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## **Nature lovers have their permanent nest**

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MONTPELIER — The North Branch Nature Center has served as a nature lovers' outdoor classroom for the past 17 years. Now, with the purchase of its 28-acre site, it has a permanent home.

"This is really huge for us," said Chip Darmstadt, executive director of the organization. "Now we can start really dreaming and planning for the future."

The purchase of the land for \$100,000 from the Vermont Institute of Natural Science (VINS) was made possible by a one-year, interest-free loan made by an anonymous donor. The nature center split from VINS in 2006 and became a nonprofit in its own right. Since that time the center has leased the center from VINS for what Darmstadt said were very favorable terms. However, the lease was due to expire, VINS was looking to sell the property, and in looking at the financial picture the opportunity to purchase the land seemed to make sense.

"Before, we were leasing and it really has held us back," he said. "We felt that we really needed to properly plan for the future... to secure the land where we're deeply rooted."

Now that the organization has a permanent home it is possible to attract more funding from interested foundations, donors, and the community.

Montpelier Mayor John Hollar said the center provides an important service to the community. "Its programs for children and the public have enriched our community for years," said the mayor. "I look forward to seeing the nature center continue to thrive and grow."

The nature center's facilities include an old farmhouse for collections and offices, and a winterized barn for programs. In addition, there are trails, community gardens, and a pedestrian bridge that connects to the North Branch Municipal Park.

It would be safe to say that thousands of Montpelier kids have attended nature camp at the site since 1997. These days its ECO-education program reaches hundreds of Vermont school kids annually.

But Darmstadt says that many people come to just ramble on the trails, maybe spy a bird or two, or simply be in nature.

"People love to come here and just enjoy the property," he said. "Maybe they kayak, or garden... mom and dad and the kids. Just people doing their own thing."

There will be a community celebration of the purchase June 1 at the nature center's annual BirdFest.

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