

REPORT ON POTENTIAL FUTURE USES OF THE FORMER TALC MILL PROPERTY

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PURCHASE OF THE PROPERTY BY THE MUNICIPALITY

The former Talc Mill property, jointly owned by the Town and the Village of Johnson, consists of approximately 195 acres of land and several buildings. Until 1995, a part of the property served as an industrial site for the Luzenac Corporation's talc-processing operations. The Town and Village of Johnson jointly purchased the property in two phases. The first purchase of about 15 acres, two large industrial buildings and an office building occurred in 1996. The remaining 180 acres and related physical infrastructure were acquired in 2003.

Special Town and Village meetings were held in 1995 and 2003 to seek voters' approval to purchase the property. Reasons for purchasing the property included the availability of buildings that would satisfy the need for space by the Village Water & Light and the Town Highway Departments, and the need for a new public water source and land to develop the water source. Parts of the property not needed for municipal purposes would be sold in order to bring the property back on tax rolls. Intentions to sell any portion of the property would be presented to voters first.

The Selectboard and the Trustees asked the Planning Commission to study potential and desirable uses of the property and prepare a report with findings. The report and recommendations for next steps follow.

GENERAL PROPERTY DESCRIPTION

The Lamoille River, from approximately the end of Railroad Street and along Lendway Lane, defines the northern border of the property. From the river, the property extends southward and connects to Upper French Hill Road. The property is predominantly forested and located on slopes ranging from 2-60%. The only flat and non-wooded portions of the property are located along the Lamoille River. Here, a complex of municipal buildings located at the end of Railroad Street occupies about 15 acres of land and is connected to water, sewer and electricity. Halfway down Lendway Lane, there are approximately 25 acres of cleared and undeveloped land. Most suggestions for further development of the former Talc Mill property offered to date tend to focus on this 25-acre portion of the property.

Access to the Property

The property is accessible from Railroad Street, Railroad Street's extension Lendway Lane and Upper French Hill Road. These roads either end at the property border or circle around portions the property. No maintained municipal highway currently intersects the property.

Railroad Street

Railroad Street is a busy class II highway that connects the property to Route 15. A lumberyard, located towards the village side of Railroad Street, generates some large truck traffic along this otherwise predominantly residential neighborhood. Railroad Street ends at the entry to the former Talc Mill industrial complex that is now used for

municipal purposes. Within the municipal complex, smaller roads provide connections among the municipal buildings.

Lendway Lane

Lendway Lane is a class III road that runs along the northern border of the property and connects riverside portions of the property. Lendway Lane is not a through road and ends at a private residence located about a mile down the road. In 1999, a survey of the road was conducted for a property adjacent to the former Talc Mill property that indicated that an officially laid out town highway existed beyond the limits of Lendway Lane and, winding along Lamoille, connected all the way to current Route 15. This town highway, highway #44, was laid out in 1827. The current status of the highway is not clear but initial research by the Johnson Ancient Roads Committee suggested that, when the Lamoille Valley Railroad was laid out in 1875-76, the Town might have passed title of its right-of-way to sections of road #44 to the railroad company. Further research to determine the status of the road might be necessary.

Upper French Hill Road

Upper French Hill Road is a class III road that defines the eastern border of the property. On one end, the road connects to Railroad Street, on the other end the road leads to Morristown Corners.

Interior Connections

Interior connections throughout the property are represented by a system of logging roads that, according to a recent study completed by the Conservation Commission, is unusable due to various stages of disrepair. The only well maintained trail that intersects the property is the trail used by the Vermont Association of Snow Travellers. This trail connects to the Lamoille Valley Railroad which is in the process of being converted to a four-season recreational path.

Current Uses of the Property

At present, the property is predominantly used for municipal and recreation purposes.

Municipal functions

Municipal functions are concentrated in the municipal complex located in proximity to the entrance to the property from Railroad Street. A two-story office building houses the office of the Public Works Superintendent, Boy Scouts meeting room, storage space for youth sports equipment, and a Food Shelf. Two large industrial buildings are home to the Village Electric, the Village Water & Light and the Town Highway Departments. The third large building is used for cold storage and smoke training by the Fire Department. The municipality also uses the property for storage of road salt and sand. According to the Municipal Administrator, all buildings are well utilized and fulfil purposes outlined at the outset of the property purchase.

