

# **Ecosystem Services and Municipal Planning:**

## **Engaging Local Decision- Makers**

**A Town Hall Discussion**

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**ACES 2014  
December 9, 2014  
Arlington, VA**

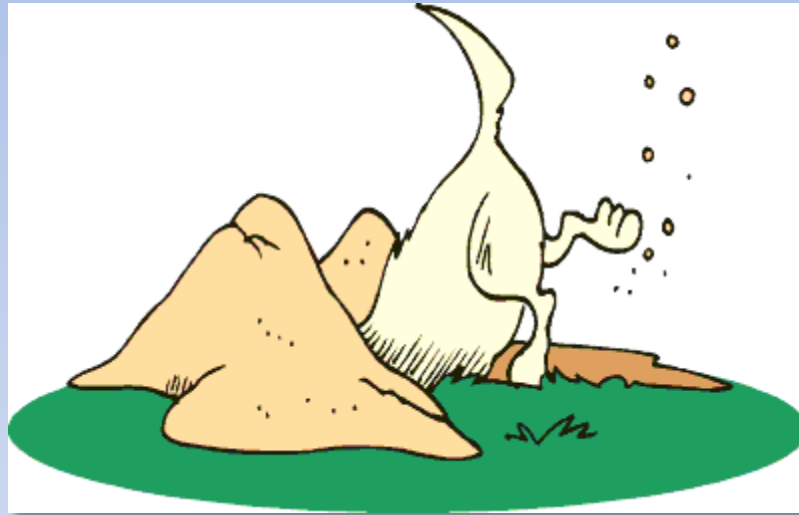
# Background

- In towns and small cities, important land-use and planning decisions are made by boards composed of citizens who often have little or no scientific background
- Many municipalities face issues that lend themselves to an ecosystem services approach
- Knowledge and tools relating to ecosystem services are often not available to these organizations

# Town Hall Objectives

- Gather information on the utility of an ecosystem services approach at the municipal level
- Identify available tools and resources
- Identify obstacles and challenges to including ecosystem services in municipal decision-making
- Assess interest in building a community of practice among local planning organizations and natural resources professionals

# Tails from the Trenches:



one nearsighted view



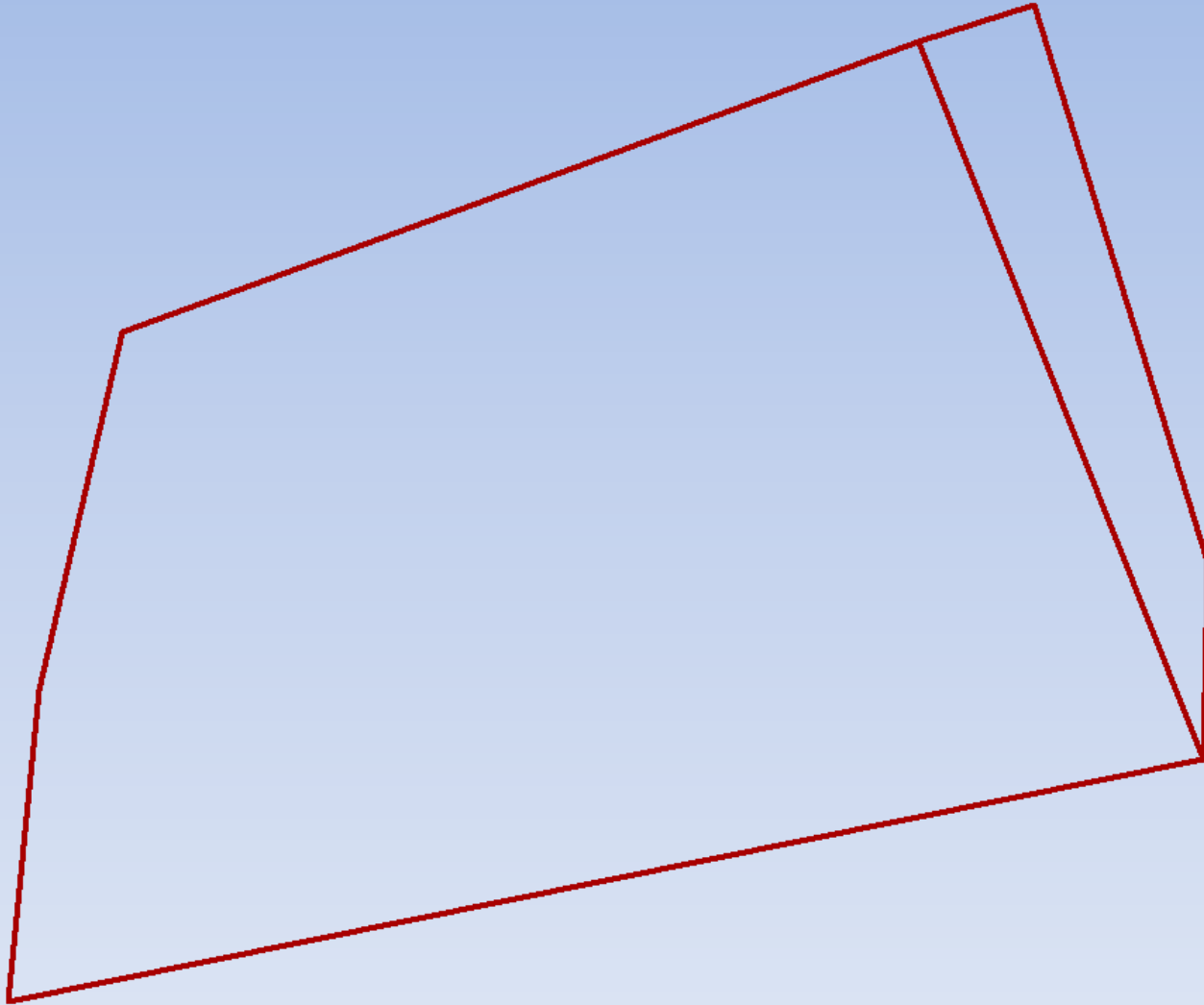
In New Hampshire most Planning Boards and Conservation Commissions are made up of volunteers, some bring knowledge and experience, some don't.

