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Where She Walked, Many Have Followed

By Michael Wright

For nearly 20 years the Southampton Trails Preservation Society has been at the forefront of efforts to create and protect the serpentine hiking trails through the East End's dwindling open space. And for all of those years, the trails society has been led by a tenacious trailblazer.

But now Dai Dayton, the first and only president of the trails society, is stepping down after 19 years at the helm.

Ms. Dayton will continue to be a member of the trails society and will take over as chairwoman of one of its offshoot groups: Horses on Trails, or HOT. She said this week that her decision to step down as head of the trails society was necessary because of increasing demands on her time by her landscaping business and family.

"I just really don't have the time to put into it that I had in the past," Ms. Dayton, said. "Also, you know, it's been 19 years with the same person in charge. The makeup of the group has changed a lot. They are more of a real hiking group now, and I think it will be good to have someone who relates with that more in charge."

She will be replaced as president by Glorian Berk, a semi-retired vice president of finance at Time Incorporated.

Ms. Dayton's move to the head of HOT harkens back to the earliest days of the Southampton Trails Preservation Society.

At its inception in 1986, the group was formed by about 10 horseback riding enthusiasts who were incensed by the loss of their favorite riding trail in the Long Pond Greenbelt. The trail is now Wainscott Harbor Road. Early on, the group set out to see that Southampton Town government take steps to protect such woodland trails from creeping development.

"We basically went to [then Supervisor Fred W. Thiele Jr.] with the idea of trying to preserve historic trails," Ms. Dayton said. "He agreed with us and wrote the trail code into the Planning Board process. We would go to the Planning Board meetings and take maps of the existing trails to make sure they were preserved."

In the ensuing years, as members of the trails society blazed trails through local woodlands and made sure they were protected in each development application that came forward, the maps of Southampton's hiking trails grew into the dozens. From those grassroots beginnings, the Trails Preservation Society, under Ms. Dayton's leadership,

has grown to more than 100 members. It hosts guided hikes along the dozens of meticulously mapped trails it maintains on town and county land.

“Pretty much anywhere you see green on a map now, you have a trail system,” Ms. Dayton said. “That is where you will find us.”

Today, the society maintains and maps more than 20 loop trails—hiking trails that start and end at the same location—on town and county owned lands to facilitate easy hikes. Many trails have short loops and longer loops, leading through multiple parcels of protected open space. The trails are meticulously laid out to lead through and past interesting natural features of the land—a painstaking effort that Ms. Dayton credits mostly to naturalist and Southampton Press columnist Mike Bottini—like isolated immense rocks known as glacial erratics, overlooks and unique groves of trees.

With the recent subdivision of a farm parcel in Sagaponack, the group is now close to completing what it calls the “Bay to Ocean” trail, leading from Sag Harbor to the ocean beach near Peters Pond in Sagaponack.

The advent of the Community Preservation Fund and the expenditure of millions of dollars to protect vast swaths of open space pushed the trails society to create and map new trails with each acquisition, Ms. Dayton said. The town’s open space preservation resources have also facilitated the cataloguing of the now sprawling trail system. The town is currently developing a map of all the town’s trails.

“The CPF department has been the biggest help we’ve ever had,” Ms. Dayton said. “They are marking trails with GPS now and flagging new trails all over.”

After protecting existing trails from development proposals became the norm, the trails group began focusing on blazing new trails, most importantly a connecting route for the Paumanok Path—a planned hiking trail covering the length of Long Island. Today, completing the Paumanok Path remains one of the trails society’s chief goals. Because of heavy development and the bottleneck of narrow land around the Shinnecock Canal, Southampton holds the dubious distinction of being the last gap in the path, a 10-mile stretch between Hampton Bays and North Sea.

Helping to close that gap will be the job of new trails society president Ms. Berk, who only recently moved to the East End full time and has been a member of the trails society for five years.

“But I think she’s going to really pick up the things we haven’t accomplished yet,” Ms. Dayton said of her replacement.

Ms. Berk says that completing the Paumanok Path and expanding the group’s membership to boost its advocacy influence will be at the top of her to-do list.

“I see a great opportunity for this organization to expand,” she said this week. “More active members will help us speak with government bodies about preservation, which is one of the things that brings people out here. We have some big-ticket goals.”