

# Lessons from the Lowell Parks & Conservation Trust

Paul Marion



*"The law locks up both man and woman  
Who steals the goose from the common,  
But lets the greater felon loose  
Who steals the common from the goose."  
(Anonymous)*

## **Mission of the Lowell Parks & Conservation Trust (established 1990)**

Improve the quality of life for the people of Lowell through the creation, conservation, and preservation of parks, open space, and special places. The Trust's programs focus on land protection and greenway development, urban forestry, and environmental education.

## ***Origins of the Trust***

In 1990, Stephen Conant and Matthew Donahue, both of whom were deeply involved in local environmental issues, created the city's first "green" nonprofit organization, the Lowell Parks & Conservation Trust (LP&CT or the Trust). Both Conant and Donahue were past chairmen of the Lowell Conservation Commission, an appointed City board. Their original intent in starting the Parks and Conservation Trust was to form "a private land holding entity in Lowell that would protect conservation land that the municipal government was unwilling to accept and manage," according to Conant, who is serving as president of the Trust in 2003. Explaining the development of the organization, Conant says:

"The Trust has evolved through three general stages of growth as it has moved to meet unmet demands of environmental protection and

stewardship in the city. In the first phase of its history the Trust worked as an advocacy organization to help identify and reverse inappropriate public use of valuable riverfront property on the Merrimack River for student parking by University of Massachusetts at Lowell and to the City's proposed use of its oldest public park as the site for a new school.

Our opposition to the University's use of riverfront property for student parking accelerated the University's creation of new student parking facilities, and now the riverfront property is a beautiful public park. Our opposition to the use of parkland for school building construction failed, but the Trust's stance on this controversial project attracted the respect and support of people throughout the community, without permanently alienating the public officials to whom we stood in opposition." (1)

### *Maintaining a Focus, Pursuing it in Innovative Ways*

In Phase Two (1995-2000), the Trust acquired the historic 18<sup>th</sup>-century Spalding House on Pawtucket Street from the remaining members of the local Molly Varnum Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution, which was in need of extensive restoration before it could be reused by the Trust. During these years, the Trust carved out a small park fronting on the Concord River in the Back Central neighborhood, and named it Jollene Dubner Park in memory of another of the Trust's early leaders. After hiring Jane Calvin as executive director in 1996, the Trust moved to acquire additional land and helped the City make an eight-acre soccer complex. The "2,000 for 2000" tree-planting project far surpassed its turn-of-the-century goal, with some 4,000 trees planted as of 2003.

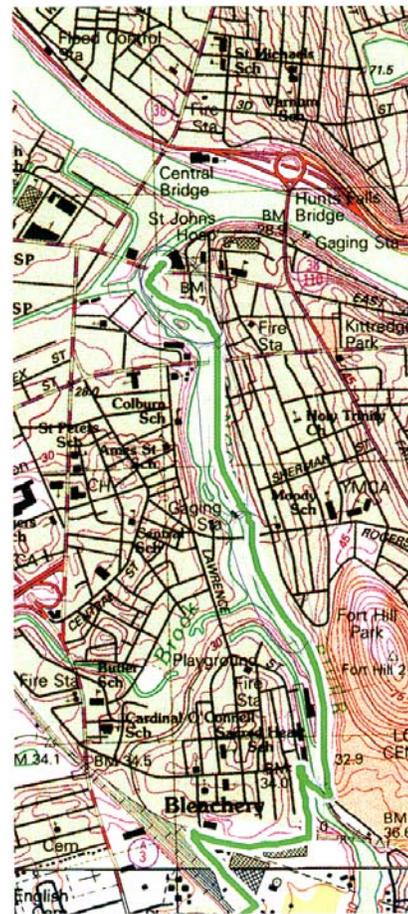
## *Pursuing a Visionary Process*

Currently in Phase Three, as Conant assesses the group's growth, the Trust has boosted its programming, strengthened its environmental education efforts, increased membership to more than 900 people from Greater Lowell, and reached out to include more of Lowell's ever expanding minority communities.

