**Mohawk Trail Woodlands Partnership - MAY 2018 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 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.

**NEW MTWP PROJECT WEBSITE!**
A new website has been created to provide the public with information about the MTWP project:

[www.mohawktrailwoodlandspartnership.org](http://www.mohawktrailwoodlandspartnership.org)

**MTWP STATE LEGISLATION STATUS**
With letters of support from most of the towns, State legislation was filed by our legislative delegation in January 2017 to create a Special Designation of the 21-Town region. The legislation was assigned to the Environment, Natural Resources, and Agricultural Committee. After review and revisions the legislation was favorably reported out of Committee in March 2018. Revisions to the legislation unanimously adopted by the MTWP Advisory Committee in January 2018 included:

- More strongly emphasizing the importance of carbon storage and sequestration
- Requiring sustainable forest management practices for any management activities related to the Partnership
- Establishing a minimum threshold of communities (11 of the 21) that must “opt-in” before actions can be taken
- Expanding the Partnership Board to include experts in public health and forest ecology / climate change
- Clarifying that funds will not be used to construct or operate a wood pellet manufacturing plant
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 50 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 creation of a plan and 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 19 of the 21 towns, appointed by the Select Board, 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 have 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. If State legislation is passed, each town would have the opportunity to “opt-in” to formally join the Partnership via a vote of the Select Board or Town Meeting. If enough of the 21-towns opt-in, Federal legislation would be pursued that would be based on the State legislation.

Funding and Business Model: By creating a special designation, the MTWP could then 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.

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...
Significant Accomplishments

The MTWP has leveraged these grants:

1. 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 emergency response related to tourism.

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. If the program moves forward, a long-term “governance” structure would be responsible for making key decisions and implementing the plan. The proposed governance structure contains two key elements: a decision making body responsible for higher level policy and programmatic decisions; and a non-profit organization responsible for the day-to-day administrative, financial and implementation activities. Annual budget and funding decisions for the programmatic priorities would be determined by the “decision making body” which would have town representation to ensure a strong local voice.

The non-profit would be staffed by an Executive Director and an Administrative Assistant. As proposed, the 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.

For more information contact Peggy Sloan, FRCOG psloan@frcog.org or Tom Matuszko, BRPC tmatuszko@berkshireplanning.org