

About Land Trusts

Land trusts are charitable organizations that conserve land by purchasing or accepting donations of land and conservation easements. Land trust work is based on voluntary agreements with landowners and creating projects with win-win outcomes for communities.

Nearly a hundred land trusts work to protect important lands across Pennsylvania. Governed by unpaid boards of directors, they range from all-volunteer groups working in a single municipality to large multi-county organizations with a dozen or more staff. They depend on landowner goodwill, member support and other donations for their continuing efforts.

Some land trusts address a wide variety of conservation needs. Some focus on a single conservation priority. Land trusts may conserve land to protect our rivers, streams and groundwater. They may protect community open space for new parks, scenic views, wildlife preserves or neighborhood gardens. They may conserve productive farmland or working forests. Some focus on protecting biodiversity while others preserve traditional hunting grounds.

Regardless of size or conservation focus, Pennsylvania's land trusts share a commitment to conserving natural resources for the people of today and for the generations not yet born.

The Countryside Conservancy is a regional land trust dedicated to the preservation of open lands and natural resources in and near the Tunkhannock Creek Watershed and the Endless Mountains in portions



Countryside
Conservancy

of Wyomissing, Susquehanna and Lackawanna counties for the public benefit now, and for years to come.

About Conservation Easements

A conservation easement is a legal agreement between a landowner and a land trust or governmental body.

The agreement limits certain uses on all or a portion of a property for conservation purposes *while keeping the property in the landowner's ownership.*

The easement is nearly always perpetual—applying to all present and future owners of the land—and is recorded at the County Recorder of Deeds office.

The restrictions contained in the easement are tailored to the particular property and to the goals of the landowner and conservation organization. An easement might state, for example, that no building or road may be placed within 200 feet of a stream passing through a property; however, the easement might allow for a house to be built elsewhere on the land. Another easement might support farming but forbid development.

Yet another easement might prohibit all activities except for sustainable forestry and recreation. The flexibility of the easement tool is endless.

Most conservation easements held by land trusts are donated by landowners who wish to protect a beloved place. In rare cases, they are sold at a bargain price or fair market value. Federal tax benefits are available to easement donors whose donations meet IRS requirements.

The Pennsylvania Land Trust Association promotes voluntary land conservation by supporting land trusts and building a positive climate for conservation in Pennsylvania.



Visit www.conserveland.org

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*Don't judge each day
by the harvest you reap,
but by the seeds
you plant*

— Robert Louis Stevenson



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Pennsylvania's Land Trusts
Conserving our Commonwealth

Countryside
Conservancy

Christmas Trees and Conservation

The Spring Hills Farm Story

Margaret Hull stands strong and tall like the trees she takes for timber. Her bronze arms are strung with muscle from daily farm labor.

She cuts locust logs, splits them, digs the holes and sets the fence posts to hold her team of Belgian draft horses. She drags the logs from the woods using her team to lessen the impact on the forest floor. She also digs diversion ditches and repairs the machinery.

Her mind is sound and analytical. But the romantic in Hull comes out when she speaks about children, farms, horses and dogs. "Something happens to a child when they touch a horse. Their whole face changes," she said. "So few children these days are turned loose and use nature as their playground. It really concerns me that in the future they might not have anywhere to go."

Hull's Spring Hills Farm is one of two working farms remaining in Lackawanna County's North Abington Township.



Margaret Hull

Margaret recognized the challenges in keeping the farm when she and her sisters took title in 1983. Margaret is the main laborer of the land and her sisters and 88-year-old father are active partners. None of the family members want to see the farm developed.

"I want this farm to be able to be passed on to the next generation," Margaret said. "Land values are going up so far that it is possible that the farm's

future value will make the estate taxes unaffordable. The bottom line is: The whole family loves the farm; we'd like to keep it, and if we can't, we don't want to see it become overdeveloped."



Farm fresh...A visit to Spring Hills Farm nets this friend wreaths, greens and maple syrup.

Countryside Conservancy

In 1998 she discovered the Countryside Conservancy, a young land trust made up of area residents who work to help people like Margaret conserve their land.

Conservation organizations like the Conservancy recognize the public benefit of preserving community open space and character, the security of growing food locally and the urgency of protecting the resource base of Pennsylvania's agricultural economy. The work of these organizations focuses on finding conservation solutions that both provide significant public benefit and meet the needs of the landowner.

"We are trying to help protect the rural character and a way of life in the Abingtons so that our children and grandchildren can play in the woods or wade in a creek," said Kathleen Graff, an active volunteer and past president of the Conservancy. "We have this wonderful beautiful area right outside [the City of] Scranton, but our window of opportunity is closing rapidly."

Conserving the Land

Margaret and her sisters decided to use two tools to conserve their land: They donated a conservation easement on 123 acres of mixed forest and wetlands to the Countryside Conservancy and sold a conservation easement on 114 acres of farmland to the Lackawanna County Agricultural Land Preservation Board.

A conservation easement is an agreement between a landowner and a land trust or government conservation agency to limit development on the

"Having the easement gives the family more freedom. If we want, we can sell the land without compromising our values."

- Margaret Hull

land. Just as a utility easement gives a power company the right to use a portion of someone's land for power lines forever, a conservation easement gives the conserving organization the right to enforce the conservation restrictions of the easement forever.

Because the easement creates a public benefit and reduces the value of the property, the easement donation to the Conservancy is considered charitable. That provides a federal income tax deduction for the generous landowner.

Because the Pennsylvania General Assembly recognized that donating an easement does not work for everyone with prime productive farmland, they created the state's Agricultural Land Preservation Program to pay farmers for their development rights. The state program authorizes counties to establish Agricultural Land Preservation Boards and use state money to purchase conservation easements on high quality farmland threatened by development.

By donating an easement to the land trust and selling an easement to the County Board, Margaret was able to both conserve the land and meet her financial objectives including reducing her income tax and estate tax liabilities.

Conservation easements don't aim to prevent all uses of land, only those that would harm the conservation values to be protected. The Hull family still logs, syrups, grows Christmas trees and plants crops. They just won't be building hundreds of houses. Conservation easements give landowners another option to selling for development.



Margaret and her Belgian draft horses.

Looking Back, Looking Forward

Spring Hills Farm has always meant more to the community than a place to get their Christmas trees. For more than 50 years the farm has produced timber, maple syrup and a lot of childhood wonder. Countless school children have poured from their buses, destined for horse-drawn carriage rides and the experience of choosing the perfect Christmas tree for their classrooms.

The Hull sisters added environmental education to the carriage rides. Thousands of children, many of whom never saw a farm or even had a garden, learn how natural and agricultural systems work. College students interested in natural sciences often use the farm as an open-air laboratory.

Margaret, now an active volunteer with the Countryside Conservancy, helps other people find conservation tools that work for them.

"Once you go through the easement process, it's easier to help others understand how it works," Margaret said. "It has been wonderful. "Since my easement two of my neighbors signed on."



Neighbor Jim Rowlands, who grows wheat and tomatoes, was looking for an antidote for the gnawing feeling that his 130-acre farm would someday be developed into a resort. Rowlands applied to the Lackawanna County Agricultural Land Preservation Board, which purchased the development rights on his farm.

"The fact is, it does help financially and it gives me peace of mind," Rowlands said. "I know there are others that are getting into it."

The Countryside Conservancy hopes that more of Margaret's neighbors consider voluntary land conservation. Margaret's farm and others surround Lackawanna State Park. Protecting those lands from development is important to maintaining the area's scenic and agricultural character. It also helps to filter run off from developed areas before it enters the park's waterways.

"Father was sure this land would be sold off for development. He has been quite surprised."