

# ***Where there's a will(is), there's a way for open space***

***By Anne Marie Tobin***

Emilie Cademartori received the good news as August came to an end: The town is on pace to become a part of what is being touted as a unique project designed to protect and preserve hundreds of acres of open space at the intersection of four neighboring communities.

The Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC) informed Cademartori, Lynnfield's director of planning and conservation, that the town had been awarded funding to participate in the agency's technical assistance program (TAP).

"Preservation of this undeveloped acreage holds the potential for a large, connected wooded-trail network as well as access to the Ipswich River," said Cademartori. "The Lynnfield piece is only about 20 acres, but the overall plan calls for opening up approximately 500 acres in all."

Titled "A Vision for Willis Woods," the grant will support the development of a regional effort to create a vision, and ultimately a work plan, for open space at the intersection of the communities of Lynnfield, Middleton, North Reading and Peabody.

Cademartori said opening up access to the Ipswich River will be the main focus of the project.

"The plan calls for removing the Boston Dam, which will restore the current water supply the dam holds back into more of a river," she said. "(It) is very exciting, as it not only will result in an ecological renovation of that part of the river, but will also present added recreational opportunities over and above the woods and trails that presently exist."

Working with MAPC, Lynnfield will act as the lead community. The vision plan will focus on perpetual protection of this large collection of contiguous open space.

The aggregate area includes various conservation-owned properties, municipal water district lands and large, privately-owned parcels, all adjacent to the Ipswich River and two miles of the abandoned Salem-Lowell Rail Line.

"The whole area has such potential with a lot of stakeholders and landowners involved, so this 'Vision' plan will bring all of them to the table so we can take this natural resource to the public," Cademartori said.

"Our town is truly grateful for this opportunity to work collaboratively with the towns of Middleton and North Reading and the City of Peabody to preserve this vast area of undeveloped forest," said Lynnfield Town Administrator Robert Dolan. "Our four communities, and clearly the larger region, increasingly depend on these open spaces to safeguard our natural resources and strengthen our climate resiliency. This grant award marks a tremendous step in advancing those goals."

The MAPC, Essex County Greenbelt, the Lynnfield Center Water District, Ipswich River Watershed Association and other critical regional stakeholders have long expressed interest in the preservation of this area.

The project has come into focus with the recent activity surrounding the pending private sale of 20 acres of forested land in Lynnfield, known as Richardson Green, to developer Angus Bruce, who has proposed a 16-home development. The property is one of the last unprotected parcels in Lynnfield, and a possible “keystone” to this larger area.

"Richardson Green is so important to this plan as with it we have access from Main Street," Cademartori said, adding she expects the proposed purchase by the town to be on the warrant for the October town meeting.

The town has a right of first refusal on the land at a price tag of \$2.7 million, or it can assign that right to a nonprofit organization, such as Essex County Greenbelt. Should the town choose to do neither, the land — located between Sagamore Golf Course, Ipswich River and the town’s water district wellfields — will proceed to sale for the development of housing.

In January 2021, Selectman Phil Crawford said that given current circumstances, the town was not looking to spend such a hefty sum of money on the parcel despite having a \$200,000 commitment from the Conservation Commission. Allowing the land to proceed to sale with Bruce, however, is also not ideal.

“Nobody really wants the development,” said Crawford, referring to Bruce’s plans. “The town doesn’t need 16 more homes when there’s already a school-capacity issue.”

Since then, the town has obtained a \$1.6 million grant, bringing the town’s total funds available to purchase the property to approximately \$1.8 million, Crawford said.