The most ambitious project launched by the Trust to date is the Concord River Greenway Park, a vision for 2.5 mile riverside park and "multi-purpose trail" that would connect Lowell's most expansive green space, the combined Shedd Park and Rogers Fort Hill Park, to the downtown historic district of Lowell National Historical Park. The path would follow "an abandoned railroad right-of-way paralleling the river." The Concord River Greenway would also fill the so-called "missing link" in the 200-mile Bay Circuit Trail, a recreational trail linking 50 towns and cities around Boston. The Trust expects this complex project will take at least another three years to complete, given the complicated nature of acquiring land and securing easements on the riverside corridor, not to mention design challenges regarding the pathway and open spaces. (2)

"Day by day we work to change people's perceptions of the urban environment," says Executive Director Jane Calvin. "That's our primary goal, and we've been successful in achieving it." (3)

### *Concord River Greenway Park*



## *Putting a Face on the Mission: Meet Executive Director Jane Calvin*

**H**ired by the Trust in 1996 as its third executive director, Jane Calvin has become to many people the face of the Trust. She is familiarly known as the “Tree Lady” for her tireless work on tree planting throughout the city. She spearheaded the successful “2,000 for 2000” campaign that aimed to put 2,000 new large-caliper trees (with trunks several inches around, these are not whip-like saplings) in the ground by the year 2000. The effort to date has yielded 4,000 trees in neighborhoods across the city; on the grounds of the Tsongas Arena, Lowell Community Health Center, and other public places; on the UMass Lowell campus; and elsewhere.

Aside from her enduring professionalism and inspiring dedication to her job, Jane’s credibility in the city stems from her extensive knowledge of her discipline. She holds a master’s degree in environmental management from Yale University’s School of Forestry and Environmental Studies and an undergraduate degree in biochemistry from the University of New Hampshire. In addition to her work with the Trust, she is a half-time Community Action Forester for Eastern Massachusetts, working for the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation. Before joining the Trust, she was a policy specialist for the Society of the Protection of New Hampshire Forests.

To promote the Trust’s work, Jane adopted a strategy of attending monthly meetings of the various neighborhood groups around the city. She also oversees an ambitious organizational marketing effort that entails regular mailings to members and person-to-person contacts. Jane is the Trust’s representative at countless planning and development meetings in the city, working closely with the Parks and Recreation Department, Lowell Heritage Partnership, and others.

When asked why the Trust has been successful, she says:

- ≡ **BE POSITIVE:** “We look for the positive in every situation in the city. For example, When we’re working on the Concord River project, we try to build positive relationships with the abutting businesses.
  
- ≡ **STAY FOCUSED:** Staying focused is crucial. You have to know when to say ‘No.’ We get asked to do many things that we can’t do. It’s not helpful for an organization to commit itself beyond its capacity to deliver. When there is a situation in which we cannot get directly involved, we often look for other ways to help. We’ve offered use of our mailing list and helped with networking at times when we could not directly participate in a program or project.

≡ *CREATE A PLAN, AND SHOW MEASURABLE RESULTS:* We have developed good relationships with grant-makers. Our grant writing improves all the time. We propose real projects that will make a real impact, and which will have measurable results. We're not asking for fluff. It's important to show that the organization follows through. Having a strategic plan, which was completed in 2002, to back up our grant requests has proved to be a great benefit." (4)

### *Set Clear Goals*

**S**ummarizing the work of the Trust, the board describes four strands of activity: "1) offering programs on the Concord River; 2) educating people about their current and historic impact on the natural environment; 3) planting trees in Lowell's inner city neighborhoods to maintain a healthy urban forest; and 4) acquiring and protecting conservation lands where nature is left undisturbed." (5)

### *Organize, Organize, Organize*

**T**he Trust has more than 900 members (with a near term goal of 1,000) supporting a pyramid-shaped organization with a wide base topped by a small board of directors and staffing equivalent to 1.5 positions. The 2002 budget was approximately \$200,000. Membership income in 2003 approached \$40,000. When current executive director Jane Calvin was hired in 1996, the Trust had about 100 members. "Our membership took off from there, and especially in 1998 once we hired someone with a membership background to help us part-time," explains Calvin.

### *Involve, Involve, Involve*

**L**owell Parks & Conservation Trust a master of involving members and non-members in its activity. Being with the LP&CT is a hands-on experience – from the early years when LP&CT hosted big-time kayak races on the Concord River and needed volunteers for tasks along the race course to today's projects, such as restocking the Concord River with alewife (river herring) and the painstaking effort to restore the historic Spalding House, the LP&CT has shown people that parks and conservation work is a group project. This kind of participation creates "stakeholders" for the organization.

