Preserving Standing Rock

Land Conservancy’s first Jefferson County project protects creek where hellbenders were reintroduced

A stretch of Yellow Creek containing a massive granite boulder called Standing Rock as well as one of the few remaining populations of Eastern Hellbenders in Ohio has been permanently preserved.

Beverley Christen, who owns a 134-acre farm in Jefferson County, has granted the nonprofit Western Reserve Land Conservancy a conservation easement permanently protecting the property. Christen’s small cattle operation is in the Yellow Creek valley, 20 miles northwest of Steubenville.

It is the Land Conservancy’s first protected property in Jefferson County.

Brett Rodstrom, vice president of eastern field operations for the Land Conservancy, said the Christen farm is locally known as the location of Standing Rock, the huge boulder in the Yellow Creek channel. The boulder fell thousands of years ago from the towering cliff almost 300 feet above where it sits today. Standing Rock has a long history dating back to precolonial Native Americans; several Midwest tribes used it as a meeting place, and it remains part of Jefferson County’s cultural heritage.

“We are so grateful to Bev for permanently preserving this special place,” Rodstrom said. “Bev comes from a long line of farmers in that valley who are very passionate about their part of the world.”

Christen said she wanted to make sure the land was permanently protected.

“Every farm along this creek is one owner away from being strip mined – a big, filthy hole in the ground,” she said. “This (conservation easement) keeps the place from ever being stripped, thank God.”

The property contains two-thirds of a mile of Yellow Creek, an Ohio River tributary that is designated an Exceptional

Walking advocate to speak at conference

Mark Fenton, a nationally recognized advocate for active transportation and former host of “America’s Walking” on PBS television, will deliver the keynote address at the fifth annual Ohio Land Bank Conference, which is Sept. 21-23 at the downtown Wyndham Cleveland at Playhouse Square.

Fenton, a public health, planning and transportation consultant and adjunct associate professor at Tufts University, will speak during the conference’s luncheon on Sept. 22. Fenton is known for practicing what he preaches: He chooses walking and cycling for as many routine trips as possible.

The conference is hosted by the Land Conservancy’s Thriving Communities Institute and is expected to draw more than 250 people from around the state, including representatives of county land banks, governments, nonprofit organizations and companies.

“Mark Fenton is a dynamic speaker who will enliven our audience,” said Jim Rokakis, director of Thriving Communities Institute. “I have heard him on numerous occasions, and he never
Rec district now owns former Girl Scout camp

The Land Conservancy, which purchased the 339-acre former Camp Crowell Hilaka in Richfield to keep it from being developed or timbered, has transferred ownership of the property to the Richfield Joint Recreation District.

In a July ceremony at Richfield Village Hall, the Land Conservancy turned over to the RJRD all of the 85 keys to the property, which is located between Broadview and Oviatt roads, north of state Route 303. The keys are for the property’s gates and buildings, including Gund Hall, historic homes once owned by the Oviatt and Neal families and inventor James Kirby and a millhouse with the first-ever ball-bearing mill wheel.

The Land Conservancy struck a deal to purchase the property from the Girl Scouts of North East Ohio, which had closed the camp in 2011. They worked with the Village of Richfield, Richfield Township and a host of community groups to find a long-term owner. In November 2014, voters in the village and township approved the purchase of Crowell Hilaka by the newly formed RJRD.

Earlier this year, the Land Conservancy applied for an approximately $1.1 million Clean Ohio grant on behalf of RJRD, and the funding was approved by the Ohio Public Works Commission. The Land Conservancy will hold a conservation easement on the Crowell Hilaka property; a conservation easement is a legal document that permanently restricts development on a parcel.

The RJRD is now exploring possible future uses of the property and has opened it to the public on weekends.

RJRD and Land Conservancy representatives thanked a number of groups for supporting the project, including voters in the village and township, Richfield Township Trustees, Richfield Village Council, the Friends of Crowell Hilaka, the Coalition for Greater Richfield and the Richfield Historical Society.

Other key supporters of the project included Melissa Haslinger, Bill and Laura Hlavin, State Sen. Frank LaRose, Sharon and Mike Hargrove, former board members Donna Skoda and Bob Lucas, the Ohio Public Works Commission and Natural Resources Advisory Council District 8.

“I am so proud to be part of this community and a member of this board, which has accomplished so much in such a short amount of time,” said RJRD Board Chair Floyd Ostrowski. “Our mission to preserve, conserve and recreate will not just be for this generation but for future generations.”

Richfield Mayor Bobbie Beshara said, “Today is a celebration of hard work, perseverance and the love of a historic piece of property that our residents and visitors will enjoy for many, many years to come. The purchase of the Crowell Hilaka property is a testament to our community’s values and willingness to sustain those values. Thank you to all who contributed to this incredible goal including Richfield Village Council, the Richfield Township Board of Trustees, the Friends of Crowell Hilaka, the Richfield Joint Recreation District Board of Trustees, Western Reserve Land Conservancy and most importantly the people of Richfield.”

