

Woodstock Community Trust hires director, seeks to grow and serve the community in new ways

By Tom Ayres
Senior Staff Writer

Originally founded by a small coterie of local affordable housing advocates who supported the development of the Safford Commons community in West Woodstock, the Woodstock Community Trust (WCT) has been a behind-the-scenes player in supporting a range of not-for-profit projects and entities aimed at improving the quality of life in the area.

Moribund for several years after Safford Commons was opened in 2015 after a nearly a decade of community outreach, regulatory, and legal wrangling, the WCT was revived in 2018 with the renewed mission of expanding access to more reasonably priced, workforce housing in Woodstock. In 2020, the WCT was the fiscal sponsor for the Woodstock Area Relief Fund (WARF), which raised and distributed nearly \$1 million in aid to those adversely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Several years ago, the WCT also began to support other community projects via its 501(c)(3) status, recognized by the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) as exempt from federal income tax. Under IRS statutes, entities such as the local trust essentially function as private operating foundations with the characteristics of both public charities and private foundations, maintaining active programs while potentially having a more limited funding base. The local trust's revenues are largely derived from administrative and fund management fees charged to the projects in its active portfolio.

Until now a relatively low-key player on the Woodstock area non-profit and fundraising landscape, the WCT is stepping up its activity, public posture, and support for select community projects and endeavors. Coincident with this effort, the trust recently appointed its new part-time executive director: former State Rep. Tesha Buss, a longtime housing, family, and child care

advocate in the region.

There are currently six community projects or initiatives in the trust portfolio, with two of them newly ensconced under the WCT umbrella within the past year: the Woodstock Village Conservancy (WVC) and Pride of Woodstock. Together with those two efforts, the other four entities in the current WCT portfolio are The HUB, Local Deeds, East End Park, and the Ottauquechee River Trail. All six organizations leverage the trust for administrative and financial support, including its tax-exempt status, to enable tax-deductible donations, back-office operations, and guidance in fundraising and marketing efforts. This enables project leaders and volunteers to devote more of their energy to the core missions, objectives, and fundraising efforts of their individual organizations.

In addition to the six project-oriented organizations, the community trust has also given the Little Branches Learning Center in Woodstock access to its IRS tax exemption as the school, previously operated as Woodstock Christian Child-care by the First Congregational Church on Elm Street, seeks its own non-profit status and raises funds to move to a new location.

Here are snapshots of each of the seven community projects currently receiving support from the WCT.

The HUB is a community-funded organization that helps restore stability for residents facing unexpected costs and financial setbacks. The HUB steps in to provide direct and confidential support for essentials like rent, child care, heating, and transportation, as well as to get people back on their feet and on a path to longer-term security.

Local Deeds makes a tangible contribution to housing stability in our community. It ensures that families and individuals who live and work here year-round can afford to stay, by offering a substantial one-time cash payment towards their home purchase

in exchange for a permanent commitment that at least one local worker lives in the home.

East End Park represents the culmination of more than a decade of work by area residents who transformed a previously neglected corner of Woodstock Village into an inviting community space. The group continues to maintain the area and plan for its future.

Ottawaquechee River Trail was formed in 2017 by a group of Woodstock residents who joined together to create a 2.8-mile, flat walking trail on private land near the center of Woodstock and adjacent to East End Park. ORT volunteers help maintain and improve the trail, providing the community with abundant opportunities for exercise, river access, and a totally new exposure to Woodstock's nature and beauty.

Woodstock Village Conservancy joined the local community trust portfolio in August 2024. The project's mission is to enhance and maintain public spaces and the connections to them in the Village of Woodstock. Recognizing the importance of well-kept public spaces as drivers of economic and civic health, the conservancy is focusing on intentional design, environmental sustainability, accessibility, and maintenance. The group's first major effort will be the restoration and improvement of The Green, including studies of vehicular, cycle, and pedestrian traffic around its perimeter. The initiative has already gained official support from the Village Trustees and the Town Selectboard to move forward on this initial project.

