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To protect and conserve in Portsmouth

As development increases, Aquidneck Land Trust strikes a balance by targeting more open spaces to preserve

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Map shows layout and trails of Spruce Acres, which straddles Middletown and Portsmouth and is open to the public.



Posted Thursday, July 6, 2023 8:01 am

By Jim McGaw

PORTSMOUTH — At first glance, the **Aquidneck Land Trust** (<https://ailt.org>)'s (ALT) latest land acquisition doesn't look like much.

The 9.85-acre property on Hedly Street, purchased outright from JIC Capital LLC and located across from Maplewood Farm, is a wetland featuring red maples, an upland forest and meadow, and multiple tributaries that meander through into Bloody Brook, which eventually empties into Narragansett Bay. The public doesn't even have access at this point.

But like with every piece of property the nonprofit land trust targets, there was a good reason behind the acquisition, said Alex Chuman, the ALT's conservation director.

"We look at property all over the island and we have lot of different conservation values that we look at. We look at property we think may help improve our drinking water, or that is great farmland, or that it's great habitat property," he said, noting that ALT scores each property based on its watersheds, farmland soils, public access and other factors. "If it hits all those conservation values, that's a property we really want to go after."

In the case of the Hedly Street property, he said, "first and foremost it's habitat property. There's a small meadow area, lot of different wildlife on site. It's also near farmland that we've protected as well, and we like to create connected open spaces. Also, in the future we may look at some sort of public access, whether it be a trail or passive park."

If it seems like ALT has been particularly active on this side of Aquidneck Island over the past few years, you're not imaging it. So far, the land trust has conserved, with the help of local landowners, sponsors, the Town of Portsmouth and other agencies, 1,629 acres across 36 properties in Portsmouth.

"That's the most out of all three towns," said Chuman, noting there have been more opportunities to conserve land in Portsmouth than elsewhere on the island. In Middletown, ALT has protected 918 acres on 41 properties, and in Newport 255 acres on 24 properties.

"With the uptick in development, we've really tried to keep up our land conservation efforts. Locally, it's definitely an urgent situation right now," he said. "There are certainly a lot of great places to develop but there are also a lot of great open spaces that aren't protected that we've been trying to work on."

Trail extended

One of ALT's proudest achievements is the **Sakonnet Greenway Trail** (<https://aitl.org/aquidneck-land-trust-trails-maps/sakonnet-greenway/>) (SGT), the longest contiguous nature trail on Aquidneck Island which runs through Portsmouth and Middletown. It's still a work in progress, as ALT is always looking for ways to extend or improve the trail for the public.

A few years ago the land trust worked with a few private landowners to create a 7.5-acre parcel off Glen Farm Road, just north of town-owned Glen Farm Stables. Part of the deal included an agreement that ALT could put a 0.4-mile loop trail around the perimeter called the Glen Pasture Trail.

"That is officially open, but what we're working on with the Town of Portsmouth is to connect that loop to that head of the Sakonnet Greenway Trail on Linden Lane. When we do that, that will be an additional mile on the Sakonnet Greenway Trail," said Chuman.

Last month the Portsmouth Town Council unanimously approved ALT's request to build a 0.6-mile trail through town-owned Glen Farm to connect Glen Pasture Trail to the SGT. The council directed town staff to work with ALT on a 10-year easement to allow the trusty to build and maintain the trail. There's still some work to be done and some fund-raising around construction, but Chuman said ALT hopes to have it open by next year.

"If you walk from Glen Park, you can really walk all the way to Newport Vineyards off-road," said Chuman. "The Greenway Trail to me is one of the Land Trust's most amazing accomplishments, just because of the number of landowners we had to work with to piece that system together."

Other properties

The properties ALT has preserved that are open to the public run the gamut from a former tree farm (Spruce Acres Farm) to an old-growth beech forest (**Oakland Forest & Meadow Trail** (<https://aitl.org/aquidneck-land-trust-trails-maps/oakland-forest-meadow/>)).

Spruce Acres (<https://aitl.org/aquidneck-land-trust-trails-maps/spruce-acres-farm/>), which straddles Portsmouth and Middletown on the west side of East Main Road, was protected in 2017 but has seen continual changes since then in order to improve visitors' experience.

"The pavilion went up last year, in honor of our former executive director (Charles B. Allott retired at the end of 2022) and a new compostable toilet was installed as well. It's a lot more accessible," said Leah Kossak, ALT's marketing and engagement director, who graduated from Portsmouth High School in 2012.

Chuman said **Little Creek Preserve** (<https://aitl.org/aquidneck-land-trust-trails-maps/little-creek-preserve-trail/>), a 15.3-acre property that also connects to the Sakonnet Greenway, is special from a wildlife perspective. "You have so many habitats in such a small area," he said.

Its history is also interesting. "This property was on the market and we saw it and reached out, and the landowner who lives nearby was thrilled we wanted to work on it. He still helps me maintain the property. Any time we work with somebody who really cares about the land is great," Chuman said.

Promoting the properties

But how does ALT educate the public about the existence of these magnificent properties and get them to come out?

"We do a lot of outreach," said Kossak, noting that ALT hosts many community events such as a botanist program or birding talks, to get a dialogue going with local residents. "We recently worked with GrowSmartRI to host three different workshops on transportation, housing, and conservation in each town, which was open and free to the public," she said.

Donations and volunteers are always needed.

"We have plenty of volunteer opportunities. You can fill out a form on our website, which puts you in our database," Chuman said. "Working on Aquidneck Island in particular is interesting, because it's only a certain amount of time before the island is totally built out, so the mission is really important. We appreciate everyone's support, whatever that may be."

For more information, visit <https://aitl.org> (<https://aitl.org>).

Keywords

ALT, Aquidneck Land Trust, Sakonnet Greenway