



# KEY

UNCHECKED GROWTH COMPLICATES  
ACCESS TO VERMONT'S KINGDOM TRAILS

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BY DEVON O'NEIL

# THE

PHOTOS BY DAVE TRUMPORE

# KINGDOM

November 5, 2019.

The letter landed on Abby Long's desk on a Tuesday. It came in a yellow envelope, addressed to Long and the Kingdom Trail Association in East Burke, Vermont, a small village in the state's remote Northeast Kingdom that is home to one of the best trail networks in America.

Long, the organization's 35-year-old executive director, had taken the job in February 2018. She'd moved from Colorado after growing up in Harrisville, New Hampshire, a town not much larger than Burke, whose 1,700 residents are spread across 34 square miles. Long studied nonprofit management at the School for International Training in Brattleboro, earning a master's in intercultural service, leadership and management. Though she calls herself a "leisurely intermediate" mountain biker, she understood well the significance of the Kingdom Trails network, which includes 83 miles of the region's sweetest singletrack, all of it built on private land. "Its purpose truly is to serve and uplift this community," Long says.

The letter's timing was inconvenient, to say the least. In a few weeks, "KT" (which is what locals call the association) was scheduled to host its 25th anniversary landowner appreciation gala. Long, who'd been named Citizen of the Year by the Burke Area Chamber of Commerce in September, felt her heart begin to race as she read the letter. It was from Gary and Sue Burrington, who owned the most significant piece of land in the network: 500 acres on Darling Hill, the epicenter of the system and home to its three most iconic trails—Today's Tour, Troll Stroll and Tap 'n Die, collectively known as the "Three Ts." The letter was also signed by two of the Burringtons' neighbors, who owned smaller parcels. "As of the end of this mountain biking season 2019," it read, "the three properties listed below will no longer allow mountain biking." Long started to cry.

The letter didn't give a reason for the closures, and it didn't have to. Use of the land by KT and its riders was entirely by permission of the landowners, who numbered nearly 100 and received no financial compensation. Access could be rescinded at any time, which had always been a selling point.

Long had been trying to contact the Burringtons for months. "You'd always hear rumblings," she says. "Just that they were unhappy. But I also wanted to walk a fine line and give them privacy." Before the letter arrived, KT had commissioned a \$100,000 capacity study to analyze impacts, establish tipping points, and set management strategies across the network. "I knew things were coming to a head," Long says. "A busy summer day here is too much; there's a lot of people. The trails are fine because there are so many miles, but the village infrastructure cannot handle it. And we don't have enough parking." Long would call the Burringtons and leave messages, but she hadn't heard back until now.

The closures eliminated more than 13 miles of trail and crucial connectivity, dividing Darling Hill into northern and southern segments now linked by a road. Locals were furious. But more than that, they feared a domino effect. If the Burringtons were willing to rescind access, would others follow suit? Could the entire network crumble?

**WHEN A 6-FOOT-6 SKIER NAMED JOHN WORTH STARTED** building trails on Darling Hill in the late 1980s, East Burke was a summer ghost town. Tumbleweed rolled down the streets if the wind blew. Worth and some of his friends had bikes, and they wanted somewhere to ride them. Worth only started asking landowners for permission once he realized his routes could get discovered and destroyed, he chuckles.

He pitched the idea of a formal trail network to Doug Kitchel, an elderly, well-connected local who owned Burke Mountain ski area and had dreamed of turning their 18th century town into a four-season destination. Intrigued, Kitchel started going door to door, requesting permission to expand the network and recruiting other founders. It officially opened in 1994. Worth sold \$3 maps out of a popup tent at East Burke Sports, which he co-owns, then pivoted to \$5 day passes.



Abby Long (bottom right) strives to maintain a symbiotic relationship between riders and East Burke land owners, a delicate balance required to protect access for bikes in this New England riding mecca.





The Darling Hill detour.

Their broader goal was to boost the economy across the Northeast Kingdom, which had long been the poorest region of Vermont. Its three counties—Essex, Caledonia and Orleans—rank last in per capita income in the state, averaging around \$20,000 a year. The network grew slowly at first, relying on word of mouth, then picked up steam around the turn of the millennium. Stories touting its bounty appeared in the *New York Times*, *Bike Magazine*, the *Boston Globe*, and the *Montreal Gazette*. From 2004, when former executive director Tim Tierney became KT's first full-time salaried employee, until Tierney left in 2017, the network grew from 4,000 annual visits to 100,000. Revenue jumped from \$18,000 to more than \$1 million. Eighty-four percent of riders came from out of state, and two out of every five were Canadian (East Burke is a half-hour drive from the border.)

