



Landscapes

Fall 2021

The Value of Our Rural Landscape to All of Us

The past year of isolation has given us the opportunity to spend time outdoors, take notice of nature all around us, and enjoy our backyards, the green space, trees, parks, and preserves. We learned about the life cycle of cicadas and to appreciate their noisy presence. Many of us used sunny days to drive back roads of the Eastern Panhandle to enjoy the rolling hills, planted fields, livestock, streams, ponds, and acres of fruit trees in seasonal splendor. It is this beautiful and bountiful landscape that has drawn so many to make the Eastern Panhandle their home.

However, the Eastern Panhandle today faces a building boom that threatens the beauty, natural resources and historic character, which together have made our region such an attractive place to live. A similar boom 25 years ago brought concerned residents together to focus on voluntary conservation easements as a way to help residents maintain those values.

The visual evidence of today's growth is borne out by building permit statistics. In both Berkeley and Jefferson Counties, building permits increased to decade level highs in 2020 and appear likely to maintain that level in 2021. This reflects population growth over the same decade, with Berkeley County increasing 17% over the past decade, to 122,076, and Jefferson County population rising almost 8%, to 57,501.

In 2020, the last full year of data in Berkeley County, building permits increased to 1223 permits compared to the prior 10-year average starting with 2010 of 502 permits. In Jefferson County, the 2020 increase in building permits is more pronounced with a three-time increase to 601 permits compared to the prior 10-year average of 216 permits per year. The outlook is for a further increase this year.

Besides the increase in single family homes, there is also a change to higher density housing with townhouse permits for the first time at 200-300 units per year starting in 2004 in Berkeley County and 50 + units in Jefferson. A permit increase in townhomes is again occurring in 2019 to 338 permits in Berkeley and in 2020 to 91 in Jefferson.

There is always a balance that needs to be struck in fast growing regions. In light of that need, focused protection through strategically placed conservation easements can save

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Special Event

The Two Rivers Giving Circle was formed to promote and recognize conservation in the Eastern Panhandle. This year two individuals were selected for their contribution to conservation in the Eastern Panhandle. **Grant Smith**, president of the Land Trust of the Eastern Panhandle (Land Trust), and **Kristin Alexander**, Executive Director of the Potomac Valley Audubon Society (PVAS).



Grant has been part of the establishing of 50 conservation easements that are protecting over 4800 acres of land in the Eastern Panhandle, protecting land, water, and also our culture and history and working with regional Partners for protecting and managing easements for many additional acres that have helped preserve our landscape.

Kristin, an employee of PVAS for 20 years, has been instrumental in

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2021 VISIONING and Planning for the Future

In a continued effort to become more relevant, visible, and dynamic, the Land Trust of the Eastern Panhandle (LTEP) has been meeting in a series of strategic planning retreats, facilitated by board member, Susan Whalton.

The LTEP in 2020 just celebrated its 25th anniversary, and according to board member Lucien Lewin, “we want to update our vision for the future, and especially the ways we can help meet the mounting alarm of Panhandle landowners over the rapid loss of land, trees, and habitat to development.” Another growing concern is the resultant fears that other natural resources, especially water, are being negatively and irreparably impacted by the loss of land.

Land conservation - voluntary placement of conservation easements by private citizens on their lands - remains the single most effective means of protecting water and balancing the march of development. The LTEP’s goal is to be more available - and more responsive - during this important time in the Panhandle’s growth. Board President Grant Smith notes that the LTEP currently protects and defends 1700 acres of open land throughout the Panhandle, either as the sole or lead conservation agent, or in partnership with Farmland Protection Boards on an additional 3137 acres. “But we want to accelerate the rate of new easements while there is still a chance for us to work with residents to protect important landmarks and landscapes that remain - especially those that are located along creeks and other source water areas, wetlands, forests, and land that is on karst.” Karst, a land feature, results from dissolution of limestone rock, creating sink holes, caves, and underground drainage systems. The formation of this rocky surface is present in large areas of the Panhandle. The surface water and groundwater, we drink and use, need to be protected from pollution, which can be transported long distances by the underground drainage system of the Karst. It is important to protect the land surface in areas of Karst so that pollution does not enter the surface and subsurface drainage, protecting water as it flows and becomes our source of drinking water.

Georgia Jeppesen, LTEP Treasurer, who has long been an environmental advocate, noted that “Strategic planning is very important. We, as the Board of Directors, have a responsibility to our founders, past board members, donors, and to the landowners who have put their trust in us when they put their land in conservation easement. This includes not only fiscal and organizational responsibility, but also the responsibility to be on the leading edge of what a land trust can and should do to preserve open space and rural landscapes.

So, although the planning is important, the informed, collaborative action to carry out our mission in the light of our current and future reality is even more important.”

Susan Whalton added, “What we are learning is that in many cases the effort to conserve nature, water, land and wildlife, when done sensitively and in partnership with planners and developers, actually serves the best interests of both efforts. In those best cases, smaller townships and neighborhoods are revitalized by protecting their landmarks, landscapes, and identities, offering new residents moving into the area an actual community to join.

We have many vibrant rural neighborhoods in the Panhandle - both incorporated and unincorporated - whose history is part of our cultural and real landscape. What we want to do now is find a way to enable landowners in our three counties who wish to conserve their land and their heritage with the means to do so and help point the way to more sensitive and responsible development.”