Following the purchase of the property, the Village of Johnson conducted a series of drillings to determine the potential of the site to serve as a water source supplying the

municipal water distribution system. The results indicated that the property was not suitable for this purpose.

Recreation functions

Snowmobiling is the prevailing recreational use on the property. Snowmobilers use the VAST trail that intersects the forested part of the property and connects to the former Lamoille Valley Railroad trail. Occasionally, the rail trail is used by walkers, joggers, skiers and snowshoers.

LAMOILLE VALLEY RAIL TRAIL

The Lamoille Valley Rail Trail (LVRT) will be a 92 mile-long four-season, multipurpose recreational trail that will traverse an east west route from St. Johnsbury to Swanton. The ultimate responsibility for the conversion of the old rail bed into the recreational path is born by the Vermont Association of Snow Travellers (VAST) that leases the rail bed from the State of Vermont. In April 2008, VAST completed a comprehensive engineering assessment of the trail. The purpose of the engineering assessment was to discover, document and evaluate existing condition of the trail and the extent of repairs that will be needed to build the trail. The assessment also provides an estimate of construction cost, and process and timing of trail construction.

Approximately 0.6 miles of the future trail intersects the municipal property. To make this portion of the trail functional, VTrans, in collaboration with the municipality, will need to address a right-of-way issue that, according to the assessment report is a “critical showstopper” which, unless corrected, will prevent the trail from being built in this area. The assessment identifies that the railroad right-of-way has been compromised in the area of the Town Garage and a portion of the Town Garage is in the railroad right-of-way. The assessment also states that the trail could still be built on the edge of the right-of-way. (Note: The LVRT right-of-way is 66 feet wide. The trail will be a minimum of ten feet wide with two foot shoulders on each side). In communication that dates back to 2003, the Town suggested to the Agency of Transportation to alter the location for the rail trail by swapping right-of-ways between the railroad and Lendway Lane. To date, no feedback has been provided to that suggestion.

STUDIES OF THE PROPERTY TO DATE

In 2004, the Johnson Planning Commission sponsored the Recreation Facilities Plan that described the recreation potential of the property and suggested multiple recreational uses. In 2006, the Conservation Commission conducted a Natural Resources Inventory of the property and generated recommendations for future uses. In 2007, the Conservation Commission completed a Natural Resource Management Plan for the property. Also in 2007, the Town of Johnson completed a preliminary environmental assessment and utility expansion feasibility study of a 25-acre “Lower Talc Mill” portion of the property.

Recreation Facilities Plan – Key Points and Recommendations

The location of the former Talc Mill property as well as recreational resources that already exist in the proximity of the property are two factors that, according to the Recreation Facilities Plan, present obvious advantages for further recreational development of the property into a multiuse recreation campus. Among the existing recreational resources adjacent to the property are the Lamoille River, the Long Trail and the Old Mill Park athletic fields. A prime resource that will enhance the recreational use of the property in years to come is the former Lamoille Valley Railroad that will be converted into a four-season, multipurpose recreational path. When the rail trail becomes fully functional, the municipal property can become the trail users' gateway to Johnson. Therefore, according to the Plan, the municipality would be wise to consider the development of a welcome center that will encourage rail trail users to visit historic Johnson Village and use the services of its business district.

Other new amenities that would increase the recreational value of the property could include a basketball court or a skate park at the cement slab located at the Lower Talc Mill parcel; use of the municipal building located north of Lendway Lane for bicycle, canoe and kayak rental and storage for snowmobilers' maintenance equipment; cross country ski trails; a campground; an outdoor skating rink; and a bridge over the Lamoille connecting the property to the River Park. Excerpts from the Recreation Facilities Plan are attached.

Natural Resource Management Plan – Key Points and Recommendations

The majority of the Former Talc Mill Property is forested and is home to abundant wildlife. According to the Natural Resources Management Plan, desirable uses of the Town Forest could include timber stand improvement; maintenance and enhancement of forest interior wildlife habitat; and educational programs to promote natural and cultural history of the property. The study also recognizes the high recreational potential of the property. The Plan divides the property into four management units and presents management recommendations for each unit. Excerpts from the Plan are attached.

