



American Planning Association

Making Great Communities Happen

July/August 2014

PAS MEMO

Land Trusts: Conserving Land, Strengthening Communities

By Robert Aldrich

A large, community-supported organization in the Northwest is working to create walkable neighborhoods near transportation choices, jobs, and shopping in existing developed areas so that the majority of new residents choose to live there instead of sprawling out and over the natural areas, working farms, and forests that make the region special.

A similar organization outside of Atlanta is well-known for integrating land preservation; affordable, energy-efficient housing; and neighborhood revitalization.

A third organization in the Northeast conserved farmland that now allows a newly immigrated family to raise goats for sale to refugees in the area who had to travel long distances to buy goat meat or order it from as far away as Australia.

What do all of these organizations have in common? They are all land trusts.

Land trusts today are undertaking activities once considered the sole purview of planning offices, like getting involved in developing and implementing smart growth policies, comprehensive planning, TOD, and PDR. They are also innovating beyond their traditional role of solely protecting natural areas, connecting their work to pressing issues of health, food, affordable housing, youth and education, water quality, and disaster planning and recovery. Some land trusts are also involved in mitigating and adapting to climate change, as well as providing access to natural areas and addressing distressed properties in urban areas.

Because collaboration is in many land trusts' DNA, planners can take advantage of these burgeoning community-supported organizations to improve the quality and increase the impact of their work. This *PAS Memo* will provide a brief overview of land trusts and offer details of land trust work in specific sectors you may not have expected. It explains how and why you should work with land trusts, and ends with a glimpse at the possible future of land trusts and planning.

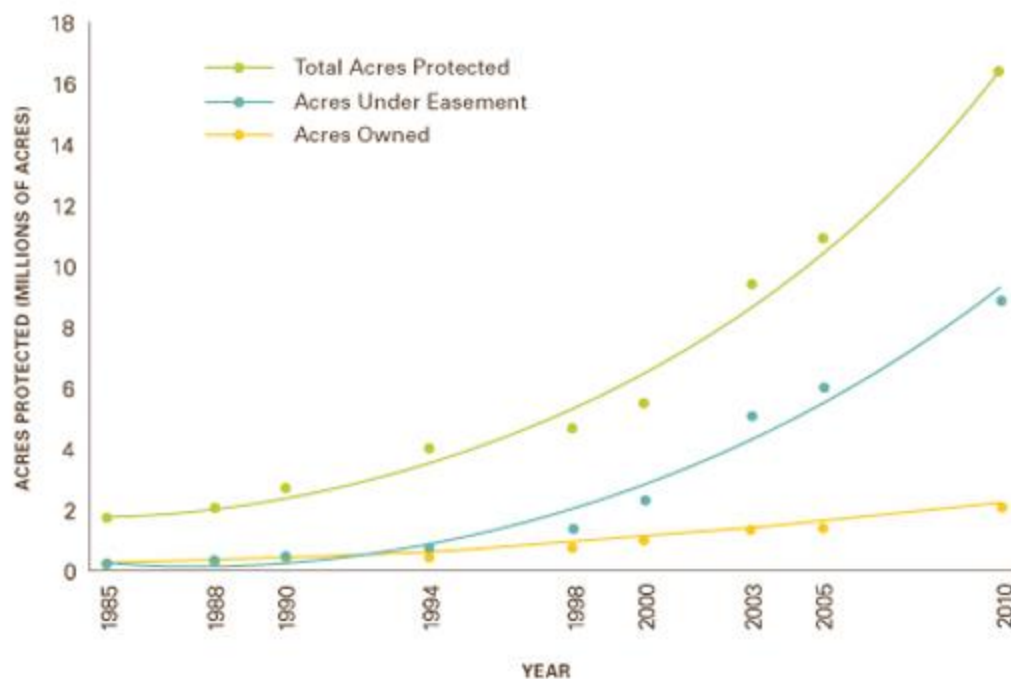
Today's Land Trusts

A land trust is a nonprofit organization that, as all or part of its mission, actively works to conserve land by undertaking or assisting in land or conservation easement acquisition or by its stewardship of such land or easements. Today, there are 1,700 land trusts that operate at the national, regional, and local levels. Collectively, they have more than 100,000 volunteers, 12,000 staff, 16,000 board members, and 5 million members, while managing more than \$1.6 billion in various types of endowments and designated funds. Land trusts have conserved 50 million acres of land in the U.S. — an area roughly the size of all the national parks in the lower 48 states combined (Chang 2011).

