

Mohawk Trail Woodlands Partnership - JUNE 2019 UPDATE

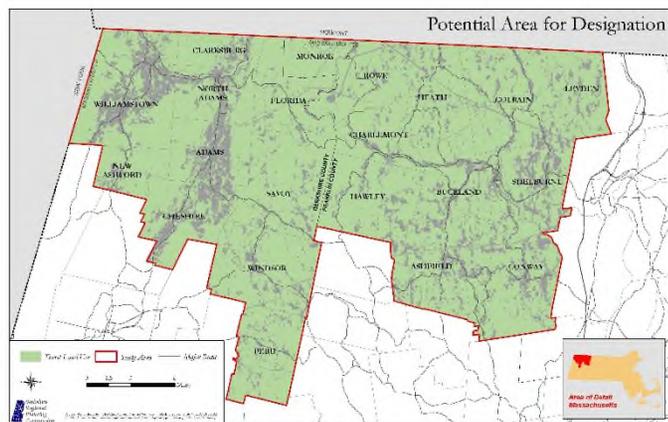
A Forest-Based Economic Development and Conservation Project



Purpose: To bring recognition and additional financial and technical resources to 21 municipalities in northwestern Massachusetts, primarily via special designation by the U.S. Forest Service and the Massachusetts Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs to:

- Increase sustainable economic development related to forestry and natural resource based tourism
- Support forest conservation on private lands and use of sustainable forestry practices
- Improve fiscal stability and sustainability of the municipalities

MTWP Study Area: The 21-town MTWP area in the northwestern corner of Massachusetts is roughly 82% forested, and encompasses Adams, Cheshire, Clarksburg, Florida, New Ashford, North Adams, Peru (added October 2015), Savoy, Williamstown and Windsor in Berkshire County, and Ashfield, Buckland, Charlemont, Colrain, Conway, Hawley, Heath, Leyden, Monroe, Rowe, and Shelburne in Franklin County.



The woodlands of this area provide a variety of opportunities and benefits. People are drawn to the area for its natural resource-based tourism activities such as hiking, skiing, camping, fishing and snowmobiling. A significant number of people make their living off the woodlands, whether running recreation-based

businesses, cutting and selling firewood off their woodlots, harvesting timber for furniture or flooring, working as foresters or tapping sugar maples and selling maple syrup. Forests provide critical ecological services including water supply recharge and protection, wildlife habitat and diversity, water and air purification, and carbon sequestration.



MTWP STATE LEGISLATION STATUS

State legislation creating a special designation for the 21-Town region and establishing the Mohawk Trail Woodlands Partnership passed as part of the State Environmental Bond Bill in 2018, as amended by Governor Baker in December 2018. This accomplishment is the result of four years of work by the MTWP Advisory Committee who collaboratively drafted the legislation with support from the project team.

NEXT STEPS

Communities within the 21-Town region need to opt-in to the partnership through a vote by the Select Board, Mayor, or Town Meeting. At least 11 towns must opt-in before the MTWP Board can be established. There is a 2-Year period for towns to opt-in after the passage of the legislation.

MTWP PROJECT WEBSITE

To learn more about the project, find a copy of the legislation, or contact project team partners, please visit:

mohawktrailwoodlandpartnership.org

THE VALUE OF TOURISM IN THE MTWP REGION



Massachusetts Office of Travel and Tourism's (MOTT) Director of Research Tony D'Agostino explained the economic impact of travel in the State and region at the February 2019 MTWP Advisory Committee meeting. MA ranks 12th in the U.S. for direct economic impact from travel and tourism.

Almost \$600 million was spent by travelers to Berkshire and Franklin Counties in 2017, supporting 4,800 jobs in the region. Surveys conducted in 2016 for travelers to western MA identify the top three activities of visitors: entertainment (79%), art & culture (70%) and nature/outdoor activities (66%). Nature and outdoor activities along with sports and recreation activities skew higher in western MA than in eastern MA.

The top reasons identified from the survey for visiting western MA include scenic beauty (61%), relax/activity balance (56%), and convenience (54%). Most travelers to the region are coming from the Boston area, New York City, northern New Jersey, and Hartford. The top spending categories for visitors are for transportation and food; spending on lodging is low. The Mohawk Trail Regional Tourism Council buys billboards annually in Boston promoting the region for its outdoor recreation and arts and culture.

