

The Sisters of Notre Dame and Essex County Greenbelt Preserving the Great Marsh

On October 15, 2013, Essex County Greenbelt announced the permanent protection of a 70-acre area in Ipswich described in the Massachusetts Heritage Landscape Inventory as “probably the finest coastal scenery in the Commonwealth.” Greenbelt, the Town of Ipswich, and the Massachusetts Department of Conservation & Recreation (DCR) led the decades-long effort, with substantial financial assistance provided by a National Coastal Wetlands Conservation grant. The parcel directly abuts the Town of Ipswich’s Strawberry Hill Conservation Area, which was acquired by the Town in 2001, also employing funding from the National Coastal Wetlands grant program.

Together the partners worked with the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur to purchase a \$1.1 million conservation restriction (CR) on a substantial portion of their holdings that are of high ecological value and contribute to a 7,000-acre corridor of permanently protected public and private conservation lands. This restriction eliminates the threat of development from a critical Great Marsh property and permanently protects its unique natural resources from habitat destruction, wildlife displacement and pollution. The restriction also provides for future public access to the property via a trail to be developed along the upland edge of the marsh.



“The vulnerable coastal wetlands, freshwater ponds and adjacent upland buffers of the Great Marsh shape more than the spectacular views and distinctive landscape that define our coastal communities,” said Greenbelt’s Executive Director, Ed Becker. “This special ecosystem is home to large and exceptional breeding populations of waterbirds, and houses fin and shellfish nursery populations that have been a high priority for conservation partners for over a decade. We are grateful to the Sisters of Notre Dame, to our municipal and state partners at the Division of Conservation & Recreation, and to our federal conservation partners at the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, who have made several other grants in this region to protect declining wetlands and habitats of rare wildlife,” he continued.



DCR Commissioner Jack Murray reiterated thanks to the project partners to achieve this significant land conservation project, adding, “Protecting land within the Great Marsh Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) has been one of DCR’s long-term priorities. This project builds on our recent land conservation efforts in the area.”

Members of the Town of Ipswich Open Space Committee began meeting with the Sisters in 1994, helping them to complete a “Resource Inventory and Analysis” of their property. “Protection of the landscape and resources of the Sisters of Notre Dame property has been a priority for the Town since our open space protection program began in the 1980s,” Charles

Surpitski, Chair of the Ipswich Board of Selectmen. “We are very grateful to the Sisters for taking this significant step to preserve this area of Ipswich.” Additionally, the Town’s Open Space Program contributed funding for the land planning and appraisals of the property.



The site, located at the mouth of the Eagle Hill River, on Jeffreys Neck Road in Ipswich, houses a retirement facility, spirituality center and administrative offices for the Catholic order of nuns committed to the poor and marginalized around the globe. The Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur are also active in programs and schools here in the U.S. and the Cuvilly Arts and Earth Center, which provide early childhood educational programs with an

environmental and agricultural focus, and operate on the property. Funds generated from the sale of the conservation easement will go towards supporting the Sisters’ mission and work across the globe

“All of God’s creation is precious to us as a reflection of God’s goodness,” said Province Leadership Team member, Sr. Mary Boretti. She continued, “We have tried to be good stewards of our property and are well aware of how fragile many of earth ecosystems have become. We are also deeply aware of the integral connection between our care for Earth and our care for those most in need. We want to engage with others who share this mission and it has been a privilege to work with Greenbelt to further preserve the integrity, sustainability and beauty of this land entrusted to our care.”

The protected parcel opens onto Plum Island Sound, about four miles southwest of the Parker River National Wildlife Refuge (PRNWR). It lies within a larger coastal wetland complex complete with coastal freshwater wetlands and ponds, intermittent streams, grasslands, coastal bluffs, coastal islands and extensive open water and intertidal areas. The region is a critically important nesting area for waterfowl, shorebirds, land birds and raptors, and a feeding, resting and staging area for birds migrating along the Atlantic Flyway.



Links

- ◆ Great Marsh – www.greatmarsh.org
- ◆ Greenbelt – www.ecga.org
- ◆ Massachusetts Heritage Landscape - www.mass.gov/eea/agencies/dcr/conservation/regional-planning/heritage-landscape-inventory-program.html
- ◆ Massachusetts Dept of Conservation and Recreation - www.mass.gov/eea/agencies/dcr/
- ◆ Religious Lands Conservation Project – www.crystalspring.org/html/religlands.html