

Fall 2008 Newsletter

Preserving Agriculture in Bolton

Protecting Some of our Farms Forever

One of the things that residents love about Bolton, and that attracts new residents to Bolton, is that our town still retains some of its rural character. Despite nearly tripling in population in the last forty years, over one quarter of the town is now protected open space, thanks to town, state and private efforts. Our protected farms are some of the most scenic protected areas.

While our tax bills have risen a great deal in the last few decades, all of this open space protection has cost Bolton taxpayers relatively little, as only 1.8% of our town's current annual budget is used for protecting



Nicewicz Farm in Winter

open space (under \$300k out of a total town budget of over \$17,000,000 in 2008). The largest part of this open space expenditure is used to repay the loan that was taken out a few years ago to protect the 170 acre

Nicewicz and Schartner farms on Sawyer and West Berlin Roads. If thousands of acres of open space had not been protected over the years, much of it would have grown its "final crop" – houses, and our taxes would probably be even higher today, since most housing developments place so big a burden on schools that they do not pay their own way in taxes. So protecting farms and other open spaces is usually both fiscally smart, and contributes to our town's character.

Agriculture has flourished in Bolton for over three centuries. One of the big reasons that Bolton does retain more rural character than many towns in our area is that some of these ancient farms carry on. Each is a landmark in its area. Most have been in the same families for generations. In addition to helping retain the character of the town, farms are also a source of fresh, wholesome fruits and vegetables, and more and more studies show that if we eat more of these we will live healthier and longer. Bolton's Farms also are important businesses that pay taxes, and attract visitors to town that shop at other businesses. Since fruits, vegetables and farm animals do not place a burden on our schools and little on our town services, Bolton's farms are also net contributors to

our budget. Farms are also important wildlife habitats. It is not uncommon to see large herds of deer or flocks of birds in the orchards.

One of the focuses of the Bolton Conservation Trust (BCT) is to work with farm owners to protect these farms so they may continue forever.

BCT led the effort to protect the Nashoba Valley Winery on Wataquadock and Berlin Roads. Its owner at that time needed to sell and a Sudbury developer offered to build many homes on its scenic hillside. In 1994, BCT presented an article to town meeting requesting \$75k to contribute to an agricultural preservation restriction (APR). APR is a state program that buys the development rights from farmers. The farmer still owns the land, but it can never be developed, except as a farm. Bolton's voters passed the article, but that was just the beginning of a long campaign. We found a buyer for the farm, and somehow got the state to contribute about five times Bolton's contribution, but were still short. So we then conducted our largest private fund raising effort to that day, or since. As a result this very visible hillside near the center is now one of the most well known farms in our region. Yet, it came so close to being just another housing development, which would have likely placed more burden on our schools and town services than it contributed in taxes, instead of becoming a net contributor to our tax base as a thriving farm business.

In 1997, BCT led the effort to protect the International Golf Course and the over 100 acre farm that it owns known as the Schultz Farm, on Sawyer and Ballville Roads. The family sold it to IGC many years ago, but still lives in the middle of it and farms some of it. In 1997, IGC's owner, IT&T was being acquired by a bigger company, and near the end placed a perpetual conservation restriction on the Schultz Farm, so that it can

never be developed into housing. At the same time, BCT worked with the Selectmen and Planning Board to craft a new zoning district for the huge IGC lands which keeps its over 500 acres as a tax paying recreational business, not a vast housing development. This is one of the largest open space preservation efforts in Bolton's history, and required no town funds. Today IGC is our largest taxpayer by far, and the Nicewiczs lease much of the very rich soils of the Schultz Farm to grow corn.

In 2000, BCT protected most of the Coolidge Farm on Farm and Berlin Roads. Less than ten acres were sold to a developer to build some houses, and 23 acres was preserved as farm land in perpetuity. This approach of minimizing the cost through developing some land to pay for protecting most of the land is called a "creative development", which BCT has used to protect several other parts of Bolton that were no longer active farms. These 29 resulting acres are now owned by BCT, and we are open to farmers and others who may be interested in farming them.



