

# Conservation Comes to the City

It's a whole new day for these land trusts. By DANIEL MCGRAW

**W**hen Jim Rokakis was a little kid growing up in Cleveland in the early 1960s, he and his pals used to do what young boys do: They'd explore. And that meant going to the edge of the valley, making their way down to Big Creek, and traipsing around on the closed landfill on the valley floor. "For us city kids, it was sort of our rural experience," Rokakis says. "Kids playing on a garbage dump."

He thought about that valley through the years. The Henninger Landfill sat on 25 acres, five miles south of downtown Cleveland, in a neighborhood of middle-class bungalows. It was part of Cleveland's industrial legacy. A city that made steel, cars, paint, and plastic also dumped its toxic refuse wherever it could, even if the dumping ground was surrounded by housing.

To the landfill's west sat the Cleveland Zoo and nearby parks, to the east the Cuyahoga River and the huge steel mills that belched orange smoke (a few still do). Rokakis was elected to the Cleveland city council in 1978 and served for 19 years (and then as Cuyahoga County Treasurer until 2011). He always thought how great it would be to turn that old dump into a park for the kids in the neighboring blue-collar neighborhoods.

"I was always trying to find ways to get our hands on this old landfill and use it for something better," he says. "Ways to get funding, ways to make all the pieces fit. But we could never get it done; the city always



For years Cleveland native Jim Rokakis thought the 25-acre Henninger Landfill site would make a great park. Today, that vision is becoming a reality thanks to a local land trust.

had other things to do besides repurpose an old landfill. The park district was concentrating on the lakefront. It was always one of those projects that could never get up higher on the list."

Now the old landfill is finally getting new life. Earlier this year, the Western Reserve Land Conservancy acquired the property for about \$500,000, according

to Rokakis, most of it provided by a grant from the Ohio green space conservation program. Early studies indicate that a relatively modest environmental remediation will be needed to convert the landfill to parkland; WRLC will likely deed the 25 acres in the next year or so to the regional park district, which owns the zoo, or to the city of Cleveland or some other entity

that will develop and maintain the property for public use. At this point, the old landfill property will most likely be used as passive open space with a bike trail connecting to trails on either side of the property.

Rokakis is now vice president of WRLC and heads up the organization's Thriving Communities Institute, which is working with local governments and community leaders and financial institutions to help clean up the foreclosure mess that began in 2008, leaving the Cleveland area with thousands of abandoned homes. Sometimes the WRLC/TCI acquires property, sometimes it helps find funding for property purchases, and sometimes it actively helps with regional planning issues.

What the WRLC is doing is blurring the lines a bit of the defined purposes of land trusts. Community land trusts have long focused on acquiring land for affordable housing in an urban setting. Conservation land trusts have often limited their focus to creating parks—sometimes in urban settings, but more often in exurbs where an old farm might be repurposed into public green space. The WRLC is doing both, focusing on creating open space—mostly in urban and rural settings—but also using its access to capital and expertise to acquire property in distressed areas so that the urban revitalization process is able to move more quickly and efficiently.

### **New take on land trusts**

WRLC isn't the only land trust that is being repurposed. Conservation land trusts have historically represented wealthy estate owners on the outer edges of an urban area, and often performed the task of acquiring a "gentlemen's farm" that hadn't seen a plow in 50 years and then deeding it to the local government agency as passive open space. The end result was nice, but the purpose was mainly to keep housing and retail development out.

Rich Cochran, the president and CEO of WRLC—formed in 2006 when eight Northeast Ohio land trusts combined to take a more regional approach to land preservation—says the trusts' leaders began seeing that their mission to provide green space in exurban communities had an unintended consequence.

"We began seeing," Cochran says, "that making the suburbs greener and less urban was making them more desirable and exacerbating the major problem in the region." It was making urban disinvestment worse. It was clear, he adds, that the trusts needed to rethink "what a land trust really is."

He adds that WRLC now has the resources and expertise to take a regional approach. "We found that we needed to take a course that vacant and abandoned homes in toxic areas affect everyone," Cochran says. "Instead of just trying to treat the symptoms, we looked at helping to determine the causes and change those."

