



Little Compton Landscapes

Newsletter of The Sakonnet Preservation Association

Summer 2001

What Is the Relationship Between Land Conservation and Property Taxes?

Some citizens and public officials worry that when land trusts and public agencies acquire property for conservation purposes they "take land off the tax rolls," thereby placing an increased burden on taxpayers. Studies from many New England states and communities, however—including Little Compton—consistently report the same finding: A thoughtful program of community land conservation can restrain the growth of property taxes by restraining the growth of expensive municipal services, such as roads, water and sewage systems, schools, and public safety.

What is the reasonable fiscal balance between land conservation and the development of taxable property? The facts available from Little Compton indicate that the community has been especially successful

in striking such a balance.

*Please
join the SPA for
our Annual Meeting
and Special Guest Speaker
on Tuesday, July 10th
at six o'clock pm*

presenting...

Trudy Coxe

*Chief Executive Officer of the Preservation Society of Newport County,
Former Massachusetts' Secretary of Environmental Affairs,
past Executive Director of RI's Save the Bay,
and past Director of Ocean and Coastal Resource Management
in the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration*

*The Stone House Club
Sakonnet Point Road
Little Compton*

All are welcome.

A "Cost of Community Services" (COCS) study prepared for the Little Compton Agricultural Conservancy Trust by University of Rhode Island resource economists Dennis Wichelns and Laurie Houston in 1994, found that for every tax dollar collected on residential property, the town spent \$1.05 in municipal services. By contrast, for every tax dollar collected on farmland and open space, the town spent 37 cents in such services. In other words, it is almost three times more expensive to provide public services for residential property than for open and agricultural lands.

"In the future, as development occurs, total town expenditures for services supporting residential activity will increase, while the acreage in farmland and open space will diminish," the

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Preservation Association**
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02837

***New Land Conservation
Donations Total 24 Acres***

At the end of 2000 several generous, community-spirited citizens donated to the SPA permanent conservation interests in two significant Little Compton properties.

Barbara and Pat Pond donated the development rights to 19 forested acres of their property west of Maple Avenue. The Pond property, which has belonged to the family for generations, will preserve wildlife and natural habitat in the heart of the town.

Clifford Shaw donated two lots totaling five acres on Sakonnet Point Road. Mr. Shaw's property links two other substantial open space tracts: the Sakonnet Golf Club to the north and property owned by the Little Compton Agricultural Conservancy Trust to the south, across Sakonnet Point Road. The SPA is grateful to Mr. and Mrs. Pond and Mr. Shaw for their generosity, which will benefit the community for generations to come.

***SPA Board Adopts Land Preservation
Policies, Procedures, and Criteria***

The SPA Board of Directors has recently adopted and published a set of guidelines titled "Land Preservation Policies, Procedures, and Acquisition Criteria." The document revises and updates the SPA's policies for evaluating and executing conservation transactions. Developed over several months by the SPA's five-member Land Preservation Committee—including Larry Anderson, Sheila Mackintosh, Lucy O'Connor, Terry Tierney, and Luke Wallin—the booklet is designed to guide both the SPA and property owners through the process of donating or selling a conservation interest in land.

Copies of "Land Preservation Policies, Procedures, and Acquisition Criteria" are available by writing the Sakonnet Preservation Association, P.O. Box 945, Little Compton, RI 02837, or by calling Sheila Mackintosh at 635-4615.

Little Compton property owners who wish to discuss conservation options for their property are encouraged to contact the SPA.

Land Conservation and Property Taxes from page 1
authors predicted. "These properties will require more services than they required as farmland and open space and this could result in a higher tax rate for the residential sector." A subsequent study of eleven Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island towns (Little Compton included) by the Southern New England Forest Consortium, Inc. (SNEFCI) arrived at similar conclusions.

SNEFCI has just released an extensive study of the entire state of Rhode Island, titled *Land Conservation, Development and Property Taxes in Rhode Island*. (Copies are available from SNEFCI, P.O. Box 760,

Chepachet,
RI 02184;
401-568-1610.)

Prepared by
economist Deb
Brighton, who

has done similar studies for other New England states, the report quantifies existing and potential fiscal impacts of land conservation in all 39 of the state's municipalities. The "report does not find that development causes high taxes nor that conservation results in lower taxes," according to its summary of major findings. "However, it does find that development, over time, has not resulted in lower taxes as has often been assumed."