“Our goal was always to conserve this beautiful property, and the people of Richfield should be congratulated for making it happen,” said Joe Leslie, director of acquisitions for the Land Conservancy. “Future generations will benefit from the steps this community has taken to acquire this land.”

Richfield Township Trustee Janet Jankura said, “We are encouraged by the strategy of preserving the park to be an active recreation destination for residents and visitors for years to come.”

Bedford Heights adds 23-acre nature preserve

Bedford Heights now has a new 23-acre passive park as a result of a partnership between the city and the Land Conservancy.

The Solon Road Preserve, which abuts the southern boundary of the city’s Lucille Reed Park and is near the Cleveland Metroparks Bedford Reservation, was created through the acquisition of two parcels and a city land bank lot. The project was funded through a Clean Ohio Conservation Fund grant from the Ohio Public Works Commission and Natural Resource Advisory Council District 1.

The 22-acre Reed Park has a large pavilion as well as basketball courts, a tennis court and playground facilities for tots and youths. The park is also home to the city’s outdoor pool. The Solon Road Preserve enhances the recreational opportunities in Bedford Heights by adding a passive recreational component to an established active recreation area while doubling it in size.

“It is rare to find areas of undeveloped land this size in the built-out sections of Cuyahoga County that contain conservable natural areas,” said Sarah Ryzner, director of projects for the Land Conservancy’s Thriving Communities Institute. “That the project could add to an existing recreation area and is adjacent to neighborhoods is even better. We are excited about the outcome here.”

Ryzner added, “The city of Bedford Heights has been a terrific partner on this project, and we look forward to exploring additional opportunities to connect its neighborhoods with these great natural assets.”

Bedford Heights Mayor Fletcher Berger said, “Bedford Heights is fortunate to have this jewel in our city. Thanks to our partners, this jewel will be preserved for the benefit of current and future generations.”

The preserve has two ravines running from north to south. The eastern ravine contains 885 linear feet of a direct tributary to Tinker’s Creek, which is the largest tributary of the Cuyahoga River.

The Land Conservancy has partnered with Tinker’s Creek Watershed Partners on a restoration plan for the project. In May, volunteers from the Land Conservancy, TCWP, Cleveland Metroparks and the city spent a day planting 900 trees and shrubs along the stream bank, as well as in the flood plain and former home site on the property.
The Land Conservancy is expected to complete citywide property surveys in Cleveland and Dayton this fall, giving those communities an updated snapshot of the condition of more than 225,000 parcels and the buildings associated with them. Cleveland has 150,000 parcels, Dayton 75,000.

Both surveys are being conducted by the Land Conservancy’s Thriving Communities Institute. Paul Boehnlein, associate director of applied GIS for the Land Conservancy, said crews work in teams of two and gather information while on sidewalks and public rights-of-way. Information about each parcel – including whether it is vacant, the condition of any structures on it and a photo – is recorded on a tablet computer. Cities can then use the information to make planning decisions.

The Cleveland survey is being done in cooperation with the city’s Department of Building and Housing, Cleveland City Council and local community development corporations. Survey crews, which are made up of mostly Cleveland residents, are hired and managed by the Land Conservancy.

In Dayton, the city is funding the survey. The Land Conservancy is contracting with Wright State University’s Multicultural Affairs & Community Engagement Office of Service Learning for the “on the ground” part of the survey; WSU hired the students and is providing day-to-day management.

“The surveys are a valuable tool and will give the cities a more accurate picture of their housing and building stock,” said Jim Rokakis, a Land Conservancy vice president and director of Thriving Communities Institute. “This information will help to guide decision makers as they determine how to allocate their demolition resources.”

Thriving Communities Institute has completed community-wide surveys in Akron, East Cleveland, Lorain, Sandusky and Oberlin. Other Ohio cities have also expressed interest, Boehnlein said.

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The Land Conservancy has secured a Clean Ohio Conservation Fund grant to acquire the former Henninger Landfill and adjacent properties along Big Creek, just east of the zoo and West 25th Street. The parcel could eventually become a key link between the zoo property and the Towpath Trail.

Plans call for public use of the property, and project partners are working together to make the vision a reality.

The project protects 1,015 linear feet of Lower Big Creek, and improving its water quality will support the improvement and ultimate delisting of the Cuyahoga River as an Area of Concern (AOC).

“For over 40 years – since the closing of this old landfill – community leaders in Old Brooklyn have struggled with how to repurpose this land,” said Jim Rokakis, director of the Land Conservancy’s Thriving Communities Institute. “Western Reserve Land Conservancy has taken the critical first steps by finding the grant money to buy this and identifying the dollars to do the minor clean up that is required. Now we can begin the planning process in earnest.”

