

## December 2021- Project Update: Conservation of 224 acres on Al Harvey Road

**Background Information:** Situated in the northwest section of Stonington, the 224-acre property came on the market in the summer of 2020.

Based on requests for assistance to find a way to conserve the land from Town of Stonington First Selectman, Avalonia Land Conservancy, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) - [The Trust for Public Land](#) (TPL), a national non-profit conservation organization, worked to secure an option in late 2020 to purchase the property.



*Photo credit: Richard Freeda*

Since that time, TPL has been working on the many facets required to move forward with the purchase, including developing a funding strategy and working with partners on an outcome that puts the community and conservation at the center.

The natural resource values, surface water protection, public access and passive recreational opportunities offer an array of public benefits to Stonington and beyond. The areas along the streams and in the wetlands, along with a dense understory provides important nesting and cover for various wildlife and species, while Copsps Brook flows directly into Aquarion Water Company's drinking water reservoirs. Preserving forestland and wetlands is also important as communities, and the State, look to both mitigate and adapt to climate change impacts.

Tentatively, TPL and partners intend that Avalonia Land Conservancy (an accredited land trust) will own 120 acres for open space, and USFWS will own 102 acres as part of the Great Thicket National Wildlife Refuge. Trails traverse both properties, and both entities prioritize conservation and public access for residents and visitors alike. Appraisals are currently underway. Below are some of the relevant facts relating the acquisition and management of the properties.

1. The 224 forested acres on Al Harvey Road in Stonington are nested between several conservation areas and the land has been a conservation priority by both local government and land trusts.
2. The Town's Plan of Conservation and Development, showed 89% of survey respondents want more bicycle and walking trails and 79% want more open space and nature preserves. Based on this information and other factors, the Town of Stonington Board of Finance endorsed using up to \$300K from the dedicated open space fund for the purposes of conserving the property. The plan for the funds from the Town will be for the purchase of acquiring roughly 120 acres, which will be owned and managed by the Avalonia Land Conservancy.

3. Avalonia Land Conservancy will follow its longstanding, best practices for opening and managing its conservation properties.
4. The USFWS has their own potential funding for the purchase of the northern parcel, approximately 102 acres.
5. The USFWS is governed by federal regulations regarding land ownership and management. After the appraisals are completed, if USFWS decides to move forward with the potential purchase, the agency will conduct a pre-acquisition compatibility determination to determine appropriate future uses such as hunting, wildlife observation, photography, fishing, environmental education and interpretation. The USFWS is required by federal law (the Refuge Improvement Act) to consider these uses. The pre-acquisition compatibility determination will offer a public comment period. The full process is outlined in the [Great Thicket NWR Final Protection Plan / Environmental Assessment](#) dated October 2016 with Alternative B approved in January 2017.
6. Boundaries, including interior boundaries, will be posted.
7. Historically, the property has been hunted and there are deer stands on the property. Hunting on USFWS-owned land in Connecticut is managed according to State regulations set by the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection, though USFWS reserves the right to be more restrictive, such as limiting hunting seasons to shorter periods and/or to offer fewer species. At this time, no decisions have been made regarding hunting on either parcel.
8. The [USFWS purchased a property in North Stonington](#), the first Connecticut segment of Great Thicket National Wildlife Refuge.
9. Federal land ownership qualifies the Town of Stonington for the [Federal Land Access Program](#), which provides Federal funding for road improvement projects:
10. The public is welcome to send questions to any of the agencies and entities listed here.