

ENVIRONMENT

A conservation project for the ages

Largest-ever land conservation project on Buzzards Bay protects a unique and valuable salt pond

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DARTMOUTH — Down a tractor path paved with quahog shells hides a piece of Massachusetts coastline both stunning and strategic.

Fields of corn and alfalfa on this South Dartmouth farm slope almost imperceptibly down to the water at Allens Pond, which is not a true pond at all, but an estuary where fresh and saltwater meet, egrets hide in marsh grasses and endangered terns forage for food.

Sea-level rise threatens salt marshes around the globe. But at Allens Pond, something beautiful is happening. Plant species are adapting. They're moving up with the water.

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Annett is vice president for watershed protection at the Buzzards Bay Coalition, one of three organizations that worked together to permanently protect the 115-acre farm.

Completed this summer, the \$8.1 million project is the largest-ever land conservation project on the coast of Buzzards Bay and the most important coastal property the coalition has helped to preserve, according to the group's president, Mark Rasmussen.

Speaking at a celebration of the project in September, he said the farm is unique and delicate.

"This deal had it all: It was about preserving these exceptionally rich farmland soils, sensitive and globally important wildlife habitats, pollution-filtering wetlands, extraordinary views, all of it, and all in one project," he said.

The coalition worked with the Dartmouth Natural Resources Trust and the farm's neighbor, the nonprofit and sustainable Round the Bend Farm, to place conservation restrictions on the land. The project is part of the larger Allens Pond Conservation Completion Project, totaling 215 acres.

They call it "completion" because all of the major developable parcels around the pond have now been protected. Some 2,700 largely contiguous acres have been set aside for conservation from Horseneck Beach to Slocums River.

"This is one of the biggest, and certainly the most intact, salt marsh systems on Buzzards Bay," Annett said.

The Dartmouth Natural Resources Trust plans to open a new public trail with boardwalks over the wetter spots and an observation platform overlooking Allens Pond, according to Dexter Mead, executive director.

Cornfields near the water will be replanted in native vegetation, and 13 acres will be managed for grassland instead of hay, and cut only when birds are done nesting, he said.

Up and down the Massachusetts coastline, urban development has displaced untold acres of historical marshland. At one time, salt marshes ringed Boston Harbor and the surrounding area, but an estimated 81 percent has been lost since pre-colonial times, according to the Boston Harbor Habitat Atlas.

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times in recent years, Kasmussen said.

The farm's value lies not only in its pristine waterfront, but also in the prime agricultural land that comprises the inland portion of the property. As part of the agreement, the organic Round the Bend Farm will work the northern 55 acres, more than doubling the organization's food-production capacity.

Ownership of the land has been divided into two pieces: Round the Bend Farm to the north, and the Dartmouth Natural Resources Trust to the south.

The Buzzards Bay Coalition holds a conservation restriction — a permanent deed restriction separate from ownership — on the north side.

The Dartmouth Natural Resources Trust owns the southern part, which is 60 acres and includes a narrow stem of land providing access to Allens Neck Road and a parking area. The south parcel has a conservation restriction co-held by the coalition and the Dartmouth Conservation Commission.

Landowner Roberta Hobart, whose family once farmed the property, agreed to work with the organizations. She did not speak at the public celebration, and attempts to reach her for an interview were not successful.

Desa Van Laarhoven, executive director of Round the Bend Farm, said women from the community played an essential behind-the-scenes role in developing the trusting relationships necessary for the plan to come to fruition.

“Together, these women created an environment of trust, respect and stewardship,” she said at a celebration of the project in September.

Round the Bend Farm wants to provide equitable access to agricultural and educational opportunities, Van Laarhoven said.

“We envision opening this land to a new generation of farmers, to women and people of color who have historically worked the land but were traditionally locked out of long-term leasing and ownership,” she said.

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Nearly all of the owners were initially skeptical, according to neighborhood resident and retired Superior Court Justice Lloyd Macdonald, who grew up on Barney's Joy Farm.

In the early 1970s, his mother, Angelica Lloyd Russell, became the first private landowner to grant a conservation restriction on the pond to Mass Audubon, he said.

Macdonald said his mother felt strongly that the land should be protected. And today, her children have the pleasure of walking the land knowing it won't change.

"We're really blessed by the foresight of our parents," he said.

Mass Audubon was a significant force in promoting early conservation restrictions, he said.

Passionate conservationist Ted Raymond, who Macdonald said was a second-generation resident on the Slocums River and active with Mass Audubon, developed what Macdonald called "the singular vision" for a sanctuary on Allens Pond.

Today, Mass Audubon owns the 611-acre Allens Pond Wildlife Sanctuary at the west end of the pond.

Macdonald said he sees a certain poignancy in the protection of Ocean View Farm, because it was the last of a large community of Portuguese-owned dairies in that part of Dartmouth.

"They're the ones who were the stewards," he said. "I hope that we're faithful, that we live up to their example."

Gina Purtell, director of the wildlife sanctuary, said a number of cottage lots remain unprotected on the ocean side, the development potential of those lots is limited. Around the pond, property owners have chosen to leave their land undeveloped, even though they had opportunities along the way.

"At each of those junctures, someone said, 'Eh, we're not going to exploit our property that way,'" she said.

But Purtell said she lives with the fear that laws that prevent development around the pond could change. It wouldn't be easy, but it's possible, depending on the political environment.

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The Trump administration is considering shrinking the boundaries of four national monuments and opening those and others to new uses. Sen. Orrin Hatch, a Utah Republican, said in late October that Trump had told him the decision to reduce two Utah monuments was done. As of this writing, the administration had not made an announcement.

Purtell said the pond has a high nitrogen load, and no one has been able to pinpoint the source. The water has been tested, but more research would require larger studies. That would be expensive, but it is an area for future work, she said.

Over the past year, the Buzzards Bay Coalition led the effort to piece together federal, state, and local funding. Dartmouth residents voted to contribute \$600,000 in Community Preservation Act funding, and the project secured grants from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation. It also won support from the Bromley Charitable Trust and more than \$2.9 million in private donations from 365 individuals and families.

Malcolm Johnston, a fervent advocate of the project, had been gravely ill with cancer but made an appearance at the September celebration. He died on Oct. 27. His obituary in The Boston Globe said his proudest accomplishment was securing funds for Ocean View Farm with the Dartmouth Natural Resources Trust and Buzzards Bay Coalition.

In the end, 52 percent of the money came from private donors, 35 percent from federal agencies, 8 percent from the town of Dartmouth, and 5 percent from the state. Rasmussen called the private support “amazing” and the overall cooperative effort a model partnership for conservation.

Public use and enjoyment is a big part of the future of Ocean View Farm and Allens Pond, he said. “Because special places like Allens Pond aren’t preserved just by preventing development. That’s absolutely Step 1, but that’s not the end. Places like Allens Pond are saved, in the long run, when people connect with and care about these places.”

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