

## **A Proactive Approach to Managing Conservation Land**

*By Kathy Sferra*

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With more than 1200 acres of town conservation land and 540 acres of conservation restrictions under its care, the Stow Conservation Commission has increased its focus on property stewardship in the last year. The Commission has worked to organize stewardship files, post conservation land boundaries, and educate and engage property owners that live adjacent to conservation land.

Our first task was to organize our stewardship information into large easy-to-use reference binders. Each major conservation area has its own binder with deeds, assessor maps, abutter information, survey plans, aerial photos, management plans and other key reference documents. Smaller properties are collected in another binder, each in a separate plastic sleeve. We did the same with each of our conservation restrictions and also inventoried which conservation restriction properties have baseline documentation and which needed to have it completed. These reference binders are in almost constant use on a day to day basis, able to be taken out into the field, and much easier than having the information in file folders.

Next up was boundary posting. We decided to start with posting one of our larger and more popular conservation areas. The Commission spent winter weekends posting the boundaries using existing surveys gathered from files and from the Registry of Deeds. We notified the abutting property owners in advance and took the opportunity to engage some of them in helping us locate boundaries while we were in the field. We also used the mailing to solicit volunteer property stewards to help us monitor the trails and report downed trees and other issues. As we walked the boundaries we documented encroachments by abutting property owners and prioritized them for follow up. While some of these were minor, such as leaf and brush piles, others were more significant and involved cutting trees or constructing fences on town land.

As we located the boundaries of a second property in preparation for boundary posting – a relatively new gift of open space surrounding a new subdivision – we discovered that more than half of the residents were already using our conservation land as an area for dumping of yard waste or storage. Rather than following up individually with each of them, we developed a two page Q&A format flyer “Stow’s Conservation Land: A Guide to the Open Space in Your Neighborhood” which we mailed to all of the residents along with a friendly letter letting them know that we would be returning to post the boundaries in a couple of months, and enclosed a map of the conservation land. The flyer addressed common questions about what is and is not allowed on conservation land, removal of hazard trees and invasive species, composting and the Commission’s process for addressing encroachments. Several residents have already called and let us know that they appreciate the outreach and are addressing their issues, so we are hoping that our need to follow

up on encroachments will be reduced through public education. We have also posted the flyer on our web site and will be using it with future neighborhood outreach efforts.

We have a lot of work to do to complete the posting of our land townwide and address management issues like invasive species and user conflicts on trails. We want to expand our volunteer efforts, and our (very) part-time land steward position in the coming year. But we're off to a good start and happy to talk with other communities that are interested in developing or expanding their land stewardship efforts. After all, Conservation Commissions were in the land ownership and management "business" long before there was a Wetlands Protection Act!

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