Despite the desire, it takes precious time and commitment to acquire the expertise and be able to bring ecosystem questions and concerns to the discussion. And board turnover can erase gains.

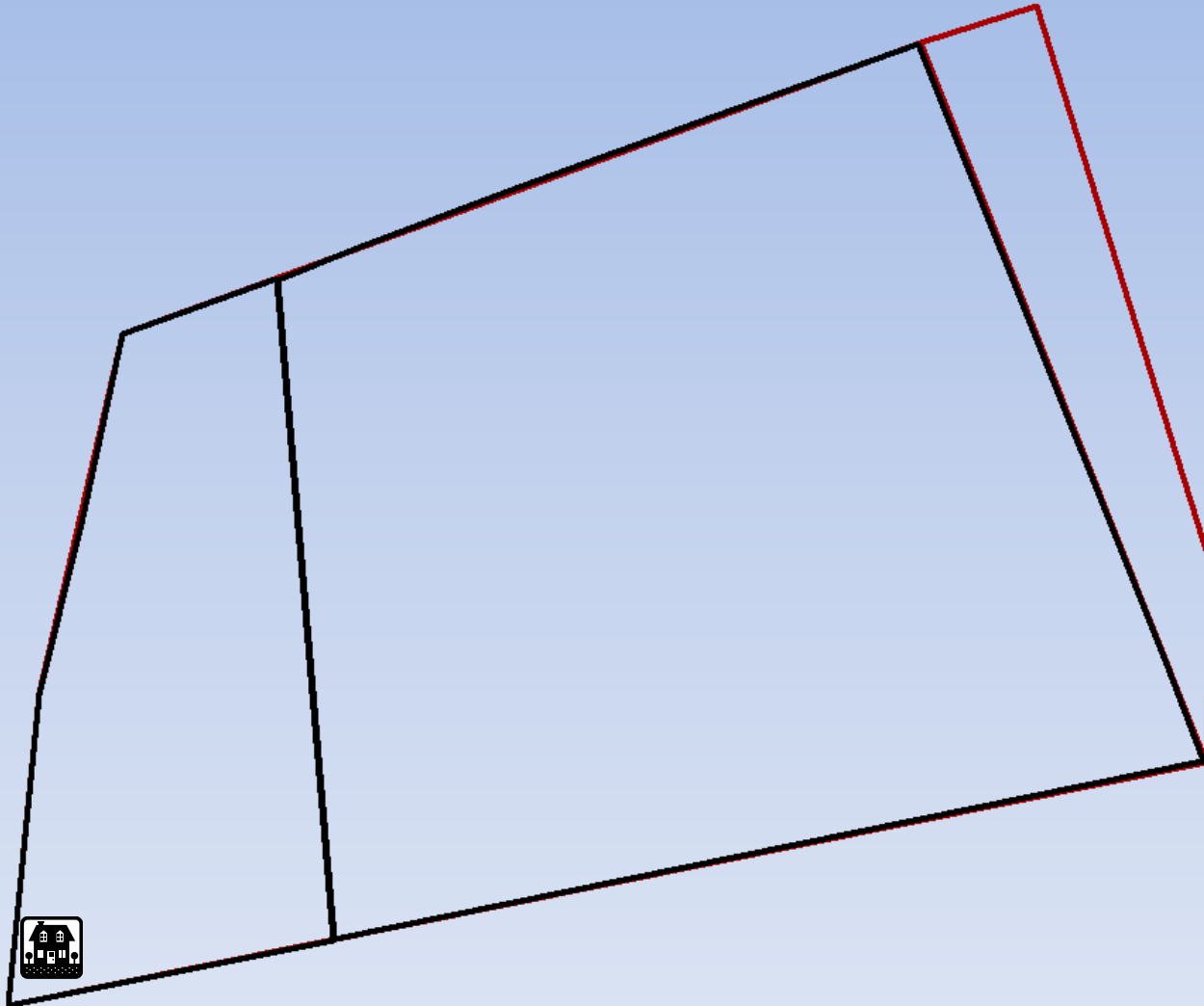
The development side comes with funding and expertise motivated by the decision to convert to what is considered to be the "land's highest and best use."