Total Acres Conserved

	2000	2005	2010
Acres owned by state and local land trusts	1,123,689	1,527,656	2,144,709
Acres under easement by state and local land trusts	2,316,064	6,007,906	8,833,368
Acres acquired and reconveyed and acres conserved by other means by state and local land trusts*	2,031,062	3,370,772	5,097,783
Total acres conserved by state and local land trusts	5,470,815	10,906,334	16,075,860
Total acres conserved by national land trusts	18,388,023	25,964,032	30,945,639
Total acres conserved by all land trusts	23,858,838	36,870,366	47,021,499

Private Land Conservation by State and Local Land Trusts



Land trusts had conserved nearly 50 million acres of land in the U.S. by 2010, and this number continues to grow. *2010 National Land Trust Census*, Land Trust Alliance.

Land trusts work with landowners and the community to conserve land by accepting donations of land, purchasing land, negotiating private voluntary conservation agreements (called conservation easements or conservation restrictions) on land, and stewarding that conserved land over time. The most traditional tool for conserving private land, the [conservation easement](#), is a legal agreement between a landowner and a land trust or government agency that permanently limits uses of the land in order to protect its conservation values. It allows landowners to continue to own and use their land, and they can also sell it or pass it on to

heirs. Most land trusts are community based and deeply connected to local needs, so they are well-equipped to identify land that offers critical natural habitat as well as recreational, agricultural, and other conservation value.



Conservation easements are important tools used by land trusts to carry out their missions of conserving open spaces. © Bill Bivens, courtesy of Taos Land Trust.

Strategic conservation is a process that identifies, prioritizes, pursues, and protects those specific tracts of land that will most effectively achieve the land trust's mission and conservation objectives. According to Ole Amundsen, the program manager for both the Land Conservation Loan Program and the Strategic Conservation Program of The Conservation Fund, "Strategic conservation plans make land protection decisions more defensible and transparent to withstand scrutiny by outside parties, the news media, landowners, and the public, and present the image of a well-organized and thoughtful conservation organization. The best plans clearly delineate how individual projects fit into a larger conservation framework of government partner plans, such as a municipal open space or state agency plan, or fulfill the spirit of government policies, such as farmland protection."

Fully 75 percent of all land trusts actively acquiring land report that they have a strategic conservation plan to guide their activities. In addition, a few states have started conservation easement registries, and many land trusts are contributing to the [National Conservation Easement Database \(NCED\)](#). NCED is the first national database of conservation easement information, compiling records from land trusts and public agencies throughout the United States. This public-private partnership brings together national conservation groups, local and regional land trusts, and state and federal agencies around common objectives of planning more strategically, identifying opportunities for collaboration, advancing public accountability, and raising the profile of what's happening on the ground in the name of conservation.

How Land Trusts Are Involved in Planning

Many land trusts are involved in planning either directly or indirectly. The Brandywine Conservancy in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania, has a [Municipal Assistance Program \(MAP\)](#), whose staff members apply their extensive knowledge and solid experience in natural resource inventories, open space conservation, growth management, and land-use planning techniques

to public agencies developing and implementing comprehensive plans. An increasing number of local governments are using MAP to work on transfer of development rights, design of urban growth boundaries, the municipal plan review process, and even innovative mapping technologies for resource management and smart growth planning.

Central Indiana Land Trust in Indianapolis, along with The Conservation Fund, engaged its community in a broad-based public participation process of long-range planning called ***Greening the Crossroads***. *Greening the Crossroads* seeks to reverse the decline in quality as well as quantity of natural assets and improve the public perception of central Indiana as a desirable place to live and work. It addresses forest interiors; water quality and quantity; people, greenways, and wildlife corridors; working farmlands; and wetlands.

