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\$8.8M DEAL PRESERVES MAJOR FOREST TRACT

JERREY ROBERTS

A view of Brushy Mountain in Leverett, part of a nearly 3,500-acre tract of land owned by W.D. Cows Co. that is now preserved from development. It is seen from Teawaddle Hill Road in Leverett.

W.D. Cows Co. sells development rights to 3,486 acres in Leverett, Shutesbury

By NICK GRABBE
Staff Writer

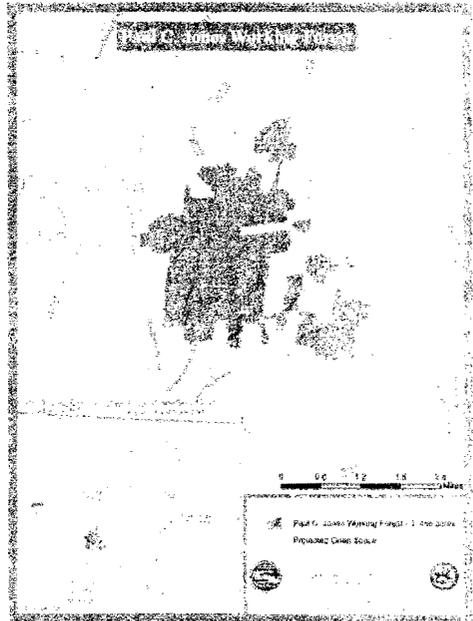
LEVERETT — A tract of Valley forestland will be permanently protected from development but remain open for public recreation under the largest conservation deal in the state's history, involving an Amherst lumber company, local land trusts and state and federal agencies.

The 3,486 acres, the equivalent of 5.4 square miles, is centered on Brushy Mountain in Leverett but includes adjacent land in Shutesbury. It has been owned for 125 years by the W. D. Cows Co. of North Amherst, which has managed it for timber and will continue to do so.

Four years of negotiation, involving the Kestrel Land Trust of Amherst and the Franklin Land Trust of Shelburne Falls, resulted in the payment of \$8.8 million Friday to Cows for the development rights. The company relinquished all rights to build residences or businesses — and accepted restrictions such as no cellphone or wind towers — and agreed to adhere to the highest level of forest management.

"This successful and historic land conservation initiative is the result of a unique partnerships that will protect this treasure for generations," said Gov. Deval Patrick in a

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Cinda Jones, president of W.D. Cows in Amherst, left, and Kristin DeBoer, executive director of Kestrel Land Trust, stand in front of Brushy Mountain in Leverett.

This map of the Cows property in Leverett and Shutesbury shows the land that falls under the new conservation restriction.

Conservation deal protects extensive forest tract in Leverett, Shutesbury

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statement. "This land will forever be home to iconic wildlife, while remaining a productive working forest that supports local jobs and allows hunters, anglers and hikers to enjoy the great outdoors."

Honoring Jones

The Paul, C. Jones Working Forest is named for a man who died Nov. 21 and was a member of the eighth generation to run W. D. Cows, the 12th-oldest family business in the U.S., dating from 1741. Cinda Jones, his daughter and the president of the company, said her father spent his whole life promoting public recreation on the company's timberland in 28 towns. The company is the largest private landowner in Massachusetts.

"It's so gratifying to name it for him," she said. "But it's hard to do without him enjoying it with us."

Her family has received many inquiries about the land over the years, from a Texas resort developer to conservationists seeking to preserve it, Jones said. But the family was never tempted until she received a phone call four years ago from Kristin DeBoer, executive director of the Kestrel Land Trust.

"Many family farms have to make decisions to keep them whole through different generations," Jones said. "They often sell house lots or subdivide part of it to keep the land. We want to

sustain the family business over the generations and the way we find most compatible with our mission of sustainable forestry is not to do those options, but to sell the development rights."

About \$2 million of the \$5.8 million will go to pay capital gains taxes, and the company has close to \$1 million in debts related to a sawmill in North Amherst that ran at a loss before closing two years ago, Jones said. Some of the money will go to renovating the 14,400-square-foot sawmill to make it rentable, Jones said. The company also plans to buy more timberland, she said.

Cows gets its income from log sales, residential and commercial rentals, cellphone tower leases and sand and gravel sales, Jones said. The recession of the last three years helped propel the sale of the development rights on Brushy Mountain, she said.

"It's what we had to do to sustain our family business," she said. "We're on the ninth generation and I want nine more, and this will help guarantee that. If we don't continually change our business model and reinvest, it won't survive."

