



Connecting People with Nature and Each Other

Woodstock Community Trust projects are improving our green spaces

By Katherine P. Cox

Efforts by groups focusing on creating, enhancing, and protecting green spaces in Woodstock have resulted in the completion of Ottauquechee River Trail and East End Park over the course of many years. Beautiful public spaces have been shown to create economic opportunity, bring people together outdoors, and foster a greater sense of community. A third group, Woodstock Village Conservancy, is in its development phase, hoping to further improve public green spaces in Woodstock. All three groups are projects of Woodstock Community Trust, which provides legal, accounting, and financial oversight to all the projects in its portfolio.

East End Park community celebration in 2023.





OTTAUQUECHEE RIVER TRAIL

Ottauquechee River Trail meanders for almost three miles in a bucolic loop along the river on the east side of Woodstock. With over a mile of river access, it is used by some 400 people a week, appealing to children, families, runners, walkers, strollers, and anyone who wants to enjoy the year-round beauty of this local gem.

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— Tom Weschler, project leader of
Ottauquechee River Trail

“It’s magical,” says Tom Weschler, project leader and part of a group of about 15 citizens who came together in 2017 to walk properties, contact property owners, and lay out a vision of what a riverwalk would look like. Today, Tom is a project leader with a team that includes Randy Richardson, Wendy Jackson, and Phil Robertson that spearheads trail maintenance. The Woodstock Economic Development Commission provided the majority of funding for construction and building of the trail, which opened in 2020. “The community has been very active in supporting the trail, both with volunteer hours and funding for the ongoing improvements and annual maintenance,” Tom says. After a flood in 2023 left the trail under 10 feet of water and washed away benches, trail signs, and bog bridges, the community stepped



Above: An afternoon walk on Ottauquechee River Trail.

Right: (Back row) Randy Richardson and Tom Weschler. (Front row) Wendy Jackson and Phil Robertson.





Ariel view of the river trail along the field and bird migration zone.

up with a major fundraiser, “and now the trail is totally rebuilt and better than before, with stone benches.”

The 2.8-mile trail winds by a working agricultural field, with part of the trail on the 150-year-old Woodstock railbed, and traverses private property, including Woodstock Inn & Resort, East End Partners, Sunset Farms Condominium Association, and Town of Woodstock Wastewater Treatment Plant. The trail is maintained by dedicated volunteers and funded by donations and grants, “and the combination of East End Park and Ottauquechee River Trail has been a catalyst for the development of the east end of Woodstock, which has always been a priority for the town,” Tom says.

“There are a variety of constituencies that use the trail,” Tom says. Anybody who is seeking nature and peace and quiet will find it on the trail, he says. There are eight or 10 river access points with benches and picnic tables at many of those points. The trail is popular with families and children, dog walkers, and seniors. Woodstock Terrace, a senior living community, is near the trail, and Thompson Senior Center organizes walks on Mondays. “It’s a wonderful place for everybody. The trail is very friendly with universal access for wheelchairs and strollers,” Tom says. “There’s a tremendous amount of nature and wildlife.”

People use the access to the river to fish and it’s a birder’s paradise. “The agricultural field that is the heart of the trail is in a migration zone, so birders come from miles around, in the fall especially.” It’s beautiful any time of year, though. “It’s a four-season trail. It’s a beautiful walking trail, but in the winter, people snowshoe and ski on it. It is the best place to view the leaves and color in the fall because when you get to the trail and you’re down by the river, you get a 360-degree view of beautiful homes, beautiful landscape, and the mountains. The colors of the trees are spectacular. It’s a fun place and we’re lucky to have it. We’re so lucky that owners have contributed or allowed the public to use their lands.”

EAST END PARK

Transforming what was once a blighted area in the east end of Woodstock into what is now a beloved scenic park was an “unbelievable undertaking by a lot of really committed folks,” says Emily Friedman of the massive, years-long project that resulted in East End Park. The effort to establish a park in the east end dates back to 2009, when East End

“It was a community-led grass-roots effort to establish a park in a place that was the town’s designated snow dump, and beyond that people used it as an overall dumping ground. It was an area that was vital but had fallen into disrepair. It was colloquially called the jungle around here.”

— Emily Friedman, Woodstock Community Trust board member

Action Group formed to turn a former town snow dump into an area that was environmentally robust, would provide opportunities for economic development, and foster a strong community center around the east end, says Emily, project leader for East End Park and a board member of Woodstock Community Trust.

There were a couple of plans over the years, Emily says, “but East End Action Group really kicked things off around 2012.” They organized under Sustainable Woodstock and applied for grants, built



East End Park hosts many community events such as Music by the River.

relationships with the town and village, and fundraised. “It was a community-led grass-roots effort to establish a park in a place that was the town’s designated snow dump, and beyond that people used it as an overall dumping ground. It was an area that was vital but had fallen into disrepair. It was colloquially called the jungle around here.”

The transformation of the site took

place over several phases that included volunteer labor, hiring contractors and experts, and bringing in the town and the village as essential partners, Emily says. The snow dump had to be moved first, she says, and East End Action Group worked with the town and the village to move it away from that site, which opened it up for the park’s development. Trash and debris removal fol-



The East End Park site in 2013, when it was still nicknamed “The Jungle.”

lowed, and the soil had to be replenished for planting. “It started from a really rough point and volunteers came in and planted, built an amphitheater and a labyrinth, planted trees, built stone walls, and put up benches and picnic tables. Opening in 2020 was the culmination of years of putting in work. Now that it’s built, the joy has come from seeing how people use it.”

