



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

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Highlands region  
of Massachusetts



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CONWAY

HEATH

# HIGHLAND HAPPENINGS

A NEWSLETTER OF THE HIGHLAND COMMUNITIES INITIATIVE (HCI)



## Connecting Communities Through Trails

In Williamsburg and Ashfield, two citizen initiatives are strengthening the fabric of their communities by connecting town centers to outlying settlements, and neighbors to neighbors through trails. Working with landowners, recreation seekers, and their local citizens, both initiatives are providing residents with recreational opportunities that inspire a greater understanding of their community's landscape and offer an intimate look at the nature and history that lies within their town borders.

Formed by the Selectboard in 2002, the **Williamsburg Woodland Trails Committee** has taken their charge quite seriously and has worked on trail creation and maintenance, mapped approximately 70 trail miles, and organized work days and trail use events. As the existing trails in Williamsburg cross a mixture of public and private land and are used by many types of users, the Committee also works with property owners to enhance local trail opportunities and address use conflicts.

Recreational uses on Williamsburg trails include hiking, skiing, hunting, horseback riding, birding, trail biking, and ATV

riding, among others. With this variety, one might expect problems between trail users, but according to Committee member Paul Jahnige, there have been surprisingly few. He stressed that one of the Committee's main goals is to strengthen the coalition of trail users in order to maintain a high quality visitor experience for everyone. To minimize trail mishaps, all users are encouraged by the Committee to be good stewards, to respect the rights of private landowners and other users, and to protect the sensitive natural and historic resources within the trail network.

Meanwhile, just north in the town of Ashfield, the labors of another group of citizens are beginning to bear fruit. The **Ashfield Trails Committee**, a diverse group of residents, has spent the last year or so learning about the historic roads and pathways, existing snowmobile trails, and other potential hiking routes in preparation for developing a trail network across town. Like the Williamsburg Committee, the volunteers in Ashfield hope to create connections to the remote corners of town so that friends and neighbors can explore the little-known places of beauty and interest on foot. *(Continued on page 2)*

BE ON THE  
LOOKOUT FOR  
TRAILHEADS  
MARKED WITH THE  
WILLIAMSBURG  
WOODLAND  
TRAIL SIGN



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© LATOR/W. MORGAN

The first trail established by the volunteer Trails Committee will connect Sanderson Academy via Peter Hill (the highest point in town) to the lookout at Bear Swamp Reservation, owned by the Trustees of Reservations.

This 3.5 mile trail will

cross moderate terrain and will be open to foot traffic only.

**THE FORMER ROADS AND CART PATHS THAT LACE THE HIGHLANDS FORM A GREAT LOCAL TRAIL INFRASTRUCTURE**

The route across Peter Hill will traverse primarily privately-owned lands, and the Committee has secured the willing participation of the handful of local landowners whose property the trail crosses. Interestingly, the Committee did not seek any permanent trail easements from landowners, but instead, the Franklin Land Trust has agreed to hold a temporary agreement for access that will allow landowners to test the impacts of the trail before making a long-term commitment. This temporary consent approach may encourage more landowners to allow trails across their land in the future, which could be good news for the Ashfield Trails Committee as they continue to develop a trail network across the rich rural landscape of Ashfield.

**SEE THESE TOWNS' TRAILS FOR YOURSELF:**

THE WILLIAMSBURG WOODLAND TRAILS COMMITTEE IS SPONSORING THEIR ANNUAL VOLUNTEER TRAILS DAY, SATURDAY, MAY 1ST FROM 9AM UNTIL 12PM AT THE BRIAR HILL CONSERVATION TRAIL (1.5 MILES OUT BRIAR HILL ROAD ON THE EAST SIDE). THE INAUGURAL HIKE OF THE NEW ASHFIELD TRAIL IS MAY 2ND.

## A Win for Conservation and the Town Budget in Granville

Agreeing how to spend town money is always difficult, and when it comes to spending town money on open space acquisitions, things can get downright contentious. Yet the Town of Granville recently came to consensus over the decision to purchase 25 acres of forested hemlock groves and rock outcroppings. A driving factor in the decision was the fact that preserving the land, located along an un-maintained road, will save the town money in the future.

The parcel was slated for eight building lots, but the Planning Board denied the development plans, citing inadequate access for emergency vehicles along the road. The Board's decision prompted a lawsuit by the applicant, and the town began accruing legal fees. Rather than pursue a costly legal battle and risk the costs of improving the road or an increase in town services if the homes were built, the Highway Superintendent and the Selectboard began examining other viable options.

After months of research and discussion, they presented the town with three options: continue the lawsuit, assume the cost of fixing the road, or purchase the land. Town Meeting chose the only option with a clear outcome and fixed costs—to purchase the land, place a conservation restriction on most of it, and sell one remaining building lot.

While seemingly contradictory, Granville's decision to expend money now in order to save money in the future will certainly have lasting benefits for both the town's landscape and finances.