A true story.

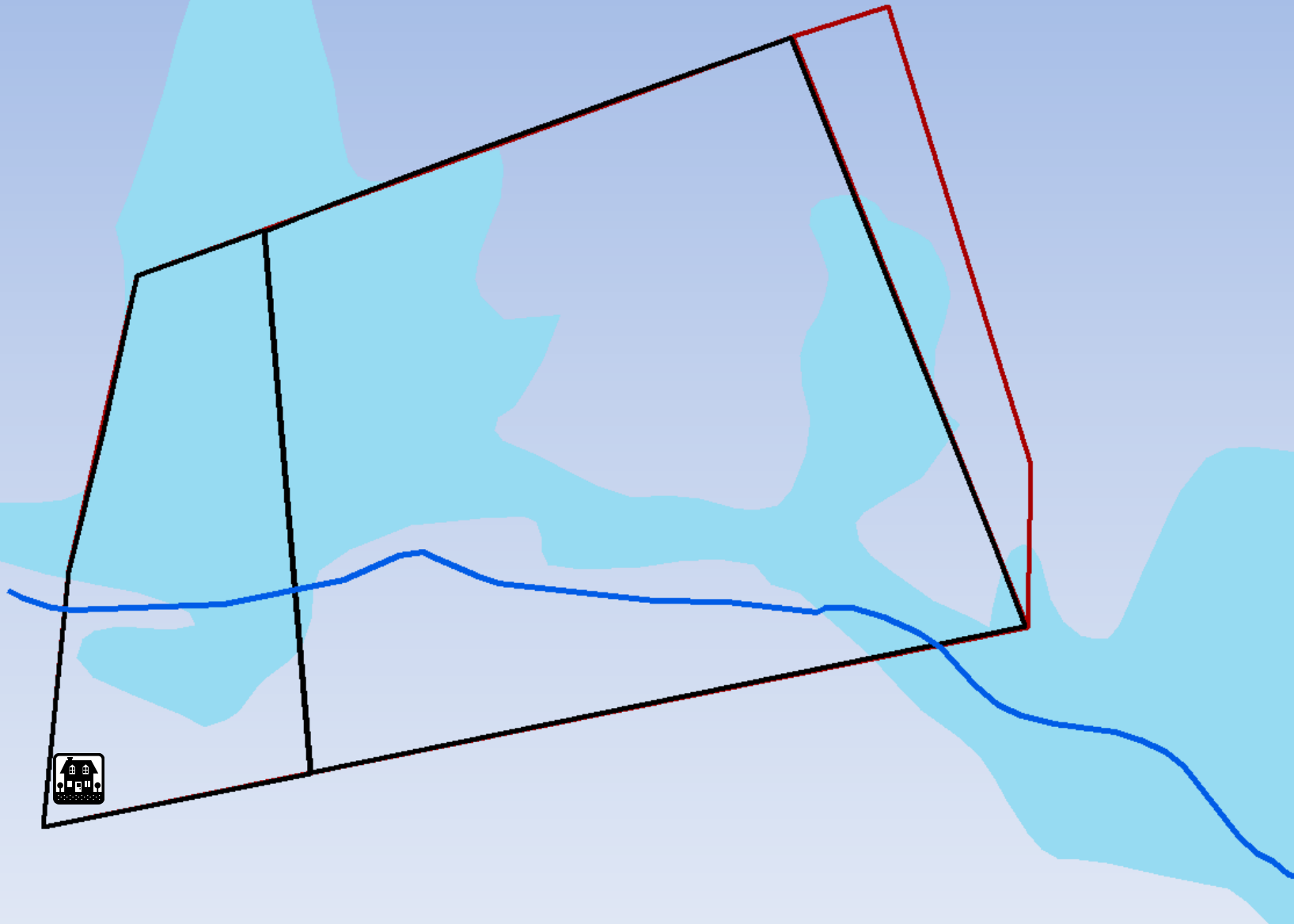
A landowner held two parcels, a big one and skinny one.