There is no set allotment of funds set aside by the WRLC for inner city or suburban and rural projects, Cochran says, "but we are taking the approach that they are all connected to each other and we do not like to limit ourselves by more traditional geographic boundaries that land trusts often put themselves in."

### **The rationale**

Jennifer Wolch, dean of the College of Environmental Design at the University of California–Berkeley, wrote an article called "Green Urban Worlds" that appeared in *Annals of the Association*

*of American Geographers* in 2007. Her paper detailed the links between social justice and ecological justice, the interconnectivity of agrarian and suburban and urban interests in a region, and the need to make environmental design appealing to people beyond the "hikey-bikies and tree hugging set."

The challenge, Wolch wrote, was how to do it: "As a new sort of urban regime takes shape, focused on regulating environmental relations, lines of authority are blurred, partnership is the order of the day, and almost anything goes in the scramble for funds."

Wolch was prescient. Part of the reason land trusts are doing more regional planning is that the dynamics of local governments have changed. Since the 1970s, the federal government has doled out Community Development Block Grant funding to cities to fix up blighted neighborhoods, but those funds have dropped substantially, from \$5 billion in 2000 to about \$3 billion this year. The decline in property values from the bursting housing bubble has left many local government budgets in deep decline as well.

In the scramble for funds, the process has become more complicated. For a community park project, the lead agency would combine local government funds with a grant from a private foundation and the deal was sealed. Now an identical project might need state tax credits for the property seller, federal environmental cleanup funds, utility easement transfers, and studies to determine traffic flows and community impacts. Local governments often don't have the expertise, staff, or funding to meet those needs.

### **From the ground up**

"I think part of the reason we have broken out of our traditional [rural] conservancy role is that we had expertise in certain areas of acquiring land, and cities and towns needed help in many areas, especially finding different ways of funding a project," says Seth McKee, land conservation director for Scenic Hudson, a land conservancy organization that works along the Hudson River from Yonkers to Albany, New York.

Among other things, Scenic Hudson has championed the daylighting of the Saw Mill River in downtown Yonkers. The river was covered with concrete in the 1920s, and Scenic Hudson secured a \$30 million state grant and other funding to uncover the river, McKee says. More than the environment was at stake. "What Scenic Hudson and the city of Yonkers saw was the ability to revitalize a part of downtown with a river corridor that people will gravitate to and has become an anchor point for redevelopment," he notes.

In the Seattle metro region, the land conservation group Forterra is trying to manage growth in parts of the city that are either gentrifying or accommodating an influx of immigrants. One major project is long-term planning for the inner ring suburb of Tukwila (pop. 19,000), located on the Duwamish River.

Forterra has acquired and preserved more than 238,000 acres of land over the past 25 years for parks and community gardens and other uses, and it has set in motion a community outreach program for refugees from Bhutan and Burma who have settled in Tukwila. Some of these projects aim to preserve the balance between affordable housing and open space in an area that faces both density and economic issues.

"We started out just acquiring property, but we found we can do so much more while we are doing that. Sometimes we are a disrupter, and that is a role we can do in a thoughtful way," says

Michelle Connor, Forterra's executive vice president for strategic enterprises.

Yet another approach is being taken in Los Angeles. The Los Angeles Neighborhood Land Trust, formed in 2002, has adopted the neighborhood preservation ideals many old land trusts began with in the early 1900s. In effect, says Alina Bodke, LANLT's executive director, the organization is trying to keep property from being developed in poorer neighborhoods.

"Study after study has shown that a person's health is directly related to their proximity to parks and green space," Bodke says. "So we find land parcels for community gardens, and try to carve out open space where we can." As the group moves forward on this planning-based health initiative, it may help bring health care screening programs and grocery stores into impoverished areas like East LA, Bodke says.

"I think it is important that the land trusts be at the table in regional decision making: transportation, commercial, residential, conservation," she says. "What we can do is keep from making the same mistakes that many urban centers made when they were being planned out many years ago."