## HEAR THE HIGHLANDS ON THE RADIO!

Between May and August 2004, WFCR's *Field Notes* will feature 10 radio programs on the natural history and unique resources of the Highlands region. So tune your dial to WFCR 88.5 on Mondays at 7:30AM to explore the region with Highlands resident and noted naturalist Laurie Sanders. If you miss the morning programs, you can listen to the Highlands programs from the *Field Notes* archives at [www.wfcr.org/fieldnotes.html](http://www.wfcr.org/fieldnotes.html).

## HCI SMALL GRANT AWARDS

- The Franklin Land Trust and the Ashfield Trails Committee will use a \$1,377 award for the development of a new trail in Ashfield.
- HCI awarded Friends of WFCR, Inc. \$4,800 to profile special places in the Highlands on WFCR's *Field Notes* program.
- The Town of Blandford Historical Commission's inventory of historic Watson Park will be supported by a \$3,500 HCI award.



## Rural Roads Report

On April 3<sup>RD</sup>, HCI brought together over 80 members of town boards, land trusts, highway departments, regional planning agencies, and the Massachusetts Highway Department to discuss rural road issues.

In his opening address, representative Steve Kulik remarked that roads are the second largest item on every town budget, and thus the impact of road maintenance and discontinuance are important topics for townspeople to understand well. The program's featured speakers explained how road improvement projects are undertaken, and provided examples of new state efforts and programs designed to improve and enhance rural roads without detracting from their character. Specifically, MassHighway staff discussed the Footprint Roads Program and the update of the state highway design manual. In the afternoon, environmental attorney Alexandra Dawson guided the audience through the intricacies of road discontinuance.

The overwhelming turnout for the day sent a clear message to everyone present that the region's roads are treasured assets, and seminar participants expressed a strong commitment to maintaining safe roads and protecting the resources and road elements that contribute to the rural community character. 🍃

THE HANDOUTS FOR THE DAY ARE AVAILABLE ON HCI'S WEBSITE. FOR PAPER COPIES, CONTACT HCI.



## A Cluster by Any Other Name

In late March, land-use attorney Joel Russell treated eleven planning board members from all corners of the Highlands to a presentation about cluster subdivisions. Russell remarked that the various names given to cluster subdivisions—flexible developments, open space developments, conservation subdivisions, or agricultural developments—can sound more appealing and acceptable to community members and developers alike. When drafting a cluster bylaw, Russell strongly recommends requiring the developer to undertake a conservation analysis of the land's resources prior to laying out building lots and roads. Approaching the process in this manner will help ensure that the remaining open space is land that the community actually wants and values, rather than the leftover undevelopable portion of the parcel. 🍃

FOR A COPY OF THE PROGRAM HANDOUTS AND BYLAWS, VISIT OUR WEBSITE, [WWW.HIGHLANDCOMMUNITIES.ORG](http://WWW.HIGHLANDCOMMUNITIES.ORG), OR CONTACT WENDY SWEETSER AT 413/587-0716 X14.

# UPCOMING EVENTS

### WETLANDS—NOT JUST SWAMPS

May 1 | Huntington

Free, To register, contact Phil LaBranche at 413/454-3664

### SPRING MIGRANTS

May 8 | Ashfield | 9AM-11AM

Free, Please register with HCI

### MASS ASSOCIATION OF CONSERVATION COMMISSIONS UNIT 6-ORDERS OF CONDITIONS

May 13 | Stanton Hall, Huntington | 6:30PM

\$22.50, Register by calling 617/489-3930

### TRACKING THE MIGHTY MOOSE

May 15 | Goshen | 9AM-1PM

\$25, Please register with HCI

### BIODIVERSITY—YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

June 5 | Huntington

Free, To register, contact Phil LaBranche at 413/454-3664

### INTRODUCTION TO READING SITE PLANS AND MAPS

June 9 | Granville Town Hall | 7PM

Free, Please register with HCI

### TOUR OF THE BECKET QUARRY

June 19 | Becket | 10AM

\$5 Donation requested, Please register with HCI

## The Nature Conservancy Hires Program Director for Westfield River Watershed Area

*Submitted by TNC's Massachusetts Chapter*

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) recently hired Bill Toomey as Westfield River Watershed Program Director. In this newly created position, Toomey will direct the Conservancy's outreach, conservation and land protection activities in the Westfield River Watershed landscape.

Extending from Westfield to Conway and as far west as Pittsfield and Lee, the landscape encompasses approximately 380,000 acres. "The intact nature of the landscape—with its high quality rivers, streams and wetlands, its large unbroken tracts of forest and its high concentration of rare species—makes this landscape one of the best and last opportunities for lasting large scale conservation," Toomey said.

One of the last wild areas of the state, the landscape links habitat from the mid-Atlantic through the northern Appalachians, creating safe passages for wide ranging mammals such as moose, fisher, bobcat and black bear, and supporting diverse populations of plant and animal species. The forests also act as a buffer for important river and wetlands systems, protecting the waterways that sustain our drinking water supplies.