The trails became a blueprint for how to enrich a rural economy with recreation. Other towns studied their success; the provincial government in Quebec modeled its own network after KT's. Instead of long, dead summers in East Burke, now KT was helping to pay for new sidewalks and lines were snaking out of every shop and restaurant in town. "We were starving. This area was economically repressed for a long time," says Village Sport Shop co-owner Chris Hibshman, 44, who was born on Darling Hill and grew up with his older sister, Carrie Tomczyk, at Mountain View Farm. "Then you could see this money coming in, and it was feeding a lot of families. The trails saved the Kingdom. There is no question."

Because Darling Hill is a glacial esker—basically a giant sand deposit—it offered a tamer alternative to the rugged tread found elsewhere in New England. "For the trail crew, a rock was a dinosaur egg," Tierney says.

KT representatives stressed "the common good" to landowners, and that included Gary Burrington, a fifth-generation Burke local who owned a road-and-bridge construction company. "Whenever I would approach Gary about building a new trail, he would be like, Do whatever you want on my land," Worth says. "That's why I developed it so heavily. He was a friendly landowner."

As ridership grew, locals converted barns into lodging and opened inns and bars and restaurants. "I didn't advertise, because I didn't have to," says Mike Mathers, a third-generation local who opened Mike's Tiki Bar in 2014 on a former gravel pit. Trail fees eventually grew to \$20 a day or \$75 a year, but the visitors kept coming. And spending: the network is estimated to inject more than \$10 million per year into the local economy.

They brought negative impacts too, namely entitlement and a lack of awareness that the trails exist on private land. KT discouraged groups of more than 10, but Worth sometimes saw 30 people pedaling in a line, all wearing the same jersey. The effects were exacerbated as KT's numbers grew to 115,000 annual visits in 2017, then 137,000 in 2018—including 4,300 for the annual NEMBA Fest on Darling Hill, which some liken to "Woodstock for mountain bikers." KT had stopped marketing, but it didn't matter. "Let's say one out of 10 people are assholes," says Johnny Lotti, a Massachusetts transplant who opened Café Lotti, East Burke's prime coffee shop, in 2016. "With 10 people, you can deal with that, but with 120,000 people, now you've got 12,000 assholes."

Complicating matters further, due to state law the landowners could not receive direct compensation from KT if they wanted to maintain liability protection on their property. Which meant that anyone who didn't benefit from having a business in town was left to pay exorbitant property taxes—Vermont's tax rate is the fifth highest in the U.S.—with nothing to show for their trouble.

User numbers grew to a point where KT staff spent most weekend days directing traffic in town and pleading with visitors not to ride two abreast on local roads. Visits ballooned to 150,000 in 2019; KT brought in \$1.3 million. "That's when I noticed it was a different crowd," says local woodworker Doug Clarner, who rents his Burke Bike Barn and Maple Grove Farmhouse to visiting riders. Guests destroyed his lawn with a bonfire and broke his sink. Some wouldn't even ride; they just came to party. "You had the faithful saying, 'I don't ride on the weekends anymore' or 'That trail was hammered' or 'I can't even get a seat at the Tiki Bar,'" Clarner says. "I think it was just unchecked growth."



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—ABBY LONG



The Kingdom's abundance of trails and New England charm attract hoards of riders—it's a blessing and a curse for the small town of East Burke.



**“IT CAME TO THE POINT WHERE WE COULDN'T DO IT ANYMORE. WE COULDN'T WALK THE TRAILS, BECAUSE THERE WERE JUST SO MANY BIKES, SO MUCH TRAFFIC, AND IT KEPT ESCALATING.”**

—GARY BURRINGTON, DARLING HILL LANDOWNER

KT still made videos thanking its landowners and feted them at an annual appreciation dinner. But the intimacy had changed. “It got bigger than we could deal with,” says Liliias Ide, KT’s longtime communications manager and a Kingdom native. “I think that’s where that personal touch got lost.”

