

Saving 'Hallowed Ground' and Irreplaceable Vistas- Catoctin Land Trust Helps Preserve Open Space

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Few corridors in America have witnessed more history than the 175 miles from
Charlottesville, Va., to Gettysburg, Pa.

Lying in the shadow of the Appalachian Mountains, this corridor contains innumerable,
invaluable and irreplaceable historic and natural assets. Battlefields, covered bridges, and
historic homes and farms line the route. Known as "The Journey Through Hallowed
Ground," the corridor was named in 2005 by the National Trust for Historic Preservation
as one of America's 11 most endangered historic places.

The potential is enormous for intense development and spillover from population growth
within metropolitan areas like Baltimore-Washington, Richmond, and their suburban
environs. Can the greenways, the grand views and the historic sites be saved in the wake
of demand for bedroom communities and the services needed to support them?

No army that ever fought within this corridor ever surrendered in it. Nor do the many
activists, dedicated to preserving what they can, intend to give up.

A greenbelt for Emmitsburg

Local business leader, and president of the Catoctin Land Trust, Donald Briggs
commented at a "Journey Through Hallowed Ground" press conference earlier this year at
the Washington, D.C. National Press Club that Emmitsburg, with Mary's Mountain (aka
College Mountain) to its back, is "Maryland's billboard" for those entering the area from
Pennsylvania.

The Catoctin Land Trust was established as a non-profit organization in 2000 by Briggs, ThorpeWood Executive Director Samuel T. Castleman III, and Raymond Herdon, with the Conservation Fund, a national organization based in Arlington, Virginia.

Present members include Briggs (president); Treasurer James Draper, Draper & McGinley, P.A., Secretary James Wilburn, Advanced Land and Sea, Inc.; Castleman; Geordie Newman, Chesapeake Wildlife Heritage; and Andrew Nichols, Teamlink, Inc.

From the start, the group's primary objective has been to try to preserve the greenery of the countryside surrounding Emmitsburg, and the views afforded of the mountains immediately to its west. "The trust was established to protect the views and watersheds around Emmitsburg and the Catoctin mountains," Briggs told The Dispatch.

Part of the reasoning behind the greenbelt concept involves aesthetics. "We want to leave something for tomorrow. The vista is important. It is part of what we enjoy living around," Briggs stated.

However, much is based on hard science as well. Beyond scenic values, greenbelts surrounding populated areas protect water quality by filtering pollution contained in storm water run-off which could otherwise freely discharge directly into area rivers and streams.

Additionally, greenbelts add to the available natural habitats essential for many native plants and animals, according to the Maryland Department of Natural Resources.

Getting the job done

During the organization's first four years, it has amassed an impressive amount of farmland with development restrictions and watershed lands nearly surrounding Emmitsburg, and has secured deed restrictions and preservation easements on more than 1,700 acres of land.

Various strategies and tactics have been used. "We're either putting easements on properties or doing deed restrictions that limit and define any development to a specific area on a given tract," Briggs stated.

Of course, little could be done without property owner cooperation. At least two-thirds of the total greenbelt properties to date were donated by property owners to the Conservation Fund, or were purchased outright, and then administered by Sustainable

Conservation LLC, a special corporation established by the fund to serve in a stewardship capacity.

Other property easements and guarantees are obtained through making property owners aware of tax incentives. Briggs told The Dispatch, “We approach them with certain tax benefit potential which gives them an alternative to breaking up traditional farm tracts that have been in families for years.”

As part of those settlements, property owners generally agree to reserve a portion of their land for open space, with any future development restricted in both degree and location on the tract. This is defined and spelled out in the deed, and the agreements are perpetual.

A major portion of the proposed greenbelt was purchased outright through fundraising, the 550- acre mountain tract (formerly the Ski Mountain Liberty property) acquired for about \$2 million.

“About 2000, I went to the Conservation Fund about the Ski Mountain Liberty property. Met with the owners, set up an acquisition price,” Briggs said. He added that state GreenPrint money was obtained for the purchase and the town agreed to be the owner.

Maryland created the GreenPrint program In May 2001. Designed to protect lands critical to the state ecology, GreenPrint essentially expanded the pool of money available for state land acquisitions.

Beyond the greenbelt

The Catoctin Land Trust continues to work to obtain strategic properties to help preserve the vista and the watersheds.

“We’re working on other adjoining properties (to expand the greenway),” Briggs said, adding that, “We’re looking forward to having approximately 2,500 acres by the end of the year (dedicated to some form of preservation).”

Trust members are also considering developing trails within the greenbelt area, and connecting them both to the Catoctin Mountain Park, and to the Appalachian Trail. Briggs sees other existing grounds not slated for development as part of the overall greenbelt pattern, including the Grotto grounds.

Preserving mountainside properties also continues. “The Mount has about 300 acres of mountainside preserved,” Briggs noted. Along with the former Ski Liberty site and town watershed properties, about 1,600 acres of mountain land are already set aside for permanent preservation.

Example of success

The work of the Catoctin Land Trust reflects the degree of success dedicated local efforts can achieve.

There are many preservation entities out there – groups of local citizens, non-profit preservation associations or chapters of larger national groups. What Briggs and others would like to see now is connectivity between the various and sometimes independent groups.

For more information about the Catoctin Land Trust, contact Don Briggs at 301-447-3110 or Sam Castleman, 301-271-2823, or visit www.catoctinlandtrust.org.