Forterra is a land trust and also the largest conservation and community building organization in the Northwest. Based in Seattle, Forterra is advancing an innovative new approach to conservation that seeks to make developed areas so attractive that people choose to live there instead of undeveloped areas. Forterra created the **Landscape Conservation and Local Infrastructure Program**, which was passed into state law in 2011. This program creates incentives for both conservation and community support by combining TDRs with tax increment financing to conserve farms, forests, and natural areas, while also providing funding for plazas, parks, sidewalks, and bike lanes. Like Brandywine Conservancy, Forterra offers a full spectrum of professional services to not-for-profit groups, businesses, and government clients across the region. Its professional staff assists in property acquisition, TDRs, restoration and stewardship, carbon mitigation, geospatial technologies, and planning and policy development.





Forterra worked with the City of Federal Way, Washington, to develop new policies and codes to support urban agriculture and make the city's streets inclusive of walkers and bikers. © Becca Meredith, courtesy of Forterra.

Land trusts can be valuable allies in planning exercises. As private, nonprofit, community organizations, they can complement public agencies working to help their communities to thrive. Land trusts can help municipalities implement common sense and balanced conservation solutions that reflect community values by identifying desirable resources, acquiring critical parcels, or helping to site, acquire, and manage greenways that provide access to recreation lands and opportunities to get outdoors to exercise and meet others. For example, during the Gulf of Mexico Coastal Land Conservation Visioning and Mapping Charrette in New Orleans during September 2013, representatives of the [Partnership for Gulf Coast Land Conservation](#) coalition member organizations were asked to review preliminary draft maps and identify additional priority areas that should be included on the Gulf Coast Conservation Vision maps.



Representatives of the Partnership for Gulf Coast Land Conservation coalition member organizations during the Gulf of Mexico Coastal Land Conservation Visioning and Mapping Charrette. Elizabeth Barber.

Innovation on the Land: Sector-Specific Land Trust Successes

Land trusts have found that by listening to their communities and identifying what challenges their neighbors face, they can use their land conservation expertise to address those challenges in sometimes unusual and surprisingly effective ways. Doing so engages citizens, strengthens the land trust, and makes communities healthier places to live, work, and play.

As should now be apparent, today's conservation organizations are not your mother's land trusts. In addition to preserving natural habitat and open space, land trusts are demonstrating the direct, intense link between saving land and health, safe and local food, affordable housing, youth development and education, water quality, and natural disaster prevention and mitigation. Here are examples of land trusts across the U.S. whose work goes beyond simply protecting open space.

Public Health

Los Angeles Neighborhood Land Trust (California): To help address high rates of childhood obesity and adult diabetes in South LA, LANLT, in partnership with the University Muslim Medical Association and the Los Angeles Unified School District, opened the **Fremont Wellness Center & Community Garden**. This 1.5-acre lot has a 2,500-square-foot health clinic, a greenhouse, a vegetable and medicinal garden, an orchard, and a neighborhood park. Neighborhood children get access to fresh food and vegetables, a safe place to get exercise, and educational programming around medical, environmental science, and agricultural subjects.

Orange County Land Trust (New York): Through the Living Memorials Project, the forest land conserved by the Orange County Land Trust helps people such as the bereaved families of firefighters face life's most difficult problems — death, pain, trauma, and grief.

McDowell Sonoran Conservancy (Arizona): When McDowell Sonoran Conservancy in September 2009 opened a barrier-free trail, accessible even for motorized wheelchairs, the response from the community was

overwhelmingly positive. Visitors with disabilities as well as young families, senior citizens, dog walkers, and others said they found the trail a safe and easy way to experience the land trust's vast desert preserve.

[Waltham Land Trust](#) (Massachusetts): "Outdoors Rx" is a program where doctors and other medical professionals write prescriptions encouraging children to spend more time playing outdoors to improve their health. The Waltham Land Trust and Healthy Waltham teamed up to create maps of six urban walking routes in Waltham neighborhoods and along the banks of the Charles River.