In assessing the long-term impacts of land conservation, the study found that, on average:

▲ "the tax rate was lower in the Rhode Island towns with the fewest year-round residents and higher in the towns with the most residents";

▲ "tax rates are higher in the towns that have the most commercial and industrial property and lower in the towns that have the least";

▲ "the tax rate is higher in the towns that have the most jobs and lower in the towns that have the least"; and

▲ "the tax rate is lower in the towns that have the most open land and higher in the towns that have the least."

The SNEFCI report urges communities to use its findings "to strike a balance between what improves the community, what residents can afford, and what is fair. . . . Like building a school, a police station or a library, conserving land is an investment in the community."

Facts and Figures for Little Compton

Little Compton has consistently enjoyed relatively low property tax rates by comparison with the state's other municipalities. According to figures compiled by the Rhode Island Public Expenditure

Council, Little Compton had the state's lowest "effective" 2000 property tax rate equalized at 100% valuation. The town in some

"In other words, it is almost three times more expensive to provide public services for residential property than for open and agricultural lands."

years swaps the bottom spot with New Shoreham (Block Island). There are, of course, some unique factors that keep property tax rates relatively low in rural, sea-skirted towns like Little Compton and Block Island. For example, the high percentage of valuable seasonal homes in such towns means that part-time residents pay a significant percentage of property taxes. Owners of seasonal property create a relatively low demand for public services such as schools, trash disposal, and public safety. In effect, part-time residents help subsidize the services provided to those of us who live in town year-round.

How much Little Compton property, in terms of valuation, has been "taken off the tax rolls" for conservation? This is a relatively easy and straightforward question to answer, by reference to the annual Tax Book compiled by the Board of Assessors. (The figures cited below are from the 2000 Tax Book. More recent data, taking into account the recent townwide revaluation at 100% of full market value, will be available this summer.) As of December 31, 1999, according to the Tax Book, the total valuation

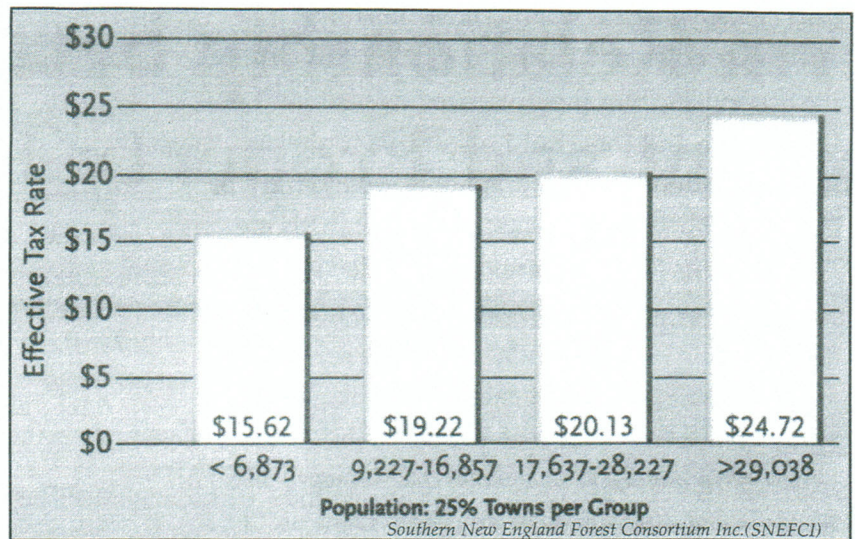
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Little Compton Landscapes

Land Conservation and Property Taxes from page 3 (at 50% of full value) of the town's taxable real property was \$367,422,863. This total 1999 taxable real property valuation represented an increase of \$5.37 million, or 1.5%, over 1998. The Assessors in 1999 exempted from taxation additional real property with a total valuation of about \$18.57 million, which represents about 4.8% of the valuation of all town real property. This total includes \$2.8 million in property-tax exemptions granted under state law to veterans, the blind, and other legally qualifying property owners. It also includes \$15.77 million of property held by conservation organizations and agencies—and by other government agencies and tax-exempt organizations, such as the Town itself, the state, churches, the Historical Society, and the Nursing Association. This \$15.77 million figure, according to the Assessors, translates into \$229,455

"The tax rate is lower in the towns that have the most open land and higher in the towns that have the least."

