



THE HIGHLAND COMMUNITIES INITIATIVE
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HIGHLAND HAPPENINGS

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Supporting
community efforts to
conserve the distinctive
natural and cultural
landscapes of the
Highlands region
of Massachusetts



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SAVOY



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CHESTERFIELD

HIGHLAND HAPPENINGS

A NEWSLETTER OF THE HIGHLAND COMMUNITIES INITIATIVE (HCI)



Historic Mill Site Protected

The Plainfield Historical Society has recently acquired a 1.5 acre parcel along Mill Brook in Plainfield where there's a story waiting to be told. The Plainfield mill site contains remnants of three mill foundations that date from the early 19th century through the first decade of the 20th century. Thanks to the Historical Society's recent conservation efforts, the public will soon be able to visit this trio of mill site remains, which illustrate the technological innovation and basic evolution of early water-powered industry in Massachusetts.

The three mills show a progression in waterpower technology that reflects the industrial changes that occurred nationwide nationwide at the time. They vary in size and complexity, and their different wheel configurations portray changing production practices and waterpower design. Water delivery systems to the mills also appear to have changed over time,

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perhaps reflecting the shifting natural water regimes that accompanied the re-forestation and farm abandonment trends that swept across the 19th and early 20th century Massachusetts landscape.

As part of the conservation project, the Historical Society also purchased 8.6 acres of forested upland along River Road for an acquisition total of 10.1 acres. Public support for the project was evident in the fundraising campaign, which raised almost \$18,000 from individual donors and an additional \$5,000 award from the Highland Communities Initiative Small Grant Program. With the property now safely in hand, the Historical Society would like to open the site to the public, and is carefully considering plans for walking trails and an on-site historical interpretation program.

There is much to be learned from the physical remains of former industry and habitation found in our hills: old stonewalls, foundations, wells, mills, and kilns create a snapshot of what the landscape might have looked like at some point in the past. These remains allow our imagination to create the intricate stories of how settlement patterns and economic forces have shifted over time, and remind us of the ever-changing and enduring relationship between industry and our environment—a relationship that is clearly illustrated by the historic Plainfield mill site. 🌿

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THE PLAINFIELD MILL SITE, CONTACT THE PLAINFIELD HISTORICAL SOCIETY, 525 WEST MAIN STREET, PLAINFIELD, 01070.



A PORTION OF ONE OF THE THREE MILL SITES RECENTLY PROTECTED.



© TERRY W. SWENBER

DISCONTINUING ROADS IN POOR CONDITION CAN PREVENT FUTURE DEVELOPMENT ALONG THEM.

The Road Not Taken

Road maintenance is a popular subject this time of year as the spring thaw reveals countless potholes, ice cracks, and mud puddles. Though roads do not typically garner much attention beyond concern over day-to-day driving conditions, the location and legal status of a road can have significant implications for future development in town.

In Massachusetts, new lots for single-family homes that meet zoning criteria and are located on a public road are created easily through a process called “Approval Not Required,” or ANR. The problem is that rural towns often have an abundance of cart paths and trails winding through town that are classified as public roads. Because of the ANR process, people may be able to build in environmentally unsuitable areas that are accessed by these paths and trails. But these “roads” cannot typically support emergency vehicles, and the cost of bring them up to proper standards is borne by the town. Once improved, the road then becomes much more attractive to increased development.

Thus, it is important for towns to have clear maps and classifications for the public roads within their boundaries. However, incomplete historical records can result in ambiguity about which roads are public.

One way to solve both issues is to discontinue certain roads. Discontinuance is a legal term for eliminating the right of public passage on a road. It can be accomplished by a vote at Town Meeting, after which the land reverts back to the abutters of the road. Once discontinued, the ability to build homes along the road is considerably limited or eliminated. Towns can also resolve their lack of road records by discontinuing all the roads in town, and then accepting all the roads that are commonly used as public ways. This process also eliminates the potential for building along a cart path in the middle of a forest and clearly establishes the status

of every town road. A discontinued road also removes the costs of maintenance and liability for use of the road.