DeBoer called the price of \$2,524 per acre, which was arrived at by two independent appraisals, "a bargain." The Kestrel Land Trust often helps owners sell development rights to farmland for between \$10,000 and \$20,000 an acre, she said. This tract is ten times bigger than the largest land conservation deal the trust has ever been

involved in, she said.

"The forests of the Pioneer Valley are part of our quality of life," DeBoer said. "This maintains one of the largest tracts of forest as forest. This is an outstanding opportunity to create the largest conservation restriction on private land ever in Massachusetts, right here in the Valley."

Hadley and Amherst have the largest and the second-largest number of acres in the state's Agricultural Preservation Restriction program. DeBoer said she would like to see local Hilltowns become the leaders in forest conservation.

Deal's numbers

The \$8.8 million purchase includes \$5 million from the U.S. Forest Service's Forest Legacy Program, which protects environmentally important forestlands threatened by conversion to non-forest uses. The two land trusts secured \$899,600 from the Western Massachusetts Land Protection Fund and Saving New England's Wildlife, and a grant of \$1 million came from the state's Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs Landscape Partnership Grant Program. The state's Department of Fish & Game contributed \$1.46 million from an open space bond authorization and \$500,000 in funds from the sale of fishing and hunting licenses.

Hiking, cross-country skiing, hunting, fishing and birdwatching have been allowed on the 3,466 acres, and the new con-

servation restriction continues this public access. Bicycling and horseback riding on designated roads, camping for seven days or less, rock climbing and snowmobiling are allowed, but could be restricted if they prove detrimental to the land, Jones said. All-terrain and off-road vehicles, motorcycles and dirt bikes are prohibited because they cause erosion, she said.

Public use of the land has been a "Valley secret," said Jones, but she expects more people to come because of publicity about the conservation restriction. There are small parking areas off Rattlesnake Gutter, Number 6, Dudleyville and Montague roads, and signs identifying the property's location will be posted at the major entry points. But the trails will not be marked or maintained, and no maps will be printed, she said.

The land provides habitat for moose, black bears, deer, turkeys and bobcats, as well as birds such as scarlet tanagers, Blackburnian warblers, wood thrushes, Canada warblers and Louisiana waterthrushes, according to Mary Griffin, commissioner of the Department of Fish & Game. The village centers of North Leverett and Shutesbury, where three wells are located, are less than a half mile from Brushy Mountain.

Reaction to deal

Eva Gibavic of Leverett was in her living room watching the sunrise over Brushy Mountain

Friday morning, two hours before the deal was finalized. She has lived near the mountain all her life, hikes there several times a week, and does research on Native American history.

"I'm thrilled with this," she said. "It is an amazing mountain, with a great deal of local early Leverett and Native American history. To have it protected has been a dream of mine forever."

Peter D'Errico, a member of the Leverett Select Board, said he looks forward to cooperating with Cows to develop the town's trail system. "This is a major guarantee to the town of Leverett that we will have open space that will be preserved in perpetuity," he said.

Board member Julie Shively said the possibility that Brushy Mountain — with its wildness, its scenic views and old house foundations — could be developed has hung over the town.

"This is huge," she said. "Ever since I moved to Leverett, this has been a concern, and now that it's not going to happen, we're all pretty excited."

Joe Larson of Pelham, who has hunted on Brushy Mountain, was involved in the land deal as a member of the state's Fisheries & Wildlife Board.

"I think this is really a tremendous achievement," he said. "It sets an outstanding example of how private ownership and stewardship of natural resources can be joined with valuable public access. I'm very happy to have been part of it."

U.S. Rep. John Olver, D-Amherst, who helped secure the federal funding, said he has hiked Brushy Mountain. "Millions of people live within an hour or two of this rare and special place," he said in a statement. "It's gratifying to know that it will always remain both a recreational and an economic asset in the Valley."

State Sen. Stan Rosenberg, D-Amherst, praised the public-private partnership that resulted in the deal. "Preserving these wilderness and scenic areas for all to enjoy can only be achieved when government agencies and private concerns continue to work together," he said in a statement.

Rep. Steven Kulik, D-Worthington, represents Leverett in the Legislature. "I am pleased that the land will continue to be sustainably managed, thus contributing to our region's natural resource-based economy," he said in a statement.

DeBoer said the deal does not create a park, and the intention is not to have the 3,466 acres become a destination spot.

"The focus is on public use that is self-powered," she said. "There are no toilet facilities, no warming sheds, no visitors' center. This is woods, and if you can navigate on your own, it's a great place to walk around. That's what the Valley is all about. We have the opportunity to go to great schools and then spend an afternoon hiking with our family in the woods."