Shartner Farm in Spring

In 2002-2006, BCT led our largest farm preservation project to date, protecting 170 acres of the Nicewicz and Schartner Farms. One of the owners of the Schartner Farm was interested in selling to a developer, but the other owner wanted it to stay a farm. The abutting Nicewicz farm was not immediately threatened to be developed, but in the long term all unprotected farms are

threatened, as every farmer receives huge lucrative offers from developers tempting them to sell their lands. This project was so big that BCT teamed up with The Trust for Public Lands (TPL), a national land protection group. TPL did not donate funds, but they did do all the complex negotiations with both large families. In 2004, Bolton town meeting voters overwhelmingly approved \$1.69 million to contribute to the project, which was then passed by 80% of voters in a ballot vote. Senator Bob Antonioni and Rep. Pat Walrath then helped secure a similar amount of state APR funds. But we were still quite short, so we got 6 private funds and even the town of Berlin to contribute, did fund raisers, raised private contributions, spent some of our own BCT reserves, and then even sold some of the land beyond the 170 acres in a creative development, including one house lot on the gravel portion of Sawyer Road. The resulting protected Nicewicz, Scharfner and abutting Schultz farms stretch for well over a mile along the length of Sawyer Road. If you want a glimpse of "Old Bolton" drive down Sawyer Road, or better yet bike or walk this rural road.

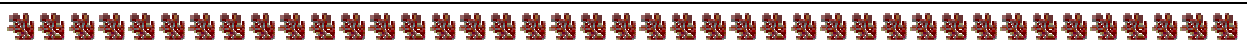
BCT is very grateful to Bolton citizens that have so strongly supported our land and farm preservation efforts. While very little of our tax bills are spent on conservation, we realize that we are now in challenging economic times, and that our town is also currently making significant enhancements to its infrastructure, after so many years of population growth have left us with an undersized police station and library. So BCT is quietly working with some farm owners on efforts that will not reach voters for quite a while, and on other ways to

protect land with no contribution from the town.

For example, we are now working with the Mentzer family to protect a very important parcel that abuts Bolton Spring Farm on Main Street, that important gateway farm that welcomes anyone entering Bolton from the east. The Mentzer land also abuts the Jo-Barb farm on Annie Moore Rd. We are attempting a creative development on the Mentzer parcel that would result in selling one large five acre lot up the hill away from the sounds of Main Street, with an exceptional view of orchards and protected hillsides. (We have just lowered the price of the lot (contact us if you know someone that may be interested in it, as it is a very good price for a view lot like this.)) Selling this lot would enable us to protect 24 acres of conservation land in perpetuity, which would provide an important buffer to the two abutting farms. It would also protect the open space at the corner of Meadow Rd and Main St, and provide a trail link to the over 400 acres of protected land directly across Main St.

Much of Bolton is still unprotected open space, including many major forests and farms, and BCT will continue to strive to protect some of the more special areas from development, including our landmark farms. BCT is a private, non-profit organization, that is dependent upon its over 200 members for all of its financial support. We thank you for helping us to help protect the rural character of Bolton.

- Ken Swanton



Happy Thanksgiving!

If you want to work off that great dinner, try a walk along one of Bolton's beautiful trails.



Beavers in Our Midst

Beneath the dim moonlight, a chiseling sound betrayed the presence of the creature I could not see. I had arrived before dusk on a damp November evening of a couple of years ago and hunkered down at the edge of the Green Road beaver pond, still and silent, hoping to see the industrious animals emerge for the night's activity. Autumn is a good time to try to see (or hear) beavers gnawing on bark, for it is when their preferred grasses and aquatic plants of spring and summer are becoming scarce, and they must rely more on woody vegetation. It is also the time of year they drag branches and saplings to their pond and pile them up in the water close to the lodge for consumption during winter when ice and snow restrict their movement. This food caching behavior is an adaptation which allows beavers to survive the coldest climates.



