

Tips for Townspeople Interested in Creating a Town Forest

Getting Started

1. **Get out there.** Meet people by attending regional and state conservation workshops and gatherings. Call your local land trust. Be open-minded and just see where conversations and ideas lead you.
2. **Benefits.** What are the ways in which your town would benefit from a town-owned forest? Don't dwell on size or "structure" yet. Just think about how your town would be better with a town forest—its first or perhaps an additional one.
3. **Location.** Where would the best location be for this forest? Do pro's and con's on one or more sites. Dream...don't get stuck in "they'll never conserve/sell their land."
4. **Input.** Casually bounce your ideas off of other townspeople. What are their thoughts and dreams: brainstorm, brainstorm, brainstorm. Touch base with local organizations or groups that might benefit or have ideas (e.g., bird watchers, hikers, foresters, loggers, local historians).
5. **Leverage.** Has anyone else had a similar idea before? Dig around the internet, town office, or library for old reports like Master Plans or Natural Resources surveys. Why reinvent the wheel? Maybe you just need to make it spin!
6. **Negatives.** What are the down-sides to such a forest? Really think about this, and be upfront about it later. Will there be a loss of local tax revenue? If so, how much, and what will it mean for the residents? Often, with a few extra calculations, you'll discover even the worst-case scenario isn't that bad. But hang a lantern it yourself—never look like you're hiding anything.

Gathering Local Support

1. **A paper and a map.** Put something down on paper and pass it around. Also, create a nice big map that can be taped to a flip chart. The goal here is to illicit feedback. Start with those you think will be your core supporters. Then branch out to other key influencers, maybe on a more formal basis, such as your town's Conservation Commission or Planning Commission. Then next to your elected governing officials, such as your town council or Selectboard. And don't forget your state representative and senator. Keep going; the more input and connections you make, the better. Each time you hear something you like, put it in there. Refine your draft. (And keep track of all the people you meet. You'll want to keep them updated and ask for their formal support later.)
2. **Gain a little publicity—early.** Publicity is a great way to generate more feedback, pull in supporters you didn't know were out there, and plant the seeds of the town forest idea so it doesn't come as a surprise later on. You want encouraging applause, not raised eyebrows. Do you have a local paper or community newsletter? If you think you have enough for them to write a story, meet with the editor or a reporter (this is also a great first step in developing a relationship with them—you'll need them more later, too). If the town forest concept needs more input and refinement, be part of someone else's story (e.g., have a table at an event or make a presentation).

Making It Happen

1. **Get people out on the land!** Presentations and conversations certainly are critical in making the new town forest happen. But let the land speak, too.
2. **Secure great partners**, such as your local land trust. They'll help you formulate a strategy which, inevitably, will include the all-important funding piece.
3. **Cool brochure.** Publish a dazzling "brochure." This means it's inviting, professional, comprehensive. Use maps, photos, testimonials. List supporters. Provide contact information. Let readers know how they can support the project.
4. **Cheerfully repeat your message.** Over and over, repeat the goals, purpose, and benefits of the town forest with townspeople and others as you distribute your brochure. Never assume that someone remembers all the points you previously discussed with them. They're busy, have a lot on their mind, and may have had different conversations with others since they last spoke with you. It's on top of your mind, but probably not theirs.
5. **Seek formal voter approval.** Perhaps start with a resolution your town council can pass at a meeting (e.g., Resolved: The Selectboard of the Town of West Fairlee supports the effort to create a West Fairlee Community Forest in the eastern portion of town in the Brushwood area."). Then, if you have an annual town meeting, see if you can put a non-binding resolution for residents to actually vote on. Don't ask for funding right off the bat. That may come later...again, funding is something your land trust partner can help you strategize.
6. **Think roller-coaster, and stay positive!** There will be ups. Downs. Lots more ups. And then a few more downs. But the initiative, to be successful, must have a leader who remains positive and optimistic at all times.

And the most important tip of all...

Celebrate your "ups"! Don't wait until the end or "when such-and-such wrapped up." You and your team—volunteers, land trust partner, landowners, local officials—deserve to feel good about your accomplishments all along the way. And it's integral in keeping up the momentum and building community.