Southern New England Forest Consortium Inc.(SNEFCI)



property valued at \$1.58 million (exempted taxes: \$22,926), including conservation/ recreational properties like the Haffenreffer Wildlife Refuge, the Simmons Mill Pond Management Area and Sakonnet Harbor boat ramp.

As for the conservation organizations with significant property holdings in Little Compton:

- ▲ Sakonnet Preservation Association: property valuation, \$1.69 million; exempted taxes, \$24,633
- ▲ Little Compton Agricultural Conservancy Trust: property valuation, \$2.06 million; exempted taxes, \$29,959
- ▲ Audubon Society of Rhode Island: property valuation, \$285,000; exempted taxes, \$4,148
- ▲ The Nature Conservancy: property valuation, \$3.158 million; exempted taxes, \$45,949

A review of the Assessors' reports beginning in 1986, the first year of the Agricultural Conservancy Trust's operations, reveals that the town's taxable real property base has consistently grown between 1% and 2% each year—during a period when conservation organizations have been active in acquiring Little Compton property. How can the tax base grow if conservation land is "taken off the tax rolls"? First, new residential construction and improvements to existing homes create new

of foregone property tax revenue. (The total local property tax levied at the 2000 Financial Town meeting, based on real estate, tangible property, and motor vehicle valuations, was \$5.69 million.)

Among holders of tax exempt property, the Town of Little Compton has the largest holdings amounting to about \$4.24 million dollars of property valuation and \$61,600 of exempted taxes. Some Town property includes the school, town hall, police/fire complex, and dump; but the Town also owns conservation and recreation property such as South Shore Beach, Wilbour Woods, and Town Landing. Similarly, the State of Rhode Island owns

sources of taxable property. During the 1990s an average of 23 building permits were issued annually for the construction of new homes in Little Compton. Any driver, walker, runner, or bicyclist on the town's roads is aware of the number of substantial home renovations taking place at any given time. Second, but more difficult to document, property values throughout the town may be enhanced by the town's commitment to open-space protection. Third, properties subject to conservation easements and conveyance of development rights remain on the tax rolls, based on their value as undevelopable land.

A more formal analysis of land conservation and property taxes in Little Compton might compare and correlate a number of changing factors over time, such as: the tax base, municipal spending, the property tax rate, and acquisition of

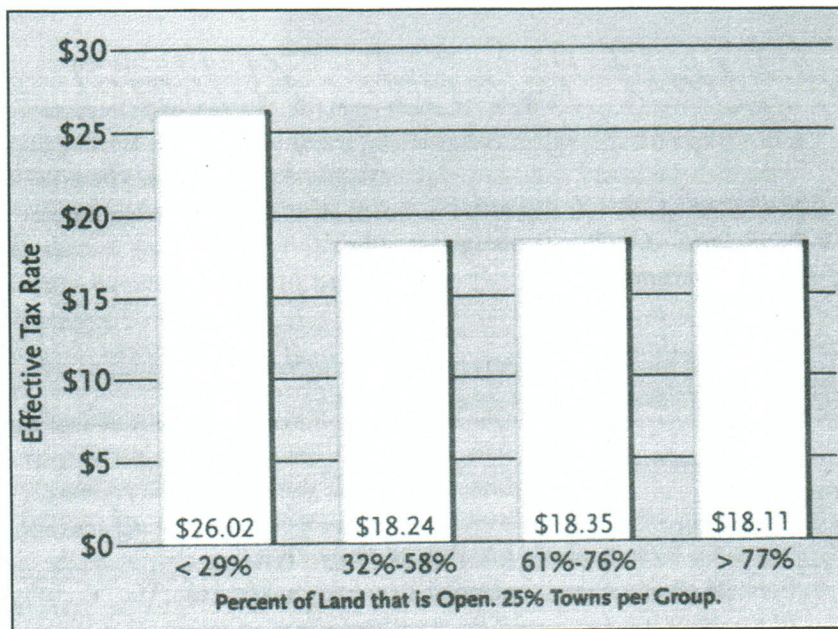
conservation property. But the readily available data surveyed in this article suggest how it is possible to reconcile several trends that may at times seem contradictory, namely: 1) the acquisition by land-conservation agencies and organizations of significant interests in open-space, agricultural, and recreational lands over the past 10 to 15 years; 2) steady growth in the town's taxable property base over that period; and 3) a consistently moderate property-tax rate, at least by comparison with other Rhode Island communities.

