

## ***Executive Summary***

The Jay Land Group is pursuing a path for the Town of Jay to purchase 194 acres of land near the heart of the Village in Jay to create an enduring multi-use green space on a property that has a long history of public uses.

The 194-acre parcel lies in the floodplain of the Jay Branch and is a significant wetland. The location and coverage of wetlands limit access to the parcel, and the permitting pathway for development would be onerous if not impossible: potential for conventional development of housing or commercial uses is severely limited. These barriers to conventional development are further described in the “*Barriers to Development*” section.

At the same time, the wetland functions of flood protection, water purification, groundwater recharge, and wildlife habitat provide significant value to the community and the region. This collaborative project aims to leverage and support the physical features of the parcel to integrate human uses while sustaining and expanding the vital ecosystem services present there. Some of the benefits of community ownership that have been identified include a fire pond for public safety, affordable housing, multi-use recreation, conservation and restoration of an important natural area, outdoor education, flood resilience, and community building. These are discussed in more detail in the “*Community Benefits*” section.

The Jay Land Group is an ad-hoc committee: partners involved in the project include the Jay Selectboard, local residents, the Missisquoi River Basin Association, Jay Recreation Committee, Vermont Land Trust, RuralEdge, Catamount Trail, Country Riders Snowmobile Club, and the VT Department of Environmental Conservation Rivers Program. Comparable sales of large parcels in the area range from \$580 per acre, up to \$1500 per acre for prime farmland. We have authorized a third party appraisal, and anticipate a report of fair market value by mid-March. An offer to purchase would be forthcoming after the appraisal. We do need site control to invest the time and resources needed to structure the funding to close. Depending on the purchase price, we anticipate a period of 8-12 months between the contract and closing.

Through the partnerships emerging within the Jay Land Group, the community will be able to leverage benefits from the land. There are community needs, such as affordable housing and flood resilience, that have intensified with the expansion of the Jay Peak resort, and so it seems appropriate that this property be developed in a way to mitigate (to the extent possible) these impacts on the community and develop synergies that will serve both the community and the resort. Given the extent of wetlands, there is very little “buildable” land. Even construction of an exclusive get-away or single family home would require significant attention to wetlands and permitting. Given these physical characteristics, it seems the way to maximize the value created through sale of the property is to sell it to the Town of Jay to cultivate the value of the wetland itself and support these community benefits.

## ***Barriers to Development***

- Wetland delineation identified up to 25 acres of “developable” land, though there is no clear access to these areas. A portion of that 25 acres is within the Flood Hazard Area.
- The parcel is bound by a dynamic waterway and has two additional branching tributaries creating multiple setbacks and no practical way to build continuous road access for infrastructure on the property.
- The majority of soils on the parcel do not support on-site septic and the nearest connection to town sewer is on the opposite side of the Jay Branch where a connection would require a conduit under the waterway and Army Corps of Engineers permitting.
- The town zoning minimum lot size is 3 acres, so very few building lots could be created. Any profit-producing venture would need to be approved as a Planned Unit Development.
- There is frontage on Cross Road with a steep drop into the parcel where access would need approval from the Vermont Wetlands Program. There is also a bit of frontage on VT Route 105 with steep grades and wetlands, and given the proximity to existing intersections, it would be a challenge to get an approved curb cut on the state highway from the Vermont Department of Transportation.

## ***Community Benefits***

Public Safety: The Town currently uses a dry hydrant at the Cross Road bridge over the Jay Branch. This hydrant does not remain in place, rather it must be maneuvered into the brook while fire trucks are parked on the traveled road, contending with ice and variable water levels. The addition of a new fire pond and installation of a stable dry hydrant, located near the fire station and main Village of Jay, would increase public safety for the Town. Additionally, depending on the size of the fire pond, this space could also double for community recreation like fishing, and outdoor ice skating and hockey.

Affordable Housing: As in most communities, affordable housing is in short supply in Jay. This is exacerbated by Jay’s destination as a ski town with conversion of many single family homes and long term rentals to short term rentals. Additionally, as with most of Vermont, we have an aging population, and residents have expressed concern regarding the lack of options for people wanting to downsize from a family home to a smaller and more manageable unit. A higher degree of turnover of family homes could benefit our entire population. There is a small portion of the parcel (approx 8 acres) that would support on-site shared septic systems where the Town could explore compact development to offer affordable housing.

Recreation: This parcel is adjacent to an existing recreation area that is very popular both locally and regionally. The Jay Community Recreation Centre boasts wonderful spaces and trails, though many of these were designed with mountain biking in mind. An extension of the trail system - and located just across the road - would expand the accessibility of the trails to a diversity of physical abilities, and meet the multi-use desires of our community. Additionally, this parcel already hosts both the Catamount Trail and an extensive VAST trail, and is therefore

important to winter recreation for both nordic skiing and snowmobiling. Snowmobilers travel locally and regionally on the existing trail network on the parcel and patronize local businesses.

Restoration and Conservation: Restoration and protection of the parcel itself will support both the short term health of the Jay Branch and the Missisquoi River and long term climate resilience with important and healthy habitat for wildlife in our region. Streams and floodplains provide important places for smaller members of our ecosystem, and important corridors for larger ones.

The soils on this parcel offer an opportunity as a prime site for a currently-under-development conservation nursery. This native plant nursery will propagate native vegetation for clean water projects throughout northern Vermont. There is currently an unmet demand for restoration seedlings: locally-grown stock has the highest survival rate, and therefore the biggest positive impact for clean water, but there is a lack of nurseries within our region. The Missisquoi River Basin Association has substantial funding to launch and support the nursery, providing benefits to Jay and watersheds throughout the region.

Outdoor Education: The parcel is directly across the Jay Branch from the Jay/Westfield Joint Elementary School. Students currently use the brook itself for some field excursions. Town ownership of the property would create an extended opportunity for infrastructure to serve students at Jay/Westfield School and schools from nearby communities as well. The conservation nursery plan includes such infrastructure, and holds education and hands-on experiential learning as part of its central goal.

Flood Resilience: Working with the Department of Environmental Conservation and the Vermont Wetlands Program, there is potential to establish a River Corridor Easement. If the Town of Jay is the owner of the parcel, it is possible to access additional funding to restore the floodplain to reestablish a braided meandering channel that will decrease flood velocities and encourage deposition reducing the sediment and nutrient load of the waterway. This will serve to increase community resilience through flood moderation and improvement of surface water quality.

Community: Having public outdoor spaces is good for the health of community members and visitors alike. While northern Vermont appears to have abundant outdoor space, there are few large tracts that truly welcome multi-use visitors. Having one located right near Jay's 'downtown', and along the stream that is such a visible and viable part of the town would invite people into the "green heart of Jay", as one member of Jay Land Group put it. The Town of Jay has a strong identity, but the community sometimes gets conflated with the resort. While this can be a benefit, it can also be a burden, and having the opportunity to 'claim' this land and make it into a community asset will surely be a boon for this Town.