**DUE TO THE UNIQUE ARRANGEMENT PROPPING UP THE** network, it didn’t take long for worry to creep in among locals. This was especially true on Darling Hill, which had grown more congested than other areas. Everyone noticed when the Burringtons got horses and knew it wouldn’t be a good mix. Businesses were so busy renting bikes, slinging drinks and catering to guests that the network’s frailty fell into the shadows. “We forgot to say, ‘It’s private and there are landowners and you might see some horses, and be careful crossing the road because people have to get to work,’” Chris Hibshman says, sitting with his sister outside their bike shop on Darling Hill. Tomczyk adds, “It was a system that had been siloed: the landowners were siloed, the business owners were siloed, the riders were siloed.” She sighs. “But my friend had been saying to me, ‘It’s a delicate house of cards.’”

“That was always there, and you’d live in semi denial of it. Losing permission was something I didn’t consider enough, honestly,” says Tierney, who now works for the state’s Department of Economic Development.

Gary Burrington dropped hints from time to time that he wasn’t pleased. “I was at the Pub one night,” Clarner recalls, “and he gave me a list of three things that were upsetting him, and I said, ‘I don’t blame ya.’” Still, no one thought the Burringtons would close the trails. “It broke my heart,” Worth says. “I was devastated.”

As word spread, social media exploded. And in a move that the organization now regrets, KT turtled. Riders turned on each other, looking for someone to blame. “It was embarrassing, as a rider, as a business owner, as a member of this community,” says Tomczyk, who served on KT’s board in the early 2000s. “It just was so far from the nature of this whole positive thing.” A lengthy Facebook thread on KT’s page with hundreds of comments, many of them critical of the organization, suddenly was deleted. (Long says this was accidental.)

“We were in crisis mode,” Long explains, sitting on her front porch 18 months later. “We were letting it all happen and watching it unfold, eyes wide, not knowing the best approach. And all I wanted to do was pump the brakes. But you can’t with social media, and you can’t when you’re supposed to be serving the community.”

On January 23, 2020, more than two months after the initial letter arrived, KT posted a note to its community, signed by Long and the board of directors. It apologized for their “lack of voice and leadership.”

“It is clear that we have insufficiently managed the exceptional growth of Kingdom Trails, which has placed undue stress and impacts on our community,” it read. “We, like many others, have been caught up in the trail network’s economic successes but have missed the unintended consequences and negative outcomes that growth brings. We wholeheartedly commit to a change in focus.”

KT announced the creation of a Landowner Advisory Committee, which Clarner chairs, as well as a new code of conduct and a public forum to clear the air. The letter did not directly reference the closures, nor name the landowners who had rescinded access.

Locals tried to bridge the divide with the Burringtons, to no avail. They included Jim O’Reilly, one of KT’s founding members, whose Wildflower Inn on Darling Hill hosted NEMBA Fest; Clarner; and Mathers, who grew up with and worked for Burrington, and remains one of his closest friends. KT, meanwhile, stayed out of it, focusing on its internal changes. For a year and a half, the Burringtons said nothing publicly about their decision.

**THAT CHANGED ON A SUNNY WEDNESDAY** afternoon in May 2021. Sue Burrington answered the door at their home on Darling Hill, and Gary soon joined her on the stoop. They consented to an interview after a few minutes of small talk. Gary, who is 69, had a neatly trimmed white beard and wore a Burke Mountain T-shirt from 1990 that read: “Just ski it. Nobody owns it.”

He explained that his grandfather bought three dairy farms and gave one to each of his children. Gary spent his first five years living in the building that houses East Burke Sports, then moved to their farm on Darling Hill. He left to attend school in Massachusetts when he was 13. Seventeen years later, he returned to the Kingdom and entered the construction business. He and Sue, who’s from West Burke, married 15 years ago.

Early in the trail network’s existence, anyone who rode on his land was a familiar face. “It was easy, you could deal with it,” he says, chuckling at his lack of foresight. “I’m one of those guys who never thought the Internet would take off. How stupid can you be?”

A friend’s mountain bike rested against his barn. Gary used to have one, too, but he rarely rode it. He served on KT’s board for a brief period decades ago, when meetings were still held at the Pub and attendees could drink beer. After they became more formal, he lost interest.

In the mid 2000s, he and Sue used to ride their ATV down to the west branch of the Passumpsic River at the bottom of their property. They swam and walked the trails. “Then it came to the point where we couldn’t do it anymore,” he says. “We couldn’t walk the trails, because there were just so many bikes, so much traffic, and it kept escalating.”

