

Great Bay Acres Save: Area's Conservation Celebrated

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As a child, it was Kerri Merrill's quest to make it from her family's home on Bay Road to the Great Bay. While it didn't appear to be a far trek, the wet marsh made it a difficult task and Merrill never made it. This was one of many memories Merrill and her father, Frank Smas, who lived on the 35-acre parcel from the early 1980s to 2005, shared Monday, May 18. While they sold the land to The Nature Conservancy in 2005, they joined Monday with local conservation leaders and New Hampshire Sen. Judd Gregg in celebrating the 5,000th acre of land conserved along the Great Bay.

"It's great but it's bittersweet to be here knowing I grew up here and so many things happened here," said Merrill. "I'm so glad it will be conserved the way it is — natural — and not be built upon. I'm glad I can come back here and still see it like this."

The Great Bay Resource Protection Partnership recently reached the 5,000-acre landmark at Great Bay. It was the culmination of 15 years of hard work and collaboration from its member organizations, along with Gregg who has secured \$56 million for the protection of sensitive environmental lands surrounding the bay.

"It's such a reflection of the community effort," Gregg said. "Great Bay is obviously one of the gems of our state and an important ecological recharge area for our differing life forms." When the effort began, Gregg said the entire area was under huge pressure to be developed. It was the efforts of those in the partnership that resulted in the protection of New Hampshire lifestyle, the quality of the environment and the land, he said.

The Great Bay Reserve, 10 miles inland from the coast of New Hampshire and the Maine border, offers a diversity of land and water areas around the estuary, such as salt marshes, rocky shores, bluffs, woodlands, open fields and tidal waters.

The Great Bay Resource Protection Partnership is a group of organizations committed to protecting the habitats of the Great Bay region, many of whom were present Monday.

Jack Savage, vice president of communications/outreach for the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests, said the organization is one of those that has sat around the table, helped to identify key parcels and purchased or taken over conservation easements on the properties. "To think that 5,000 acres has been protected in, all things considered, a short period, that's remarkable, and it shows what you can do when you focus a lot of different people and attention," he said.

Newmarket Town Administrator Ed Wojnowski said the years he lived on the bay were "some of the best times" he ever had. Wojnowski remembers when a moth flew just a few feet away from his face and a bat quickly swooped down to snatch it up. It's stories

like this that Wojnowski remembers about the Great Bay, and he thanked the partnership for preserving the land so new stories can be created. "It truly keeps a large portion of not only Newmarket, but the entire state well preserved for the future to come," he said.



Frank Smas and his daughter, Kerri Merrill, take a stroll down memory lane in the field at the Nature Conservancy's Great Bay Office in Newmarket, which once was their home. Smas had the land in his family since 1941.