The landowner wished to subdivide the big parcel to sell a building lot.

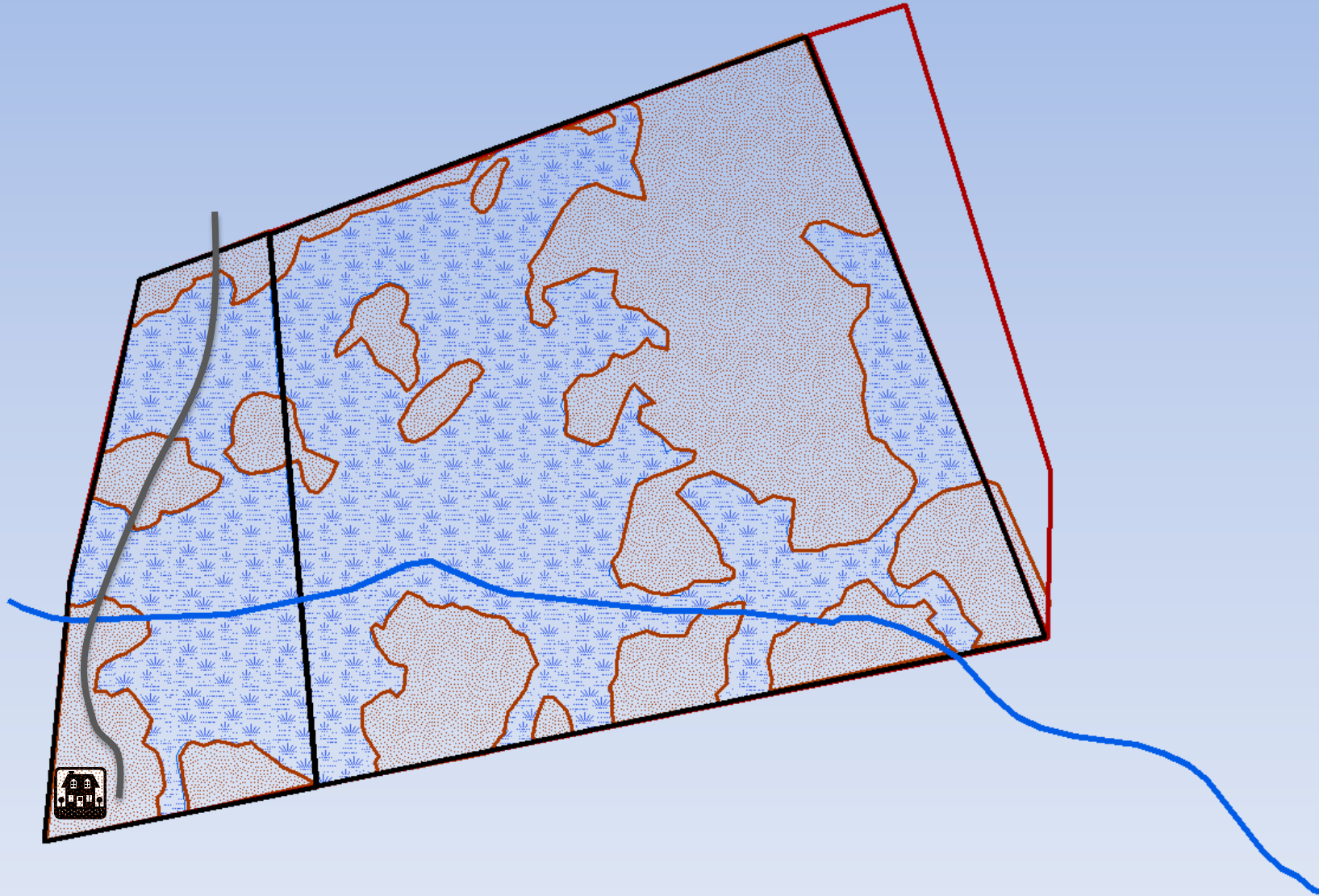


The land had a stream running through it and the county soil survey said some headwater wetlands.

