

## Sen. Gregg lauded as champion for Great Bay: Nature Conservancy marks 5,000th acre preserved

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NEWMARKET — After being lauded Monday as an "unwavering champion" behind protecting Great Bay, U.S. Sen. Judd Gregg was posing for pictures in front of the preserve when he was asked if he could "come up with money for a dead birch tree."

The ashen tree outside the The Nature Conservancy's office looked like it could use some help, but the request, of course, was a joke.

Yet with numbers like the following you can see why he was asked: the Rye Republican has delivered more than \$171 million in federal funds back home, including \$56 million dedicated to Great Bay, to help protect more than 337,000 acres statewide.



EJ Hersom/Staff photographer U.S. Sen. Judd Gregg speaks at a news conference for The Nature Conservancy Monday in Durham.

Now Gregg says he's looking to retire from the Senate after 16 years, bringing with him what he and others describe as a personal stake in the state's natural landscape. He says he and his wife will stay active in land stewardship, but some in the field are worried the state will lose one of its biggest boosters, especially as environmental concerns mount.

"That did raise a red flag when I heard he was retiring," said Anna Boudreau, executive director of the Strafford Rivers Conservancy Inc. "We definitely discussed that at the board level."

Gregg has also been able to steer home \$15,000 to help The Great Bay Resource Protection Partnership last year close on an easement on 15 acres in town, which planners described as the catalyst to four other landowners deciding to preserve their land and secure the partnership's 5,000th protected acre.

The funds were derived from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, which falls within the Department of Commerce, the same agency Gregg could have led as secretary had he accepted President Barack Obama's nomination.

The partnership and others gathered outside the conservancy office Monday to celebrate the "5,000 acres for people and nature" milestone, and some lavished Gregg with praise. Daryl Burnett, the conservancy's state director, said preservation is a result of public officials, different groups and landowners coming together. But he said Gregg deserves special credit for grasping the "urgency of protecting gems like Great Bay," which is home to fishing, wildlife and waterfowl hunting, hiking, cross-country skiing, bird watching and other activities.

Burnett's words served to remind the audience that while Gregg is known for being a fiscal conservative, especially these days while he does battle with Democrats in Washington, he's also nurtured a reputation — a legacy, some say — as a committed conservationist.

"He personally understands conservation, personally understands why we need to preserve New Hampshire's landscape and he's used his influence in Washington to fight for conservation," said Jack Savage, a spokesman for the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests.

"People don't need to convince him," Boudreau added.

Gregg said his work stems from his upbringing by parents that enjoyed summers along the coast and who "were totally committed to good stewardship" of the state and its natural character.

"I think it was Mark Twain who said in the South the people define the land and in the North the land defines the people," Gregg said in an interview. "And that's certainly true of New Hampshire. People come to New Hampshire for the physical beauty, and they see it as a place where they can raise a family, get a decent job, but also be in a place that's beautiful. It's not by luck."

Gregg rattled off a slew of efforts dating to the early 1900s to protect and preserve the state's natural resources, adding, "It's just my job to keep it going."

Gregg began leaving an environmental imprint before hitting the Senate. It was 1989, during the first week of his run as governor, when the Pease Air Force Base closed and efforts sprung up to develop environmentally sensitive land around it. He opposed the efforts, he recalled, insisting the land be turned into a wildlife sanctuary, one that served as the "anchor" for Great Bay preservation efforts.

Two decades later, Dave Langley was standing alongside the senator as he relayed his family's experience protecting their Durham homestead, where archaeologists helped realize his "boyhood dream" when they discovered about 5,000 artifacts dating back 300 years.

As he spoke with eventgoers and surveyed the land, Gregg, wearing a tie under his green Windbreaker, appeared somewhat content with what he's been able to do. Yet it wasn't clear if his contribution has made his decision to leave elected office easier.

"I haven't stopped and I don't plan to stop simply because I'm no longer in the Senate," he said. "In a year and a half Kathy and I plan to be very active citizens of New Hampshire and be very, very active on these issues."

That's welcome news, conservationists say, considering the issues impacting Great Bay.

The increasing amount of pavement being laid is sending storm-water rife with fertilizer and pesticides into the bay, accounting for a sizable portion of the "nitrogen loading" there, said Joel Harrington, director of government relations for the conservancy.

Nitrogen impacts the ability for organisms in the bay to get oxygen and its impact on the oyster population has been profound. Oysters serve as "filter feeders," feeding on all sorts of nutrients and cleaning the bay, sort of like a natural swimming pool filter, he said.

"We're going to need help" from the remaining and new members of the state's congressional delegation, Harrington said. "And we hope that that legacy continues beyond Sen. Gregg."



EJ Hersom/Staff photographer Frank Smas, left, and his daughter Kerri Merrill walk along land he donated to the Nature Conservancy in Durham after a news conference Monday to celebrate the group's 5,000 acre milestone.



EJ Hersom/Staff photographer Land donor David Langley speaks on behalf of land owners who give easements to their land to The Nature Conservancy during a news conference in Durham Monday.