



REPORT OF

**HIGGANUM COVE  
COMMITTEE**

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November 2000

## REPORT OF HIGGANUM COVE COMMITTEE

To: Town of Haddam, Board of Selectmen

From: Higganum Cove Committee

Date: November 1, 2000

Re: Recommendations of the Higganum Cove Committee

The Higganum Cove Committee respectfully submits this report documenting the Committee's work concerning the Higganum Cove. The Committee was appointed by the Board of Selectmen in early 2000 to identify and evaluate potential ownership, use and management issues for the Higganum Cove once the environmental remediation project for the Cove is complete. This report documents the Committee's conceptual model for ownership, use and management of the Cove. The members of the Committee are Timothy Brewer, Marge DeBold, Steven O'Brien, David Platt, Peter Smith, and Anthony Bondi (*ex officio*).

### I. Executive Summary

The Committee's recommendations for the ownership, use and management of the Higganum Cove are as follows:

1. Ownership. The Town of Haddam should own Higganum Cove. The State of Connecticut or the Haddam Land Trust, or both entities, should hold a conservation easement for the Cove ensuring that it is not developed.
2. Use. Higganum Cove should be open to the general public and be used for passive recreational, educational and scientific purposes. These uses should be designed to capitalize on the outstanding natural attributes of the Cove as a property encompassing Higganum Creek and abutting the Connecticut River. They also should be low impact - - necessitating only limited structural and other developments in this valuable natural area. For example, the Cove should be used for bird watching, fishing, hiking and nature study, and should be available for small boat (e.g. canoe and kayak) launching. The Cove also should be used by area school children for nature study and gardening, and by area high school students, boy and girl scouts, college students and scientists studying natural resource issues. To the extent possible, historical features of the Cove (e.g., old foundations, sluice ways, stone walls and barriers) should be preserved to memorialize the Cove's industrial past, and its importance to the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century economy of Haddam. A conceptual layout of these uses appears on an exhibit (Appendix B) to this report.

3. Management. Higganum Cove should be managed by a diverse management committee made of individuals with staggered two-year terms. The committee should include as representatives: the Haddam First Selectman (or his or her designee); a representative from the Haddam Wetlands or Conservation Commission; a representative from the Region 17 School District; a member of the Haddam Land Trust; a member of the Haddam Sportsman Club; and two residents-at-large from the Town of Haddam.

## II. Background

Higganum Cove comprises an approximately twelve-acre site downstream of the confluence of Candlewood Brook, Ponsett Brook, and Bible Rock Brook in Higganum. The merged streams – known as Higganum Creek – flow over natural waterfalls as well as man-made dam and sluice way features, and meander through the Cove before discharging into the Connecticut River. The Cove is home to significant fisheries resources, including a number of anadromous species that spawn in Higganum Creek. It also has abundant woody and herbaceous species of plants and trees, a variety of wildlife (including beaver), and a myriad of birds (songbirds, waterfowl, heron, American eagles). The Cove flows directly into the Connecticut River, one of only a dozen "American Heritage Rivers" in the United States. An illustration of the Cove in its present configuration appears as Appendix A to this report. This Appendix A also illustrates the existing site constraints (physical and regulatory) on development and use of the Higganum Cove.

While the Cove teems with a wide variety of fish, wildlife and plant species, it also bears the scars of its industrial past, in the form of environmental contamination. For over a century dating back into the 1800s, the Cove served a major role in Higganum's economy by housing industrial and manufacturing businesses of a number of types. The environmental contamination left behind – including PCBs, municipal solid waste, and asbestos problems – is a concern that is being addressed under the supervision of the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection ("DEP") and the federal Environmental Protection Agency. To date, almost half a million dollars of DEP monies have been spent to identify and characterize contamination in the Cove. Through these efforts, the DEP has determined that approximately \$2 million is necessary to complete the remediation of the Cove so that it may be opened for use. The DEP (e.g., the Bureau of Natural Resources and Bureau of Water Management), the Town of Haddam, the Haddam Land Trust, the Connecticut River Watershed Council, and concerned citizens and legislators are working hard to attempt to secure these monies from public funding sources of various kinds.