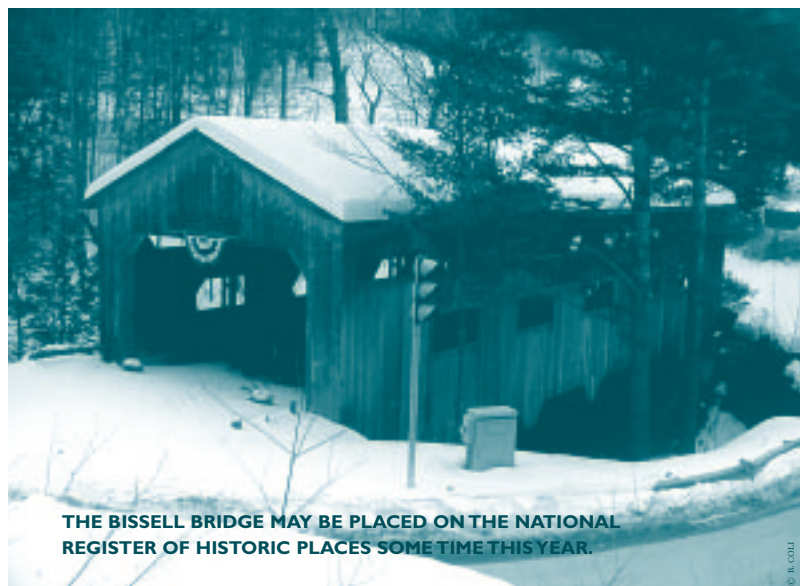
However, there are drawbacks to the process. With fewer public road miles, the towns will be eligible for less state Chapter 90 funding, which is intended for road upkeep and improvement. It is also important to ensure that no existing landowners will be locked out of their home or land by discontinuing their road. In addition to being a politically sensitive issue, it is also legally complicated, and the procedures for discontinuing roads vary according to how the road was first acquired.

To assist towns in clarifying this topic, HCI is printing an updated version of *Discontinuing Town and County Roads*. HCI is also holding a Rural Road Seminar on April 3 at the Cummington Community House on this topic and other road issues (see related paragraph, page 5). 🍃

A Covered Bridge’s Uncertain Future

If the National Park Service follows the Massachusetts Historical Commission’s lead, Charlemont’s last remaining covered bridge will be placed on the National Register of Historic Places some time this year, a move that could help secure the embattled Bissell Bridge’s future.

With Charlemont residents wanting to preserve the historical structure and MassHighway pushing for the safety of concrete and steel, little progress has been made in improving the safety of the bridge since it was closed in 1995. Since then, travelers along Route 8A have been diverted across a temporary bridge to cross Mill Brook.



THE BISSELL BRIDGE MAY BE PLACED ON THE NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES SOME TIME THIS YEAR.

© B. COLL

Last summer, MassHighway altered its priorities to allow for greater local control. “To our surprise,” said Bill Coli, a former selectman who has spearheaded preservation efforts, “the Romney administration came in with their ‘fix-it first policy’ and stressed community-friendly solutions that were respectful of community preference for design standards.”

In conjunction with the pending National Parks Service decision to place the Bissell Bridge onto the National Register, MassHighway is cooperating with Charlemont and assessing the feasibility of rehabilitating the bridge. Moreover, MassHighway has pledged to follow through with rehabilitation if the study produces a favorable result. The town’s own independent research into the Bridge’s structural integrity leaves Coli with few concerns. “We’ve spoken with engineers, and we’ve had assurance from MIT professors that Bissell could cover any load that you want it to carry,” he said.

Bissell is now one of only seven remaining covered bridges in the state. The recent debate over the future of the Bissell Bridge is not the first time the town has fought to preserve physical links with its history. In the late 1940s, the original covered bridge on 8A was condemned and plans were developed to replace it with a concrete and steel structure. Then, as now, town residents worked together to maintain this important physical and historic feature.

In both cases, the economic benefits of maintaining a rare cultural resource were strong motivators for the formation of consensus between Charlemont and MassHighway. “My wife, Norma, and I are very interested in historic preservation,” Coli said, “but we’re also looking at this as an economic development issue for the town, and for the area.” Similarly,

in 1951 the state and town agreed to the reconstruction of the Bissell Bridge because they saw the positive impact of a covered bridge on the area’s tourist economy.

The town has been pushing to secure the bridge’s future for several years, and Coli is not ready to give up yet. “Right now,” Coli said, “I’m tentatively encouraged that the bridge will be rehabbed to carry modern loads and we’ll have a national register bridge.” 🍃

New Resource!

HCI has recently produced a new guide, *Understanding the Community Preservation Act* that describes the Act, what it can accomplish, how it works, and advice for running an effective campaign. If you are curious about the CPA and are considering tapping into this funding source for community projects, contact HCI for a free copy at 413/587-0716. You can also download the guide from our website, www.highlandcommunities.org. 🍃

We Need Your Feedback!