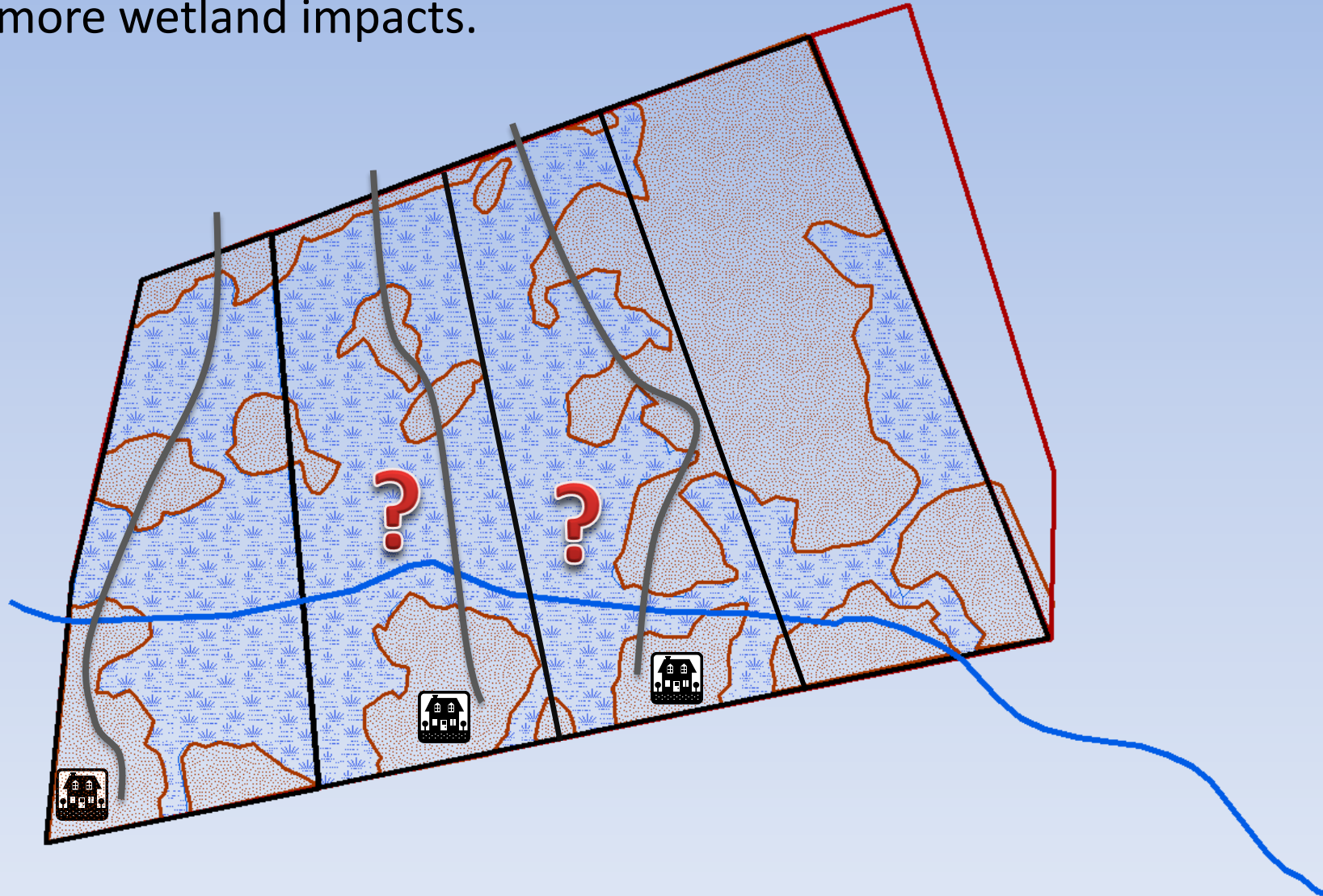




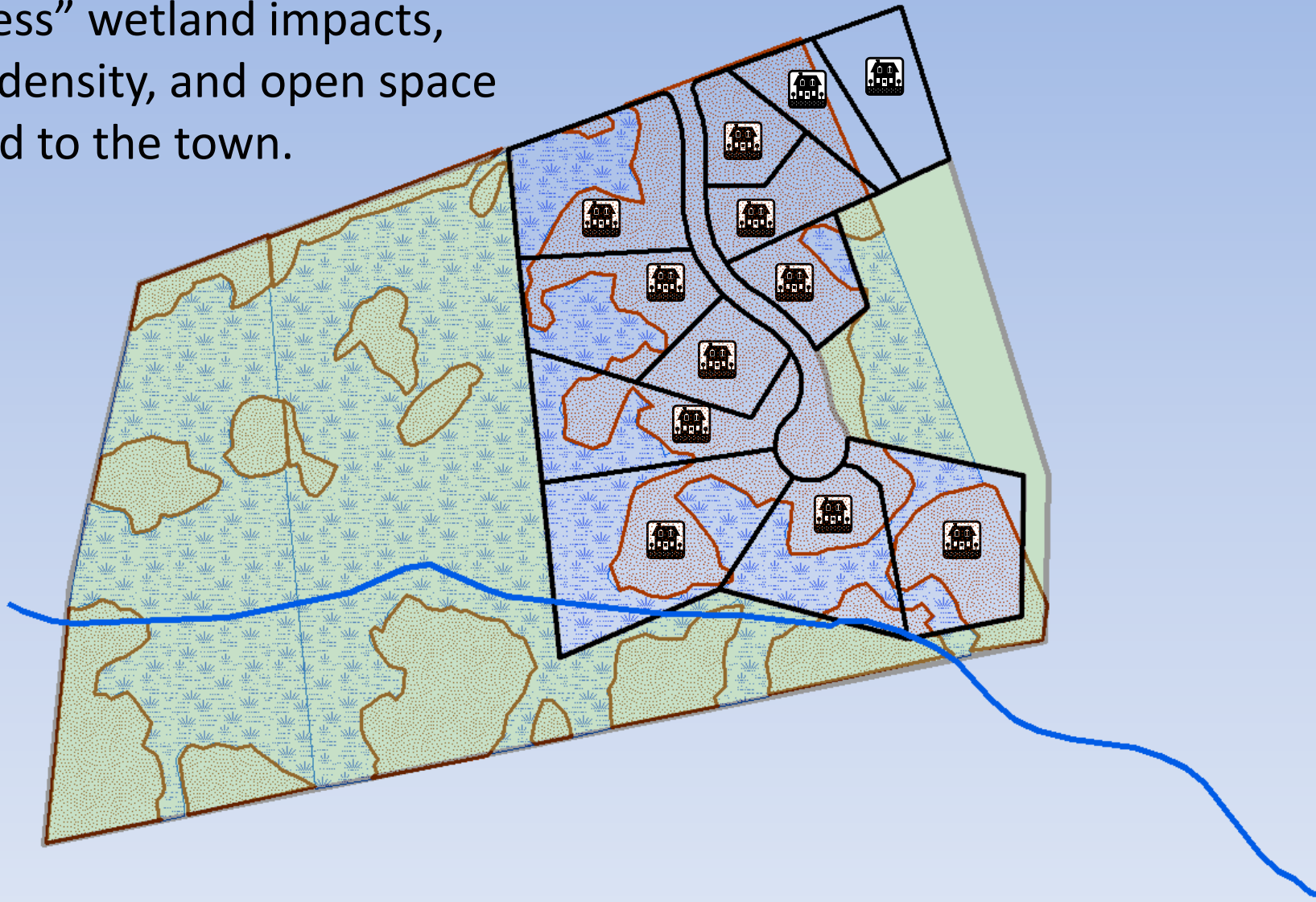
A site specific survey gave more information about the wetlands.















