Ottauquechee River Trail to receive $20K grant for flood repairs, needs to raise $10K match

By Tom Ayres
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Wooden bridges over bog land, benches, and picnic tables along the Ottauquechee River Trail were demolished and scattered when eight to ten feet of Ottauquechee River floodwaters devastated the mile-plus-long lower field of the trail last July. Photos Provided

The Ottauquechee River Trail (ORT) organization has secured $20,000 from the Better Places community matching grant program of the Vermont Department of Housing and Community Development (VDHCD) to facilitate extensive repairs to significant portions of the trail in Woodstock's East End and its infrastructure that were heavily damaged by floodwaters last July.

"The only caveat is that the ORT needs to raise $10,000 or more locally by May 31 as a match toward the state funding," ORT spokesperson and volunteer Tom Weschler said last weekend. An online crowdfunding campaign launched on Monday, utilizing an online platform called Patronicity, the state-appointed crowdsourcing program that all Better Places grantees are required to use for their community-based fundraising efforts.

"Patronicity is a separate organization from VDHCD and Better Places because the state agency doesn't want to build the infrastructure to support the funded projects, so they are having us use this standalone entity for fundraising," Weschler explained. "We actually have a campaign coach that we are working with at Patronicity and she is giving us guidance on how to do the campaign. Patronicity does all the vetting of the campaign and all the documentation."

The repairs needed for the flood-ravaged ORT are largely confined to what trail officials refer to as the lower field, which is predominantly used as a hayfield by the Billings Farm & Museum. The tree-rimmed field sits directly across the Ottauquechee from the Billings Farm and is held by the Woodstock Resort Corporation. "Our worst damage was clearly in the lower field where we lost trail signage, 12 benches, a few picnic tables, and the bog bridges," Weschler noted. "We also need to remove significant debris and trash to be able to have the trail once again along the edge of the hayfield. That lower field, which is over a mile long and right next to the river, was under eight to ten feet of water during the flooding. And wood floats, so all our tables, benches, and bridges floated away and either got damaged or are now in Long Island Sound somewhere," the ORT volunteer lamented, laughing sardonically.

When the current crowdfunding campaign reaches its goal of $10,000, it will trigger the release of the $20,000 matching grant from the Better Places program. "In addition to the lower field repairs, the funding will also enable planting of trees to strengthen the riparian buffer along the trail and to improve signage at the trailhead," Weschler said. "It's important to remember that every $1 the community contributes means $3 for the ORT," Weschler added in a statement on Monday morning. All contributions are tax-deductible.

VDHCD and ORT representatives are both urging businesses, organizations, and community members to make donations to the repair effort directly online at patronicity.com/ORTRebuild, "That's the preferred way to make contributions because Patronicity does all the work and data collection, and the Better Places program recognizes those directly toward the match," the ORT spokesperson added. "If, however, people prefer to give by check, please mail donations to ORT Rebuild Project, Woodstock Community Trust, P.O. Box 802, Woodstock, VT 05091. Offline contributions will be manually entered into the Patronicity database at the conclusion of the campaign, Weschler explained. The ORT is a project of the Woodstock Community Trust.

The Better Places program is led by the VHDCD in partnership with the Vermont Department of Health, the Vermont Community Foundation, and Patronicity. "The program supports community-led projects that create, revitalize, or activate community gathering areas that bring people together to build welcoming and thriving places across Vermont," according to a statement on the Better Places web page.

To date, more than $957,000 in matching grants have been allocated to nearly 50 local projects statewide, with local, community-based crowdfunding contributing an additional $564,000 in support. In addition to the ORT, financial support to Better Places grantees has helped facilitate the creation of a downtown green space along Main Street in Springfield, the establishment of a World Wars I and II Memorial in Veterans Memorial Park on Railroad Row in White River Junction, installation of a lift as part of an accessibility project at the Windsor Public Library, and the "Moon & Stars" series of music performances and environmental film screenings planned for the South Royalton green this summer. Each of these projects has already met its matching fundraising goals with significant community support, Better Places officials report.

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