They would often see groups lounging in the field near their pond down the hill. Gary lamented that the rise in popularity had made it harder for locals to afford homes. Darling Hill Road



Brooks Curran, left, and Ella and Alex McAndrew enjoy their backyard trails in a rare moment of quiet.

was quiet all winter, then it became a highway. They heard mountain bikers from their bedroom window first thing in the morning. “They’re excited, they’re happy,” Sue says. “But, I’m sorry. We live here, you know?”

The Burringtons had friends whose horses were spooked by cyclists patting them on the butt as they rode by. Sue felt anxious about riding on their property. “Personally,” she says, “we haven’t had any one-on-one confrontations, but it’s just cockiness on the trails.”

Last October, when traffic was relatively light due to the pandemic, Gary says he sat in his barn and watched 50 mountain bikers ride past in a half-hour. Friends told him he could limit the road traffic by allowing them back on the trails. “Everybody said, you’re crazy. But we had to do something,” he says. “You can’t not be able to use the property for what we want to use it for.” He sighed. “We’d lost our quality of life, and as Vermonters, that’s why we live here. So we finally put our foot down and said, we want it back, we want our lifestyle back. Even though it’s never going to be the same. As long as the trails exist, the Kingdom has changed. Some people think it’s changed for the good, and there are some of us who think maybe the change isn’t as beneficial as everybody who’s benefiting from it claims it is.”

The Burringtons still allow bikes on their land farther north, a 200-acre plot where the White School and Flower Brook trails lead to East Haven. “That’s sort of the direction we’d like to see them go,” he says, adding that he and Sue did not pressure their neighbors into joining them on the letter they sent to KT. “We just told them we’re going to do it, and they said they would like to participate.”

Gary is well aware how unpopular his decision was among locals, and he does not relish that aspect. “It’s maybe a little selfish, but I don’t think so,” he says. “We never intended to hurt the economy, and I don’t think we’ve hurt the economy one iota.”

Was it hard to send the letter? “No,” he says, looking out at his field. “When we made our minds up, it was the simplest thing, like, ahhhh.”

**AS PAINFUL AS THE RECKONING WAS FOR KT TO BEAR, “IT** really lit a fire in us,” says Abby Long. “We’re the ones who are responsible for every trail user who comes into our community. They have to be respectful, and we’ll continue saying that forever. You can’t just say it once and move on, because there are so many people coming every day.”

The association partnered with the Vermont Land Trust to raise \$600,000 and purchase 270 acres abutting the Burringtons’ land last year. The capacity study that KT commissioned before the closure brought a slew of recom-

## RIDE WITH GRATITUDE

mendations this spring, including how to reduce congestion and where to build a new welcome center and parking.

Meanwhile, Long is working with legislators to change the statute that prevents landowners from receiving compensation—either as direct payments or tax breaks—for recreational use of their property. “If Vermont wants to represent itself as the outdoor mecca in the Northeast,” she says, “then they need to see who the backbone of those experiences are, and it’s the private landowners.”

The money KT used to spend creating marketing videos now is spent on education, like how to “ride with gratitude” and how to ride near horses. KT also doled out \$50,000 in grants last year to feed locals in need and build a new playground.

Because the pandemic limited the number of visitors in 2020, it’s hard to know how the likely surge this summer will play out, especially on Darling Hill. KT and its stakeholders are intent on finding a better balance. “This is such an economically depressed area, and people want it not to be, but it’s kind of like, pick your poison,” says Olympic bronze medalist Georgia Gould, who moved to East Burke from Colorado in 2018 and sits on the Landowner Committee. KT still built 13 miles of trail last year, offsetting the lost mileage if not the iconic routes. “You can’t do that anywhere else but on private land,” Gould says, highlighting the model’s nimbleness.

KT is currently reviewing its E-bike policy and has asked its 103 landowners to guide that direction. “Our No. 1 lesson from the closures,” Long says, “is to communicate better.”

When locals walk into Café Lotti in the morning, they don’t talk about how Darling Hill changed, they talk about what’s coming up—the future. “It’s still fragile, but a lot of people have gotten the message. It was a heck of a wakeup call,” Johnny Lotti says. “This is not something we can afford to lose.” ▲