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 results in projects with win-win outcomes for the landowners and the community. To learn more about land trusts in Pennsylvania, contact:

Pennsylvania Land Trust Association
1000 S. 16th St., 6th Floor
Philadelphia, PA 19103
Phone: 215-281-9656
Fax: 215-281-9701
Email: info@conserveland.org
Website: www.conserveland.org

Pennsylvania's Land Trusts
Conserving our Commonwealth

Conservation Options

Land trusts and landowners, as well as governments 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 agreement may be for a portion of a property for conservation purposes while keeping the property in the landowner's ownership and control. Landowners can always sell the land and retain the profits. These charitable gifts may qualify the donor for federal tax deductions. In unusual cases, the land trust may even purchase a property interest for an agreed to price using donations from others.

A land trust can provide a property, place a conservation easement on it, and then sell it to a conservation buyer—someone who wants the same property. Regulations may restrict the use of the property to a certain purpose. Sometimes a municipality or state agency wishes to conserve a property but can't meet the financial or zoning demands of the landowner. A land trust can help by appraising and then donating or selling the property to the government where the government takes over the property.

Growing Greener Program

Growing Greener is a program created by the state of Pennsylvania to provide financial assistance to local governments with resources and training to more effectively conserve land. It is comprised of more than 70 growing greener conservation organizations that collectively work to conserve land for the people of Pennsylvania.

Playing a Significant Role

Since 1957, the Wissahickon Valley Watershed Association has been working in partnership with Pennsylvania's land trusts by purchasing or accepting conservation easements. The association is a welcome addition to the land trust community. About 10,000 acres along the Wissahickon Creek are permanently protected, thanks in part to the leadership of the association.

A Ribbon of Blue, A Ribbon of Green

When we were children, my mother would point out places and say, "This used to be a field and that one a farm," and we would think, "Oh mom you're so old!" Ellen said. "I find myself saying the same thing to my children but now, it's everywhere—instead of once a year, it's happening so much faster now." Ellen and her brother had spent their childhood days riding horses, frolicking in fields or chasing crawfish in the Wissahickon Creek. Their great uncle's farm was a 300-acre natural playground, not only for them but also for other children and adults who lived in the area.

Ellen's mother, Jane O'Neil, inherited her bachelor uncle's farm and found herself fielding calls from developers offering big money. As she counted the new developments consuming the land around her, she began to wonder about her property's future.

Jane decided to ask her children how they felt about preserving the land. The family's unanimous decision was to forgo their inheritance and make a multi-million dollar gift to the community. Their great uncle's farm was a 300-acre natural playground, not only for their children but also for other children and adults who lived in the area.

We grew up with open land," Ellen said. "It's ingrained in us."

Ellen's mother, Jane O'Neil, inherited her bachelor uncle's farm and found herself fielding calls from developers offering big money. As she counted the new developments consuming the land around her, she began to wonder about her property's future.

Jane decided to ask her children how they felt about preserving the land. The family's unanimous decision was to forgo their inheritance and make a multi-million dollar gift to the community. Their great uncle's farm was a 300-acre natural playground, not only for their children but also for other children and adults who lived in the area.

Ellen decided to ask her children how they felt about preserving the land. The family's unanimous decision was to forgo their inheritance and make a multi-million dollar gift to the community. Their great uncle's farm was a 300-acre natural playground, not only for their children but also for other children and adults who lived in the area.

Our warmest appreciation to the many thoughtful and generous people who make land trust work possible. Among those people are Ellen Lea and her family. The land trust community is grateful to Ellen and her family for their leadership and for their record-setting gift.

Ellen's mother, Jane O'Neil, inherited her bachelor uncle's farm and found herself fielding calls from developers offering big money. As she counted the new developments consuming the land around her, she began to wonder about her property's future.

Jane decided to ask her children how they felt about preserving the land. The family's unanimous decision was to forgo their inheritance and make a multi-million dollar gift to the community. Their great uncle's farm was a 300-acre natural playground, not only for their children but also for other children and adults who lived in the area.

Ellen decided to ask her children how they felt about preserving the land. The family's unanimous decision was to forgo their inheritance and make a multi-million dollar gift to the community. Their great uncle's farm was a 300-acre natural playground, not only for their children but also for other children and adults who lived in the area.

Ellen decided to ask her children how they felt about preserving the land. The family's unanimous decision was to forgo their inheritance and make a multi-million dollar gift to the community. Their great uncle's farm was a 300-acre natural playground, not only for their children but also for other children and adults who lived in the area.

