

LOCAL

## **‘A great thing for the town’: Hampton Falls' Clay Brook Forest protected forever**

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**HAMPTON FALLS** — Thirty-two acres of land along the Taylor River are preserved forever for local enjoyment now that the Clay Brook Forest conservation easement is in place.

A project of the town's Conservation Commission since 2018, the conservation easement excludes the land from development. It became a reality when more than \$700,000 was raised through a number of sources so the Society of Protection of New Hampshire Forests could purchase the Clay Brook Forest easement on May 27 from the land's owners, Hampton Falls' Toppan Lane residents James and Katherine Kibler.

"This project would not have happened without James and his wife, Kate," said Hampton Falls Conservation Commission member Shawn Hanson. "One really good thing about this easement is that it allows people access to the land for passive recreation."

"Land conservation is very important to us," James Kibler said. "This property is a wonderful asset to the local community, offering residents an established trail system used for hiking, snowshoeing, nature observation, and dog walking... It would be a shame to see it developed."

Known historically as the "Toppan's Ox Pasture," the 32 acres are located off Old Stage Road and includes a quarter-mile frontage on the Taylor River. Clay Brook, a tributary of the Taylor River, runs through the property with a 1,000 feet of frontage. Home to a multitude of indigenous wildlife, what is now known as Clay Brook Forest is downstream from the town of Hampton Falls' 73-acre Taylor River Headwaters Conservation Complex and abuts the Rockingham Conservation District's 163-acre Hurd Farm conservation easement.

Hanson said, as well as removing the land from development potential and preserving it for local enjoyment, the parcel's location provides access to the other conservation lands.

According to Jack Savage, president of the Forest Society, the easement is a very strategic acquisition, since it's in a part of New Hampshire that's highly developed. It protects wetlands that are part of one of the largest freshwater wetland complexes in the Seacoast, and preserves the land for community use.

A conservation easement is a perpetual commitment on the land owners part to keep the land undeveloped, protect wildlife habitat, and ensures the land is open to the public for passive recreation, according to the Forest Society. The Kiblers still own the land and may use it to practice agriculture and forestry.

According to Hanson, the acreage, known by many as the Toppan Lane property, had been listed for sale years ago by its previous owners for \$1.2 million, with an unofficial proposal for a subdivision for five to eight homes. The Conservation Commission wanted to buy the land outright, Hanson said, considering it important to preserve open space and maintain Hampton Falls' rural character. That couldn't happen, he said, because the land's appraised value didn't support the asking price.

Enter the Kiblers, who live abutting the property, Hanson said. The couple realized the land's potential for development, but also its local value for preservation.

According to the Forest Society, the Kiblers "took a leap of faith and purchased the property," while working with authorities to permanently preserve the property through selling the conservation easement. A fundraising mechanism was undertaken, ultimately allowing the Forest Society, with the help of Hampton Falls, to purchase the conservation easement from the Kiblers this week.

The Forest Society may own the easement, according to Selectman Lou Gargiulo, but Hampton Falls will benefit from it forever.

Selectmen officially signed on to the 50-page conservation easement document at their May 19 meeting, where James Kibler was openly delighted. He expressed his gratitude to everyone involved, the selectmen, Conservation Commission, Town Administrator Lori Ruest, the Forest Society, the state and private funding sources, as well as the private donors who contributed to the cause.

"I've always thought this was a great thing for the town," Kibler told selectmen. "I'm glad you think so, too."

Select Board Chairman Lou Gargiulo thanked the Kiblers on behalf of the town. In an interview following the meeting, Gargiulo said the easement preserves this important piece

of land in perpetuity for the enjoyment of residents, as well as its value to the environment and ecosystem.

According to the Forest Society, the purchase of the conservation easement is funded by contributions from the town of Hampton Falls and its Conservation Commission totaling \$376,365, as well as from grants from the New Hampshire Land and Community Heritage Investment Program (\$100,000), the state Department of Environmental Services' Aquatic Resource Mitigation Fund Program (\$40,000), Great Bay Resource Protection Partnership (\$10,000), as well as private foundations including the VF Foundation and the Fuller Foundation. Community outreach led by the Friends of Clay Brook Forest, also resulted in about 100 individuals contributing to the effort.

Established in 1901, the Forest Society is a private, nonprofit land trust holding 750 conservation easements protecting 135,000-plus acres, as well as owning 191 forest reservations with more than 57,000 acres in 105 New Hampshire communities.