Pride of Woodstock celebrates love, diversity, and community while fostering an environment of inclusivity and acceptance for LGBTQ+ individuals and allies within Woodstock. The second annual "Pride of Woodstock" weekend is scheduled for this Thursday through Sunday, June 5-8. The organization also hosts other events throughout the year.

Little Branches Learning Center serves more than

50 families from Woodstock and the surrounding area, providing a nurturing and enriching environment where children from six weeks to second grade can grow, learn, and thrive.

The current trustees of the WCT include Jill Davies, Todd Erceg, Emily Friedman, Andrew Hayward, Pam Matthews, Caitlin McCurn, Mariza McKee, Greg Olmstead, Wendy Spector, Sarah Glasser Tucker, and Nancy Winter. "The board has always been very hands-on," Davies, a former Woodstock Town Selectboard member and a longtime leader in the local housing advocacy movement, said in an interview last Saturday. "We serve as the board members for the projects in our portfolio and we provide officer insurance so these other projects don't have to. We give those groups our 501(c)(3) status so that they can raise tax-exempt dollars when they need to."

"The naming of an interim executive director is a big step up for us," Davies continued. "The work that's been done before this was done by myself, by Pam Matthews, who has been our treasurer, and by our operations manager, which was Trena Tolliver. Wendy has been doing our marketing. Mariza has been offering legal reviews of documents and things — it's a very hands-on board. But there comes a point when volunteers can only do so much and you need to pay people to do it — and that's the point we've reached."

Buss stepped into the interim executive director position with the WCT last month. The founder/operator of the Good

Commons retreat center in Plymouth, Buss moved to Vermont in 2004 after an earlier career in musical theater on Broadway. In her local community building work, Buss led the Rainbow Playschool expansion project in Woodstock, developed the Mt. Rainbow Community Solar array, and cofounded The Community Campus, an afterschool program. She also utilized one of the Woodstock Economic Development Commission's incentive programs to create a one-bedroom unit dedicated to housing local educators. Buss has been actively engaged in work on affordable and workforce housing initiatives in the region for many years, which is how she met Davies and learned about the WCT and its interests.

Speaking from her South Woodstock home on Sunday evening, Buss said she was "very excited to have this opportunity to share with people a lot of what the trust has done and what we might be able to do in the future. We have such a capacity issue in our community. We don't have that many people and everyone is shy of volunteers. If we have six projects, and they all have their individual boards, we'd have 30 people supporting administrative tasks, just so those projects could exist," Buss explained. "So now what we do is we put those 30 people straight into the front lines. And I think that we could have the opportunity to do that for more organizations, for more projects and events, so that the administrative tasks, which can be really boring and time-consuming, can be taken

off their shoulders. The trust can operate at scale and each organization won't have to go it alone. That's what I am really excited about."

"There are so many opportunities out there," the WCT interim director continued. "There are ways for us to collaborate, in terms of public/private partnerships, that haven't really been explored yet in great detail — and that really excites me," the new WCT interim leader offered. "I really hope that is where we can go, besides just me getting on the learning curve, basically professionalizing administrative tasks to grow the trust and what the trust can support," she added.

Buss is clear about what it means to be the WCT's new interim executive director — a bit of a misnomer, since it implies that the organization has had a professional director in the past, which it has not. "This is really about evolving the organization to its next level and then preparing the way for a more permanent executive directorship when it reaches that level. The community trust really wanted somebody who could roll with the punches, think outside the box, who had an entrepreneurial mindset, and knew a lot about regulation and administration."

"I've had a lot of board experience and I've done a lot of things that hadn't really been done before. So Jill [Davies] thought I would be a good fit for at least this first year to see hopefully how the trust can grow and serve our community in new and unique ways," Buss concluded.

WOODSTOCK VILLAGE/TOWN ASSESSORS IMPORTANT 2025 NOTICE OF GRIEVANCE HEARINGS

The grievance period begins after April 1st and ends on June 18th. Please complete the Grievance Application on our website: townofwoodstock.org and drop off, email or mail by June 18, 2025. Listers are available M-F 8:00-12:00 to answer any questions prop-