Ellen decided to ask her children how they felt about preserving the land. The family's unanimous decision was to forgo their inheritance and make a multi-million dollar gift to the community. Their great uncle's farm was a 300-acre natural playground, not only for their children but also for other children and adults who lived in the area.

Ellen decided to ask her children how they felt about preserving the land. The family's unanimous decision was to forgo their inheritance and make a multi-million dollar gift to the community. Their great uncle's farm was a 300-acre natural playground, not only for their children but also for other children and adults who lived in the area.

Ellen decided to ask her children how they felt about preserving the land. The family's unanimous decision was to forgo their inheritance and make a multi-million dollar gift to the community. Their great uncle's farm was a 300-acre natural playground, not only for their children but also for other children and adults who lived in the area.

Ellen decided to ask her children how they felt about preserving the land. The family's unanimous decision was to forgo their inheritance and make a multi-million dollar gift to the community. Their great uncle's farm was a 300-acre natural playground, not only for their children but also for other children and adults who lived in the area.
The Wissahiccon [sic] is of so remarkable a loveliness that, were it flowing in England, it would be the theme of every bard, and the common topic of every tongue, if, indeed, its banks were not parceled off in lots, at an exorbitant price, as building-sites for the villas of the opulent.”

—Edgar Allan Poe in Opal Magazine, 1844

A Ribbon of Blue

On a map, the Wissahiccon Creek is a ribbon of blue, surrounded by a ribbon of green—the Green Ribbon Preserve. The Wissahiccon Valley Watershed Association’s preserve provides open space, scenic beauty, wildlife habitat and a trail linking communities from northern Montgomery County to Philadelphia. The preserve also protects water quality, absorbing the pollution from storm water runoff before it reaches the stream.

“When I was nine, I visited the Big Sponges,” said Phoebe Dintino, who still lives in the creek valley and volunteers as an Association board member. “I think people have the misconception that because they don’t see the water and don’t hear the water, it’s not what you would expect to find in one of the top seven cities in the country.”

“WVWA conserves land by buying, and acquiring donations of land and then maintaining it. It also buys and accepts donations of conservation easements—keeping land in private ownership but with permanent restrictions on development. ‘It has been raining,” said Phoebe Dintino, who owns conserved land along the creek and volunteers as an Association board member. “Some parcels took us 20 years to achieve.”

“We want to see the preserve develop to its full potential. The preserve also protects water quality, absorbing the pollution from storm water runoff before it reaches the stream. Because stormwater flows across the land, whatever happens to the land will affect the creek. Protecting the Wissahiccon means protecting the land.

In the early 1980s, the Fairmount Park Commission and the city of Philadelphia decided that industry was damaging water quality and scenic quality of the creek. Then, in 1984, the creek contributed much of the city’s drinking water. The Commission ordered dozens of industrial facilities to tear down, as well as many inn and restaurants. The City acquired the land for the park to protect the drinking water supplies.

The one remaining sweet spot in the Valley Green Inn, a historical landmark owned by the charitable Friends of the Wissahiccon (and leased to a restaurateur). An inn and restaurant, it became a private residence, and then was torn down. In 1999, the Association bought the property and restored it as a private residence.

Carol DeLancey, director of special events for the Wissahiccon Valley Watershed Association (WVWA).

“The Wissahiccon [sic] is of so remarkable a loveliness that, were it flowing in England, it would be the theme of every bard, and the common topic of every tongue, if, indeed, its banks were not parceled off in lots, at an exorbitant price, as building-sites for the villa of the splendor.”


A Ribbon of Blue, A Ribbon of Green

In the early 1800s, the Fairmount Park Commission and the city of Philadelphia decided that industry was damaging water quality and the scenic quality of the creek. Then, in 1984, the creek contributed much of the city’s drinking water. The Commission ordered dozens of industrial facilities to tear down, as well as many inn and restaurants. The City acquired the land for the park to protect the drinking water supplies.

The one remaining sweet spot in the Valley Green Inn, a historical landmark owned by the charitable Friends of the Wissahiccon (and leased to a restaurateur). An inn and restaurant, it became a private residence, and then was torn down. In 1999, the Association bought the property and restored it as a private residence.

Water doesn’t recognize municipal lines

In the 1800s, conserving Philadelphia County lands was sufficient to protect the creek. However, as development pushed outward from the city and into Montgomery County in the mid-1900s, the upper portions of the creek begged for attention.

The Wissahiccon Valley Watershed Association took the lead and turned to protect Montgomery County lands in earnest about a quarter century ago. It has now protected more than 700 acres—the equivalent of 200 football fields.