steering Committee identified project partners, defined their roles, applied for funding, and brought the project to life.

1. Early Negotiations

“There is a lot of leverage at play here. Everybody is putting in part of what needs to be put in, but no one player is contributing all of it.”

--Project founder

¹¹ For more information about the Forest Stewardship Council green certification program, visit <http://www.fscus.org/>.

Even before completing the proposal, OCHP had engaged the land trusts in initial discussions about ways in which they might collaborate. Once the proposal was written and sent to the land trusts, in November 2004, it took some persistence on the part of project organizers to get discussions started again. In January 2005, Ginny, Ben, and Davis met with key members of VLT; shortly thereafter, they met with UVLT. After these meetings, a period of negotiation ensued between OCHP and the two land trusts as they discussed the details of collaboration and funding. These efforts culminated in separate written Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) with both land trusts.

One land trust staff member described his reaction upon first seeing the proposal: “My initial thought was, ‘Oh, they’ll never do this. It’s too big.’” This individual’s thinking changed over time as he became more familiar with the proposal and, eventually, the project:

“They had really done a lot of work. This is pretty impressive. We’re all so accustomed to reports gathering dust on shelves. But this has not been a document gathering dust. This, in many ways, has been a road map that has gotten them funding and rallied people to the cause. And then success breeds success. Right away we started getting land conserved. You start saying, you know what? This is easy.”

Orange County Headwaters Project organizers have expressed appreciation for the strong relationships forged with VLT and UVLT; one founder and organizer stated that, “OCHP simply would not exist without the Vermont and Upper Valley Land Trusts.” Though established and successful, the land trusts engaged with OCHP and, through the MOUs, demonstrated a willingness to collaborate on a project that was outside of their normal working approach.

I asked both land trusts if they’d worked with community projects like OCHP in the past. Both asserted that they’d worked with community projects of all shapes and sizes, but that OCHP is unusual. Several interviewees, including one land trust staff member, suggested that OCHP is unique because it came to the land trusts with a well-defined vision for their region that was developed independently and with strong community support. A staff member of one land trust stated:

“I consider OCHP to be uniquely successful in Vermont. In most instances that we’ve seen, you get a group of people together who are really interested and say they’ve come up with this vision. And then they come to the land trust and say: ‘These are the five most important properties in this area. Can you contact these landowners and see if they’re interested?’ What the folks with OCHP have done, however, is develop a shared local vision and appreciation for the landscape. They got commitments from a couple of dozen landowners that they’d be interested. Then they gathered a lot of data about the area, and came to the Vermont Land Trust and Upper Valley Land Trust and said, ‘Here’s our vision. What can you do to help us?’”

A staff member from the other land trust stated:

“They’ve supported the conservation of more parcels of land than many groups that set out with similar goals. It appears to me that that they’ve done it in a way that has built a broader community understanding of conservation, a sense of stewardship of their land resources, and kind of a mutual commitment.”

That OCHP chose to control of much of the project during implementation was also considered unique. Many projects give a land trust complete responsibility for contacting landowners directly, finding

funding for each parcel individually (forgoing the need for a project to apply for funding as a whole) and working out the details of the easements independent of any involvement with project coordinators, steering committees, or other project partners. Rather than relinquish coordination of the project, OCHP worked to find mutually beneficial roles for the land trusts. One project supporter said:

“Communities are often looking to the organization to take the lead and kind of carry the project along. I think the real power with OCHP is that the community took the lead. They’ve been very clearly articulating what works and doesn’t work for them. This was imperative because it maintained the project’s independence, sense of identity, and momentum. I think ultimately it worked out.”

2. A Path is Discovered: Land Trust Memorandums of Understanding

“The land trusts have jumped up and been great partners. This project would not have been able to succeed without the help of the land trusts. We talked about forming a land trust, but that’s the last thing I want to do. The two land trusts that are currently operating know how to do it. They’re established organizations with great track records. It’s perfect to have them working with us hand-in-hand.”

--Project coordinator

Negotiations between OCHP and the land trusts resulted in two MOUs that defined specific roles and responsibilities for land trust staff and OCHP coordinators. The Vermont Land Trust signed an MOU in April 2005, and in May of 2005, UVLT sent OCHP a letter that, though less formal than VLT’s MOU, nevertheless served as a commitment to the project.

