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Above: The 100-Acre
Woods.

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A Rare Opportunity: The 100-Acre Woods

Final push to conserve the largest privately-owned, undeveloped tract of land in Portsmouth

It's spring in Portsmouth and the thaw has come to the 100-Acre Woods. Carefully dodging soft earth and puddles, Joe Cavaretta orients himself and, like a human compass, points east to a ridge of trees that ring his sprawling property.

"As the crow flies," he says, "the ocean is just a few miles that way."

You wouldn't know it of course. Standing near Joe's house, with forest on every flank, it certainly doesn't *feel* like you're a morning walk from the sun and surf. And it is precisely because of this bucolic idiosyncrasy that Joe knew the future of this spectacular, family land was conservation.

"About five years after I had a minor heart problem, I said, well what am I going to do with this place?" he recounts. "I talked to developers and then I thought, you know, I don't want to leave here. I just I love this place."

Upon that epiphany, Joe reached out to SELT and kicked off the 12+ year conservation dialogue that would eventually lead to where we are today: a community campaign to protect the 100-Acre Woods. The 100-Acre Woods matching challenge has recently launched, providing a

dollar-for-dollar doubling of all gifts made to conserve and steward this unique property.

"To say the Seacoast community is excited about this opportunity is an understatement," says Brian Hart, SELT's Executive Director. "Since we first announced this project last year the response has been a mix of surprise and excitement. People know that a chance to protect a land of this size and value comes along once in a lifetime."

Apropos, considering Joe's property has been in his family for multiple generations. The Cavarettas trace their roots to Portsmouth, and, later, to Rye where they set up shop as the owners of the iconic Foye's Corner Market (where Joe would cut his teeth in his first job).

His commitment to help the family business and stay in the area paid off in a big way when Joe's uncle sold him his 100-acre property in 1979. And Joe has been there ever since. As Portsmouth has been built out around him, Joe kept his property largely untouched, save for a modest house; that has meant the vast natural benefits of the 100-Acre Woods – wildlife habitat for rare and threatened species, water quality

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A Mark of Distinction

The accreditation seal AFFIRMS national quality standards are met.



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- ✓ LASTING STEWARDSHIP

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The 100-Acre Woods, continued from page 1

protection of Berry's Brook, wetlands for flood storage and pollutant capture, and wildlife travel corridors connecting large blocks of habitat – has stayed intact.