Please help us to evaluate HCI’s impact and success over the past few years by sharing your thoughts on our programs and projects on the brief survey card enclosed in this newsletter. Your feedback is very important to us, and it will help to shape a future for HCI that will serve the needs of Highlands residents and communities. Let us hear your opinions of our work and your ideas for our future! 🍃

UPCOMING EVENTS

MACC ANNUAL ENVIRONMENTAL CONFERENCE*

March 6 | Worcester | \$85 member.
For more information, call 617/489-3930

MASSACHUSETTS LAND TRUST CONFERENCE*

March 13 | Worcester | \$30, please register in advance. For more information, call 978/537-4458 x312.

PREPARING FOR GROWTH—ALTERNATIVE SUBDIVISIONS WITH JOEL RUSSELL

March 16 | Chesterfield Senior Center | 7PM | \$5

CITIZEN PLANNER TRAINING COLLABORATIVE CONFERENCE*

March 20 | Worcester | \$45
For more information, visit www.umass.edu/masseptc.

READING THE FORESTED LANDSCAPE WITH TOM WESSELS

March 27 | Williamsburg Grange | 7PM | Free to all.

HCI RURAL ROADS SEMINAR

April 3 | Cummington Community House
Registration forms available at www.highlandcommunities.org, or call 413/587-0716.

MACC TRAINING WORKSHOP—WETLAND TYPES

April 13 | Becket | 7PM | \$22.50 for Highlands residents.
For more information, call 617/489-3930.

DEERFIELD RIVER WATERSHED FORUM

April 24 | Mohawk Trail Regional School, Buckland
For more information, visit www.deerfieldriver.org.

For more information on these events, please visit www.highlandcommunities.org or call 413/587-0716. Program cancellations due to severe weather will be announced through a recording at 413/587-0716 x14. *Scholarships available, see page 4 for details.

Deerfield River Watershed Association Forum

The Deerfield River Watershed Association (DRWA) will hold their annual forum on April 24, 2004 at the Mohawk Regional School in Buckland. This year, the forum will focus on two watershed-wide projects: the **Deerfield River Watershed Assessment** and the **Deerfield River Watershed Open Space Plan**.

The Watershed Assessment is a compilation of all existing natural resource data, including water quality and quantity, fisheries, wildlife habitat, open space, and recreational assets. The final assessment will be presented at the forum, as will a Five-Year Watershed Action Plan that was created from the assessment's findings.

The Franklin Regional Council of Governments (FRCOG) is leading the watershed-wide Open Space and Recreation Planning effort, and is seeking public input. So come out on the 24th of April, learn something new about the Deerfield Watershed, and contribute your to the plans for its future. 🍃

FOR MORE INFO ON THE FORUM AND THE DRWA'S OTHER ACTIVITIES, VISIT WWW.DEERFIELDRIVER.ORG.

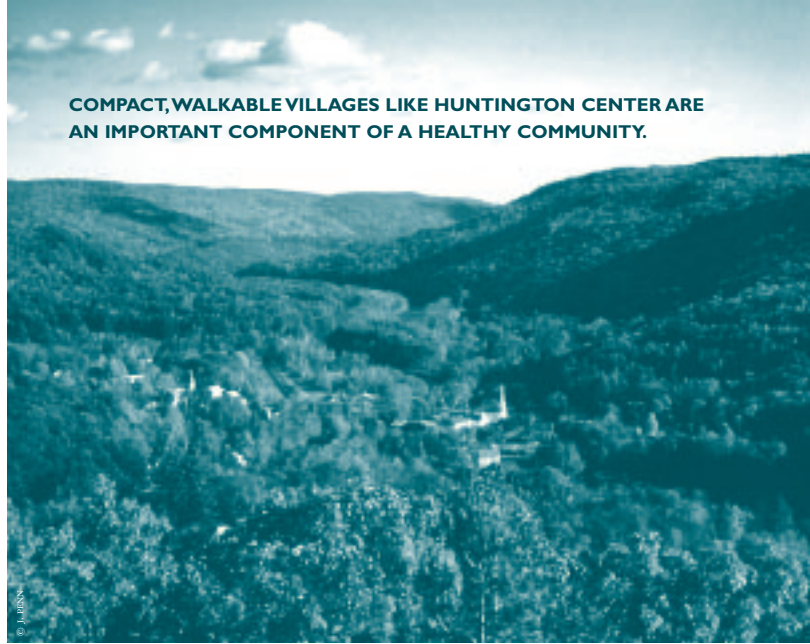
Recognizing Vibrant Villages

Villages can be thought of much like people, with varying stages of maturity and needs, said Planner Denis Superczynski at the HCI Planning Vibrant Villages workshop in February. Some villages are young and full of potential, while others are older, wiser, and have a well-earned sense of history and balance. No matter its age, a village can benefit from attention and future planning. Denis recommended starting with a vision of what is desired for a village, and building prescriptive zoning and incentives based on that vision.