Lower Talc Mill Environmental Assessment and Utility Extension Feasibility Study

The study was conducted on a 25-acre portion of the property in the vicinity of the concrete slab. The study focused on a preliminary environmental assessment of the property, initial wetland and floodplain analyses, and calculation of cost of extending water and sewer utilities to the parcel. The narrative of the study is attached. Following is a brief summary of conclusions:

1. The preliminary environmental assessment of the property revealed that the site had no "recognized environmental condition" and further environmental evaluation was not necessary.
2. Review of the Vermont Significant Wetland Inventory showed the presence of a wetland complex on the central portion of the property. During the site inspection however, no visually obvious signs or evidence of wetland vegetation were noted. As the next step, it was recommended to request the State Wetland specialist to perform wetland status verification. (Note: The site visit was performed on May 7, 2008 and initial indications are that development of the site could be

- accomplished by delineating and protecting the wetland fringe around the disturbed areas of the site).
3. Review of site-specific elevation data confirmed that the majority of the parcel is in the 100-year flood plain. The study also indicated that the development in the 100-year flood plain would be possible within the floodway fringe, which, according to the study, covers a substantial part of the Lower Talc Mill parcel.
 4. Three options for the extension of water and sewer utilities were explored: along former railroad bed; along the access road; and beneath the Lamoille River. The study determined the installation of the utility lines along the former Lamoille Valley Railway as the most economically feasible option. The estimated cost for the preferred option was \$567,250.

PUBLIC INPUT: DEVELOPMENT SCENARIOS FOR CONSIDERATION

Based upon their review of available studies, the Johnson Planning Commission held two meetings to obtain public input on desirable uses of the property. To guide the discussion, the Planning Commission proposed the following development scenarios:

Scenario 1:

Develop the property as a multi-purpose recreational campus serving both local and visiting recreationists.

Rationale:

This scenario envisions the property as the hub of recreation in Johnson. As such, the hub will provide recreational opportunities for multiple generations in and outside the community. Full utilization of recreational resources on the property and in its surroundings will create a vibrant center of recreation that will enhance economic and tourism opportunities, and help establish Johnson as a destination point. This scenario envisions Long Trail hikers connecting through the property to the Village Center; Rail Trail bikers, walkers and snowmobilers using welcome and rest facilities to get oriented in Johnson and visit downtown, canoists accessing the Lamoille River from the property and community recreating at the Old Mill Park.

Scenario 2:

Enhance natural resources and wildlife habitat.

Rationale:

The majority of the Former Talc Mill Property is forest-covered and is home to abundant wildlife. The municipality can choose to act as an active steward of its Town Forest and support activities that enhance appreciation of natural and cultural resources on the property. According to the Natural Resources Management Plan developed by the Conservation Commission, desirable uses of the Town Forest could include timber stand improvement to increase potential for future saw timber; maintenance and enhancement of forest interior wildlife habitat; and educational programs to promote the natural and cultural history of the property.

Scenario 3:

Develop the Lower Talc Mill parcel for commercial/light industrial uses

Rationale:

The Town and the Village purchased the property to meet their need for additional municipal buildings to house municipal services as well as to investigate the development of a new public water source. Having met these purposes, the elected boards are looking for ways of bringing portions of the property back on the tax rolls. Developing the property for light-industrial/commercial use would achieve that goal. Light industrial development would also diversify Johnson’s economy and create more local jobs.

Scenario 4:

Designate parts of the property for housing development.

Rationale:

Johnson lacks diversified housing opportunities. The 2006-2010 Town Plan supports residential development that will enable residents of different ages to live in a broad variety of housing types based on their preferences and what they can afford. According to the Plan, Johnson has a specific interest in increasing the proportion of single-family houses to correct the existing imbalance in Johnson. In Johnson, the proportion of one-unit buildings is notably lower than in the County (49.3% in Johnson versus 70.5% in the County).

PUBLIC RESPONSE: OPINION SUMMARY

Response from the public meeting indicated that each development scenario presented by the Planning Commission had support from some of the participants, and some participants thought that different uses could harmoniously coexist on the property. Comprehensive notes documenting public input are attached. Some patterned recommendations that emerged from the public meetings were:

Light industry: Some participants felt that the property was Johnson’s best chance to develop a light industrial site. These participants stressed that it was very important to get property back on tax rolls and that Johnson needed proposals for development that would generate revenue for the community. Lighter industry that would not be cost prohibitive and would meet the goal of improving the tax base would be an appropriate use of the property.