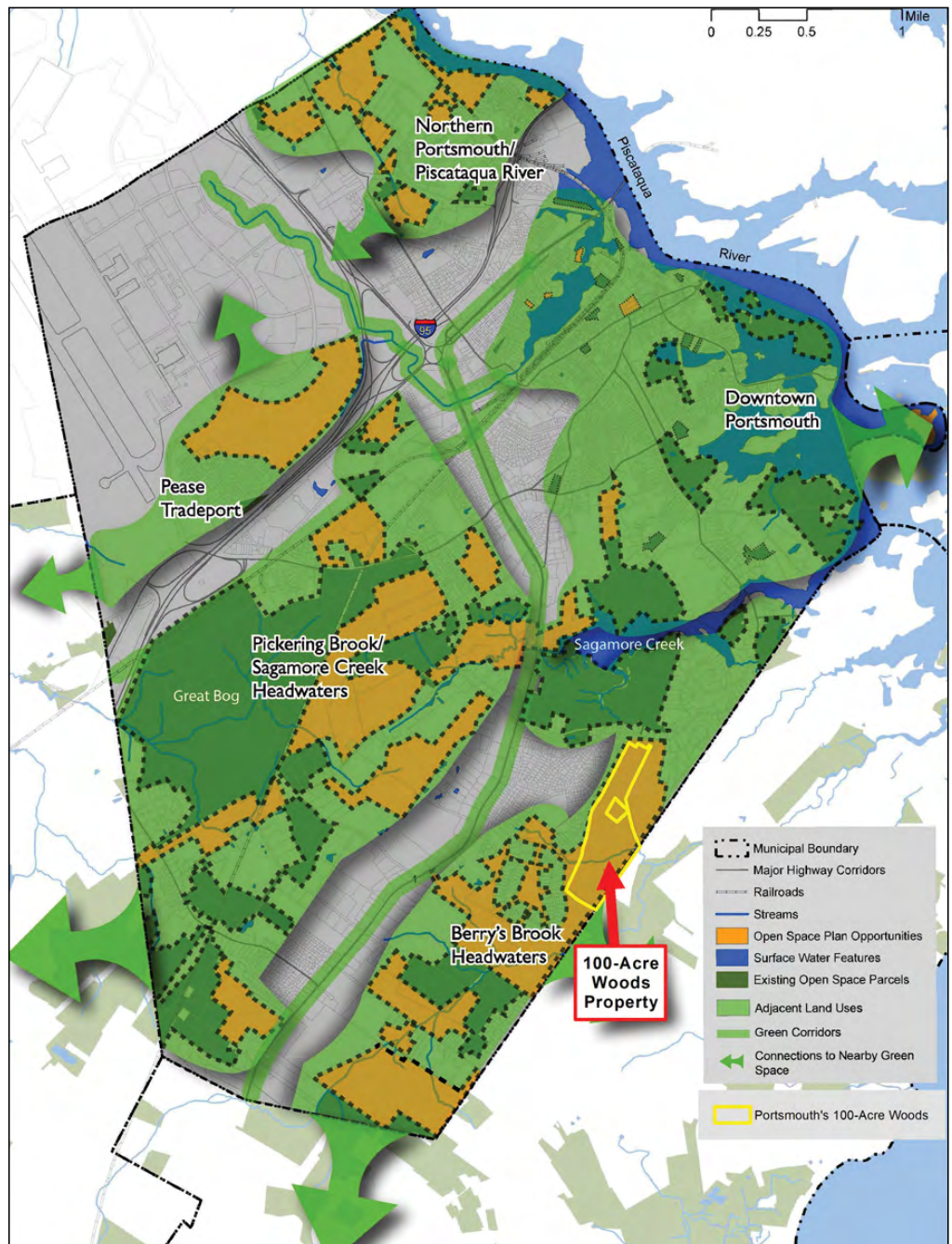
Over the years, Joe has seen – and captured on camera – an astonishing array of wildlife, including deer, fox, coyote, and bobcat. His photos and observations show in real life what the 2019 *Connect the Coast* study mapped – that the 100-Acre Woods is a critical link as a travel corridor from the Berry's Brook area in Rye to the Urban Forestry Center on Sagamore Creek.

As one would expect, nearly 100 acres in Portsmouth is incredibly valuable.

The conservation easement was appraised by an independent, licensed appraiser at \$2,145,000. Joe agreed to accept a reduced purchase price of \$1.8 million, generously forgoing \$345,000 in value. Add in typical due diligence (such as title review and boundary survey), legal and project management fees, and funds to support SELT's long-term stewardship of the easement, and the project totals about \$1.931 million.

Fortunately, tremendous progress has been made to raise the necessary funding, led by the City of Portsmouth. As Deaglan McEachern, Mayor, explained: "The conservation of the 100-Acre Woods is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to protect this irreplaceable habitat, ensure that future generations can enjoy and benefit from this open space, and safeguard the vitality, quality of life, and sense of place that are so important to all who enjoy our City."

Last September the City Council voted unanimously to accept the Conservation Commission's recommendation to expend up to \$1 million from the City's Conservation Fund. In December, the Land and Community Heritage Investment Program (LCHIP) awarded \$350,000 for the project. This, spring leadership contributions from Portsmouth families have generously created a matching pool, narrowing the funding gap to the remaining \$243,000. Now, SELT is seeking gifts of all sizes – to be matched – to complete the conservation of the 100-Acre Woods.



100-Acre Woods shown in yellow. SELT

For Joe the desire to conserve his land is sourced from something personal and sentimental:

"It feels like stepping back in time," he says. "This is the way Portsmouth was when I grew up. It's the only place like it around, and that's what really makes it special to me."

And with your support, and that from hundreds of others in Portsmouth, these 100-acres will be permanently conserved as a special place for future generations.

100-Acre Woods Matching Challenge:

Double your donation to protect the 100-Acre Woods by visiting seltnh.org/protect100acrewoods or scan the QR code to give.