### Time and money

Avana Andrade is getting her master's degree at the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies and recently wrote a research paper on how land trusts are making the foray into urban planning. She came to two conclusions about what is driving the change.

"First, I discovered that land trusts have the skills and tools to solve many of the issues that cities are dealing with, and they have the funding and the ability to move on things more quickly than government agencies do," Andrade says.

But she also says age is a factor: "A younger generation is defining preservation as more than just having some open space in a rural setting."

Anthony Brancatelli, who headed up a community development organization before being elected to the Cleveland city council in 2005, agrees with Andrade's first assessment. He points out that most projects now have "mezzanine financing," meaning layer upon layer of different funding may be involved. "The complexity of structuring any sort of land deal today is just much harder," he says.

Still, he says, WRLC and the city share similar goals. "We know that more forests and parks within our city are good for us all, yet we sometimes don't put them up on the list. And we found that [the WRLC] has been crucial to moving quickly on . . . the abandoned housing that needs to be torn down. Their ability to acquire the properties and move them through the process cuts down the time in a huge way."

"Turning that landfill into a park does not happen without them," he says.

### Caveats

In adding planning duties to their mission, today's land trusts are also entering unknown territory. They are working with public entities, but their boards and donors aren't answerable to the public the way a government agency is.

Two examples: WRLC helped a park district east of Cleveland

acquire 600 acres for a park that included about 1.6 miles of Lake Erie shoreline. A dozen funding groups were involved in the \$10 million purchase. But WRLC kept about 50 acres inland and will be selling that property to private interests that may want to pursue an industrial use.

Likewise, Forterra may buy a mobile home park in Tukwila and possibly retool it into affordable housing for the refugee community—also without direct government involvement.

"I think what is now different is that we see economic development as a part of our work," says Sarah Ryzner, a real estate lawyer who gave up the private sector to work with WRLC in 2012. "We are not of a single mind on anything we do. But we won't survive and be a major contributor if we do not take into account all the stakeholders, and come up with a plan that makes sense economically as well as fits in with the regional planning."

That approach certainly went into practice for Cleveland's Henninger Landfill. In acquiring the property, WRLC had to balance the interests of eight different groups, some of which were government agencies and neighborhood community groups.

A key point of interest in the acquisition plan was that WRLC proved the landfill offers a vital connection to other open spaces: On the eastern end it will connect with the Towpath Trail, which ultimately winds through downtown Cleveland and to Lake Erie. On the western end, it will connect with the 70 miles of paved trails operated by the Cleveland Metroparks (known as the "Emerald Necklace").

Rokakis says he is proud to help move the landfill project along so that within a few years he may see kids playing next to Big Creek—but playing in a much safer environment than the one he encountered there many years ago. He also imagines bike riders using the trails as part of their downtown commute—and bird-watchers strolling along on a fall afternoon.

"We have seen population decline, state funding being stripped from Ohio cities, the federal government saying we have no more money to help out the working poor, [plus] the foreclosure crisis," Rokakis says. "But what we are doing is finding a way for many players in the region to speak with one voice, and not be competing interests."

The land trusts in Cleveland and elsewhere are very important, Rokakis adds, "because we have made some people aware that what happens in our inner cities has a very big effect in other areas of our region. It's taken this crisis of sorts to make people see that. But seeing that landfill getting redone as a park makes it real for me. It's not just going to be green space. It's going to be a key part of this community." ■

Daniel McGraw is a freelance journalist and author living in Lakewood, Ohio.

### RESOURCES

#### ONLINE

Forterra: [forterra.org](http://forterra.org).

Scenic Hudson: [scenichudson.org](http://scenichudson.org).

Los Angeles Neighborhood Land Trust: [lanlt.org](http://lanlt.org).

Western Reserve Land Conservancy: [wrlandconservancy.org](http://wrlandconservancy.org).

"Green Urban Worlds" by Jennifer Wolch, in *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* (2007): <http://tinyurl.com/oulmfzs>.