The Land Conservancy has placed a conservation easement – a legal document that permanently restricts any development – on the property. Land Conservancy representatives said preserving the property will also protect water quality in Big Creek, a tributary of the Cuyahoga River.

Acquisition of this property could also lead to possible future restoration work along Lower Big Creek, including erosion and water quality improvements, native plantings, invasive plant removal, native tree reforestation and reestablishment of native grasses and native woodland wildflowers.

The project is located within the Cuyahoga River Watershed, which drains a total of 812 square miles and flows through all or part of six counties. Much of the lower Cuyahoga River watershed is an internationally designated Great Lakes Area of Concern, a designation for the worst polluted tributaries to the Great Lakes. To delist the Cuyahoga River as an AOC, identifying and protecting natural areas to address the loss of fish and wildlife habitat within its watershed is an essential step; in a developed urban area, this project does just that.
The Land Conservancy has acquired a 63-acre portion of what is known as Oberlin Great South Woods with the intent of creating a nature preserve on the property.

The Land Conservancy used a Clean Ohio Conservation Fund grant to acquire the property from West Park Ltd. The parcel, which has forests, wetlands and a sedge meadow, will be used for passive outdoor recreation, including walking, jogging, birdwatching, picnicking and nature study.

The undeveloped parcel is on the south side of Hamilton Road, west of the Oberlin Ball Fields and Splash Zone. Several rare species of birds, reptiles and amphibians have been sighted on this property. Oberlin Great South Woods has been targeted for conservation for more than a decade and was listed by the former Firelands Land Conservancy as one of its top three priorities in 2006, when it joined seven other land trusts in a merger that created Western Reserve Land Conservancy.

The property is in the Black River watershed and contains educational opportunities, including the study of unique habitats like vernal pools, high quality mid-successional maple-hickory-oak forest and successional fields. These habitats provide shelter, food, and nesting areas for birds, amphibians, small and large mammals and other wildlife. The vegetated and forested buffers along the drainages help control runoff, prevent erosion and mitigate flooding to downstream properties.

“Preserving this part of the Oberlin Great South Woods is significant for many reasons,” said Andy McDowell, vice president of western field operations for the Land Conservancy. “First, it will help protect many rare plant and animal species and contains great habitat. Additionally, it will help control stormwater runoff, which has been an issue in that area for some time. Last, but not least, the land between Hamilton Road and state Route 20 will eventually see increased development pressure, and this helps to set aside critical habitat and open space before too much development takes place.”

Earlier this year, Oberlin City Council approved a resolution of support for this project and the Clean Ohio application. In addition, funding from the Oberlin College Green EDGE (Ecological Design and General Efficiency) Fund, a student board, helped make the project possible.

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A joint effort by two conservation groups and two landowners has permanently preserved another 92 acres in the village of Gates Mills.

The Sherman Road Preserve, located at the southwest corner of Sherman and County Line roads, is the product of a partnership between two nonprofits, Gates Mills Land Conservancy and Western Reserve Land Conservancy, plus donations from landowners Evelyn Newell and Hickory Nut Farm, LLC.

A Clean Ohio Fund grant was used to purchase the northern 38 acres along Sherman Road. This property, along with three acres donated by Hickory Nut Farm, will be owned by Gates Mills Land Conservancy. Western Reserve Land Conservancy holds a conservation easement on this 41-acre tract. A conservation easement permanently barring development of the remaining 51 acres – an easement co-held by the land conservancies – was donated by Newell, who retains ownership.

The land conservancies have been working on this project since 2008. “This is a great example of what can be accomplished when conservation organizations work in concert with conservation-minded landowners for the benefit of the larger community,” said Joe Leslie, director of acquisitions for Western Reserve Land Conservancy. “We are grateful for the generosity of Evelyn Newell and Hickory Nut Farm and for the partnership of Gates Mills Land Conservancy.

Chris Szell, director of conservation project management for Western Reserve Land Conservancy, said the assistance of the Ohio Public Works Commission, which oversees Clean Ohio funding, was critical in the completion of the Sherman Road project. The project is in the district of State Sen. Tom Patton, a long-standing supporter of Clean Ohio funding.

“Through the Clean Ohio Fund, we continue our commitment to protecting the beauty and sanctity of natural areas and the unique species that inhabit them,” Patton said. “I applaud Gates Mills Land Conservancy and Western Reserve Land Conservancy for their collaboration to make the Sherman Road Preserve possible.”