Local Food

[Brooklyn Queens Land Trust](#) (New York): This land trust was created in 2004 to manage 34 community gardens in neighborhoods throughout Brooklyn and Queens. BQLT has since grown into a community institution sponsoring school groups, fish fries, cookouts, jazz concerts, and art exhibits.

[Vermont Land Trust](#): VLT, in partnership with the Association of Africans Living in Vermont, has created the **[Vermont Goat Collaborative](#)**, offering new immigrants with agricultural backgrounds garden space and resources to become independent farmers. Before, African refugees in Vermont had limited options to buy goat meat, a staple of their customary diet. But now this conserved land has created an economic opportunity that also supports the cultural and nutritional needs of a community. And through its **[Farmland Access Program](#)**, Vermont Land Trust also helps make farmland available for beginning farmers.

[Scenic Hudson](#) (New York): Scenic Hudson has completed a well-researched study of the Hudson Valley that documents farmland and other resources that are necessary to ensure that the people of New York City and the region have access to safe, local, and fresh food — what it calls the NYC "foodshed."

[Taos Land Trust](#) (New Mexico): Taos Land Trust's program "De la Tierra a la Cosecha" ("From Earth to Harvest") promotes family farming and ranching that provides food security for the community. It also works with local government to make sure that land conservation is always a part of long-range planning.

[Equity Land Trust](#) (Massachusetts): Equity Land Trust has a "Farms for Farmers" program that promotes alternative ownership structures for farms, which benefits farmers who need affordable farmland as well as communities that want a secure source of locally grown food and a way to preserve their cultural, scenic, and environmental resources.



Wild Shepherd Farm, owned by David Hassan and Emily Amanna and located in Athens and Grafton, Vermont, was conserved as part of the Vermont Land Trust's Farmland Access Program, which helps new farmers afford their first farms. © Vermont Land Trust/Caleb Kenna.

Affordable Housing

Athens Land Trust (Georgia): ALT, a nonprofit organization founded in 1994 to address the social and environmental issues related to land use, develops affordable housing, provides houses for both lease and purchase, and offers credit counseling and homebuyer educational services. ALT is one of the few organizations in the country that is both a conservation trust and a community land trust. Its holistic approach to sustainable development addresses environmental, economic, and community needs.

Vermont Land Trust: Vermont Land Trust and the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board have teamed up to help Vermonters conserve over 365,000 acres of land and make available nearly 8,500 units of permanently affordable housing.

Franklin Land Trust (Massachusetts): Franklin Land Trust and Dodson Associates co-authored the 1989 guidebook *Combining Affordable Housing with Land Conservation*, which promoted more sustainable communities and established design and site planning principles, criteria for site analysis, and a formula for objective assessment of financial resources.

Youth and Education

Lake Forest Open Lands Association (Illinois): Since its founding in 1967, this land trust has acquired or preserved over 800 acres that it has restored and now maintains for the benefit of the community, and for many years has provided a conservation element to the science curricula of local schools. They have also offered a summer day camp for kids in grades pre-K through 6, and in 2009 launched the Center for Conservation Leadership to provide sustained programming to students who have shown an interest in nature and the

environment, but are not yet ready for, or do not have access to, internships at some of the major conservation organizations.

Shirley Heinze Land Trust (Indiana): Since 2009, the Shirley Heinze Land Trust in Indiana has been partnering with the Field Museum of Chicago and the Dunes Learning Center at the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore on a highly successful program called the "Mighty Acorns" that helps students reconnect with nature through a variety of study and stewardship excursions that focus on experiential learning. The Mighty Acorns program provides the healthy air, water, soil, and sunshine needed to ensure that children grow up with a strong understanding of the importance of land conservation.

Openlands (Illinois): Removing asphalt and concrete to make way for green space on Chicago school playgrounds has become routine for Openlands, one of the oldest metropolitan conservation organizations in the nation and the only such group with a regional scope in the greater Chicago region. Openlands has helped 54 schools build gardens and green space in the Chicago Public School district, often taking out impermeable surfaces in the process.

Lookout Mountain Conservancy (Tennessee): A small grant from the Chattanooga, Tennessee, water department to Lookout Mountain Conservancy to clear a ravine of overgrowth and trash has created a program that is changing the lives of Howard High School students, who are volunteering and interning with the land trust.