According to the MOUs, OCHP would be coordinated at the local level by Ben and Ginny, and OCHP committed to raising funds to support the equivalent of one half-time position for the three-year duration of the project. As well as continuing to perform many of the feasibility stage functions, the coordinators would support the land trusts by providing information to landowners about easement donations and would represent the group of landowners in relationships with the land trusts, appraisers, lawyers, and other project partners. One land trust staff member commented on the importance of this local coordination:

“Other local projects have had staff, but they haven’t always been linked to the land – personally, professionally, relationally linked to the landowners in that landscape. Ginny and Ben, on the other hand, know everybody. As the staff members, they have such a strong connection to the people and the land that I think they can accomplish things through all those relationships that somebody sitting in an office in wherever couldn’t accomplish.”

With the MOUs in place, OCHP coordinators helped prepare landowners for a narrowly focused discussion with the land trusts regarding their conservation easements. As part of this educational process, the coordinators arranged a combination of group and individual meetings attended by landowners and the project lawyer¹². In addition, project coordinators interviewed each landowner about his or her conservation priorities. These interviews were guided by a questionnaire, and the completed questionnaires were passed on to the land trusts. After reviewing the questionnaires, the

¹² The project coordinators found both a lawyer experienced in conservation law and an experienced appraiser willing to work at reduced rates.

land trusts took the lead role for each parcel and initiated in-person meetings with individual landowners to complete the easement. The land trusts customized each easement by working closely with individual landowners, preparing a baseline documentation report,¹³ conducting a title search, and handling the closing of the easement and its legal recording. During this final stage, OCHP coordinators were less actively involved, although they remained available if requested by the landowner.

The MOU arrangement also divided responsibility for project expenses and fundraising. The land trusts agreed to fundraise for the cost of each stewardship endowment, including the staff time required to draft and close the easements. In turn, OCHP agreed to fundraise for the cost of local coordination, landowner legal counsel, and a rolling loan fund to cover appraisals. A reserve of funds was set aside and limits were placed on costs allotted to each landowner so that both parties had some recourse in the event of difficult or lengthy landowner easement donation processes.

Both land trusts expressed satisfaction with the arrangement for sharing responsibilities with the coordinators. As one land trust staff member put it:

The arrangement put more work on OCHP's shoulders than would be typical for a local entity like this. Because of this arrangement, my meeting with the landowner is focused on helping them implement their vision, since they've come pretty far on the continuum towards getting there. That enables us to help conserve more pieces of land in a year than we would otherwise be able to find the staff time to do. That's really the key. The time we put in is nicely limited by this great background work that the Steering Committee and the folks at Redstart Forestry do.

Subsequent to the signing of the MOUs, OCHP worked with both land trusts to change some language in the easement template. They engaged in negotiations regarding forestry language, third-party violations of the easements, and title warranty. This continued dialogue demonstrated the willingness of both parties to compromise in order to accomplish the shared goals of the project.

3. Investing in a Community Effort: Funding OCHP

"We had already negotiated the terms with the land trusts so that our budget could reflect the land trusts' commitment. If we had gone to major funders without this commitment, I doubt we would have made any headway."

--Project founder

In May 2005, while the MOUs were being negotiated, OCHP applied for project funding to the John Merck Fund (JMF). In this application, OCHP used a budget that was developed during the MOU negotiations. When the grant reached JMF, an anonymous donor decided that they would fund the proposal independently by working with TCF as a partner. One funder/advisor suggests that "The donor has always been interested in this idea of incubating local community conservation projects."

¹³ The land trusts evaluate the appropriateness of donation/sale and feasibility of easement enforcement by mapping geography and resources so as to identify significant conservation values and investigating current land use patterns, boundaries, titles, and tax requirements so as to identify legal issues that may infringe on the easement restrictions. The land trust compiles this information into a Baseline Documentation Report that, in turn, informs the easement.

At present (January 2007), the project continues to garner additional funding support; supporting organizations now include TCF, the Freeman Foundation, VLT, UVLT, the Connecticut River Mitigation and Enhancement Fund, the Maverick Lloyd Foundation, the Connecticut River Joint Commissions, the Vermont Community Foundation, the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation-Upper Valley Region's Wellborn Ecology Fund, the New England Grassroots Environment Fund, the Peter J. Sharp Foundation, and 62 individuals, many of whom are local landowners.

More than one interviewee spoke about the power of the community's donation as leverage in fundraising. One project founder stated:

"Based on the initial appraisal for the first property, it looks like the value of what the community is giving is about \$2.5 million. And that really gives a new context to our request for funding. In other words, if you as a funder know that you're giving \$50,000 that will go 10 percent or 20 percent of the way towards helping 30 different parcels get conserved at a total value of \$2.5 million, your money is just enabling a much larger community donation."