Federal Funding in Focus

An uncertain impact on the future conservation landscape

SELT's approach to land conservation is almost always achieved through private-public partnership amongst landowners, community members, and government at the local, state, and federal level.

"Partnerships can leverage limited funding and maximize the impact and reach of our work," says Brian Hart, Executive Director. "That means having available federal funding to support community goals."

While SELT has not yet experienced the widely reported cancellation of existing federal grants or contracts, many land trust and conservation groups across the country have.

"We've gotten past the initial point of uncertainty created by the rapid pace of change," Brian says. "Though we remain watchful for any new actions that could affect our open contracts and grants."

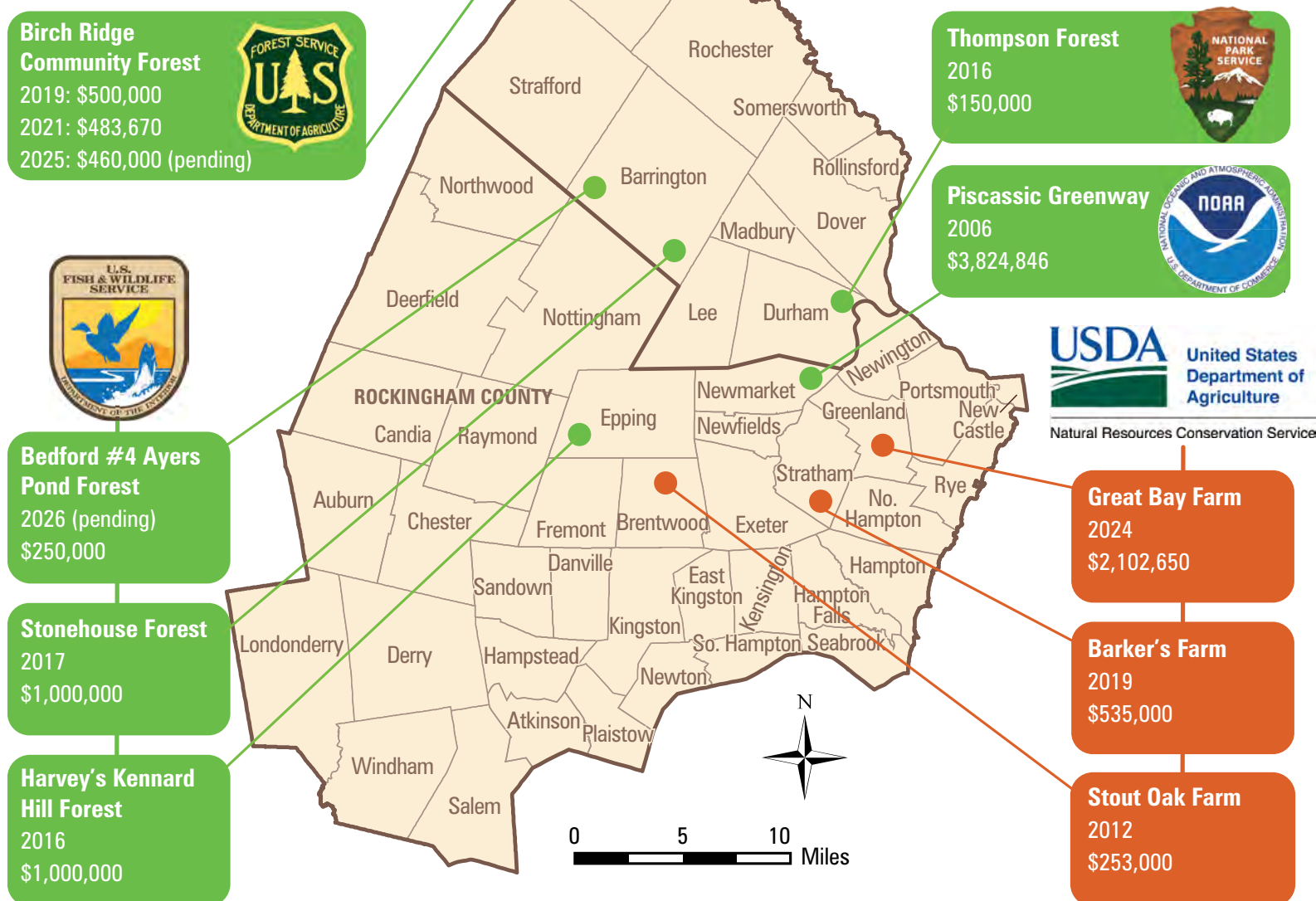
What is more disconcerting is the trajectory for federal conservation funding and the long-term impacts. As shown in the accompanying map, many of SELT's most beloved public places and some of our region's most productive farms have been conserved in part with federal funds, secured through competitive processes and with widespread community support. Recent budget proposals from the current Administration and