The project adds to the significant land-preservation efforts in Gates Mills, where GMLC has permanently preserved 550 acres, or approximately 11.4 percent of all the land in the village. Western Reserve Land Conservancy preserves natural areas and farmland throughout northern and eastern Ohio; to date, Western Reserve Land Conservancy has protected more than 560 properties and more than 42,000 acres.

Szell said the property has grasslands, about 44 acres of hardwood forest and a primary headwater stream that flows directly into the State Scenic Chagrin River. The tributary begins at the eastern portion of the property at an elevation of approximately 1,050 feet and drops nearly 300 feet before it empties into the Chagrin River.

Primary headwater streams flow into the Chagrin River.

Preserving continued

Warmwater Habitat. It is an important stream because it contains one of the last few populations of the Eastern Hellbender – a large salamander – in southeastern Ohio.

In 2014, the Christen farm was the site of a pioneering Eastern Hellbender reintroduction program lead by Greg Lipps of Ohio State University. In this groundbreaking program, fertilized hellbender eggs are harvested from known spawning sites in several Ohio streams and hatched at the Toledo and Columbus zoos; after two years, the juvenile hellbenders are released back into the wild in selected high-quality streams. Yellow Creek is one of those streams, and the specific pool behind Standing Rock on the Christen farm is the exact location for the release of these young hellbenders.

Rodstrom thanked Lipps, who made the Land Conservancy aware of the property, Yellow Creek Watershed Coordinator Mike Sisson and corporate supporter Access Midstream/Williams for making the project possible.

Rodstrom said the Land Conservancy has been doing more land-protection work in eastern Ohio and expects the interest in conservation will continue to increase. Property owners interested in protecting their land can contact Rodstrom at brodstrom@wrlandconservancy.org or (440) 867-6659.
Why giving away life insurance

If you’re like most people, you probably think of life insurance as a way to ensure that your loved ones will be taken care of when you are gone. And you’re not wrong. But life insurance can also be a convenient and flexible way to make charitable gifts, and reward yourself while you’re at it.

Americans are generous people. Every year we give billions to charities. Giving with a life insurance policy can give you the ability to contribute more to your favorite cause, and can potentially offer some tax breaks to boot.

Charity makes your money go further

If you take out a policy on your life with the Western Reserve Land Conservancy as the sole beneficiary, the Land Conservancy will receive the entire amount of the policy upon your passing -- usually much more than you would ordinarily be able to give. Gifting the life insurance policy itself to the Land Conservancy can also reduce your taxable estate, and it could earn you a tax deduction during your lifetime, based on the policy’s value. Also, paying monthly or quarterly premiums...
Why giving away life insurance makes more sense than you think

on a policy owned by the Land Conservancy may be a little easier than making a lump sum donation. You could make annual gifts to the Land Conservancy to help us cover the cost of the premium, and your gifts would be tax deductible to you.

It’s also possible to add the Land Conservancy as a beneficiary to an existing life insurance policy. This is simpler than purchasing a policy on behalf of the Land Conservancy, but it doesn’t give you the same income tax deduction. It does, however, reduce your estate tax by the amount of the death benefit paid out.

Lastly, if you own a paid-up policy, you can transfer ownership to the Land Conservancy, and we can either hold the policy until your passing, or we can cash it out. You can deduct the cash value of the policy at the time of the gift.

Policy ownership

You can transfer ownership of a life insurance policy to the Land Conservancy, so that we are responsible for its administration, or you can keep it yourself. Keeping ownership and naming the Land Conservancy as the beneficiary gives you complete control, meaning you can change the death benefits, the monthly premium payments and your beneficiary designations.

Allowing the Land Conservancy to own the policy means you lose that control, but it could increase your income tax deduction. And if you buy the policy and then transfer it to the Land Conservancy at a later date, you could also qualify for a charitable income tax deduction.

A flexible giving tool

These are just some of the options that make life insurance a powerful financial tool for charitable giving. Talk to your advisor to explore how life insurance may help you find more ways to benefit the Land Conservancy, or feel free to call Nancy McCann at (440) 528-4153.
Land Conservancy website gets a brand new look

The revamped Western Reserve Land Conservancy website, which went live in July, combines the former Land Conservancy, Thriving Communities Institute and EverGreen EverBlue sites into one easy-to-navigate location. The web address remains www.wrlandconservancy.org.

Features include:

- An interactive map that enables users to find each of our more than 560 protected properties;
- A glossary feature in which the meaning of certain terms and the descriptions of programs and partners pop up when you hover over them;
- Live Twitter and YouTube feeds on the home page and most other pages;
- Stories about those who have conserved their land with the Land Conservancy;
- News stories that also feature related content;
- Pages that are optimized for smartphones and tablets;
- User-friendly drop-down menus; and
- Expanded information about our staff and trustees.

The Land Conservancy saved money by using staff and volunteers to revamp the website. Please check it out!