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Land trust trail project weighs conservation and accessibility in Bowdoinham

KELT plans to reshape a section of Center Point Preserve so trail users, including those with mobility challenges, can enjoy views of Merrymeeting Bay. It won't be the first project of its kind, but the new trend has opened up a debate about "nature for all" vs. "nature for nature's sake."



[Laura Sitterly](#) *The Times Record*

6 min read



Andrew Morgan (left), Enock Glidden and Matt Coughlan assess the trail at Center Point Preserve on April 23, 2024. *Andrew Morgan photo*

A section of the Kennebec Estuary Land Trust's Center Point Preserve in Bowdoinham will soon be reshaped so handicapped outdoor enthusiasts can enjoy the trail.

The existing path is riddled with roots and loose terrain. The updated [Center Point All Persons Trail](#), as its name hints, is intended for everyone.

KELT acquired the 22-acre preserve in February 2023 and obtained an additional 11 acres in December of the same year.

Thanks to a multi-year collaboration and a recent \$460,000 award from the Maine Natural Resources Conservation Program (MNRCP) to upgrade three existing culverts on the property, over \$630,000 in grant funding has been devoted to improving the property's wetland habitat and building a new trail that meets USDA Forest Service accessibility [standards](#).

The Friends of Merrymeeting Bay ([FOMB](#)) oppose the project, arguing that a new trail may restructure the space in a less-than-ideal way.

However, Andrew Morgan, KELT land and stewardship director, pointed out some positives, such as improved tidal flow, high-value wading bird/waterfowl habitat, fish habitat connectivity, nutrient exchange and increased flood water drainage capacity.

The trail will offer expansive views of Merrymeeting Bay and enhance its health, according to KELT.

“[It’s] one of the most diverse ecosystems in the state,” Morgan said. “An underwater cliff prevents saltwater from mixing with freshwater, making it suitable for freshwater tidal marshes. By removing culvert restrictions, we can enhance the potential for these marshes to migrate inwards as sea levels rise, benefitting both the habitat and the community.”



Center Point Preserve viewpoint of Merrymeeting Bay. *Andrew Morgan photo*

‘Where rivers and communities converge’

In January, the Maine Department of Environmental Protection announced that KELT’s Center Point Preserve would benefit from MNRCP’s latest award (\$1.2 million) to restore wetlands, enhance wildlife habitat and reduce flooding impacts.

The wetland mitigation program is part of the state’s [In Lieu Fee Compensation Program](#), which operates on an annual grant cycle. Since 2008, it has awarded over \$33 million for 175 conservation projects, covering the cost of wetland consultants and engineers to support project design, implementation and long-term monitoring.

Bryan Emerson, mitigation program manager at The Nature Conservancy in Maine, shed light on the proposal review and award process, explaining that the funds for the MNRCP come from developers who pay fees to the state to compensate for (or offset) wetland impacts.

“Land preservation is seen as a viable mitigation strategy,” Emerson said. “[But] regulatory agencies prefer restoration because it replaces lost functions and values and lost wetland acreage.”

In the past, KELT has used MNRCP funding for land protection and restoration efforts. While the latest award will honor that application pattern, it also strives to make the land trust’s trail system more accessible for visitors, particularly those who need mobility devices.



Center Point Preserve All Persons Trail Design. *Andrew Morgan photo*

“We want everyone to have the chance to experience stunning views of the estuary,” Morgan said. “This region is prone to flooding. A less-restricted tidal system will prevent this — and promote increased nutrient/sediment exchange, benefitting nearby farms.”

Morgan acknowledged that removing the road would be the best way to enhance habitat. Unfortunately, that’s impossible with neighboring properties that depend on that route for access. He feels that improving the road and trail is “the next best option.”

In addition to increasing the resiliency of 33 acres of forest and wetlands, public access to Merrymeeting Bay, and road sustainability, KELT plans to improve trail system signage so that users can make informed decisions when they visit.

