

South Burlington Land Trust

dedicated to preserving South Burlington's forests, wetlands, farmlands and other natural areas through landowner preservation agreements and other conservation vehicles to maintain city residents' high quality of life.

University of Vermont
Campus Planning Services
109 South Prospect Street
Burlington, Vermont 05405
Attention: Director, Linda Seavey

The South Burlington Land Trust is submitting this position document to the University of Vermont's Campus Planning Services in response to the RFP issued by the University of Vermont on June 20, 2017 for development proposals for the Edlund South Tract and Martin Tract in South Burlington, Vermont.

Conservation not Development

This is not a proposal to purchase and develop. This is a proposal to conserve the Edlund South and Martin tracts in their current natural state. Here, we outline why we believe these properties would be better off maintained in a conserved state, rather than selling them for development.

Who is the South Burlington Land Trust?

The South Burlington Land Trust (SBLT) is an entirely volunteer conservation organization whose mission entails the retention of undeveloped lands and agricultural lands in South Burlington for their natural resource values, support of the South Burlington Open Space strategy, collaboration with other conservation organizations to procure land and easements, and support of agricultural activities in the city of South Burlington. We also work with adjoining towns to pursue these objectives.

The University of Vermont's Environmental Commitment

The University of Vermont's commitment to the environment is demonstrated in myriad arenas. On June 6, 2017, in response to U.S. President Donald Trump's decision to withdraw the United States from the Paris Climate Accord, UVM President Thomas Sullivan reiterated UVM's commitment to the university's vision statement "To be among the nation's premier small research universities, preeminent in our comprehensive commitment to liberal education, environment, health, and public service." Sullivan further noted "Our commitment to the environment is a key element in this declarative statement. That commitment remains fully intact and as strong as ever."

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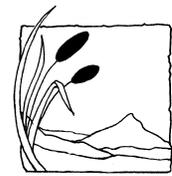
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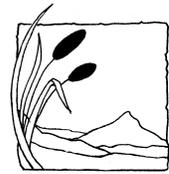
Further, UVM has recently been awarded a STARS (Sustainability Tracking, Assessment and Rating System for higher education) Gold Rating for its Sustainability Efforts. The work that UVM has done has placed the university in the top 12 percent of all rated institutions. Importantly, one of the components of the STAR ranking system is Participatory Governance. In their most recent report, UVM notes “Campus Planning Services prides itself in promoting collaborative processes to ensure diverse perspectives are considered in all of its planning efforts to ultimately meet the needs and be in the best interests of the University.” Although only a small component of the ranking system, this statement does not align with the criteria set forth in this RFP, as there was little vetting of the RFP in the community.

Additionally, in 2007 UVM signed on as a Charter Signatory of the Presidents’ Climate Commitment. The University’s Climate Action Plan (2010) calls for the use of certified renewable power or carbon offsets by 2015 (accomplished) and for carbon neutrality by 2025. The sale of a forested property for a housing development is contradictory to a goal of carbon neutrality.

Finally, UVM has recently included sustainability as one of the University’s General Education Requirements. One criterion for courses to be designated as “SU” is to illustrate personal responsibility: “Students, as members of society, can recognize and assess how sustainability impacts their lives and how their actions impact sustainability.” Given the groundbreaking work that has been conducted at the Gund Institute for the Environment around a more holistic approach to economic sustainability, this RFP is in contrast to the values that UVM aims to impart on its students.

The Gund Institute for the Environment has a long and decorated history of quantifying the true costs of economic development by taking into account the impacts on ecosystem services. Ecosystem services, those goods and services that are provided for “free” by nature, are typically discounted when we look at the short-term economic gains that are accrued when we harvest our natural resources. The Edlund South and Martin tracts perform a variety of ecosystem services that will not be accounted for in the sales of these properties. Carbon sequestration by the forests, watershed protection (of impaired Potash Brook), biodiversity conservation, and cultural values of education, recreation, and open space conservation are just a few. If UVM were to do a true accounting of the value of these ecosystem services, the sale price of these tracts would not equal the value of these services. This is particularly true when you consider that these ecosystem services would continue to generate benefits indefinitely if the properties were to be conserved.

UVM’s stellar environmental record and commitment is clearly at odds with the short-term economic gains that would be generated by divesting the university of these natural areas for residential development.