### *Announce Objectives That Can Be Accomplished*

**L**owell Parks & Conservation Trust has made a habit of announcing achievable objectives. This successful approach keeps all members of the trust focused. This approach also create much positive visibility for the

work of the Trust. Consider, for example, some of the objectives below:

- ✓ 2,000 for 2000 Campaign, a multi-year effort to plant 2,000 trees by the turn of the century. More than 4,000 trees planted by late 2003. Working primarily with federal Community Development Block Grant funds, the Trust plants 150 to 200 trees each year. Objective met and exceeded.
- ✓ Tree City USA. In partnership with the City administration, LP&CT set out to earn this special designation from the National Arbor Day Foundation. The community had to demonstrate its commitment to planting and replacing trees at a level that would maintain and enlarge the tree stock. In 1997, Lowell earned the right to fly a Tree City USA flag alongside the official City flag. Objective met.
- ✓ Creating Jollene Dubner Park. LP&CT assumed a demolition lien on a blighted tenement and raised sufficient funds to make the pocket park overlooking the Concord River, in a section of the Back Central neighborhood where residences are cheek-by-jowl. The park not only memorialized a local environmental activist, but also added new open space and access to the river in a neighborhood that needs green space. The LP&CT gave Lowell its 80<sup>th</sup> park. Neighbors now maintain the park. By involving neighbors in the design process early on and turning over the care of the park to the neighbors, the LP&CT encouraged a sense of local ownership that promises to sustain the project over the long term. Objective met.
- ✓ Restoration and reuse of the Spalding House. Working with preservation architects, Lowell National Historical Park staff, and LP&CT volunteers, and fueled by essential grants from the Parker Foundation and other sources, the Trust restored the exterior and re-landscaped the grounds. The Massachusetts Historic Commission presented the Trust with a “2000 Preservation Award” for its work on the Spalding House. The next task is interior renovation. Objective met.

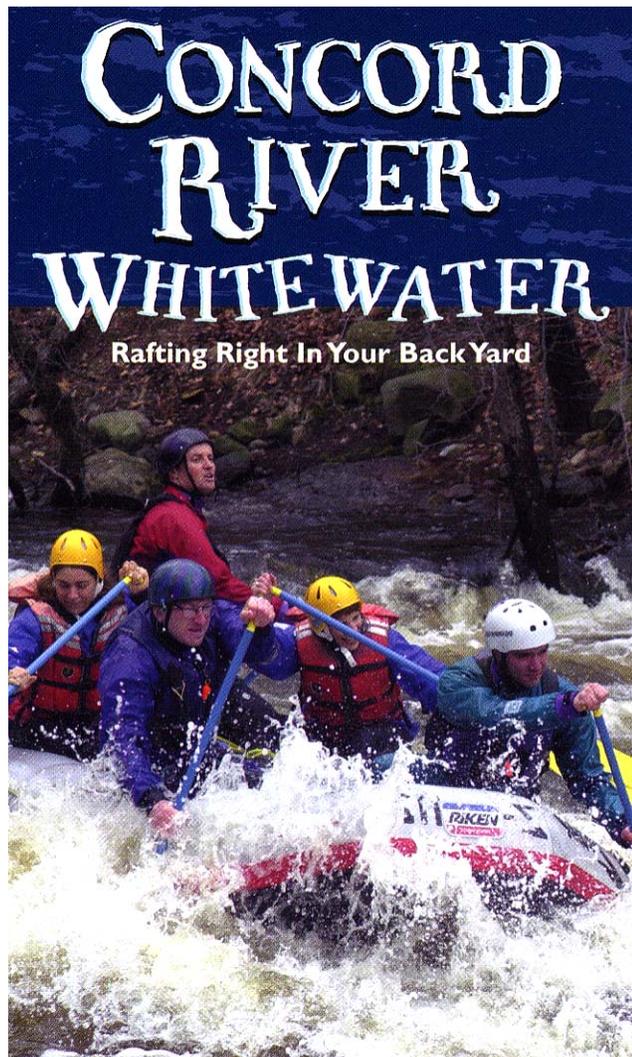
### *Seize the Moment, and Be Creative Enough to Make the Best of an Opportunity*

**F**or the preservation and adaptive reuse (still underway) of the 18th century Spalding House on Pawtucket Street, the LP&CT collaborated with the local chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR). With a membership no longer able to manage the property, the DAR approached several nonprofit organizations in Lowell to discuss possible donation of the

property. Only the LP&CT was bold enough, visionary enough, and responsible enough to step forward. Accepting the property was not a predictable move by the Trust, but by broadening the interpretation of its mission to include the protection of “special places” the Trust saw this action as consistent with its past work. While the Spalding House project was an ambitious undertaking, the acquisition of a prominent building helped raise the profile of the organization. The Trust and DAR executed an agreement by which the house and land were transferred, along with maintenance funds, to the LP&CT. The house will be used as a museum and environmental education center, with space for public functions. As mentioned above, this effort became an award-winning project for the LP&CT.

