



The Role of Relationships in Saving Land

*How community conservation builds broad
and deep support for land trusts*

BY Edith Pepper Goltra



Sometimes you learn the hard way. But in the end a difficult experience can be so transformational that it changes the way you do things. So it was for Columbia Land Trust.

In 2002 the land trust was closing on a 1,500-acre property in Washington's Klickitat County. As a courtesy, staff went before the county commission to outline their plans. A firestorm of criticism erupted in the room. Commissioners were alarmed by the land trust's plans to take a large chunk of real estate off the local tax rolls, and they were generally skeptical of this out-of-town organization, headquartered in another county. "How does it feel," one commissioner asked, "to come out here and tell us how to lead our lives?"

Columbia Land Trust staff quickly re-evaluated their approach. They made every effort to listen to the county's concerns and respond accordingly. They even agreed to continue paying property taxes on the land—a significant decision for the land trust, but one that made the county a true partner moving forward. Years later one of the Klickitat County commissioners said to Glenn Lamb, Columbia Land Trust's executive director, "We're beginning to see why you have the word 'trust' in your name."

Identifying and responding to community concerns is now a standard practice for Columbia Land Trust. "We are interested in listening to people, learning from what we hear and being willing to change what we do based on what we learn," says Lamb.

This inclusive type of approach—known as "community conservation"—is a psychological shift for some land trusts. Rather than simply thinking in terms of transactions, the

approach calls on land trusts to have their ears to the ground, to include different groups of people at the table and to be willing to think about land conservation through different perspectives. The goal is for land trusts to become truly integrated into the community—something that is vitally important for the long-term success of organizations and for voluntary land conservation in general.

"In some ways, community conservation is a big adjustment," says Rob Aldrich, the Alliance's director of community conservation. "In other ways, it's using the same relationship-building skills we've always used with landowners—just with a broader audience. It asks: 'How can we connect land conservation to the other issues that people care about?'"

Many land trusts are already seeing the benefits. New and interesting projects come to fruition. Public engagement increases. Excitement from donors and foundations rises. And the organization finds itself growing in new directions.

And community conservation works no matter the size of the organization. For example, the Boxford Trails Association/Boxford Open Land Trust in Massachusetts maintains an impressive 100 miles of trails with an all-volunteer crew composed of the board of directors and devoted community members. It also partners with local land trusts on certain projects and tasks. "Small, all-volunteer land trusts need to look around and see who else is doing what," says Natasha Grigg, president of BTA/BOLT. "When it comes to getting help, you are not alone."



COURTESY OF TED SOLDAN

Michigan Nature Association volunteer Ted Soldan builds a boardwalk at Estivant Pines, a preserve he and his wife love and care for with other volunteers.

Building a Network of Stewards

Over the past half-century, the Michigan Nature Association (MNA) has protected 170 nature sanctuaries across the state. Maintaining and stewarding this vast network of properties has been a top priority for the land trust, and MNA has tackled the challenge in an innovative fashion. It assigns stewardship organizers to different regions in the state; the organizers, in turn, engage members of the community and get them involved with the sanctuaries—and the organization—in countless ways.

"The key is to make people aware of what's in their area in the first place," says Andy Bacon, MNA's stewardship coordinator. "If we can't touch these people, they won't be able to engage."

A regional stewardship organizer is the human face of MNA. Does someone in the community love wildflowers? Does another person prefer the camaraderie of volunteer workdays? The organizer knows. "This system works because we have a real live person who can reach out and interact with people," says Bacon. "It's tough to get those

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Opposite: Feeding the troops at a Columbia Land Trust community volunteer project

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relationships started, but once you get them going, they're everything."

MNA also has lead volunteers, known as stewards, that are assigned to watch over specific sanctuaries throughout the state. People like Ted and Alice Soldan, who first came to the Upper Peninsula's Estivant Pines Sanctuary in 1979 and fell in love with the majestic, centuries-old forest there. With each subsequent visit, Ted Soldan remembers thinking of the beautiful trails and boardwalks: "Somebody's got to be maintaining all this stuff, and I'd like to help if I can." The Soldans eventually became stewards of the sanctuary and, with legions of other volunteers, have spent long hours keeping the property in pristine shape.

MNA has a knack for making volunteers feel like they belong, like they are equally invested in the success of the preserves. In 2013 alone, volunteers logged more than 3,800 hours on the land trust's behalf. One way MNA engenders such loyalty is by regularly thanking volunteers—at picnics and gatherings, for instance, but also by annually honoring volunteers who've shown distinguished service. In addition, MNA organizes outings, such as kayak trips, photo tours and wildflower walkabouts, which are not only educational but bring people together around a common purpose.

"The MNA people are so fun to be with," says Sue McEwen, a sanctuary steward. "We're from all walks of life, but in general it's a group that's focused on the same issues and the same goals."

Partnering for Livable Communities

The Valley Conservation Council (VCC) serves the entire Shenandoah Valley region, an 11-county area in Virginia. Since 1990, VCC has accomplished its broad community-based conservation agenda with a lean staff. "We work with many partners," says Executive Director Faye Cooper, "because the valley is quite large and we're too small to do it all ourselves."

One thing that VCC does exceptionally well is facilitate landowner-to-landowner relationships. Many of the organization's informational gatherings, for example, are hosted by current easement donors at their farms. The meetings have a casual, neighborly atmosphere. Food is out on the table. Farmers mill around in their blue jeans. Eventually the easement donors stand up and talk about protecting their land. "They are our best sales people and marketing agents," says Cooper. "We're there simply to answer questions and provide support."