MOTT can help market the region and works with tourism organizations across the State. For more information visit: <https://www.massvacation.com/>

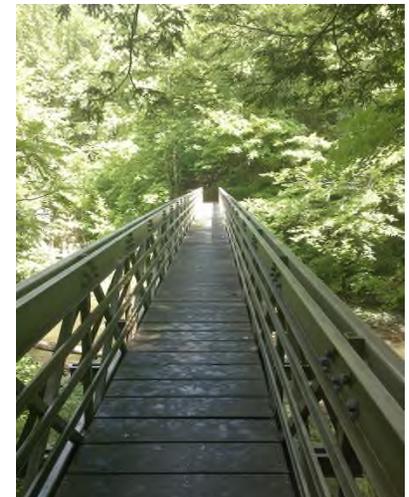
Project Background: Public and stakeholder input about the potential State and Federal designation has been and still is a key component of the Project. **Over 60 community meetings** open to the public have occurred since the start of the project to discuss and shape the project and get feedback. The project team - Franklin Regional Council of Governments (FRCOG), the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission (BRPC) and the Franklin Land Trust (FLT), in partnership with the Massachusetts Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs (EEA) – initiated the project in 2013 with regional and town-by-town public outreach sessions. Input from these sessions helped shape the project plan and goals.

A key recommendation from the community meetings was the formation of an Advisory Committee to help oversee the specifics of any designation. The **MTWP Advisory Committee** has met regularly since 2014 to craft a project plan, the State legislation, and a draft business plan and governance structure. The Committee is currently comprised of representatives from 20 of the 21 towns, appointed by the Select Board or Mayor, and regional appointments representing land conservation, economic development, forestry, and the environment. In 2014, the project team expanded to include a liaison with the U.S. Forest Service.

The MTWP Advisory Committee recommended five (5) programmatic priorities that would be given the greatest level of effort if State and Federal funding is secured:

- Forest Land Conservation
- Municipal Financial Sustainability
- Sustainable Forestry Practices
- Forest Based Economic Development
- Natural Resource Based Tourism

These funding priorities were identified through the public outreach process and research conducted by the project team. Each programmatic priority has specific implementation activities (outlined on pages 3 and 4).



State and Federal Legislation: In 2016, project team members met with 20 of the 21 towns to gauge interest in proceeding with a special designation for the region, to be created through State and Federal legislation. Most of the towns provided **letters of support** for proceeding with the State legislation. The Advisory Committee and project team prepared a draft of State legislation that would create the Partnership according to the goals and framework outlined in the plan. The legislation was filed with the Massachusetts legislature in January 2017 by legislators representing the region. A Public Hearing on the proposed MTWP legislation was held in Boston at the State House on October 10, 2017 by the Joint Committee on Agriculture, Natural Resources and the Environment. Members of the MTWP Advisory Committee attended the hearing to testify in support of the MTWP legislation. Revisions were proposed to the legislation in January 2018 to address comments from the Public Hearing, and in March 2018, the revised legislation was reported out of Committee favorably. In August 2018, the legislation passed as part of the Environmental Bond Bill. Towns now have the opportunity to “opt-in” to formally join the Partnership via a vote of the Select Board or Town Meeting during the 2 year opt-in period following passage of the legislation. As of June 2019, 11 of the 21 municipalities have opted in. The MTWP Board will be established and Federal legislation will be pursued based on the State legislation.

Funding and Business Model: By creating a special designation, the MTWP could receive State and Federal funding to support the goals of the partnership. The proposed funding request of \$30 million assumes a total Federal contribution over 4 years of \$24 million and a State contribution over the same timeframe of \$6 million. The intent of the proposed business model for the MTWP is to create a financial structure that can be **self-sustaining** over the long term. The bulk of the initial funding received would be used to establish and capitalize an “Investment Trust Fund” which would generate sufficient income by Year 5 to sustain key elements of the program over the long term. After the initial appropriations, funding via grants, donations and other income generating activities would be needed to supplement some programmatic activities. The State legislation established a MTWP Fund, but did not provide an appropriation.