Top — Openlands, one of the oldest metropolitan conservation organizations in the nation, has helped 54 schools build gardens and green space in the Chicago Public School district, often taking out impermeable surfaces in the process. Bottom — Shirley Heinze Land Trust in Indiana partners with the Field Museum in Chicago and the Dunes Learning Center at the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore on a highly successful program that provides students from northwest Indiana an opportunity to reconnect with nature. © Openlands; © Leslie Mancilla, courtesy of Shirley Heinze Land Trust.

Water Quality

Freshwater Land Trust (Alabama): One of the most polluted rivers in the state is being reborn through a partnership of the cities along its shores. Once called Creosote Creek for its chemical odor and the slick sheen on the water's surface, Five Mile Creek is now bringing economic revitalization and hope to these communities.

Trout Unlimited (Virginia): Trout Unlimited is teaming up with land trusts to protect and revitalize prized trout streams through its **Coldwater Land Conservancy Fund** grants, which provide funding to land trusts seeking to acquire land and conservation easements that protect native trout habitat in the Chesapeake Bay watershed.

New York City: One of the most noteworthy uses of land trusts and conservation easements to preserve water quality is in the Catskill and Delaware watersheds that provide 90 percent of New York City's world-renowned tap water. Located as far as 125 miles to the north of the city, these water supplies on which 9 million people depend are protected by conservation easements which are tailored to keep biological, chemical, and other sources of pollution from impacting water quality in the source water areas. They have proved to be an excellent tool to safeguard water quality by placing land-use limitations on lands that will be partly developed and on working lands that will remain in private ownership. If the city were required to filter its water supplies, the capital costs alone would likely exceed \$8 billion, plus annual maintenance costs.

Disaster Planning and Recovery

Mass Audubon: During Hurricane Irene, the 700-acre [Arcadia Wildlife Sanctuary](#) in Easthampton, Massachusetts, acted like a huge sponge, soaking up floodwaters from the Mill and Connecticut rivers and buffering nearby homes. Houses several miles upstream from the sanctuary had no such protection and local residents there had to be evacuated (Levitt and Lubin 2012).

Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation: In the aftermath of the 2008 flooding disasters in the Midwest, INHF partnered with the Rebuild Iowa Office and the Iowa DNR to help landowners swap their flood-zone fields for other parcels. The former fields are now reserved for public recreation and other uses that will diversify local economies and provide sustainable economic development benefits for rural communities far into the future.

Palmer Land Trust (Colorado): The Cedar Heights subdivision of Colorado Springs, situated in a high-risk fire area, worked with the Palmer Land Trust and accessed pre-disaster mitigation grants from the Federal Emergency Management Agency to fund fire mitigation efforts. Because of its foresight, the community was protected from the devastating Waldo Canyon fire of 2012.

The Future of Land Trusts and Planning

What does the future hold? For planners and land trusts, we may see increasing areas of shared concern and collaboration. The latest report by the [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#) demonstrates that climate change is not going away and will have deep impact on coastal cities, farmland, forests, and all the landscapes in between. Many land trusts have been working to address what climate change means for their land acquisition and stewardship practices.

With almost 85 percent of our nation's population now living in urban areas, both planners and land trusts have an interest in making cities more livable. If developed areas provide appropriate, desirable housing, along with walkable neighborhoods, good schools, and places to play and socialize, then people will choose to live where there is already infrastructure. Increasing density will relieve some of the pressure on undeveloped land.

Connecting people to the land will be another priority. As more people migrate to cities, the premium on open space will make it more and more difficult to save green spaces for the public. People have to understand the importance of land to their everyday lives, or they won't value it. Whether it is for clean water and air, safe local food, forest products, tourism dollars, or places to recreate and recharge, people rely on land to live. The land defines us as a people. With political power accruing to the urbanized areas, we need to ensure that people in those urbanized areas understand the importance of — and fully support — the policies and investment needed to protect the lands that surround and support urbanized populations.