The current owner of the Cove has vanished. Notwithstanding the best efforts of the State of Connecticut (which would like to find the owner in order to hold him accountable for the cleanup costs for the Cove), this owner has not been located. For purposes of conducting the environmental investigations, the DEP has condemned legal access to the Cove. Unless the owner is located, the State of Connecticut intends to condemn the property in order to conduct the remediation activities necessary to restore

the Cove. This condemnation action likely will not take place until remediation funding for the Cove has been secured.

### III. Recommendations for Ownership, Use and Management of the Cove

In monthly meetings since early 2000, the Committee has toured the Cove, and spent considerable time identifying, discussing and evaluating a host of issues relating to the ultimate ownership, use and management of the Cove. During these discussions and activities, a number of key concepts and themes emerged, and ultimately were critical in leading the Committee to its recommendations. These concepts and themes are as follows:

1. Ownership, use and management are not separate issues, but rather are intricately related. In other words, none of these issues can be discussed in isolation. In particular, the ultimate use of the Cove is the dominant factor in determining the best way for the Cove to be owned and managed.
2. The Cove is a very special place from both an environmental and historical perspective. These values need to be preserved and enhanced to the maximum extent possible.
3. The Cove absolutely needs to be open to the public. Its location near the heart of Higganum on the banks of one of the nation's few American Heritage Rivers is one that needs to be capitalized on for the benefit of the residents of the State of Connecticut in general, and the residents of the Town of Haddam in particular.
4. To the extent possible, and consistent with other important goals, the Cove needs to rediscover its place as a part of the local economy of Higganum.
5. To a certain degree, more rather than fewer organizations should be involved in the Cove. Many different organizations are keenly interested in what the Cove has to offer as a multiple use resource. A management structure that enables these organizations to participate in an efficient manner will help to ensure wise, long-term decisions for the Cove, with broad and diverse interests taken into account.

#### A. Use of the Higganum Cove

Consistent with its mandate, the Committee identified and analyzed a host of different potential uses for the Cove. Literally no use was selected or ruled out without ample discussion. Uses considered for the Cove ranged from intense commercial development to "forever wild" uses.

In reviewing potential uses, the Committee considered the following factors:

1. Location. While the Cove is situated near the heart of Higganum Village, it clearly is “off the beaten path.” It cannot be seen from Route 154, the closest State highway. To get to the Cove, traffic must travel along small back roads and across a single lane bridge on Dublin Hill Road.
2. Cost. Capital and maintenance costs associated with the redevelopment and use of the Cove need to be carefully considered. To the extent possible and appropriate, the ultimate use also should be one for which limited or no difficult, costly, and time consuming permitting is required.
3. Neighborhood. Notwithstanding its industrial past and the nearby commercial area of Higganum, the Cove is located in a quiet residential zone. It is surrounded by residential properties and sensitive environmental areas.
4. Site development constraints. Despite the fact that the Cove is twelve acres in size, much of these twelve acres is either under water, wetland, or within the coastal floodplain. Of the “dry” land portions, a significant percentage is tidal wetland, lies within the wetlands buffer, or lies below the floodplain level. Other development constraints include steep slopes, bedrock outcroppings, highly variable topography, and a public right-of-way. These site development constraints are illustrated on Appendix A to this report.
5. Access. In addition to the issues posed by narrow Town roads and the single lane bridge, the access to the Cove itself is narrow. The access road follows an old Town road along steep banks and cliffs on the bank of Higganum Creek.
6. Parking. As indicated above, space is tight in the Cove. Availability of on-site parking for the ultimate use must be considered. In the Committee’s view, the Cove can support only approximately a dozen parking spaces without adversely impacting the natural attributes of the Cove. These parking limitations impose significant restrictions on the ultimate use of the Cove (e.g., limited parking likely would not support a significant commercial use).
7. Resources. As described above, the Cove has abundant natural resources of all kinds. Any use of the Cove must take these important resources into account. The ultimate use also should favor water dependent uses given the prime location of the Cove on Higganum Creek and the Connecticut River.
8. History. The industrial past of the property is evident from the structures and remnants present at the site. While many of these structures and remnants will be removed as part of the remediation activities, interesting, functional and historical structures and ruins should be retained to the maximum extent possible for historical, aesthetic and practical purposes.