### *Stick to Your Message*

One of the Trust’s first public activities was kayak racing on the Concord River, which boasts Class III and IV white water rapids. Action peaks in the spring when the river’s natural flow is at its highest. From kayaking, the Trust began to sponsor white water rafting in the middle of the city, a most unusual setting. *Boston Magazine* in 1997 made the LP&CT white water rafting program on the Concord River in Lowell a Best of Boston selection (Best Urban Adventure). Since then, LP&CT used the Best of Boston endorsement constantly to underscore the high quality of the Lowell rafting program. Rafting is a signature activity and identifying image of the Trust. The exciting white-water scenes, captured by photographers and on videotape, have been used often in City marketing campaigns and promotional materials. The Trust



partners with a rafting outfit for the urban river trips. Both *Yankee* magazine and the *Boston Globe* have touted the value of the Lowell rafting experience.

### ***Keep Your Friends Close and Your Members Closer***

Lowell Parks and Conservation Trust does an excellent job of keeping in touch with members, whether via newsletters, program announcement postcards, brochures, fundraising letters, timely thank-you notes for donations, invitations to upcoming events, a fresh Web site, etc. Members typically receive six to eight mailings a year from the Trust.

### ***Identify Centers of Strength and Link With Them***

- ≡ Working with former City Manager Brian Martin, LP&CT advocated for a large increase in the city's allocation for planting trees. What began as a one-year expenditure of \$5,000 from Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds has to date continued as a CDBG annual expenditure. It should be noted that each year's funding request must be approved through a competitive process.
- ≡ Related to the funding for trees, the Trust recently played a key role in the successful passage of the City's first Tree Ordinance. In an effort led by Councilor Dan Tenczar, the City Council adopted guidelines that regulate removal and replacement of trees on public land. LP&CT executive director Jane Calvin characterizes the Lowell ordinance as "progressive." A major objective of the ordinance is to ensure "no net canopy loss," (canopy refers to the area covered by tree tops) which will help sustain what the Trust calls the "urban forest" and keep Lowell green. The Tree Ordinance is another example of the Trust advocating for systemic change that increases the possibility that positive change will be sustained.
- ≡ Early on, the LP&CT entered a partnership with the Lowell Plan Inc., a private nonprofit economic development organization. The LP&CT to this day shares space and office equipment with the Lowell Plan. The Lowell Plan office suite is a crossroads for city leaders and an advantageous location when it comes to checking the city pulse. In the same block are the congressman's district offices for Lowell and the offices of the *Lowell Sun* newspaper.

### ***Use Your Tools to Make Things Happen***

**L**owell Parks and Conservation Trust has twice served as the host organization for new, related ventures in the city. In 1997, LP&CT acted as an incubator for the new Lowell: *The Flowering City* (FC) steering

committee. (In short, FC is the lead organization for a 25-year city improvement plan that resulted from an intensive community planning workshop in 1996.) This arrangement allowed *the Flowering City* project to conduct its business under the LP&CT banner. More specifically, the Trust, being a formal nonprofit organization, could be a fiscal conduit for FC, allowing FC to apply for grants and receive tax-deductible donations. In 2000, LP&CT acted as a catalyst in helping to establish a coalition of preservation, conservation, and cultural groups, the Lowell Heritage Partnership (LHP). LP&CT served as the LHP's fiscal and administrative conduit until the LHP was spun off as an independent nonprofit organization in 2003. Coincidentally, FC recently moved its operations to the LHP, where FC has a seat on the board of directors.

### ***Recognize and Honor Extraordinary Leadership***

**L**owell Parks and Conservation Trust has made the recognition of leadership a signature of its operations.

For example, on its tenth anniversary, LP&CT organized an event that saluted ten persons who had made outstanding contributions to the organization in its first ten years. Each of the community leaders received a Seeds of Growth plaque, describing how that person had helped the Trust in some extraordinary way.