The project was able to come to fruition in part due to the funding OCHP received. As one coordinator stated: "If we didn't have funding to pay for our time, we never, ever could do it. I could never do this as a volunteer."

D. Phase IV – Project Implementation (June 2005- Present)

"From what I have heard in various discussions with people, OCHP might not be unique in terms of the number of people interested. I think it is unique in that this many people took their interest one step further and said, 'I will do this.' Instead of attending a lot of meetings and wondering and thinking 'Well, this sounds like a good idea,' this group of people has signed on the dotted line and, one by one, they are making it happen."

--Steering Committee member

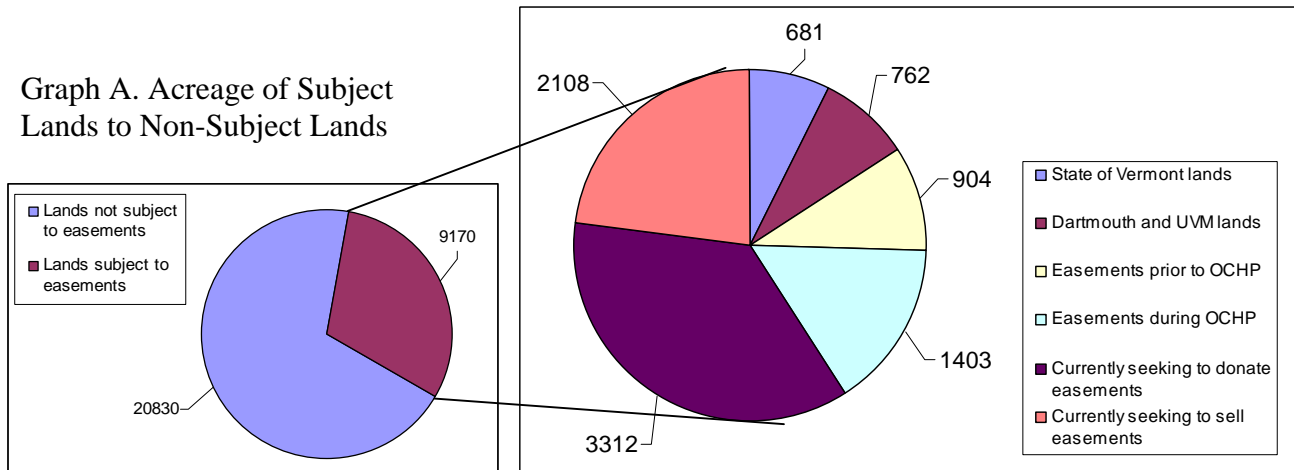
While the implementation phase will benefit from further evaluation as time passes, it is worth briefly summarizing here what has been accomplished. In June 2005, OCHP started active conservation, and, as of January 2007, 12 parcels had been conserved. In addition, the scope of the project has grown from 25 to 35 parcels that are either already conserved through OCHP's activities or are committed to easement donation, as well two parcels seeking easement sale and over 75 that have expressed a general interest in land conservation.

Some of those interviewed mentioned that they were somewhat surprised at how long each individual easement took to complete. Starting with personal decisions that the landowner needs to make, and working through the steps of drafting the easement, conducting title work, seeking legal advice, and holding a closing has taken an average of 3-6 months for each landowner, according to one project coordinator. The capacity of both land trusts has been extremely valuable in this regard.

Since OCHP initiated the feasibility study outreach effort, the project and its conservation goals have grown. The vision for the future of the 30,000 acre project area includes +/- 9000 acres of conserved land (see Graph A.). Of the 9000 acres subject to easements, there are a variety of categories (see Graph B.), including State of Vermont lands, Dartmouth and UVM lands, easements prior to OCHP,

easements during OCHP, those currently seeking to donate easements and those currently seeking to sell easements.

Graph B. Acreage per Category of Subject Lands



One of the project coordinators commented that there have been “some minor glitches” as the project’s implementation phase has unfolded. Mentioned specifically was the resignation of an advisor that occurred after it became clear that the relationship was not working well for either party. In addition, a general comment was made that the roles of the coordinators and the land trust staff have had to be adjusted occasionally through continued dialogue and compromise. Many of those interviewed seemed more comfortable discussing the earlier stages of the project and were more inclined to defer judgment on the success or failure of the implementation stage until a later date when more land conservation has been accomplished. A general interest in documenting the project and sharing the findings with other communities was expressed by many project participants.