Indeed, this brief review indicates that the amount of land preserved for conservation has a very modest impact on the town's tax base and tax rate—and that this impact, on balance, has been a positive one. The tax base has grown consistently on a year to year basis. Furthermore, the town hasn't yet suffered the rapidly increasing rates of development, demands for municipal services, and property taxes that have overwhelmed many

fast-growing Rhode Island and Massachusetts rural and suburban communities in recent years. These circumstances are all consistent with the findings and predictions of the studies cited earlier.

Little Compton citizens and public officials

should, of course, continually scrutinize and review the fiscal effects of town policies and practices regarding acquisition of conservation and recreational lands. The real-world record in Little Compton suggests that property owners and taxpayers have been the beneficiaries of public investment in land conservation. They, and the generations who follow, will also enjoy the continuing benefits and uses of Little Compton's protected landscape and natural resources.



Open land pays less in taxes than developed land does, but requires few municipal services. This indicates that taxes are higher in towns that have more people to serve.

Southern New England Forest Consortium Inc.(SNEFCI)

Larry Anderson



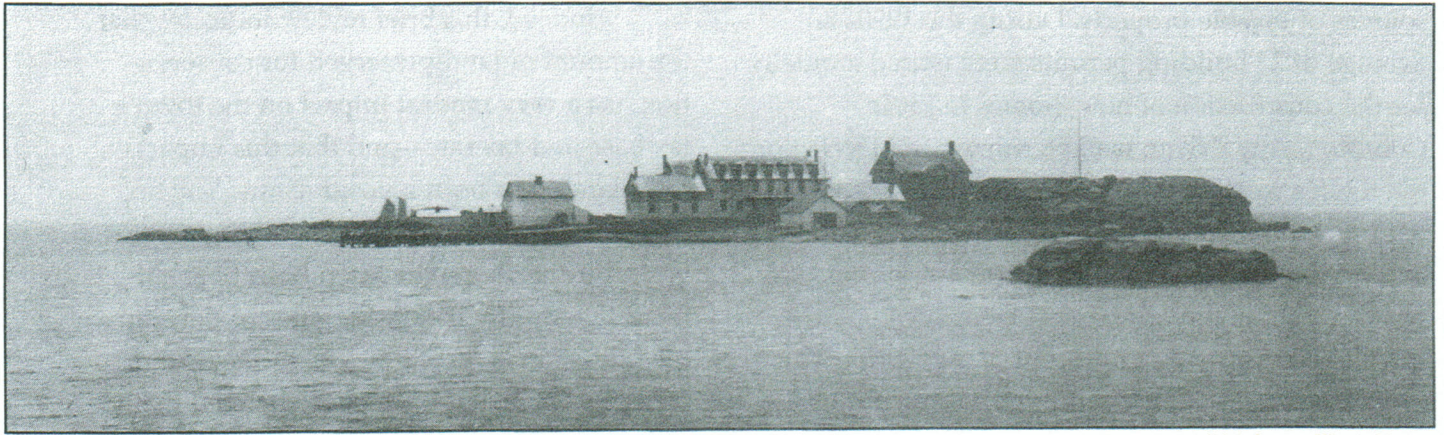


Photo courtesy of Little Compton Historical Society

East and West Islands: A Brief History

West Island, situated off Sakonnet Point, bounded by Narragansett Bay and the Atlantic Ocean, is most noteworthy as the site of the West Island Club. Early deeds indicate that Andrew Seabury, a local fisherman, owned the island prior to its sale in 1849. It was subsequently purchased by trustees of the West Island Association in 1853 for the purpose of organizing a club for fishing and relaxation by an elite group of prominent professional men. Believed to be the best bass fishing grounds on the East Coast, the Fishing Registers kept by the club attest to the large catches of bass and "lesser" fish such as tautog, flounder and bluefish.

Rarely more than eight members were present on the island at any one time, some having brought their wives and their maids. They travelled to the island in one of several club-owned sail or row boats, leaving from Taggart's Landing (now known as Third Beach in Middletown). Cornelius Vanderbuilt and his guests often embarked from a dock below his property in Newport.