WESTERN MASS WOOD: YOUR RESOURCE FOR FINDING LOCAL WOOD

The Massachusetts Woodlands Institute (MWI), a subsidiary of the Franklin Land Trust, is a non-profit organization that encourages and assists landowners in responsibly managing their woodlands. Through a grant from the U.S. Forest Service, MWI has created the Western Mass Wood website with a directory of local wood suppliers, an online marketplace to connect wood buyers with suppliers, and stories from people in the region using local wood. For more information: <http://www.westernmasswood.org/>



A barn in Worthington MA made entirely of local wood.

STUDY: LAND CONSERVATION BOOSTS LOCAL ECONOMIES

A new study of New England cities and towns shows modest increases in employment due to land conservation, with a greater impact in rural areas. The study points to reduced cost of community services for protected land combined with indirect economic benefits – clean water, flood protection, etc. – and direct economic impacts such as higher real estate values, increases in outdoor recreation and tourism, and inputs into the forest and farm products industry, as reasons for the boost in job growth. For more information:

<https://harvardforest.fas.harvard.edu/news/study-land-conservation-boosts-local-economies>

SIGNIFICANT ACCOMPLISHMENTS

The MTWP has leveraged these grants:

Regional Conservation Partnership Program (USDA): Through the RCPP, MA DCR, the Mass Woodlands Institute, Mass Audubon, and the Mass Forest Alliance assisted 33 landowners in receiving a bird habitat assessment and forest stewardship plan for their land, totaling 4,144 acres. Landowners may receive funding through the Natural Resource Conservation Service to implement items from these plans, including treating invasive plants, patch cuts to create early successional forest habitat, brush management, and forest stand improvement.

Voluntary Public Access / Habitat Improvement Program (USDA): The Franklin Land Trust, in partnership with MA DCR, Mass Forest Alliance, and the Berkshire Natural Resources Council, has launched the Voluntary Access Program, providing funds for temporary (10 year) and permanent easements to allow the public to hunt, fish, hike, or view wildlife on private land. To date, two temporary projects have been finalized - a 177 ft. fishing access trail and hunting and wildlife viewing on 13 acres in Colrain, and a 0.7 mile hiking trail in Shelburne. For more information visit www.franklinlandtrust.org/vpa

Massachusetts Department of Energy Resources (DOER): DOER has engaged the UMASS Clean Energy Extension (CEE) to conduct a study of heat demand in the region and potential air quality impacts of energy efficient wood heat. This study will provide important information to any town considering converting from oil to energy efficient wood heat.

Other proposed expenditures if funding is received are:

1. Design, construction and operation of the Mohawk Trail Forest Center, a multi-purpose facility that would provide: a.) tourism services; b.) technical assistance to private forest landowners and businesses to implement sustainable forestry practices; c.) opportunities for research and development to address climate change, invasive species or to develop new wood based products; d.) a marketing program and gallery to promote the sale of local wood products; and e.) public education about the ecological benefits of forest management.
2. Protection of approximately 2,100 acres of forest land via conservation restrictions with willing landowners with land remaining in private ownership and on the tax rolls.
3. Capitalization of a Revolving Loan Fund to support forestry and natural resource based businesses.
4. Creation of a Forest Viability Program with grants provided to forest-based businesses in exchange for a temporary restriction on forest land.
5. Establishment of “Municipal Cooperative Agreements” that provide annual grants to participating towns to support municipal services or operations related to the goals of the Partnership such as road maintenance or tourism-related emergency response.
6. Grants or technical assistance to private landowners to prepare forest management plans and implement recommendations.
7. Grants for natural resource-based recreational development or promotion.

Decision Making: Currently this effort is under the direction of the MTWP Advisory Committee. As the program moves forward, a long-term “governance” structure with strong local representation will be responsible for making key decisions and implementing the plan.

If funding can be secured, the MTWP would be staffed by an Executive Director and an Administrative Assistant. As proposed, staff would also be supported by at least one (1) high level staff person from the U.S. Forest Service that ideally would be located at the Mohawk Trail Forest Center. This staff person is expected to be funded by the U.S. Forest Service and would coordinate services and technical assistance with the Executive Director. The U.S. Forest Service could also partner with the State, a Town or a private landowner to establish a “Demonstration Forest” for sustainable forest management practices that would be open to the public.