

## Meeting Summary #3

December 17<sup>th</sup> – Baxter State Park Headquarters, Millinocket

Task Force members unable to attend include: George Smith, Brian Wentzell participated for Walter Graff, Terry Hill participated for Bob Meyers, Craig Hill participated for Ken Conaster, and Dave Getchell, Sr. participated for Rachel Nixon.

**Commissioner McGowan** began the meeting welcoming the Task Force members and the public in attendance. He reiterated the charge to the group as put forth in the Executive Order creating the Task Force and reviewed the ground rules.

**Carolann Ouellette** (Department of Economic and Community Development) presented to the group information on Maine travel and tourism. The information she provided and additional information she was asked for is available on the Millinocket meeting page of the task force website that is a link on the Department of Conservation website - <http://www.state.me.us/doc/>.

**Carolann** provided brief background to the data she presented, that it is big picture data provided by Longwoods, the research firm contracted by DECD. Some of the data is focused on types of marketable trips, i.e. specific activities such as snowmobiling, hunting, birdwatching, etc. There is not as much information on multi-activity or self planned trips.

Tourism is Maine's single largest industry and is 15% of the gross state product.

Maine follows trends of nationally growing activities.

**Carolann** shared data highlights including snowmobiling data from 1997, 95 % of snowmobile trails are believed to be located on private land, and the whitewater rafting industry serves 80,000 people and generates \$18 million per year in Maine.

**Kevin Slater** pointed out that guided trips are not included in the data Carolann presented and that some figures should be increased.

**Carolann** agreed and mentioned that the Office of Tourism and UMO are working on creating research center to provide more accurate and comprehensive data.

**John Simko** requested information on Fermata (Texas based nature tourism consulting firm that is working on a pilot project in Maine) A web link for Fermata is available on the Millinocket meeting page of the task force website.

**David Ledew** (Maine Revenue Service) then gave a presentation on property tax law and the three "current use" programs – Tree Growth, Farmland, and Open Space. An overview and the handed out materials of David's presentation are available on the Millinocket meeting page of the task force website.

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**David** began by providing an overview of the process for setting property taxes, which he roughly described as Maine towns setting their town budget and then the town assessor figuring out how to distribute the tax burden by properties' values. He described it as being expenditure and value driven.

Tree Growth in particular has grown significantly since the program was first started – currently, approximately 3.6 million acres in Maine municipalities are enrolled.

11 million acres are enrolled in a special use program statewide.

Every single parcel in Tree Growth has a forest management and harvest plan and 10 acres must be forested.

**David** responded to Peter Pray's question about where Tree Growth revenues are directed, saying no property tax revenue goes to the General Fund it all goes back to the municipalities and to pay for local service in the unorganized territories.

The point was made that land in Tree Growth typically, does not demand expensive municipal services.

**John Simko** introduced a point that land in tree growth does have underlying costs to a town, for example land enrolled in Tree Growth would likely not have student associated with it so a town's school system would lose out on funding based on numbers of students.

**David** noted that the statewide average mil rate is 15, other examples include Mexico 28, Harpswell 7.5, Garfield Plantation 2.5.

Farmland program has 175,000 acres enrolled – must have a 5 acre minimum and earn \$2,000 gross income annually from the sale of farm related products.

Open space program can be summarized as a “contract” or “promise” between the town and landowner not to develop the land – 15,000 acre maximum.

**Ray Wotten** pointed out that land bank farm land is a federal program.

**John Cashwell** raised a point about the Commercial Forestry Excise Tax acreage numbers and that they should be raised.

**John Simko** suggested that under Open Space the market value is exceeding the penalty causing little disincentive for withdrawal.

**David Ledew** countered that Maine Revenue Service has assessed hundreds of thousands of dollars in penalties.

**John Simko** asked what the impact would be on Tree Growth to add the 20% benefit that is currently found in Open Space.

**John Cashwell** cautioned that there can be unintended consequences from manipulating Tree Growth and that the program is very important to landowners. Also, landowners were forced into Tree Growth when the program was first started. Changing the program now would equal breaking a contract.