It will take new funding sources - and outreach - but we are confident that it can be done. A conservation easement is ultimately an act of love. Love of all we have been given to enjoy in nature’s rich resources, love of those who came before us and made this the wonderful place it is for us to live, and love for those who will come after us, who deserve to experience

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Special Event, continued from page 1:

the establishment of four Nature Preserves, one in each of the Panhandle Counties, with two in Berkeley. The community has benefited not only from enjoying natural beauty, but with the activities and programs for all ages, from pre-kindergarten to adults, that teach us about the environment in which we live.

Also, this year’s awards highlight organizational partnerships that are the strength of our community. Two of the Land Trust easements are sites for PVAS program initiatives, Grassland Birds, adjusting the timing of mowing to accommodate bird nesting, and Chimney Swift Towers, to replace the closing or loss of chimneys on historic structures.

The Eastern West Virginia Community Foundation provides support through community philanthropy with funds for both organizations, and the Giving Circle Fund enabled this recognition.

We are blessed to have a caring community that is willing to share their time, talents, and resources to enhance the quality of life for all people and the natural resources in our region of West Virginia.



Scenic View east from North Mountain at Parks Gap.

VALUE, continued from page 1

threatened farmland, critical natural resources, including protecting water quality within the context of growth.

The county Farmland Protection Boards (FPB), established following the adoption of the West Virginia Voluntary Farmland Protection Act in 2000, pay farmers for conservation easements that prevent future development, with an emphasis on saving the best soils. Together, the Berkeley and Jefferson County FPBs have protected almost 13,000 acres through 122 conservation easements.

The Land Trust of the Eastern Panhandle, established in 1995, helped the FPBs as they began operations, and now they are strong, well-funded operations. The Land Trust is the sole or lead holder of easements that protect 1700 acres and is co-holder with FPBs as the lead on easements, covering an additional 3137 acres. The Land Trust focuses on land that protects water resources, woods, wildlife, nature, and our historic past.

In 2017, for example, the Land Trust protected 30 acres of steep riverbank along half a mile of the Opequon Creek, ensuring this property never has more than one house and remains forested. In some cases, it has been able to combine protection of riparian land with historic preservation, since it holds easements on 102 acres along or just inland from the Potomac River that were involved in the 1862 Battle of Shepherdstown.

Our landscape continues to change. Our green open space is finite, and something to be protected for the enjoyment of all. Similarly, living on the limestone foundation of the Eastern Panhandle our water resources are not infinite and need to be protected. The limestone geology of Jefferson and Berkeley Counties means that pollution can spread quickly through underground water channels, making protection of streams and forests an issue of safety and importance for all.

Preservation of our land and water relies on the shared value and protection by us all. Voluntary conservation easements are the most effective way to protect both our land and water resources. Over 140 easement owners, friends and neighbors, have realized the value and importance of preserving the landscape and precious resources of the Eastern Panhandle to be shared by all who have made it our home. Thank you!

VISIONING, continued from page 2

the purity of sparkling spring water, mature canopies of trees, and the wonders and cycles of nature and wildlife.

In a 2003 Journal editorial written about the Land Trust, Matthew Bieniek said, "That's not to say that there isn't a role for government in conservation and habitat protection. But it's important that private citizens play a role as well - and this is an important way to preserve open spaces and parkland no matter who is in office in Washington or Charleston."

Our Board is dedicated to strategically moving forward to continue carrying out the mission of the Land Trust taking on the challenges of a fast-changing region.

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News from the Land Trust of the Eastern Panhandle

YOUR PARTNER IN RURAL CONSERVATION

Our mission is to encourage people to preserve open space and rural landscapes in West Virginia's Eastern Panhandle. We use private, voluntary initiative and education to:

- Preserve the scenic beauty and historic character that have long made our region attractive to people;
- Promote a healthy, balanced local economy by preserving productive farmland and encouraging appropriate development;
- Encourage wise stewardship of the region's natural resources.

We are a private, non-profit, tax-exempt charitable organization incorporated in West Virginia in 1995. Our board is composed of men and women from a variety of backgrounds from Morgan, Berkeley, and Jefferson counties.

We meet monthly at the Berkeley County Development Authority in Martinsburg. Special appreciation and thanks to Sandy Hamilton, Executive Director, for making her conference room available to us.

Board Members

Grant Smith
Barbara Humes
Georgia Jeppesen
Lucien Lewin
David Lillard
Kevin T. McLaughlin
David Plummer
Bonnie Stubblefield
Susan Whalton

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Support Your Community Conservation Partner!

- ☐ Please contact me to discuss **protecting** my land through a conservation easement.
- ☐ Please contact me. I am interested in **volunteer** opportunities and **sharing my expertise**.
- ☐ I would like to **support** the Land Trust with a tax deductible contribution:
 - ☐ \$500
 - ☐ \$100
 - ☐ \$75
 - ☐ \$50
 - ☐ Other \$ _____
- ☐ I would like to have a part in the **Legacy and Future of the Eastern Panhandle**:
 - ☐ ***My Legacy Gift \$** _____

NAME

ADDRESS

CITY/STATE/ZIP

PHONE

EMAIL

**More information about the Legacy Fund can be found on our website.*

Mail to: Land Trust of the Eastern Panhandle • PO Box 2240, Martinsburg, WV 25402
Visit our website for more information: www.landtrustepwv.org