

An Abbreviated History of the Fairfield County Regional Conservation Partnership

by Bill Labich, Highstead

INTRODUCTION

Over a nine-year period (2008-2017), the Fairfield County Regional Conservation Partnership (FCRCP) laid the foundation for increased cross-boundary communication, coordination, and collaboration among its member organizations, municipal commissions, agencies, and councils of government in Fairfield County, CT. Through the implementation of its strategic action and land protection plans, FCRCP was the catalyst behind the development of the Hudson to Housatonic Conservation Initiative and its subsequent iteration, the Hudson to Housatonic Regional Conservation Partnership (H2H). The history of FCRCP is one of a circle of close partners keeping their eye on their brass ring—to normalize collaborative land protection and stewardship—even as they continuously re-invented their partnership to be ever more inclusive and productive.

FOUNDING

In June 2008, Highstead’s Bill Labich convened a dozen leaders of local land trusts in Ridgefield, Danbury, Bethel, Newtown, and Redding, CT, launching a group that became the Western Fairfield County Regional Conservation Partnership (WFCRCP) (Figure 1). Partners continued to meet bi-monthly through 2009, sharing their challenges and successes, and discussing ways they could do more through teamwork. Early efforts to map the region by Highstead interns in the fall of 2008 convinced members that their shared region contained a high-value east-west woodland corridor that was mostly undeveloped and largely unprotected (Figure 2). Partners felt they could help each other succeed in protecting and caring for more of the woods and waters of their shared landscape by adopting a regional framework for land conservation entailing significant levels of coordination and collaboration. Within a year, they invited Brookfield Open Space Legacy Inc., and conservation commissions from across the now six-town region to join them. The group designed letterhead, and in so doing decided to drop “western” from their name. On October 24, 2009, the Fairfield County RCP produced a well-attended landowner outreach and engagement workshop in Newtown,



Figure 1. Members of the Fairfield County RCP at their Fall 2008 meeting at Holcombe Hill, Newtown, CT.

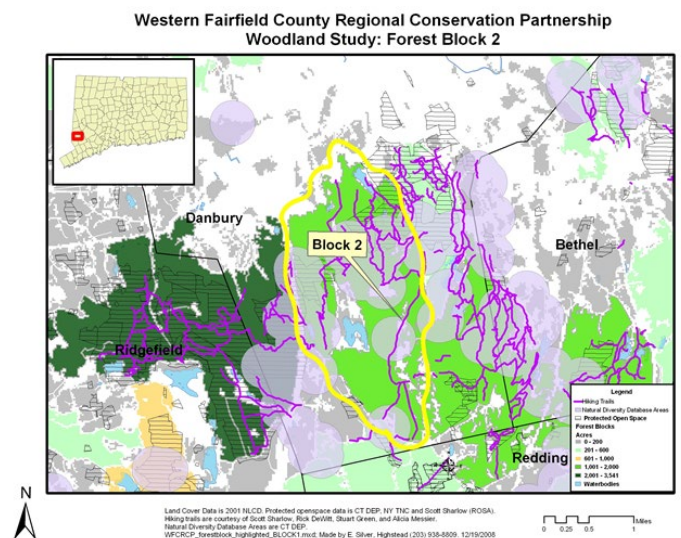


Figure 2. A Woodland Study Map Prepared by 2008 Highstead Conservation interns.

CT, which was something members said they had always wanted to do but were never able to accomplish on their own (Figure 3).

GROWTH

In 2010, FCRCP invited the Wilton Land Conservation Trust, Wilton Conservation Commission, Aspetuck Land Trust, and the Monroe Land Trust to the partnership, growing its region to eleven towns. That summer, FCRCP surveyed members and identified priorities for future activities that included a focus on land protection. Invited speakers in 2010 introduced partners to the US Forest Service's Forest Legacy Grant Program and the Wildlands and Woodlands' Land Project Aggregation Initiative. Highstead conservation interns developed a set of maps for the 11-town region helping members understand how their local protected lands and priorities connected to others across town lines. FCRCP members prioritized working with adjoining towns' land trusts to plan and carry out land protection and stewardship projects. Highstead interns also assisted the Ridgefield Conservation Commission's efforts to encourage a dozen or so landowners in Spring Brook Valley to work together to conserve and steward their shared landscape on the border with New York.