“We believe that everyone deserves to cultivate a relationship with the land,” Morgan said. “Nothing is more frustrating than setting out for a hike only to get there and find out it’s too difficult. That’s why we aim to offer accurate information on what to expect so everyone can experience the magnitude of this incredibly special place — where rivers and communities converge.”

KELT worked with [Enock Glidden](#), who used an adventure wheelchair to explore the terrain and assess the current trails. He recommended a broader, firmer treadway with minimal horizontal slope and improved signage.

The group also collaborated with Matt Coughlan from Recon Trail Design, a firm specializing in accessible trails, who considered Glidden’s suggestions during planning.

Now, with a map in place, requests for proposals will be sent out in a few months.

“Making the road and trail more accessible is relatively straightforward,” Glidden said. “[My] suggestions for removing and minimizing physical and communications barriers represent opportunities for making this property more accessible to a wider group of users.”

Multi-phase development

The project will be conducted in three phases across several years.

The first step is wetland habitat restoration. KELT will use the MNRCP funding to ensure that the three culverts to be replaced are designed and built to meet the Department of Marine Resources [standards](#). Morgan anticipates design and permitting to wrap up later this year for culvert replacement construction in 2026.

After this, grant funding from the Recreational Trails Program and the Maine Outdoor Heritage Fund will enhance the trail system to meet accessibility requirements.

Finally, a 10-foot-wide private roadway (where the trail starts) will be regraded in 2027, according to the best practice [guidelines](#) set forth by the Maine DEP Bureau of Land and Water Quality.

“One important provision of MNRCP grant is long-term monitoring,” Morgan said. “This spring, we will conduct baseline monitoring to serve as a comparison point five years after construction when we hope to demonstrate, quantitatively, the success.”



The Center Point Preserve kiosk will soon be updated with additional information about the All Persons Trail. *Andrew Morgan photo*

‘Nature for nature’s sake’

While KELT manages over 4,300 acres, what makes Center Point Preserve unique, according to Morgan, is its array of white pine, white cedar and northern red oak trees that provide “exceptional” birding opportunities — with black-capped chickadees, brown creepers, downy woodpeckers and bald eagles that call the forest home.

Although the property is open to the public from dawn to dusk to protect its ecological value, biking is only allowed along the road, camping and fires are not permitted, and no waste may be left behind.

“There used to be a house that got removed when the property was conserved,” Morgan said. “[For that reason] the accessible trail design follows historically impacted locations with resilient soil types where limited trees must be removed. We envision rewilding the habitat after the trail is created.”

Ed Friedman, chairperson of the FOMB board, has worked with landowners for years to preserve the property’s natural state.

“Because the Bay area already has so many accessible trail opportunities, our focus is on the wildlife who don’t have much of a say on their future,” Friedman said. “While regrettable, the existing lower road is not completely accessible, [but] most of the path is suitable, and FOMB would probably support the initiative if it did not require enduring environmental harm.”

Morgan emphasized that KELT has also been working with stakeholders to advance plans for the section of the road and proposed trail, which is not exclusively managed by the land trust and is in firm legal standing to proceed.

“Not all wild places need to be accessible to all people, in all ways, at all times, a troubling trend in today’s society,” said Friedman, encouraging “nature for nature’s sake.”

Similar projects are emerging across the Midcoast, such as the Americans with Disabilities Act–compliant Rhoda and Lee Cohan River Trail in Damariscotta, managed by the Coastal Rivers Conservation Trust.

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[Pemaquid Peninsula paves way for accesible nature trails](#)

This trend has opened up a new debate about “nature for all” or “nature for nature’s sake.”

“Having a well-defined trail allows us to rewild other parts of the property,” Morgan said. “At its core, this project is about habitat restoration, from enhancing wetlands with increased tidal flow to concentrating visitors onto a single durable trail surface that will enable us to reforest the areas cleared from prior land uses.”

Visit kennebecestuary.org/center-point-all-persons-trail-project to learn more about the endeavor. Donations can be made further down on the landing page.