Threats to the relatively undisturbed blocks of forest and wetlands are increasing, including habitat destruction and fragmentation through development and the decline of forest health due to insects and diseases. With approximately 70% of forested areas here lacking formal protection, there is a critical opportunity now to conduct broad-based conservation before it is too late.

A native of Massachusetts, Toomey is returning after five years at The Nature Conservancy's Connecticut Chapter. There, he led protection efforts at the Quinebaug Highlands Program, located in northeastern Connecticut and south-central Massachusetts. 🌿

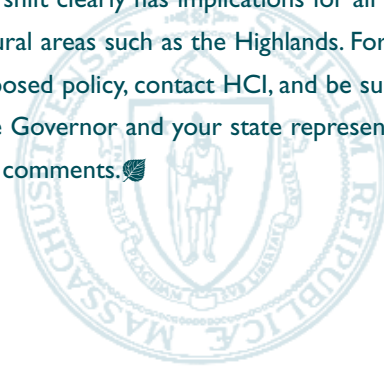
FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT TNC'S WORK, VISIT THEIR WEBSITE AT [WWW.NATURE.ORG](http://WWW.NATURE.ORG).

## The State of the State: Commonwealth Capital fund

In developing their conservation policy, the Romney Administration has embraced ten "Sustainable Development" principles that seek to integrate the areas of energy, environment, housing, and transportation. They have recently developed the 'Commonwealth Capital Fund,' which would "ensure coordinated administration of state capital spending on programs that affect development patterns."

As currently proposed, ten state grant programs would be included in the Commonwealth Capital Fund, including Public Works Economic Development Program, the Community Development Action Grant Program, the Self Help Program, and the Agricultural Preservation Restriction Program. Proposals submitted to those grant programs will have to go through an additional layer of review that considers the applicant community's progress in providing affordable housing and incorporating sustainable development principles into their local bylaws.

This policy shift clearly has implications for all municipalities, including rural areas such as the Highlands. For a copy of the proposed policy, contact HCI, and be sure to contact the Governor and your state representatives if you have comments. 🌿



**LARGE UNBROKEN TRACTS OF FOREST ARE ONE OF THE NATURE CONSERVANCY'S CONSERVATION TARGETS IN THE WESTFIELD AREA**

© TNC / D. FERLANS

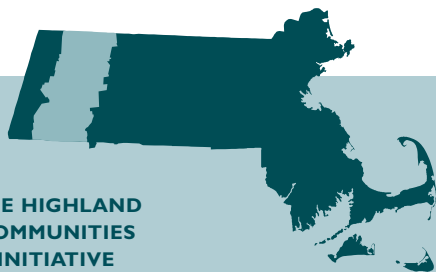
## Unsung Heroes— Local Volunteer Spotlight Gisela Walker, Charlemont

You may recognize Gisela Walker from her work as the Director of the Citizen Planner Training Collaborative (CPTC), but her efforts to improve the environment and quality of life in western Massachusetts reach far beyond CPTC. As



President of the Deerfield River Watershed Association and an active member of the Charlemont Open Space Committee, the Master Planning Committee, and the Deerfield Watershed Open Space Committee, Gisela has been engaged in many planning and conservation efforts over the years. In her 30 years as a resident of Charlemont, Gisela has founded a town Democratic Party, the Valley Play School, and the Shambhala Meditation Center. Though recently retired from UMass Extension, Gisela says she will continue her efforts of pulling communities together to help build capacity, and will be focusing her energy on her two passions—local land-use issues (she is running for a seat on the Planning Board) and the meditation center. HCI salutes all of the region's volunteers. 🍃

IF YOU'D LIKE TO NOMINATE SOMEONE FOR OUR VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT, GIVE US A CALL OR EMAIL US AT [HIGHLANDS@TTOR.ORG](mailto: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

### Reading the Forested Landscape

Tom Wessels and Cindy Tavernise of Granville puzzle through the mysteries of the forest after his presentation at the Williamsburg Grange in March.

© TTOR / J. FORBUSH



### Exploring the Spring Landscape

Spring has sprung, so join HCI and The Trustees of Reservations regional ecologist Jose Garcia for an exploratory walk of the newly awakened earth at Chapelbrook Reservation in Ashfield on May 8th. On this moderate hike through a dense hardwood forest, we'll be searching for signs of spring, including migratory birds, ephemeral wildflowers, and vernal pools. An additional attraction will be the rushing Chapelbrook Falls, close to its peak spring flow. 🍃

© TTOR / M. SZANTYR

### Tracking the Mighty Moose

On May 15th, HCI is hosting a special program with John Foster, founder of the New England Naturalist Training Center. The moderate hike through Goshen will emphasize areas with recent moose activity, and participants will learn how to examine the range of upland and aquatic habitat that moose prefer. We'll also observe how the resurgence of moose populations is integrally tied to the availability of habitat. You can learn more about naturalist John Foster at [www.nentc.com](http://www.nentc.com). To register, call Wendy Sweetser at 413/587-0716 x14 or email at [wsweetser@ttor.org](mailto:wsweetser@ttor.org). 🍃

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

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