Congressional leaders would eliminate, zero out, or significantly cut funding for many of the long existing and critical programs that SELT and our communities have utilized to protect cherished local places. **The impact of these cuts, if enacted, will be felt for years to come**, jeopardizing nascent projects under discussion and making them likely impossible to achieve.

"Without key federal programs, many of the places we all enjoy now would simply not have been possible to protect," Brian says. "The federal government can be a useful, powerful partner in achieving our community's goals, and these programs target natural resources of broad public benefit."

SELT invites its supporters to speak up for conservation funding at the federal level. Simple steps include writing letters to the editor, contacting our Congressional delegation, and writing the Trump Administration to express your support for federal programs that enable locally-initiated, community-based conservation.

This map is only a small sample of some of the projects SELT has completed in partnership with federal agencies and many others.



Merrymeeting Clean Forever: Mount Jesse and More

Momentum continues as the community rallies to safeguard the watershed of New Hampshire's cleanest lake

Merrymeeting Lake is special. The pristine waters that anchor New Durham and feed Lake Winnepesaukee have long been cherished by residents and visitors alike. So much so that back in 2017, when a logging company purchased and began clear cutting over 2,000 acres of forestland buttressing the lake, alarm bells went off throughout the community.

Understanding the threat that now existed to the lake's legendary water quality, a group of residents and conservation groups came together in 2018 to launch a campaign to purchase and protect the land that would eventually become Birch Ridge Community Forest, owned and managed by SELT on behalf of the community. That started the ball rolling and since that first project, the community has rallied, conserving Mount Molly as well as the Collins Family Forest, expanding Birch Ridge twice, and most recently protecting Mount Bet. These collective efforts have resulted in astounding progress: in 2017, just 5% of the Merrymeeting watershed was protected; today, that number stands at a whopping 40%.

Now, in 2025, the momentum continues through the Merrymeeting Clean Forever campaign with two main priorities: 1) protect the 600+ acre Mount Jesse tract at the east end of Merrymeeting Lake and 2) establish a strategic fund to protect an additional 500–750 acres by 2030, reaching 60% of the watershed protected.

Mount Jesse

Dominating the east end of the lake, Mount Jesse affords stunning, unobstructed 360-degree views to Mount Washington, Lake Winnepesaukee, and Merrymeeting. For those with a penchant for adventure, this land offers an array of recreational benefits including trails for hiking and biking, and portions of Corridor 22, an important state snowmobile trail.

On the landscape scale, Mount Jesse slots perfectly into the growing canvas of conserved lands, linking the 2,600-acre Birch Ridge Community Forest to a 5,400-acre block of conserved forestland centered on the Moose Mountains. Its forestland as well as hundreds of acres of once commercially operated blueberry barrens provide ideal habitat and travel corridors for wildlife. Add Peter Brook (and its native brook trout) and another tributary to the lake, and it is apparent how critical Mount Jesse is for water quality.

Mount Jesse has another unique feature, uncommon to land trusts: a visually prominent, off-grid home on the absolute peak of the mountain. As the only ridge top structure overlooking Merrymeeting, the house and its 1.3-mile steep driveway were a focus of SELT's negotiations with the landowner, who originally intended to retain ownership of the house. However, by the fall of 2024, those intentions shifted, and the landowner and SELT reached agreement for SELT to acquire the entire 647-acre



Collins Family Forest is a beloved destination for explorers of all ages. JERRY MONKMAN



The sun sets over Merrymeeting Lake, as seen from Mount Jesse. JERRY MONKMAN

property and the house for a price of \$1 million, still well below the appraised value of \$1.5 million for the entire property.