9. Connection to Higganum. Higganum Village is going through a renaissance of sorts. To the extent possible, the use of the Cove should “fit in” with and contribute to redevelopment efforts underway in Higganum.
10. State constraints. The State of Connecticut will condemn the Cove, and spend considerable public monies cleaning it up. The DEP has indicated that under these circumstances, the DEP will require that the Cove be open to the public, and that it not be put to a use that will not result in environmental contamination.

The Committee’s consideration of the above-referenced factors lead us to conclude that the Cove should be dedicated to open space use by the general public. The Cove should be redeveloped with unobtrusive, non costly infrastructure to support this use. Redevelopment should be small scale, unobtrusive, and low maintenance as well. To the extent possible, existing amenities (*e.g.*, foundations, stone walls, etc.) should be salvaged and preserved to support this use.

Cove uses should emphasize low impact, passive recreational activities that do not require significant infrastructure or improvements. Typical uses should include bird watching, hiking on loop trails, small boat (*e.g.*, kayak, canoe and row boat) launching, and fishing.

The Cove also should be used for educational purposes. Schoolchildren should use the Cove as an outdoor classroom for nature study. These school children could plant and maintain gardens, explore the waterways and fisheries resources, conduct water quality monitoring and experiments, and study the variety of plant and animal species that inhabit the Cove. These learning activities will take place in this outstanding outdoor classroom that serves as a dynamic reminder of both the industrial past of Higganum, as well as the adverse environmental effects that industry can have on the environment.

Finally, area educators and scientists should be encouraged to use the Cove for experiments of diverse kinds. Students and professors from other area institutions (*e.g.*, Wesleyan University and Middlesex Community and Technical College) should also be encouraged to take advantage of the Cove. From water quality studies to silvicultural research to the study of fish and animal species, the Cove offers abundant opportunities to study nature and man's effects on nature.

The Committee has studied specific possible developments of the Cove for these recreational, educational and scientific purposes. Attached as Appendix B to this report is a conceptual illustration of how the Cove might be redeveloped to accommodate these uses. Proposed redevelopment includes a gravel-surface driveway with ten to twelve parking spaces. We recommend that a component of the existing industrial foundation be preserved and used as a viewing platform over the waterfall and fish spawning area. The property redevelopment plan also includes a small boat launching area, hiking trails, and areas for small indigenous gardens and horticultural plots.

The Committee notes that over time, the Cove could support other interesting and beneficial infrastructure and compatible uses to support and enhance the recommended uses. For example, given the Cove's fisheries resources, a fish viewing area for above and below water fish viewing would be an ideal amenity for the Cove. The DEP has already expressed enthusiasm for such a project. This type of project is highly recommended for the Cove as resources become available.

#### B. Ownership of the Higganum Cove

The Committee considered a range of potential ownership scenarios for the Cove. Each of these scenarios began with the premise that the State of Connecticut will own the Cove during the period that the environmental remediation work will be carried out. Once this work is complete, the State likely will seek to turn over ownership of the Cove to another entity. According to state officials, given the relatively small size of the Cove, long term state ownership of the Cove is unlikely.

As an initial matter, based on information provided by the DEP, it is the Committee's understanding that the State prefers -- or may actually be legally required -- to limit the entities to which it may turn over ownership to public entities (e.g., municipal) or private, not-for-profit organizations. This requirement would rule out private for-profit entities.