FCRCP members worked together on two main projects in 2011: an estate planning workshop for attorneys and accountants (Figure 4) and a greenway vision map for the 11-town region to further guide collaboration and tell their story (Figure 5, next page). The estate planning workshop failed to attract the targeted audience, but FCRCP used it to educate its members instead. The regional greenway vision map showed members in this much larger region where to protect land to increase connectivity for wildlife habitat between protected lands. It showed areas intended for development as well as the undeveloped land of highest conservation value. FCRCP grew to include members of the CT Department of Energy and Environmental Protection, Charles Ives Trail Task Force, and the Norwalk River Watershed Association.

In 2012, FCRCP members focused on adopting the greenway vision map, identifying focus areas (four, of which two remain active), exploring volunteer positions that could be shared by member land trusts, encouraging cross-boundary land protection, and developing a case statement brochure based on the greenway vision map. The Newtown Forest Association and the Bethel Land Trust led a cross-boundary stewardship project and one land protection effort. They organized to send a letter from FCRCP to recommend that the Town of Bethel acquire the 72-acre Franc property on the Bethel/Newtown town line. Bethel's acquisition of this property was the first time that FCRCP's actions helped lead to open space protection. The partners also developed their first website and E-news. In the fall, Highstead conservation interns converted the regional greenway vision into the graphic art version (Figure 6) partners called the "swoosh," which became part of a draft brochure. Author Tony Hiss led an exploration of resilient landscapes that connect Westchester and Fairfield Counties, hatching the concept of a Hudson to Housatonic partnership. At their November 2012 meeting, FCRCP members learned of the development of a new grant-funded collaborative in northern Fairfield County developed by the Land Trust

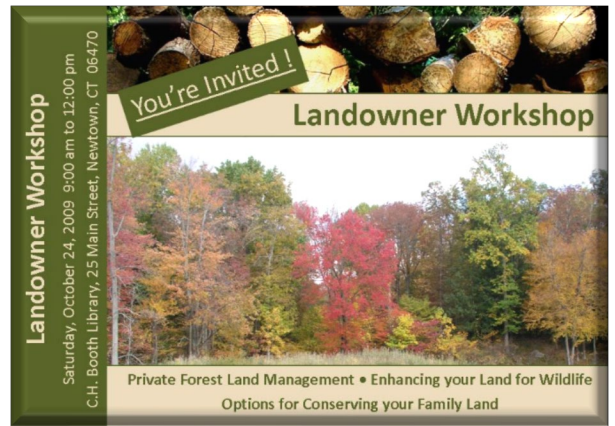


Figure 3. Postcard for the October 24, 2009 Landowner Workshop in Newtown, CT.



Figure 4. Postcard for the 2010 Conservation Workshop for Attorneys and Accountants in Danbury, CT.

of Danbury, Land Trust Alliance, and the CT Land Conservation Council that would involve most of the founding organizations of WFCRCP. As some as some partners began participating in the new collaborative to the exclusion of FCRCP, remaining partners began to consider expanding their territory to cover all of Fairfield County.

Remarkably, the formation of the new collaborative in northern Fairfield County catalyzed FCRCP’s organizational development. In 2013, the partnership decided to double its service area, growing the partnership from 11 towns to 23, and inviting the land trusts in these towns to join. New partners included the New Fairfield Land Trust, Shelton Land Trust, Norwalk Land Trust, Darien Land Trust, New Canaan Land Trust, Stamford Land Trust, and the Greenwich Land Trust. In response to FCRCP’s growth in size and activities, Donna Merrill with the Wilton Conservation Commission and Wilton Land Conservation Trust was invited to serve as FCRCP’s Co-Coordinator with Highstead’s Bill Labich. Donna and Bill established a steering committee with representation from the Ridgefield, Redding, and Trumbull Conservation Commissions, Aspetuck Land Trust, Newtown Forest Association, Stamford Land Trust, and the Norwalk River Watershed Association.

At their first meeting, the steering committee decided to organize a new five-year strategic plan for FCRCP to engage all the new partners in co-creating the larger FCRCP. Simultaneously, the committee agreed they would seek grant funding to advance efforts with landowners in focus areas. In June 2013, FCRCP members adopted the draft strategic planning process developed by the steering committee. The committee surveyed partners to prioritize goals and objectives, and by year’s end, they completed a