The stone labyrinth is much loved, especially by children who love running around it, Emily says. There’s a slide and a rock scramble for kids as well. Parents love the fact that their kids can play safely far from the road. Pentangle Arts, a Woodstock arts organization that brings a variety of arts experiences to the community, hosts Music by the River, a summer concert series. “The amphitheater was designed with that kind of thing in mind, so it’s thrilling to see it get such consistent use that way.” Community organizations can use the park facilities for events as well.

The trailhead of Ottauquechee River Trail is at the park and provides parking for its users. “We have the only public river access in the town of Woodstock because we are on public land owned by the town and the village. The trail is on private land that is open to the public. We are making sure there is river access available for the public in perpetuity in the park,” Emily says. “It’s such a nice

experience to go from one to the next,” she says of the connectivity between the trail and the park.

The park has also helped spur development nearby, which was always the hope, Emily says. New businesses such as Ottauquechee Yacht Club, Ranch Camp, and Farmer and the Bell have opened, and Emily sees more opportunities for development down the road. “It feels like

it’s the very beginning of an exciting time for the east end.”

The bulk of the park’s budget comes from donations and grants, she says. “We do an annual appeal through Woodstock Community Trust, so when we talk about planting new trees or maintenance, the funds are not coming from tax dollars; it’s funded through private donations and grants,” Emily says. A combination of work keeps the park looking good—volunteers help plant gardens, the town and village does the mowing, and a park supervisor does additional maintenance tasks. “People continue to be engaged,” Emily says. “That passion hasn’t waned. It’s a people- and community-powered park and it brings together people of different ages and backgrounds. It’s a grassroots park. It’s by the community and very much for the community.”

East End Park group hosts a community celebration every fall “as a way to give back to the community, bring people together, and focus on local food and music,” Emily says. This year’s Woodstock Community Celebration will be held Sunday, September 13.

5K River Walk

Ottawaquechee River Trail is sponsoring a Fourth of July Firecracker 5K Run/Walk as part of Woodstock’s 250th celebration. “We’re trying to introduce the trail to more of the Woodstock community and invite people to experience it. It’s a way of giving back and giving thanks to the Woodstock community,” says Tom Weschler, project leader of Ottauquechee River Trail.

The Firecracker 5K is family friendly and the route is mostly flat, easy to walk or run, and surrounded by lots of great nature. The walk/run will start at 9am on Saturday, July 4, at the ORT kiosk in Woodstock’s 0 Maxham Meadow Way and follow the Ottauquechee River as it runs along hay fields, a vernal pool, and Woodstock’s 150-year-old railbed. The Firecracker 5K is intended to be a “fun run” and it will be untimed.

There is a registration fee of \$30 and all proceeds will go toward the maintenance and improvement of the river trail “to ensure the trail remains safe, beautiful, and accessible for residents and visitors,” Tom says.

Other activities that weekend include music at East End Park on Friday night, July 3. After the 5K on Saturday, the celebration moves to the town center. Festivities will culminate Sunday night with fireworks. For more information and to register, visit runsignup.com/Race/VT/Woodstock/OttawaquecheeRiverTrailRace.



WOODSTOCK VILLAGE CONSERVANCY

In a lot of municipalities, the money available from taxes is not enough to adequately maintain and or improve public spaces, says Wendy Spector, project leader of Woodstock Village Conservancy. That's where the Conservancy comes in, with the goal of helping Woodstock

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— Wendy Spector, project leader of Woodstock Village Conservancy

with resources it needs to improve and enhance public spaces. “We’re also interested in connectors, whether it’s physical connectors like sidewalks, or figurative connectors like wayfinding, maps, or even engagement, people connecting through events and things that bring people to the parks and to each other.”

Woodstock Village Conservancy was founded two years ago with the understanding that many of its goals will take time. “So far, the group has obtained a Letter of Agreement with the town and village, which delineates our objectives, roles, and responsibilities,” Wendy says. “One thing we don’t want to do is burden them with meetings or take them away from other priorities.”



One conceptual rendering of a rehabilitated Green.

The Conservancy has a lot of initiatives in mind, Wendy says, but the largest initiative is to rehabilitate the Green. “It will take many years to come to fruition. It involves basic infrastructure improvements such as irrigation; improving grass, pathways, safety, and traffic flow around the Green; and planting trees.” The Village Corridor project would cre-

ate safe, sustainable, and accessible streets and pathways for vehicles, bicycles, and pedestrians. Other initiatives include Branch Out Woodstock, which aims to plant trees in the downtown business district where trees have died, and developing a volunteer gardening corps to help maintain the spaces. To that end, the group wants to form Conservancy Corps,




Woodstock Village Conservancy Fundraising Event.



a volunteer group that would meet from April to October. “These things will all take time because we need to raise money, get public feedback, and get the town on board.”

Wendy continues, “Studies show public spaces are beneficial to communities and foster a sense of community. They bring people together, they’re a way for people to inexpensively recreate, and a way of mixing socioeconomic groups. Having beautiful spaces brings people outdoors.” They’re magnets not just for residents but for visitors too, which creates economic opportunity. She points to the development of East End Park generating new businesses in the east end.


Much of the prospective revitalization of green spaces is still aspirational, Wendy says, “but we did enlist the work of a landscape architect to help us conceptualize what a renovated Green might look like. We created some designs so we could prioritize design elements that would enable us to start a conversation”

with the public and officials. “We’re hoping to move forward with that in the next year or so. It’s important that all the officials be brought on board every step of the way. It’s not just us deciding to plant trees.” The Conservancy is trying to forge a new kind of public-private partnership, Wendy says, so that as they proceed, they will have the support of town boards and officials. “The initiatives have been presented to the boards. They know we have gone down the exploratory path on a number of these initiatives, with a handful that are more fleshed out. We’ve begun discussions with the Department of Public Works on some of them. We’re now waiting to hear back from them.” 

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