Recreation: Multi-recreational uses of the property were encouraged. The most frequent comments regarding recreational enhancements of the property concerned the development of amenities for future Rail Trail users. It was stated that a welcome center for visitors was highly desirable. Parking, signage, informational kiosks and rest facilities should be provided. Canoists advocated for a new boating and fishing access to the Lamoille. Several participants said that lodging for Rail Trail visitors, Long Trail hikers and motorized recreationists would be a good addition to Johnson’s recreation amenities.

Housing: It was suggested that flatter portions of the property along the southern border with access from Upper French Hill Road might be the most feasible place for residential development. Three, perhaps four nice building lots could be available there.

Natural resource enhancement: To respect wildlife and the natural environment, strategies outlined in the Natural Resource Management Plan prepared by the Conservation Commission should be considered.

Access: Several people stated that any future development of the former Talc Mill Property needed to include a discussion about alternative access to the property. Further increase of motorized traffic along Railroad Street and associated impacts on the residential neighborhood were of concern. Use of Railroad Street as a travel connection between the Rail Trail and the Village Center was not safe for bikers. A biker and pedestrian friendly pathway away from Railroad Street should be explored.

RECOMMENDED NEXT STEPS

Based on the review of existing studies of the property and input received through the public meetings, the Planning Commission offers the following suggestions for next steps.

1. Complete wetland and floodplain status research of the Lower Talc Mill parcel in order to understand the viability of development solutions on this parcel. To verify the wetland status, begin by requesting a site inspection by a state biologist. Contact: Shannon Morrison, District Wetlands Ecologist, Phone: 802-241-3762. (Note: The site visit has been performed on May 7, 2008.) Regarding the floodplain status, request a site inspection and verification of base flood elevation data by state specialist. Initial contact has been made with Rebecca Pfeiffer, Phone: 802-241-4597.
2. Conduct on site soil investigation to determine suitability for residential use. (Note: A preliminary review of soils on southern portions of the property that were recommended for residential development at a public meeting has shown that soils here are three variations of Lyman-Tunbridge fine sandy loams. These soils are generally classified as rocky to very rocky with slope, the depth to bedrock and the areas of exposed rock making these soils limiting for most types of community development).
3. Research alternative access to the property. This should include research of old Town Highway #44 that, according to a survey completed by Shire Town in 1999, was laid out to connect Railroad Street with Route 15 via the former Talc Mill Property. The municipality should also encourage efforts to identify a walking/biking connection to the Village Center away from Railroad Street.
4. Establish a citizen committee that will advise the Selectboard and the Trustees on the development of trailhead facilities for future Rail Trail Users and the creation of pathways between the property and the downtown business district. The Lamoille Valley Rail Trail engineering assessment report completed in April 2008 estimates the construction cost of the trail at \$6.79 million. This cost does not

include any funding for trailhead development. The Vermont Association of Snow Travelers has made it clear that initiatives from municipalities for the development of trailhead facilities are highly encouraged.

5. Sale of the property to a private party should be accompanied by the municipality's right to retain oversight over proposed future uses of the property or any portion thereof. If the costs of determining the suitability of the site for development (including the initial purchase price and the cost of holding the parcel over time) are being borne by the municipality, then the municipality should be able to and expect to maintain some control over any subsequent private development of the site.
Public concerns over recreational and natural resource uses of the property could be addressed through the use of deed restrictions and covenants, and reservation of easements of right of way. For example, an easement could be granted for the existing snowmobile trail, development rights could be removed from the steepest slopes, and restrictions could be placed on deer wintering areas.
6. The Johnson Housing Needs Assessment and Market Study is expected to be completed by December 2008. This study should be used as a principal tool in evaluating the appropriateness of proposed residential projects in Johnson.
7. In course of the project, the Municipal Administrator and the Community & Economic Development Coordinator met with the director of the Lamoille Economic Development Corporation (LEDC) and communicated the municipality's interest in utilizing the property for economic development. Further discussions with the LEDC regarding economic development projects of interest and the LEDC's assistance with the identification of funds for the implementation of these projects are encouraged.
8. The Johnson Planning Commission would like to offer further assistance with identifying development scenarios that reflect findings of this study, including public opinion of the residents of Johnson, and that represent well balanced uses of the property.