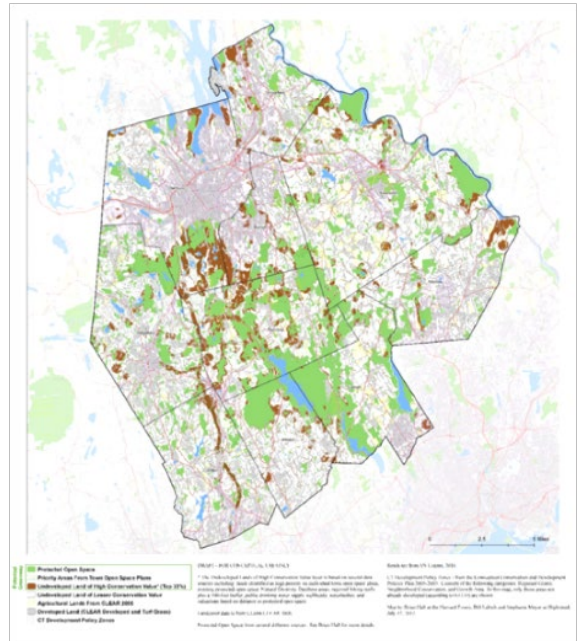
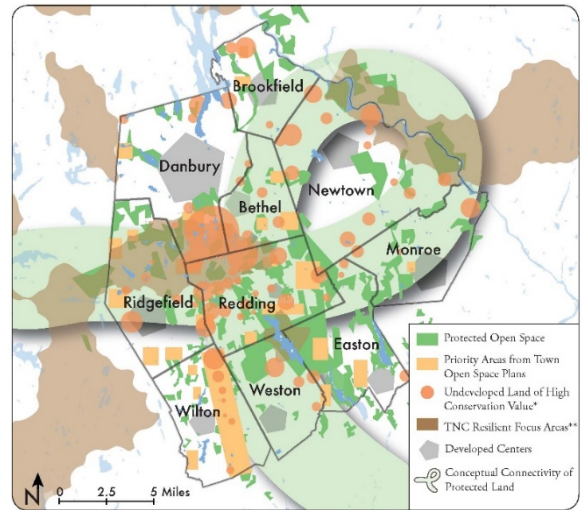


Figure 5. The FCRCP Greenway Vision Map completed in 2011.



DRAFT - FOR CONCEPTUAL USE ONLY
**Areas where some combination of trails, water features, proximity to protected open space, large forest blocks, and rare species habitat overlap. Data compiled by Highstead and the Harvard Forest.*
***See "Climate-Resilient..." below for a description of these areas. Data from The Nature Conservancy.*

Figure 6. Graphic design version of regional greenway developed by Highstead interns.

draft action plan (Figure 7). Besides overseeing the development of the strategic action plan, the steering committee also led efforts to apply for a grant to help advance landowner outreach in the focus areas. In the summer of 2013, FCRCP members worked with Highstead, Westchester Land Trust, and Mianus River Gorge to apply for funding from the US Forest Service. The proposed funding would support partners in both NY and CT to engage many more woodland owners in priority areas in conversations about protecting their land from development and managing their property in sustainable ways. That fall, Donna and Bill applied to Yale University for the opportunity to have the services of two forestry and environmental studies graduate students to support FCRCP activities. In December, partners ran a pilot Woods Forum, which brought in 27 attendees from across the North Redding, Bethel, Danbury, Newtown focus area (Figure 8).

In 2014, FCRCP completed, adopted, and launched the Strategic Action Plan and received two grants that were critical to advancing land protection activities. Based on the 2012 focus area mapping, Wilton Land Conservation Trust, the Norwalk River Watershed Association, and Aspetuck Land Trust began developing the Weston-Wilton focus area. In March, FCRCP members learned that the US Forest Service ranked their proposal for the Hudson to Housatonic Conservation Initiative 10th nationally, and that they would receive their request of over \$200,000 in funding to be shared with NY partners. Later that year, FCRCP received news that it was to receive the short-term assistance of two Yale graduate students. The students helped partners organize a Woods Forum for the Weston-Wilton focus area in April, which ended up launching Aspetuck Land Trust's Honey Hill Forest Block Assemblage land protection project. A landowner who would ultimately conserve their land with Aspetuck's help had attended this Woods Forum to learn about their conservation options. FCRCP's May meeting saw additional groups join including Audubon Greenwich, Westchester Land Trust, Mianus River Gorge, and the Trust for Public Land. Over the summer, Highstead's Bill Labich and Donna Merrill represented FCRCP members' interests in the first meeting of the Hudson to Housatonic Conservation Initiative Core Working Group. At their September 2014 meeting, FCRCP members launched their Strategic Action Plan with six prioritized actions. At the same time, the H2H Conservation Initiative began ramping up activity, diverting participation from some groups away from FCRCP. Funding from the USFS grant helped cover some of Donna Merrill's time as FCRCP coordinator and as H2H staff for initiative activities.