Another issue that both planners and land trusts may share in the future is addressing underperforming land in urban areas — especially those in distressed neighborhoods and in cities like Detroit. Ohio's Western Reserve Land Conservancy launched its [Thriving Communities Institute](#) in March 2011, a region-wide effort to revitalize urban centers in north central Ohio. In collaboration with community leaders, the institute is establishing and supporting county land banks throughout the region, which are transforming vacant and unproductive properties into new opportunities to attract economic growth, to create green space in cities, and to support safe, beautiful neighborhoods.

Groundwork USA is a community-supported organization that engages local businesses, residents, and government officials to revitalize neighborhoods and transform community liabilities into community assets. In Lawrence, Massachusetts, [Groundwork Lawrence](#) formed a land trust to help stabilize underutilized land across the city where the best and highest uses of vacant properties are neither residential nor commercially oriented. These place-based investments are designed to improve the community's most vulnerable low-income residents' health and wellness, beautify neighborhoods, and make Lawrence a vibrant community that is a healthy place to live, work, and play.

Action Steps for Planners

Skip Swenson, Forterra's senior managing director of policy, notes that land trusts like Forterra that are focused on regional sustainability are positioned to serve a critical role bringing together a spectrum of public and private interests. These regional land trusts are also able to provide technical, educational, and political support for projects, thus offering municipalities a rare combination of assets. Forterra has gained the respect of the communities where it works because, regardless of whether it is working on projects, planning, or policy, the foundation of its work is based on interactions with people — understanding their perspectives and interests and using this information to find a path toward desired outcomes.

Swenson suggests that for municipalities working with land trusts, it's best to bring in land trust partners early in the process, and as with any partnership, it is important to clearly identify objectives and roles upfront.

Here are a few steps planners can take to take advantage of all that land trusts have to offer:

1. **Find out which land trusts** are operating in your municipality — local, state, and national land trusts work in all 50 states. There are a growing number of Native American land trusts as well.
2. Partner with a land trust operating in your area. Most land trusts are open to new and different partners. If you haven't already, introduce yourself to the local land trust leaders and schedule a time to get to know each other — you may be surprised at all that you have in common.
3. Become a member of your local land trust.
4. Inquire about the possibility of joining as a board member — land trusts are always seeking qualified individuals with knowledge and a passion for saving land and creating vibrant communities.
5. Learn more about community-supported conservation of private lands:
 - Visit the Land Trust Alliance web page (www.lta.org).
 - Become a **Government Partner** member organization to get access to **The Learning Center**, a password-protected site with thousands of documents, courses, chat groups and other resources for land conservation practitioners.
 - Attend **Rally**, the National Land Conservation Conference.
 - Attend a **land trust state conference**.
 - Attend a webinar or workshop on **land-trust-related topics**.

Conclusion

Planning departments and land trusts alike are usually overwhelmed by the tasks before them. Ours are professions where the impacts of the decisions we make and the work we do today are not seen until many years in the future. All the more reason, then, to reach out and find areas of common interest that we can address together.

There are many benefits to land trusts and planners working together. With their deep roots and long-standing service to their communities, land trusts bring to the table both an understanding of the community's culture, and knowledge of the technical aspects of land conservation. Land trusts provide ready access to community thought leaders and can also serve the role of ambassador, bringing different people and organizations to the table. Some land trusts are sources of information that are otherwise unavailable or hard to get on natural communities, conservation easements, and other issues. By working closely with neighborhood land trusts, planning agencies can share their plans for the community so the land trusts know where they can fit in to supplement and complement the work of planning offices with their own local, state, or regional conservation capacity.

Land trusts are a key community resource and do much more than place conservation easements on land. Get to know the land trusts operating in your area and you may be surprised to learn they can be a valuable resource for your planning efforts as well.

About the Author

Serving as the director of community conservation for the newly formalized program at the Land Trust Alliance, Rob Aldrich is responsible for integrating community conservation initiatives into the fabric of the Alliance and the land trust community. The program is a concerted effort to expand conservation to reach a wider community through strategic partnerships and community engagement. Aldrich has a bachelor's degree in plant and soil science from the University of Maine, and a master's degree in urban planning and the environment from the University of Virginia.

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