Even without this limitation, the Committee strongly believes that the Cove should not be owned by a private, for-profit organization. Given the recommended public use for the Cove, the Cove should be owned by either the Town of Haddam or an appropriate not-for-profit organization that can ensure that the Cove remains open to the public. Accordingly, the Committee recommends that the Cove be owned by the Town of Haddam. To ensure that the Cove remains forever in its predominately open space condition, the Committee also recommends that an appropriate conservation easement be placed on the property. This easement should be held by either the Haddam Land Trust or the DEP, or held jointly by both organizations.

As the owner of the Cove, the Town should be responsible for the development and long term maintenance costs of the Cove. The low impact developments recommended by the Committee should not require substantial capital expenditures for the Town, especially if use of on-site materials (e.g., granite rocks, wood, earthen materials) and available volunteer help is maximized. Given the recommended use and management scenario for the Cove, long term management costs should be minimal.

#### C. Management of the Higganum Cove

As is the case with ownership issues, the Committee believes that management of the Cove is dictated to a significant degree by the recommended use for the Cove. In this case, because the Cove should be used for a diverse array of open space, recreational and educational uses open to the public, the Cove should be managed by a management committee that reflects these uses and values.

Accordingly, the Committee recommends that the Town of Haddam set up a standing Higganum Cove committee to manage the Cove. The committee's responsibilities should include control of maintenance activities and costs and allocation of Cove resources among users of the Cove. This committee should have a diverse membership reflecting the multiple, non-conflicting uses of the Cove. From the Town of Haddam, we suggest that the committee include the First Selectman of Haddam (or his or her designee) and a member of the Conservation Commission or Wetlands Commission. Other members of the committee should include representatives from the Region 17 School District, Haddam Land Trust, the Haddam Historical Society, and the Haddam Sportsman's Club. The DEP also should be invited to sponsor a management committee representative, especially if the use of the Cove includes components (*e.g.*, fisheries viewing station, research facilities, etc.) in which the DEP plans to have a continuing involvement. Finally, the committee should include two members from the public at large who are residents of Haddam. The members of the committee probably should have staggered terms to encourage periodic turnover, but also foster some continuity of membership.

#### IV. Conclusion

The Committee unanimously supports the use, management and ownership recommendations set forth in this report, and asks for the support of the Town of Haddam Board of Selectman for this conceptual model. The Committee notes that its conclusions and recommendations are consistent with an independent proposal (prepared by the Haddam Land Trust with significant public input) and adopted by the Town of Haddam Board of Selectman in 1995. It is our collective hope that one day soon, the Higganum Cove will reassume its place as a focal point of the Town of Haddam and its environs – this time as one of the most important public, natural resource areas in the State of Connecticut.

#### Attachments:

Appendix A - Illustration Existing Site Constraints for Higganum Cove

Appendix B - Illustration of Conceptual Site Development for Higganum Cove

# HIGGANUM COVE EXISTING SITE CONSTRAINTS MAP

NOVEMBER 2000



## SYMBOL LEGEND

- Fieldstone Wall.....
- Existing Tree Canopy.....
- Wetlands Boundary.....  
(Approximate, from MacCall & Eddy, Fig. 4, 1999)
- Watercourse.....
- Property Line.....
- Existing Pavement.....
- Existing Gravel Road.....
- Lowlands.....
- Wetlands Buffer.....

## FEATURES LEGEND

1. Historic Mill Ruins
2. Pump House
3. Utility Structure
4. Production Well
5. Water Tower
6. Chemical Storage and Mixing Bldgs.
7. Remains of Fire Hose Shed
8. Stone Foundation Ruins
9. Trail Access
10. Freestone Brook
11. Waterfalls
12. Extens of Estuary (Tidal Limit)
13. Stone Retaining Wall
14. Gravel Creek Bank

## REGIONAL MAP