Figure 7. FCRCP Members discuss priority activities as part of their strategic planning process.



Figure 8. Postcard for the Woods Forum produced by FCRCP members in the Northern Redding Bethel, Danbury, and Newtown focus area in December 2013.

TRANSITIONS

The years 2015 to 2017 mark a significant transition for FCRCP in terms of leadership, activity, and engagement. On the one hand, the strategic action plan and mapping set up FCRCP to collaborate on grants and fundraising. However, many FCRCP members were limited in their capacity to pursue these new activities as all-volunteer organizations and commissions. During this period, FCRCP helped launch H2H, and saw momentum around regional collaborative conservation begin to shift.

As a fledgling collaborative, the interstate Hudson to Housatonic Conservation Initiative benefitted from the strong relationships developed in the region through the FCRCP, and the membership of several staffed organizations with more capacity to devote to the partnership. These elements contributed to H2H's ability to collaboratively raise funds and begin protecting land relatively quickly.

In 2015 and 2016, the H2H Conservation Initiative transitioned from a partner training and landowner engagement initiative to a full-blown Regional Conservation Partnership. With the launch of H2H, the coordination of FCRCP shifted from Bill Labich to Donna Merrill to Mary Ellen Lemay all within a two-year period. Under Mary Ellen's leadership, FCRCP saw an increase in membership, including partners from Bridgeport, and the towns of Stratford, Westport, and Trumbull. Mary Ellen reached out to members across the county bringing them information about FCRCP's activities and the importance of thinking and acting across town boundaries—something the founding members of FCRCP by this time took for granted. FCRCP had fewer meetings during this period, but with the assistance of Highstead interns and associates, the partnership oversaw the production of its final strategic conservation map, an online story map, and a poster by the fall of 2016.

Even with these exciting projects underway, meetings of the new H2H Conservation Initiative were vying for the same attendees. On average, there were a dozen members in FCRCP meetings in 2015 and 2016, and Mary Ellen postponed the June 2017 meeting due to too few RSVPs. Over the course of 2016 and most of 2017, FCRCP Steering Committee members discussed the pros and cons of merging with H2H. By the early fall of 2017, the FCRCP Steering Committee voted to do so.

LEGACY

Over its nine-year history, we can credit FCRCP with developing an immense amount of social capital for the conservation community of Fairfield County and giving rise to H2H, a collaborative that galvanized partners from across the two-state region, and protected land in just two short years.

Through the FCRCP, partners strengthened their relationships with peers across town lines, leading to new alliances and productive collaborations. FCRCP helped to protect the 72-acre Franc property and the 38-acre Belknap property, introduce Woods Forums to the region, and propagate the regional conservation partnership model in eastern New York. Over FCRCP's life, Stamford, New Canaan, Redding, and Wilton land trusts hired their first executive staff, two land trusts merged, and the Aspetuck Land Trust is considering doubling its service area and incorporating an underserved adjacent four-town area. FCRCP helped bring the two councils of governments together in Fairfield County and created the first conservation map of the county in decades.

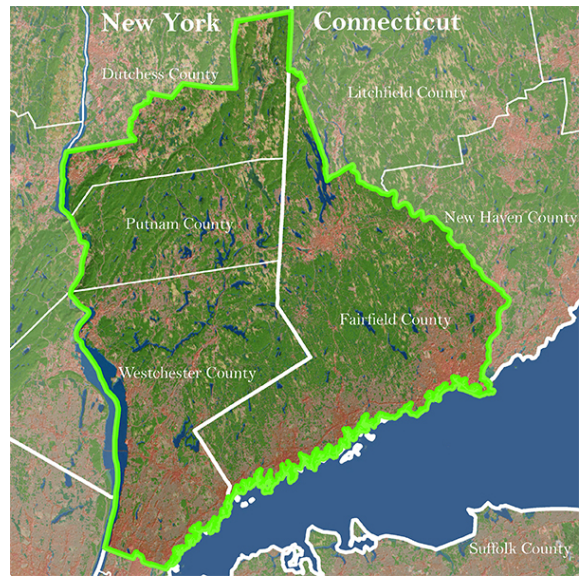


Figure 9. Region of the Hudson to Housatonic Conservation Initiative.

Finally, FCRCP has helped forge relationships among dozens of CT and now NY partners leading to much-increased levels of coordination and collaboration at the landscape-scale. H2H's current and future success rises from FCRCP's nearly decade-long experience in collaborative landscape-scale conservation.