One of the first steps is identifying the village and cataloguing its characteristics, including measuring street widths, building sizes and setbacks, sidewalks and observing the way in which traffic and people use this space. These measurements can then be transformed into zoning codes and illustrated to provide a clear picture of the desired style and form of the village. 🍃

VILLAGE ZONING IS AN IMPORTANT AND TIMELY TOPIC IN THE HIGHLANDS, AND HCI WILL BE ORGANIZING MORE EVENTS ADDRESSING IT IN THE FUTURE. STAY TUNED TO HIGHLAND HAPPENINGS FOR MORE INFORMATION!

COMPACT, WALKABLE VILLAGES LIKE HUNTINGTON CENTER ARE AN IMPORTANT COMPONENT OF A HEALTHY COMMUNITY.



Conference Scholarships Available!

Scholarships are still available to residents of the Highlands for three conferences:

- **Massachusetts Association of Conservation Commissions Conference**
- **Massachusetts Land Trust Conference**
- **Citizen Planner Training Collaborative Conference**

HCI is offering scholarships that will cover 50% of an individual's registration fee for any one of the three events. To apply, send a letter identifying the event you're interested in attending and briefly describe how that event will support your community preservation efforts in the Highlands. 🍃

SEND SCHOLARSHIP APPLICATION LETTERS TO HCI SCHOLARSHIPS, 5 STRONG AVE, NORTHAMPTON, MA 01060.

HCI SMALL GRANT AWARDS

- An award of \$1,428 went to the Town of Ashfield to support the Town Center Land Use Committee's consideration of the potential municipal uses of a property in downtown Ashfield.
- The Plainfield Historical Society received a \$5,000 grant toward the purchase of 10.1 acre property that contains the remains of three historic mills. 🍃



Unsung Heroes— Local Volunteer Spotlight James Mullen, New Marlborough

The town of New Marlborough has been fortunate to have the expertise and dedication of James Mullen on the Planning Board for the past three years. Jamie owns a residential design and build firm in New Marlborough and was inspired to work on local land use issues after



learning about the Congress for the New Urbanism, which promotes human-scale, pedestrian-oriented development. Their principles led Jamie to think regionally, which he is able to do as New Marlborough's designate to the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission. Jamie's many efforts on the Planning Board included a recent, successful amendment to the zoning bylaw to allow accessory apartments. With the Planning Board, Jamie is currently working on creating a Village District that will recognize the different character and pattern of development in New Marlborough's five villages. When he's not working or attending one of HCI's workshops, Jamie enjoys spending time at one of his favorite spots—Umpachene Falls or at home with his wife and two daughters. 🍃

HCI SALUTES ALL OF THE REGION'S LOCAL VOLUNTEERS! IF YOU'D LIKE TO NOMINATE SOMEONE FOR OUR LOCAL VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT, GIVE US A CALL OR CONTACT US AT HIGHLANDS@TTOR.ORG.



THE HIGHLAND COMMUNITIES INITIATIVE REGION

- | | | | |
|--------------|------------|-----------------|--------------|
| Ashfield | Conway | Huntington | Peru |
| Becket | Cummington | Leyden | Plainfield |
| Blandford | Florida | Middlefield | Rowe |
| Buckland | Goshen | Monroe | Russell |
| Charlemont | Granville | Monterey | Sandisfield |
| Chester | Hawley | Montgomery | Savoy |
| Chesterfield | Heath | New Marlborough | Shelburne |
| Colrain | Hinsdale | Otis | Tolland |
| | | | Tyringham |
| | | | Washington |
| | | | Westhampton |
| | | | Williamsburg |
| | | | Windsor |
| | | | Worthington |



SAVE THE DATE! HCI RURAL ROADS SEMINAR

APRIL 3 | CUMMINGTON COMMUNITY HOUSE

Are there special roads in your community whose rural character you'd like to protect? Do you have questions about road discontinuance? Would you like to understand the road improvement process, including the points at which the public can get involved, and the various road improvement programs that allow communities to fix road problems without sacrificing local character? If so, join us for the HCI Rural Roads Seminar. 🍃

REGISTRATION MATERIALS ARE AVAILABLE ON OUR WEBSITE WWW.HIGHLANDCOMMUNITIES.ORG OR BY CALLING 413/587-0716.



FOR MORE INFORMATION, OR TO JOIN OUR MAILING LIST, CONTACT US AT:

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