About Land Trusts

Land trusts and landowners as well as government can access a variety of voluntary tools for conserving special places. The basic tools are described below.

A land trust can acquire land. The land trust then takes care of the property as a wildlife preserve, public recreation area or other conservation purpose. A landowner and land trust may create an agreement known as a conservation easement. The easement limits certain uses on all or a portion of a property for conservation purposes while keeping the property in the landowner’s ownership and control. Landowners can dedicate land and easements. These charitable gifts may qualify the donor for federal tax deductions. In unusual cases, the land trust may offer to purchase a property. To acquire or to sell the land to the government where the government is ready.

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 conservation, economies and property values. They depend on landowner goodwill, member support and other donations for their continuing efforts.

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A keystone parcel

For years Schlotterer had yearned to buy a small strip of land from John Gerstemeier for conservation and for a trail. But Gerstemeier, who worked his farm until his death, wasn’t interested.

Schlotterer recalls their pleasant bantering: “He would tell me, ‘you can’t afford this farm. It is worth one million dollars.’ He didn’t want to sell any of it.”

The farm is a keystone parcel, touched on all sides by history, agriculture and wildlife habitat.

On one side is the Peter Wentz Homestead, an 18th century farmstead listed on the national historic register. Its 90 acres are preserved as a county historic site.

Murrytown Farm, a working dairy farm and country market close to local residents, adjoins the land on the other side. The same family has operated Murrytown for more than 100 years.

Another farm and Schlotterer’s own 17 acres, which he painstakingly reforested with native hardwood trees, also border the Gerstemeier property.

Making deals

Following John Gerstemeier’s death, his estate sought to sell the land for its appraised value of $512,000.

Due to his love of this land, Schlotterer was determined to purchase it. The Gerstemeier heirs were interested in selling the farm, but the asking price was too high for them.

A conservation easement was the solution, wherein the conserving entity (the Gerstemeier estate) would restrict development on the land forever in exchange for a purchase price that reflects the economic value of the development restriction.

On one hand, Schlotterer was excited at the opportunity to purchase a parcel he believed to be of great importance to the community, and on the other hand, he was apprehensive about the financial risk involved.

Schlotterer, at considerable financial risk to himself, bought more time for the land trust and township to find another conservation buyer.

“It was pretty hard times back then,” Schlotterer said, laughing. “I'm so glad another party decided to buy it.”

Med-O-Vue, Inc., a local farming business looking for reasonably priced agricultural land, took similar steps and purchased the farm in August 2002, matching Schlotterer in the legal responsibility.

The farm would be owned once again by a farm family.

Increasing the yields

A bushel of protected land was forming in Worcester. The Gerstemeier parcel added 30 acres to 80 acres already conserved as part of the Peter Wentz Farmstead historic site.

Another parcel adjoining Gerstemeier, the Scarlett Farm, entered into the County Farmland Preservation Program shortly after the sale. Yet another 17 acres was gained when Schlotterer donated a conservation easement on his own property to Montgomery County Lands Trust.

Stewardship – long-term care for the land

In addition to his timely down payment on the Gerstemeier farm, his conservation easement donation, Schlotterer gave a generous gift to Montgomery County Lands Trust to be used for watching over both properties.

Future owners of properties subject to conservation easements – even though they benefit from purchasing the restricted land at a discount price – may not be as respectful of the conservation restrictions as their predecessors who placed the restrictions on the land. Consequently, “holdovers” of conservation easements such as Montgomery County Lands Trust must regularly inspect properties to ensure that agreed-upon conservation terms are followed. And if a violation is discovered, the holder needs to be prepared to enforce the restrictions.

Outreach and education to landowners who are hand-in-hand with these ongoing monitoring and enforcement responsibilities, the goal being to facilitate partnerships with landowners in support of conservation.

The costs of monitoring, enforcing and education add up over time. Consequently, landowners usually seek “stewardship” contributions to cover the long-term costs of watching over restricted properties. The stewardship contributions are invested and the investment income is used to cover the monitoring and other stewardship programs incurred by the land trust each year.

In recognition of Schlotterer’s untiring and generous leadership, a handsome plaque is set in stone on the Gerstemeier farm for all to see. Inscribed are these words:

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