*Aug. 2, 1866 Water very clear.
Big bass seen...supposed to weigh 100 lbs.;*

*October 7, 1874 One Codfish 171 1/2 lbs.
played like an animated bag of shot;*

*August 13, 1877 Philo T. Ruggles landed a 64
pound bass, largest recorded in the West
Island records.**

The bylaws for the "Association for Angling and Shooting" were formulated in 1864 and restricted membership to thirty, each man required to pay a \$1,000 fee. Distinguished members of the club included lawyers and judges, government officials and business men such as Cornelius Vandebuilt, J.P. Morgan and Charles Tiffany. All U.S. presidents were given honorary membership, and Grover Cleveland and Chester A. Arthur were guests at the Club. Though most members were from New York, the cities of Philadelphia, Baltimore, New Jersey and Newport were also represented.

A summer hotel had been built some time prior to the Club's purchase (date not found) and became a two and a half story Clubhouse which incorporated the kitchen, billiard room and dining room. An annex was built to accommodate more bedrooms, and a kitchen herb and flower garden was dug in the rich loam that overlay the rocks in the middle of the island. A year round steward lived on the island and hired as many as ten staff each spring, including a telegraph operator. In 1885 a marine cable for the first telegraph was stretched between the island and the dunes on Sakonnet Point.

East Island, comprising approximately two acres, had a small dwelling on it when first purchased by the trustees of the West Island Club. Early deeds indicate that Jeremiah Bailey lived there in the mid

1800's, then it changed hands twice before it was bought by George Hill, an early trustee of the West Island Club, in 1875. From that time on, a summer caretaker lived on the island tending to the cows brought over for milk and cream, as well as working the extensive vegetable garden.

By 1905, the Club membership had dwindled to seventeen from a high of thirty in the late 1800's. 1906 was the last year of operation and in 1908 a former member of the club, Joseph Wainwright, bought both islands. Upon his death, they were gifted to the Episcopal Diocese of R.I. Unsuitable for church purposes, the buildings were abandoned except for bootlegging activity and occasional vandalism. A Newporter, Marion Eppley, bought the islands in 1929, but that summer all the buildings were burned to the ground by arsonists. Any remaining debris and rich topsoil were swept away in the 1938 hurricane.

In 1949, the islands changed hands again, bought by Jessie Lloyd O'Connor for the purpose of protecting their natural beauty. Hoping to keep the islands as open space for all to enjoy, Jessie Lloyd O'Connor donated them to the Sakonnet Preservation Association in 1983.

Although long abandoned except for seagulls and cormorants, the stone pillars of the former clubhouse remind us of a very different time in Little Compton. Those same pillars, along with the adjacent lighthouse, remain beacons for fishermen and sailors as they ply the waters of Narragansett Bay and Rhode Island Sound.

*An interesting history of the Club, written by Nicholas Wainwright (grandson of a club member), can be found in the Bulletin of the Newport Historical Society, Spring 1977, Vol. 50 Part 2, No. 166. This reference is the source for the article above.

Lucy O'Connor ▲

New Members

Yes! I would like to become a member of



Sakonnet Preservation Association

Enclosed is my tax deductible membership contribution.

___ Individual	\$20
___ Family	\$25
___ Sustaining	\$35
___ Special Gift	\$_____

Please make checks payable to:
Sakonnet Preservation Association
 P. O. Box 945
 Little Compton, Rhode Island 02837

Name _____

Address _____

Town _____

State _____

Zip _____

Phone _____

E-mail _____

The Sakonnet Preservation Association depends on volunteers. Would you like to help? _____yes

Your support helps to ensure that future generations will enjoy the beauty and benefits of Little Compton's natural landscape.



Author Brian Donahue Speaks About Community Farms and Forests

Brian Donahue, author and assistant professor of environmental studies at Brandeis University, described his experiences and ideas about community farming and forestry to an audience of SPA members and community members at the Little Compton Community Center on May 16th.

*During his SPA-sponsored talk, Donahue described his experiences as an activist, community farmer and conservationist in the Boston suburb of Weston, Massachusetts. These experiences are also recounted in his well-received, awardwinning book, *Reclaiming the Commons: Community Farms and Forests in a New England Town*, published in 1999 by Yale University Press and just out in paperback. Donahue discussed questions about the options for communally owned and communally managed property in towns that have been active in conserving land.*



▲ Our Mission ▲

The Sakonnet Preservation Association, a non-profit trust, is dedicated to preserving the natural heritage of Little Compton for the benefit of the community.

Postal Customer

Save the Date!
Annual Meeting
July 10th ~ 6pm
Stone House Club
Guest Speaker:
Trudy Cox



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