A task force member asked what percentage of Open Space land gets the 20% bonus?

**Kyle Stockwell** asked why there is a cap on the # of acres in open space?

**Gordon Gamble** asked about how set backs figure in to the equation of computing acreage.

**Jim LaCasce** (Dover-Foxcroft Tree Farmer) attended on behalf of Jon Olson of the ME Farm Bureau, and the bureau's 5,000 members who own 1.2 million acres. Jim talked about the perception that Maine used to have more land than people knew what to do with. However, pressure has increased, especially with technological improvements such as the bulldozer and the 4 wheel drive pickup truck. People can travel further, but also potentially do more damage.

**Jim** feels that snowmobilers and their clubs have done a good job working with landowners and policing themselves, but he is particularly concerned with ATVs. Mentioned that the Gov. has tried with the ATV task force to do something, but feels it may not be enough, quickly enough. He also cited legislation in NH that would call for roads to be left unplowed, concerned about the potential impact of mandating roads be used for recreation as opposed to kept open for moving wood.

**John Banks** (Penobscot Indian Nation) shared the tribal perspective on land and natural resource management. He talked about the different categories of tribal lands and their policies of open access (with some specific activity permits, and generally avoiding the use of gates, except during mud season) and multiple use management that includes wood harvesting and recreation. In addition he discussed the particulars of the Tribe's Trust Lands. On these lands the Tribe has its own fish and game laws and warden service. On the Fee Lands there are not special jurisdictional laws and taxes are paid to the State.

**David Getchell** (Georges River Land Trust) discussed his experiences as the land trust's trail advisor working with landowners to create the Georges Highland Path. Their trail program is eight years old and works with landowners who typically own 10 to 20 acres parcels. Approximately half the trail is on public land, the other half is on private land. Their agreements with landowners are voluntary, handshaking agreements relying heavily on education and personal contact, one individual represents the land trust to the landowner and they follow a program of sending the land trust materials to the landowner first and then following up with a phone call. They work solely on non-motorized access.

**Buzz Caverly** (Baxter State Park) then shared with the task force park use statistics, some trends they are experiencing, and methods for collecting the statistics. These included last years visitor use days were 119,000 and that the trend has been for declining use. Staff are working to determine the reasons for that trend and if it reflects statewide or national trends.

**John Cashwell** ventured that the trend echoes what North Maine Woods statistics have shown for declining use in recent years.

The agenda then turned to a sharing of ideas to encourage public access to private land.

**John Simko** shared his idea for Woods Road Access Program.

**Kevin Slater** suggested extending John's idea to trails, tradition carries, etc. as well as providing financial incentives for easements on right of ways and trails.

**Ralph Sarty** suggested pursuing flexible easements that would allow for a trail across land, but the landowner would have discretion in where the exact trail ran as long as one could get from point a to point b.

**John Cashwell** noted that flexible easements of this type are used in practice, but not yet codified.

**Bruce Kidman** talked about the need that he has seen to increase enforcement funding and he would like to see the cap on open space acreage increased.

**John Cashwell** countered that he is concerned what this would do to communities' mill rates.

**David Ledew** added that there is not a reimbursement for Open Space land, but Open Space valuations are higher than Tree Growth valuations so this would result in decreased mill rates for taxpayers.

**Commissioner McGowan** requested scenarios of what happens when parcels would switch programs or be taken out of the program.

**David Ledew** cited the 20-28% of residential property in Maine is seasonally used, highest in the country.

**John Cashwell** asked if there are statistics for the percentages of these second homes that are owned by Maine residents versus out of state owners.

**Jo Pierce** talked about SWOAM's unwavering opposition to any changes in the Tree Growth program.

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**Commissioner McGowan** suggested that the group be open to positive, "carrot" incentive ideas.

**A public attendee** suggested that the group consider the impact of the UT increasing in size as towns deorganize.

**Lenny Murphy** of Woodville a public attendee suggested looking at the impact of the real estate transfer tax would like any loopholes to be closed and suggested that a cap be placed on Maine land that is owned by outside interests, e.g. 55%.

The meeting was adjourned.