Deal keeps large parcel of forest protected

Agreement won't allow for development rights

By Stephanie Ebbert

A 5.4-square-mile forest in Franklin County will be protected from development under an $8.8 million land conservation deal announced yesterday by state officials, who called it the largest of its kind in Massachusetts history.

The agreement covers nearly 3,500 acres of working forest owned by W.D. Cowls Inc., the largest private landowner in Massachusetts. The state contributed $3 million to the deal, with the Kestrel Land Trust and the Franklin Land Trust underwriting the rest.

Cowls, which provides wood for pulp and paper, firewood, veneer, and sawmills, will continue to own the land and harvest the forest but is surrendering the right to develop it. The company will not receive a tax break.

State officials cheered the deal, which prevents vehicular traffic in the forest, which includes much of Brushy Mountain and includes adjacent parcels of forest that support local jobs and allows hunters, anglers, and hikers to enjoy the great outdoors.

While Cowls said it had no intention of developing the land, it had received numerous entreaties in recent years, said Cindy Jones, the ninth-generation president of the company.

Firms wanted to build cellphone towers or study the mountain as a potential site for wind turbines. Jones said a Texas developer approached her before the economy dipped with a pitch for a slick but inexpensive built golf course community.

"We want Brushy Mountain," Jones said he told her. "I just laughed at him and said, 'Well, it doesn't want you.'"

On the flip side, she said, land trusts had been approaching her grandfather, her father, and herself for as long as she can remember with pleas to protect the land.

"We've been conserving land for 270 years. It just seemed ironic that they were going to help," she said.

Still, negotiating the conservation deal took years, she said, because of the difficulty of deciding development rights. Some of the parcels were bought as far back as the 1880s. Who would have predicted back then that the mountain would attract cellphone towers or wind turbines?

"To be able to say what my great great great great nieces will be able to do on this property was hard," said Jones. "If my grandfather had done this, he would never have guessed that people would pay $1,500 for a bottle of water."

The forest is located between several important reserves, including Mount Toby State Reservation, the Quabbin Reservoir, Montague Plains Wildlife Management Area, and the Wendell Erving state forests. The conservation restriction covers almost all of Brushy Mountain and includes adjacent parcels, creating a larger corridor for wildlife to move through protected areas.

State officials said the deal creates the largest contiguous tract of private land preserved in this way. Others involved in the deal were pleased to secure the largest tract of unbuilt forest land and said it would protect drinking water quality, conserve habitat and connectivity, and promote sustainable local wood production.

"You don't see this many contiguous acres in Massachusetts in private ownership," said Richard Hubbard, executive director of the Franklin Land Trust. "The Cowls have left us all an amazing present this holiday season."

Hubbard said that the agreement will keep the large tract of land on the tax rolls and publicly accessible but will ensure that it is not broken up for development.

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

"Thanksgiving after a sudden decline attributed to Creutzfeldt Johi disease, a rare, degenerative and fatal brain disorder."

She said her father was proud that his family was involved in the project, and a friend suggested that they try to name it after him.

"I said, 'I can't rename a mountain,'" Jones said.

But the state Board of Fisheries & Wildlife unanimously approved her request to name the land in honor of her father; honoring his longtime commitment to conservation, she said.

"It's uplifting us right now," she said. "The greatest conservation project in the history of the state is named for Paul C. Jones. And that just makes the whole difficult experience have an upside."

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