“With the increased price and additional complexity of the house, we needed more time to consider how the structure could meet SELT’s and the community’s goals, while remaining consistent with our mission and financially viable,” says Brian Hart, Executive Director. “Fortunately, an intermediary acquired the entire property and gave SELT the rest of 2025 to raise the necessary funding and consider options for the house. Not looking to reinvent the wheel, SELT and its consulting partners are learning from the experience of other conservation organizations and will be seeking community input this summer to inform future options for the house.”

A Strategic Fund for Merrymeeting

Time and time again since Birch Ridge Community Forest was formed, landowners have sought out SELT to indicate their interest in conservation options. As this article goes to press, SELT has been approached by additional landowners within areas identified by the community as high priorities for conservation.

“The arc of conservation can be long, and initial discussions currently underway could blossom into new opportunities in 2026, 2027, or later,” says Duane Hyde, SELT’s Land Conservation Director.

And SELT – with the community’s support – wants to be ready. Recognizing the need and the demand, SELT is seeking support to establish the Strategic Conservation Fund

for Merrymeeting, with the goal of raising sufficient funds to conserve another 500–750 acres by 2030.

“Such a fund will enable SELT to be ready, willing, and able to move quickly when landowners are ready,” says Brian “It will reduce the time from agreement to closing by as much as one year or longer.”

Fortunately, to make this long-term vision a reality, a group of leadership donors from the Merrymeeting region have generously put forward a matching pool to double all gifts and pledges toward Merrymeeting Clean Forever. To achieve this ambitious vision, SELT will accept multi-year pledges for up to five years, offering those who love the lake the chance to align their giving with the long-term conservation and stewardship of the watershed. Donors interested in discussing how to make such a gift or pledge should reach out to Brian Hart, Executive Director, at brian@seltnh.org or 603-658-9717 for a confidential conversation.

**Now
is the time!
Strategic Fund gifts
and pledges made
will be doubled
immediately!**

Gifts and pledges made will be doubled immediately and will contribute to the permanent protection and stewardship of this magnificent land, as well as future, emerging conservation opportunities in the Merrymeeting watershed.

Now is the time to keep the Merrymeeting momentum going. To learn more about our ongoing work at Merrymeeting and how your support can instantly be matched, please visit seltnh.org/merrymeeting.

Thoughtful Stewardship at the Piscassic Greenway Comes to Fruition

The Piscassic Greenway, Newfields. May 2025

A brief walk from the Bald Hill Road parking area leads to part of the forest that, truthfully, if you didn't know specifically what you were looking for you would likely keep walking by. For the majority of outdoor adventurers this section of the woods just rolls into the border topography – green, healthy, leafy, great.

And that's the point. Chad Fierros, SELT's Forest and Wildlife Habitat Manager, knows precisely what he is looking at, as he surveys the patch of green: a vision of intentional, science-based land management comes to fruition 14 years later.

"After SELT acquired the Piscassic Greenway," Chad says, "one of our stewardship goals was to encourage forest health, productivity, and biological diversity within the forestlands of the property. In this case, that meant aiming to foster a spectrum of conditions that a good, healthy natural forest would exhibit."

To accomplish this, SELT implemented a targeted timber harvest, with the goal of creating openings on the forest floor to encourage new growth and more desirable species of trees to create a durable, more resilient forest. This approach to meet the goal of maintaining healthy forestland was determined through the Piscassic Greenway's management planning process, which involves thorough assessment of the land and collaboration among natural resource professionals.

"When you look at the mix in the Greenway landscape of agricultural land, wetlands, early successional woodlands, and then mature forest, it is just a very rich area," says Phil Auger, a NH licensed forester and former Land Manager at SELT who oversaw the timber harvest 14 years ago. "Wildlife habitat is a high priority, especially for the Piscassic Greenway, which we know has resident wildlife that are quite rare."

The past timber harvest approach was straightforward: identify the strongest trees to anchor the canopy but create enough space for sunlight to break through to feed the emerging understory. Looking at the results in 2025 reveals a fulfillment of that goal; saplings poke up across the forest floor and the forest structure contains a diverse mix of canopy trees, midstory trees, and a healthy understory.