VCC also has had a significant impact on local planning through its education



Page Valley neighbors, easement donors and VCC staff gather at a "meet and greet" on a conserved farm to share information about the easement process.

VALLEY CONSERVATION COUNCIL

and outreach efforts. Its seminal publication, *Better Models for Development in the Shenandoah Valley*, has been placed in the hands of nearly every planning commissioner, town council member, mayor and supervisor in the valley over the years. VCC's work has resulted in a number of important projects throughout the region, including the creation of greenways, agricultural districts and historic preservation projects in downtown areas.

"In large part, our focus does remain on the land conservation piece. However, our complementary goal is to have healthy, livable communities and vibrant downtowns," says Cooper. "If we can make our villages and towns wonderful places to live, people will be less inclined to spread out on 5-acre lots across the countryside."

Putting a [Feathery] Face on Conservation



A pair of ospreys and a webcam can change things dramatically, as Essex County Greenbelt, a land trust in Massachusetts, recently discovered.

For several years the ospreys, affectionately named Ethel and Allyn, have been returning to the same spot at the Allyn Cox Reservation, the location of Greenbelt's headquarters, to build their nest. In 2013 Greenbelt installed a video camera to provide live, streaming Web coverage of the birds' activities. People were instantly mesmerized. Greenbelt's website got *60,000 hits from around the world* while the ospreys were on the nest. Ethel and Allyn returned to build their nest right on schedule in April 2014.

Greenbelt's osprey program, which includes research and monitoring of nearly 32 nests

throughout the region, has greatly expanded Greenbelt's circle of supporters. Many new volunteers have come on board. School children—locally and from around the country—are plugged into the organization's work. "People are so curious and moved by these beautiful, majestic creatures," says Mary Williamson, Greenbelt's director of development and community engagement.

In the past, Greenbelt has had to work to get press coverage. Not so after Allyn and Ethel became overnight sensations. The media wanted the story. The land trust even got a two-page spread in *Northshore Magazine*, which allowed it to share its conservation initiatives and many achievements with a broad audience. "The ospreys," says Williamson, "have put us on the map."

ESSEX COUNTY GREENBELT



DAVE HARP

Eastern Shore Land Conservancy helps towns like Chestertown, Maryland, stay vibrant, healthy places to live, work and play.

Asking a Different Set of Questions

Since 1990, Eastern Shore Land Conservancy (ESLC) has played an integral role in preserving and enhancing the unique and irreplaceable qualities of Maryland’s Eastern Shore. The organization’s focus, however, has steadily broadened over the years. Initially it worked primarily to protect open space and working lands. But as development advanced, altering the region’s landscapes with each passing year, ESLC began posing a different set of questions.

“We asked ourselves, ‘What value can land trusts bring to communities? How can conservation improve people’s quality of life?’” says Amy Owsley, deputy director of ESLC.

Today ESLC’s work embodies the spirit of community conservation. The land trust works to build partnerships between conservation groups, business owners, local governments and neighborhoods—all in an effort to make communities stronger, more vibrant places to live.

“It has meant doing business in a different way,” says Rob Etgen, ESLC’s executive director. “It takes courage. You have to knock on doors. You enter into conversations. Whatever comes of the process is authentically coming from the community. It requires listening in a real way to where people are—and where the anxiety in the community might be.”

When an old, historic property in the town of East New Market was under threat of development, the community brought in ESLC to help facilitate a community visioning process. People wanted to consider options for future growth before it was too late. After a comprehensive design process, the town decided to buy the historic



With 14 years at the Land Trust Alliance, Rob Aldrich recently transitioned to his new role as director of community conservation.

SEAN ROBERTSON

property and build a playground, as well as invest in other projects that would restore the town’s sense of identity.

ESLC is increasingly committed to doing conservation projects that respond to the community’s interests and needs. Several years ago the land trust launched an initiative called “Inviting the Whole Community.” This year-long outreach/ input program called upon staff and board members to go out into the community and “interview people who didn’t look like them,” says Etgen. Based on the feedback, ESLC launched a community-based conservation initiative for town parks and greenbelts that will serve a much broader diversity of people. The land trust also created a Center for Towns, a collaborative partnership that provides education, design and planning resources for Eastern Shore towns.

“We once had a funder jokingly ask if our efforts were about ‘pickling the region’ through preservation,” says Owsley. “But then he hit on what we really do: help communities chart a path for change that is based on the region’s inherent strengths, assets and needs.”

Planning for Tomorrow

Looking ahead, it will be more important than ever for land trusts to build strong

relationships in their communities. The U.S. population will increase. Property values near metropolitan areas will rise, putting mounting development pressure on conservation lands. Conservation organizations will continue to face political and legal challenges.

“Many land trusts have already been doing community conservation,” says the Alliance’s Rob Aldrich. “Today’s successful land trusts are redefining their roles in their communities to be more responsive to what the community wants, provide all types of people with access to conservation land and encourage diversity within their ranks.” Some may see this as mission creep, says Aldrich, “But there’s no question that communities will be more willing to fight for conservation lands—and for the land trusts themselves—if people in those communities feel truly engaged and invested on a personal level.”

Columbia Land Trust’s Glenn Lamb puts it this way: “When the people of this place know and love and care for it so much that they will never let anything happen to it, that’s when we will have achieved our goals.”

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