The Conservation Commission and the Planning Board wondered about future subdivisions that might create more wetland impacts.



The developer made a different proposal: a cluster subdivision with “less” wetland impacts, higher density, and open space donated to the town.



# Were the ecosystem services considered?

Function/Value	Capability	
	Y	N
 Groundwater Recharge/Discharge	X	
 Floodflow Alteration	X	
 Fish and Shellfish Habitat		X
 Sediment/Toxicant Retention	X	
 Nutrient Removal	X	
 Production Export	X	
 Sediment/Shoreline Stabilization	X	
 Wildlife Habitat	X	
 Recreation	X	
 Educational/Scientific Value	X	
 Uniqueness/Heritage	X	
 Visual Quality/Aesthetics	X	
ES Endangered Species Habitat	X	
Other		

The Conservation Commission asked about the function and values of the wetlands. The developer provided a reasonable evaluation. (It was a bit of a fluke in my 10 years of observation.)

We often get responses like:  
*“Wildlife that is utilizing the area of development will migrate to other areas of the undeveloped portions of the property and surrounding lands.”*

Which might be **“death by a thousand cuts.”**



# Did the additional information get better results?

The jury is still out. Where is the follow-up evaluation?

- Relatively speaking, more information about the ecosystem was on the table.
- It was also a more than usual response to the board request.
- Expert advice would say the cluster or conservation subdivision is a development alternative with less impact. This assumes the ordinance is written and executed well.
- In the grand scheme, will the 12 cluster lots be better than the three or four houses?

## What would help? Just some thoughts.

- Information has to be site specific. Generalities do not give the land use boards enough “cover” to overcome landowner rights vs. community costs and needs.
- Quantifying the long term benefits or the costs could be a huge help, but it is difficult. The more local the better.
- Board members don’t have the time to educate themselves. Providing training has a higher chance of success, but it may have to be done multiple times and over a period of time. A long term consultant to the boards can help, but that requires funding.
- Concrete and relevant examples can be helpful. It has to be more than cheerleading.

## One last thought.

- Its not only the little and medium sized towns that need help in considering the larger picture. Sometimes larger cities fail to do proper long term planning themselves.

Case in point is a seacoast city that receives 60% of its water supply from a small river and reservoir, However, after 50 plus years it still does not address the protection of the watershed which supplies the water. (Perhaps a politically sensitive subject, since the city is not in the watershed.)

# Question 1

- What is the general level of understanding of and interest in ecosystem services among local planning boards and conservation commissions ?



## Question 2

- To what degree are ecosystem services, particularly green infrastructure, considered in the municipal planning process?

## Question 3 – Priority Topic

- Which ecosystem services are the most appropriate to address at the local planning level?

## Question 4 – Priority topic

- What tools are currently available for quantifying and valuing ecosystem services?
- How accessible are these tools to users without scientific training?

## Question 5 – Priority topic


- What services/support are currently available to assist local groups if they wanted to adopt an ecosystem services approach; e.g., who is currently offering assistance or training?

## Question 6

- **What impediments exist at the local planning level to embracing an ecosystem services approach?**

## Question 7

- o **Success stories. Are there specific examples of communities who have embraced an ecosystem services approach?**



**Other ideas, items that should be considered when designing a research project aimed at assessing the feasibility of implementing ecosystem services approaches at the local level?**

## Wrap Up...

- Synthesis
- Next steps
- Thank you for your time and interest!