"This opening was created to encourage young growth of desirable and resilient species," Chad says. "Looking at this opening created by the timber harvest, I see we have some really nice red oak, white pine, red maple, and shagbark hickory. When it comes to forest management on

SELT lands, this is the result we are aiming for – a forest with a diversity of tree species and ages, and different layers in the canopy. All together, these make the forest more resilient against current day threats such as invasive insects and climate change."

The SELT Stewardship team is planning for additional forest management at the Piscassic Greenway with the same focus: to ensure a forest that supports a diversity of wildlife with promising young growth, large, mature trees, and a good mix of trees in between.

"We were dealt a decent hand as far as forest structure and diversity when we conserved the Piscassic Greenway," Chad says. "For us we are maintaining and managing with a fairly light touch."



The healthy understory of the Piscassic Greenway. SELT STAFF



The Fernald property hugs the shore of the Bellamy Reservoir.

Family, Forever

The Fernalds trace their Madbury history to the 1850s, and their land, now conserved, will endure as a key piece of drinking water protection for greater Portsmouth.

Jodi Fernald can hear the sound to this day. The deer in the woods, huffing, puffing, giving birth. And the next morning there they were, mother and fawn, peeking through the sunlit green of the nearby forest.

This is a special land, steeped in family history and rich with biodiversity. Growing up on this 52-acre Madbury property gave Jodi and her family a front-row seat to wildlife ambling this way and that as well an outdoor world to explore. To this day, she is grateful for the ecological marvels that surround her.

"I have a mourning dove nesting right out of my front door," Jodi says. "Yesterday, I saw a brilliant red cardinal that was out here in the trees out front when I woke up. And then when I came home, and was putting things away, I saw that it was back here again."

Since 1854, the land has been in Jodi's family. It has been farmed from the beginning until the 1970s when her grandfather served as the last working farmer. The property was then lovingly managed by her father. In 2005, Jodi's father passed away and her mother passed several years ago. The family had reached a crossroads with the property; should they subdivide and sell for development, or was there another way?

Conservation became that other way. The City of Portsmouth saw immense value in the Fernalds' land thanks to it abutting the Bellamy Reservoir, the primary water supply for the City of Portsmouth and several surrounding communities. The property boasts nearly a mile of frontage along the Bellamy Reservoir. In 2022, Jodi and her family began the dialogue with SELT and the City of Portsmouth that would ultimately lead to June 4, when, in the culmination of a process that began three years ago, her family's treasured land was protected for all time through a conservation easement held by the City of Portsmouth.

"As a result of Jodi Fernald's desire to protect her property from development forever, and with the City Council's support, the City has increased our protection of the Bellamy Reservoir water quality through this conservation easement," said Al Pratt, Water Resource Manager for the City of Portsmouth. "SELT greatly assisted the City through this transaction. The conservation easement on Ms. Fernald's property is another important step toward the continued long-term protection of the Bellamy Reservoir to ensure the quality of the drinking water supply for Portsmouth and the other communities served by the Portsmouth Water Division."

"I wanted to leave this property for my niece and nephews, and for the next generation," Jodi says. "I didn't want it to be on my watch to sell it for development. My father worked so hard to keep it all in one piece."

For this project, SELT served in an assist role, helping the City of Portsmouth shepherd the project forward to completion.

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Questions, Comments, Concerns?

To contact SELT, please call **603-778-6088** or email info@seltnh.org.

247 North River Road, Epping, NH 03042
Website: seltnh.org

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Get Outside!

SELT Events Sampler

Check out these events and more at seltnh.org/events. Please register early; our events fill quickly. Registration closes at noon the day before the event. Suggested donation is \$5 per person or \$10 per family.

Raptors Rule with Tailwinds
July 9 • 5:30-6:30 PM

Take flight with our friends at Tailwinds for another fun, informative family-friendly evening.

Watershed Walk at Tucker & French Family Forest

August 6 • 5:00-6:30 PM

Explore the Tucker and French Family Forest, a 563-acre landscape rich in ecological diversity.



SELT STAFF

New Faces at SELT

As SELT grows to meet the ambitious goals of the new Strategic Plan (view it here www.seltnh.org/selt2030) we have welcomed new staff to our ranks to help save, share, steward, and sustain the lands we love, now and into the future.

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Alina

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*Stewardship and
Conservation
Administrative
Assistant*



Nicole



Sarah

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