Below we outline some of the salient issues with the RFP, as well as our vision for a more sustainable and collaborative approach to land use in the community.

Negative Consequences

South Burlington's Comprehensive Plan and Zoning have been developed with significant public participation and input. Public surveys and opinion polls have shown that South Burlington residents strongly support the conservation of open space and forest habitat.

Concerns about the negative impacts of development on these lands, both in South Burlington and the broader community, have informed the position of the South Burlington Land Trust as to the value of conserving them, and are as follows:

- The Edlund South parcel is part of an important watershed that would be permanently damaged by development. Residential development would add significant impervious surface area and increased storm water runoff in South Burlington. The steeply sloped land will direct runoff from any new developed impervious surfaces into the impaired waterway (Potash Brook), which traverses the land.
- These tracts and adjacent lands provide ecological integrity, biodiversity, and a nexus for wildlife habitat connectivity by linking UVM open lands, the Fairholt Estate, the wildlife corridor adjacent to I-189, UVM's East Woods Natural Area and the Wheelock property woods. Development of these properties would sever this connectivity and increase fragmentation of the area.
- The Edlund South parcel is zoned as Agricultural Institutional, not for residential development (zoning is defined in Land Development Regulations and Comprehensive Plan, as part of South Burlington's continuous city and land planning.)
- Development would cause degradation of unique geological features of the land (sand dunes from Champlain Sea in the Pleistocene Period)
- Based on the topography of the tracts, new access points would be placed in close proximity to a recognized dangerous intersection (Swift and Spear Streets) where additional traffic would increase the danger of current conditions.

Our primary conclusion, after all considerations, is that these properties should remain in their natural state, undisturbed.

An Alternative Vision

SBLT believes that the best option to UVM retaining these parcels would be to develop a collaborative plan that allows the City of South Burlington to acquire the properties for natural resource use or nature park purposes.



The South Burlington Land Trust has experience in developing alternate solutions for open space, one example of which is a project in which we participated in to protect the lands of the former LeDuc farm (now Bread and Butter Farm) on Cheese Factory Road. Our approach was to work with the family initially to bring them to the conservation decision and to collaborate with the Town of Shelburne, the Vermont Land Trust and others to move the project forward, and finally to help raise money for the project. Bread and Butter Farm is now thriving and is a great success story.

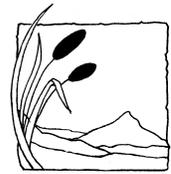
Although SBLT is an entirely volunteer organization with limited funds, it has nonetheless been successful through grassroots organizing and local networking in bringing conservation partners together to accomplish land conservation in South Burlington.

The SBLT, upon learning about the RFP, in accordance with our customary way of working, reached out immediately to conservation partners (Vermont Land Trust, Trust for Public Land, Vermont Natural Resources Council) concerning these lands. These parties as well as SBLT are all in agreement that the timetable presented in the RFP (two months) is far too short for a dialogue or collaborative plan to take shape. Furthermore, these organizations typically derive major financial support from the state funded Vermont Housing and Conservation Board in making conservation possible. This is appropriate in acquiring land from individuals or on behalf of municipalities, but may not be appropriate in the case of ownership by another state entity, in this case the University of Vermont.

What the SBLT wishes had happened, and could still happen, if the process could be slowed down to allow full discussion of alternatives, would be for UVM Campus Planning Services to meet with Planning and Zoning officials in South Burlington to explore options for the City to acquire these lands for public purposes.

Examples of public uses might include the establishment of a Town Forest, a nature park with trails linking the north side of the adjoining property at 150 Swift Street (which is currently under development review), to the UVM East Woods Natural Area, establishment of a municipal-owned area which supports educational programs for South Burlington schools, Recreation and Parks, or an independent nature-based nonprofit organization. Many other creative ideas could be generated to meet South Burlington City goals and UVM's stated Conservation and Sustainability goals.

While the SBLT believes in preserving both parcels as open space natural areas, we acknowledge and recognize that the smaller Martin tract is currently zoned for residential purposes and therefore can be developed should a proposal for its purchase be proffered. In this case, it is our hope that such a development would be sensitively positioned, so as not to disturb the natural areas that make up part of the Martin tract.



Conclusion

Conservation of the Edlund South and Martin tracts would be a win-win for UVM and the community. It would showcase UVM's environmental mission, support the goals of the people of South Burlington and conserve the ecosystem services of these properties for future generations.