III. FUTURE RESEARCH

A. A New Model?

“I think the Headwaters Project shows the way of the future. There is awareness in that community about what they love and what the threats are. The Orange County Headwaters Project encourages a paradigm shift in conservation from the grassroots up. As land conservation organizations, we should be asking ourselves, ‘How can we be in service to communities in their quest to realize their vision for the future?’”

--Advisor

One funder commented on OCHP's early success, "To me, OCHP is one of the most successful locally generated grassroots efforts I've seen."

Reactions like these from conservation professionals suggest that further study of OCHP may be warranted. Given that OCHP may be an innovative model of locally driven land conservation, future research should assess the strengths and challenges of the project, determine what makes this approach to land conservation different from other approaches, and identify the necessary elements for sustaining OCHP and replicating the project in other communities. This administrative history can serve as a first step towards a more rigorous evaluation of OCHP. It is the hope of project participants that this process can help other communities more easily overcome challenges associated with projects of this type, especially those obstacles related to fundraising that result from a lack of awareness regarding community conservation initiatives on the part of philanthropic foundations. If documenting OCHP overcomes this obstacle, then the strong private support that was essential to OCHP may be less necessary for future community collaborations.

B. Towards Evaluation: Emergent Themes

The field of evaluation provides a framework for understanding the process and outcomes of programmatic activities.¹⁴ This administrative history, while limited in scope, offers some insight for future evaluation research.

Strengths and Challenges of OCHP

This administrative history documents the important milestones in the development of OCHP. From this historical account, it is possible to identify some of the strengths and challenges associated with OCHP to date. Perhaps the most important theme to emerge, in terms of *strength* and *challenges*, is the grassroots origin and management of OCHP. Future evaluation research should continue to explore this line of inquiry: To what extent do the other participants in OCHP share this view? What, specifically, makes OCHP "feel local" in the eyes of project partners, and how important is this attribute of the project in the eyes of participants? Have there been any unexpected or unintended impacts associated with OCHP? What is the necessary balance between social capital and funding? Would the funding available to OCHP have been able to effect landscape level conservation without the community connections that existed?

Key Elements for Sustaining OCHP and Replication Elsewhere

Evaluation research can also identify the key elements for sustaining OCHP and replicating the project in other communities. As OCHP continues to evolve, what needs to happen to "keep it local?" Are there enough resources at the local level to sustain and diversify OCHP? Have mistakes been made that could be avoided by other groups with similar goals? In what ways is the experience of OCHP transferable to others? One land trust staff member described it in these terms:

¹⁴ Patton, M. (2002). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods* (3rd Ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. Weiss, C. (1998). *Evaluation* (2nd Ed.). Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

“When the project is over, how does the experience that is being gained by individual volunteers working on this project carry beyond the town boundaries? I would like the knowledge that these individuals have acquired not to stay in their heads and I’d really like for it not to stay in their neighborhood. Some of the resources that have supported OCHP are not from the project area. To the degree that a broader base of support has made it possible for these [OCHP] people to use their talents to reach their goals, it would be great if an investment were also made to spread the knowledge and inspiration to other people who need the boldness to take on the same kind of thing. It would be also good if OCHP became a conservation leader in the region and was there to share its talents in the future.”

Comparison with Other Initiatives

There is a strong belief among study participants that OCHP represents a unique, locally driven, partnership-based land conservation effort. Future evaluation research should test this assertion. In what ways does OCHP differ from other initiatives? Have these differences affected project implementation and project outcomes?

C. The Opportunity

The Orange County Headwaters Project is halfway through a three-year projected timeline as of the release of this administrative case history (January 2007). With the case history completed, the early stages of the project are well documented, providing a foundation on which to build a more rigorous program evaluation over the coming year and a half. This program evaluation could be valuable for OCHP, offering the opportunity to assess the project as it evolves over the coming 18 months. Evaluation research will also be valuable for OCHP’s partners and funders, particularly land trusts and other organizations actively engaged in land conservation on a larger geographic scale.

Through the development of the case study, a partnership between the Snelling Center for Government, the University of Vermont, and the National Park Service Conservation Study Institute has been strengthened. This partnership, with the support of OCHP and its partners, is ideally positioned to conduct an in-depth program evaluation. This evaluation would provide important feedback to OCHP and become a medium for disseminating knowledge to the broader land conservation community. In a natural environment with diverse and fragmented ownership patterns, this knowledge will be helpful for those seeking to effect landscape-level resource protection.