Beaver – Castor Canadensis

Beavers are adaptable in many other ways, as well. While they eat only plants and require a body of water, they are rather flexible within those constraints. They can feed on many different kinds of trees, and will occupy one location for years before exhausting the palatable vegetation. They

will then abandon the area and search for fresh habitat. If they are able to find an existing lake or pond, they can settle in and begin lodge construction. But a woodland stream or river will also serve their needs. They will dam it to create a new pond, a useful habitat for many insects, birds, mammals, amphibians, and reptiles. At the Green Road conservation area you can view an excellent example of a typical beaver dam made of mud, rocks, sticks, and other debris.

Dam construction can be time consuming, and this would be more of a liability if the beaver were not flexible in terms of shelter. But a burrow in the bank of a stream or river makes a fine temporary home while the animals are busy building the dam. Eventually, though, they usually construct the familiar free standing lodge in the pond, such as the one at Green Road. This is their preference, since it affords the family maximum protection from land dwelling predators, with its surrounding "moat".

A beaver family typically consists of 4-8 individuals: the breeding male and female, a few of kits of the year, and a few older offspring. The young usually leave their parents to start their own families in springtime, but the age at which they do so varies, depending on environmental conditions. Where beavers are rare and plenty of suitable habitat is available, the young might disperse when they are just one year old. Where beavers are abundant and vacant habitat is hard to find, the young might remain with their parents until they are as much as three years old. The older offspring help their parents with the rearing of their younger siblings, as well as with lodge and dam maintenance.

So beavers are flexible in terms of diet,

housing, habitat, and family structure, readily adjusting to a variety of situations. It might be hard to believe, then, that both the North American and European beavers had been wiped out of large expanses of their range by the beginning of the 20th century, as a result of our demand for their fur and, in some cases, for their meat. And while they have shown a remarkable ability to bounce back, they cannot do so without sufficient habitat. In Switzerland, for example, where beavers were completely eliminated by the early 1800's, attempts to reintroduce them have failed because the landscape has been so highly developed. Here in Massachusetts, where we are fortunate to have substantial forested landscape, reintroduction was successful and beavers are now doing well, so well that their needs are sometimes in conflict with ours.



Beaver Lodge

Such conflicts can leave us wondering why we should tolerate beavers at all. To name a few reasons: Biodiversity is certainly

enhanced at beaver wetlands, a nontrivial fact, given the estimated current species extinction rate of 100-1,000 times greater than that of pre-human times. Water is cleansed of pollutants from our fertilizers and herbicides through various chemical, physical, and microbial processes in beaver ponds. The water table is elevated, affording some protection against drought. And let's not forget recreational value. Beaver wetlands are hot spots for wildlife and, thence, for the increasing numbers of birders, photographers and trackers; for those who gain understanding about the human animal's place on Earth through studying and observing Nature's assemblage; for those who would sit still in the cold for but a glimpse of a wild animal at work in its natural habitat.

But that November night, the darkness was dense, and I would have to settle for only sounds. Fallen leaves whispered under waddling, webbed feet; the water laughed. Then, a frightened and frightening CRACK! Wild and lonely and primitive, the beaver's alarm sound, the slap of its naked, flat tail on the water's surface, reminded me that I was not a mere observer, but a participant in the intricate web of life at the pond. As a member of the species which once reduced the beaver to near extinction, I am a dangerous predator. The animals dove to safety, and I retreated to the road, hoping that when the beavers leave this wetland, they do so on their own accord.

Janet Pesaturo

Tom Denney Nature Camp

The dates for the 2009 Season are:

Staff Training: June 22 - June 26
 Session 1 July 6 – July 10
 Session 2 July 13 – July 17

Session 3 July 20 – July 24
 Session 4 July 27 – July 31
 Session 5 August 3 – August 7
 Session 6 August 10 – August 15

The Bolton Conservation Trust

Established 1974

Dedicated to its mission, "to assist in and promote the preservation of the rural character of Bolton, to preserve and maintain conservation areas, and to educate the public concerning the use of natural resources."

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