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Establishing Land Protection Priorities

Source: [Mount A to the Sea Coalition](#)

The Coalition's early land protection efforts began with several false starts resulting from "reactive" projects. As a result, the group had a number of "healthy conversations" that acknowledged the need to set priorities. The following is a brief outline of how the Coalition proceeded to frame a structure and process for setting land protection priorities.

- I. **Organize Committees:** Three committees were organized and designed not to overlap with the individual land trust regions. Committees were given specific and individual authority by the Oversight Committee to set priorities for land conservation:
 - Mt. Agamenticus/Tatnic Hills
 - York River/York Pond/ Eliot
 - Brave Boat Harbor/Gerrish Island/Route 103

- II. **Identify land protection priorities:** The three committees generally followed the same procedures, with some minor variations related to the criteria upon which the lands for the initial priority list were identified.

Step 1. Establish a list of targeted lands

Mt. Agamenticus/Tatnic Hills: The Committee knew they would need state/federal money to make many of the land transactions possible. As a first screen, they applied the criteria the state uses to determine which lands the state will hold. Information from the state Natural Areas Program and Beginning with Habitat, a Geographic Information System data series that defines habitat for rare, endangered and threatened species, served as a guide in drawing lines around areas of interest. Within the areas of interest, the Committee then looked for parcels that fell within large unfragmented blocks, parcels that were contiguous to other significant blocks of land, or land that would have an impact on road frontage. Finally, the Committee assessed each parcel by analyzing current or potential opportunities and landowner interest.

York River/York Pond/Eliot: The Committee used the same template and criteria as the Mt. Agamenticus/Tatnic Hills Committee, relying in large part on the Conservation Plan that specifically emphasized the valuable resources of the York River. Additionally, the

Committee created a list of 10-12 landowners who they knew were both interested and would be willing sellers.

Brave Boat Harbor/Gerrish Island/Route 103: The Committee relied on the Conservation Plan as it marked the boundaries of the Mt. Agamenticus to the Sea Conservation Initiative in this region and helped identify eligible lands. Additional criteria used in developing the list included lands adjacent to the Rachel Carson National Wildlife Refuge that the US Fish and Wildlife Service had identified as priorities for conservation; large properties where there was some indication of interest on the part of the landowner, and properties that would have additional interest to donors based on ecological values (using the Maine Natural Areas map, Beginning with Habitat data, and the identification of important natural features).

Step 2. Financial analysis

As properties were listed, it became abundantly clear that there were more properties to conserve than there were financial resources. A financial plan was developed as another screen with which to analyze and set priorities. The Plan allocated land acquisition funds equally among the three committees. One of the members of the Finance Committee developed a cash flow spread sheet that identified the source and availability of funds. The information was broken down by committee and tracked over time so that the Committees could match the flow of resources with the requirements of each transaction. This financial component of the priority setting process has ensured that the lists are based on both the conservation needs and on the reality of available funds necessary to complete transactions.

Step 3. Create priority lists

The Committees also identified other criteria to guide their action that influenced the timing of action on specific projects including the willingness of landowners if resources could be brought to the table, whether a project could be completed in a reasonable time frame (i.e. within the period of the Campaign), and whether a commitment had already been made to a landowner. These criteria along with the financial plan allowed the Committees to create A and B lists. As fundraising projections change, landowner situations change, and/or the timing of fund availability changes, the Committees can go to the B list for a project.

The result of this process has been a land protection program that couples targeting specific pieces of land that advance the goals of the Initiative (and are founded on both science and conservation goals) and that have a likelihood of success by linking willing landowners with secure financing of a project.