LP&CT established the Jollene Dubner Conservation Award for extraordinary contributions to environmental affairs in the city. In November 2003, this periodic award was presented for only the second time to Dr. Patrick J. Mogan, familiarly known as the "Father of the Park" (meaning Lowell National Historical Park). Longtime director of the City's Parks and Recreation Department Thomas Bellegarde Jr. was the first person to receive the award.

LP&CT honored Jollene Dubner posthumously by naming a park on the Concord River for her. She was an environmental activist who had helped in founding the LP&CT.

### ***Looking to the Future: Building a New Generation of Passionate Leaders***

**O**n the issue of leadership in general, LP&CT President Steve Conant says small organizations have to be aware of the potential "burn-out" of its leaders, especially ones who have either helped create the organization or have served as board members for a long time. One of the challenging questions, says Conant, is "When does a nonprofit organization such as the Trust

go from being somebody's passion to an institution?" This challenge raises the issues of leadership development, transition within the organization, and sustainability. In the case of the LP&CT, Conant says the excellent performance of its executive director, Jane Calvin, has allowed its founders to sustain the organization. (6)



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Lowell Parks & Conservation Trust, Inc. Board of Directors (2003):

Sha King Alston; Rep. Cory Atkins, Advisor; Laurie Cahalane, Treasurer; Stephen Conant, President; Ellen Coppinger; Matthew C. Donahue, Clerk; Lauris Donovan; Sheila Kirschbaum; Henri Marchand; William Martin, Esq.; Mark Romanowsky, MD.

(Jane L. Calvin, Executive Director; Kristin A. McCauley, Project Specialist)

Significant Supporters of the LP&CT (2003) [a selected list of foundations]:

Cabot Family Charitable Trust, J.P. Morgan Chase Foundation, City of Lowell Community Development Block Grant Program, Jesse B. Cox Charitable Trust, Joseph P. and Eileen M. Donahue Foundation, Fay Foundation, Greater Lowell Community Foundation, The Greeley Foundation, Green Leaf Foundation, KeySpan Energy Delivery Grant Program, The Lynch Foundation, Patrick J. Mogan Culture Center (a program of Lowell National Historical Park in partnership with UMass Lowell), Theodore Edson Parker Foundation, Adelard A. and Valeeda Lea Roy Foundation, Nathaniel and Elizabeth P. Stevens Foundation

## Notes

- (1) Conant, Stephen and Calvin, Jane. Jesse B. Cox Charitable Trust grant proposal narrative (2003). [Provided by Lowell Parks & Conservation Trust (LP&CT)].
- (2) *Concord River Greenway Park* (brochure). LP&CT. (c. 2001) and *Concord River Greenway and Neighborhood Trail*. Division of Planning and Development, City of Lowell. (2001)
- (3) Jane Calvin. Interview with Paul Marion. LP&CT office (11/3/03).
- (4) Jane Calvin. Interview with Paul Marion. LP&CT office. (11/3/03).
- (5) Conant, Stephen. Jesse B. Cox Charitable Trust grant proposal narrative (2003)
- (6) Stephen Conant. Interview with Paul Marion. Telephone. (11/17/03).

## Sources

- 13<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting & Presentation of the Jollene Dubner Conservation Award* (event program). Lowell Parks & Conservation Trust. (2003).
- Concord River Greenway and Neighborhood Trail*. Division of Planning and Development, City of Lowell. (2001)
- Concord River Greenway Park* (brochure). Lowell Parks & Conservation Trust. (c. 2001).
- Concord River Whitewater: Rafting Right in Your Back Yard* (brochure). Lowell Parks & Conservation Trust and Zoar Outdoor. (7/03).
- Jesse B. Cox Charitable Trust grant proposal narrative. Lowell Parks & Conservation Trust. (2003).
- Interview with Jane Calvin, executive director of LP&CT. (11/03/03).
- Interview with Stephen Conant, president of LP&CT. (11/.17/03).
- Lowell Parks & Conservation Trust Web site ([www.lowelllandtrust.org](http://www.lowelllandtrust.org)).
- Lowell Waterways Trail Guide*. Lowell Park & Conservation Trust. (various dates).
- \* Drawings by Gerry Nelson © 2003.
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