



MOUNT GRACE LAND CONSERVATION TRUST

FULFILLING OUR MISSION

“Buy local” food initiatives have taken hold across the nation. Urban, suburban and rural communities alike are responding positively to the option of having access to fresher, tastier and more nutritious food. And we all feel better reducing the miles traveled and corresponding carbon footprint of our groceries.

I have experienced the evolution of thinking about appropriate roles for land trusts in the local food movement during my 19 years at Mount Grace Land Conservation Trust, a community-centered regional land trust in rural central Massachusetts, founded “to benefit the environment, the economy, and future generations.”

In 1996, the late Chuck Matthei, founder of Equity Trust and earlier co-founder of the Institute for Community Economics, visited with me and the Mount Grace Board of Directors to urge us to take a more creative and proactive role to save the Bittersweet Farm CSA, one of only a few Community Supported Agriculture projects operating at the time. While the farmland

was indeed conserved and continues to be organically farmed today, the *whole farm*—house, barns and land—sold recently at a price unaffordable to farmers, much as it was unaffordable to the farmers then.

Today, Mount Grace is nearing completion of our first farmland purchase as part of our Campaign for Affordable Farms. Using the community land trust model—land trust ownership of land and individual ownership of homes and other buildings upon that land—Mount Grace is committed to making whole farms permanently affordable to the farmers growing the local food people want to eat.

This shared-ownership model of whole farm affordability is one way to make farms available and affordable for farmers. In many real estate markets, the combined cost—and resulting debt—of land, housing and equipment purchase is the single biggest barrier to entering and expanding farmers. Here in Massachusetts, farmers are fortunate that our state-funded agricultural preservation restrictions include an option-at-agricultural-value that restricts resale prices for farmland. But, in too many instances this leads to an unaffordable house surrounded by picturesque farmland.

After having conserved more than three dozen farms, among hundreds of forest, habitat and recreation projects, using traditional agricultural preservation restrictions and conservation easements, our board decided in 2006 that new approaches were called for to meet the needs of our community. Now, the ends we seek to achieve include this objective: “New partnerships and [conservation easements] assure some farms, forests and homes remain affordable.”

Owning and leasing farmland is one way Mount Grace can demonstrate the stewardship aspect of our mission as a model to other land trusts and private landowners. Organizations like Equity Trust and Land For Good provide leasing and transition planning tools to help individuals, municipalities and land trusts take the next step toward making access to farmland, as well as nearby housing, permanently affordable for farmers. At our first project, prominently located along the Connecticut River—both an American Heritage River and the country’s first National Blueway—visitors to Red Fire Farm at Montague Meadows can experience this model firsthand as they walk the self-guided farm trail.

I know Chuck Matthei, who once gave a plenary address at Rally making the case for closer partnerships among conservation (land) and community (housing) land trusts, would welcome land trust involvement in strengthening local food systems around the country. 🌱

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