Dear friends:

Ten years ago, we legally merged eight land conservancies to form a new organization called Western Reserve Land Conservancy. To our knowledge then and now, this was the largest ever simultaneous merger of nonprofits in the United States. Today, I take my hat off to the many people who made that unprecedented collaboration happen. There are too many to name.

After ten years of observation, the merger was a brilliant strategic move that created a nationally significant organization and dramatically increased the region’s land conservation capacity. Before the merger, the land trusts had collectively preserved less than 9,000 acres during a twenty year period. Since the merger, in only ten years, the new entity has preserved an additional 36,000 acres! As one land trust leader from Boston once said to me: “Never has so much been done with so little.”

And what is perhaps even more extraordinary is the progress we have made by adding urban revitalization to our work. We’ve led an effort to establish more than 25 new county land banks; secured an astounding amount of state and federal funding for cities in Ohio to remove abandoned homes in blighted neighborhoods; launched an innovative urban reforestation program; and acquired many new urban parks and greenways, such as Adam’s and Haley’s Run in Akron and the Henninger property in Cleveland.

I have been involved in this work for more than twenty years now, first as a volunteer and then as an employee. Today, as we close in on 50,000 acres, I feel like we are just getting started. The character of our work has evolved. Today we serve a breathtaking diversity of people and places, providing essential natural assets that improve lives and create healthy communities. At the end of 2015, we closed on many conservation projects that exemplify this diversity: huge farms in places like Trumbull County; biodiverse natural areas in Chagrin Falls; and urban parks and preserves that are small, but mighty in how many people they touch.

As we celebrate the tenth anniversary of our merger, I want to take a moment to thank all of you who quite literally make all of this good work possible. Thank you for coming together, in support of our leadership, to create such an amazing organization that has provided so much value to so many. Together, we will continue to build and support a region with thriving, prosperous communities nourished by vibrant natural areas, working farms and healthy cities.

With gratitude,

Rich Cochran,
President & CEO


109-acre “oasis” conserved in Geauga County

Western Reserve Land Conservancy has been granted a conservation easement on a 109-acre property in a highly developable part of Bainbridge Township.

The property boasts a rich diversity of habitats including 48 acres of field, grass meadow and emergent wetlands managed meticulously for wildlife, as well as approximately 60 acres of mature hardwood forest that tower over two headwater streams which flow directly into the State Scenic Chagrin River. In total, the easement preserves two miles of streams and eight acres of high quality floodplain wetlands.

“This property is meticulously managed for wildlife, making it an oasis of flora and fauna in a highly developable part of Bainbridge, Chagrin Falls, and Bentleyville,” shared Brett Rodstrom, vice president of eastern operations for the Land Conservancy.

Rodstrom said the property provides shelter, food and nesting areas for birds, fish, mammals and other wildlife. The landowners are avid birders and have documented over 170 bird species on the property over the past 30 years. The vegetated and forested slopes on the property help control runoff, prevent erosion and mitigate flooding while helping to improve or maintain water quality in the Chagrin River watershed.

Fifth-generation farmer preserves 52-acre farm in Portage County

With the help of the Ohio Department of Agriculture and Western Reserve Land Conservancy, 52 acres of working farmland has been permanently preserved in Portage County.

The farm, located in Deerfield Township, is owned and farmed by Donald Sampson III. Sampson and his wife, Adriann, are dairy farmers that milk a mix of approximately 30 Holsteins and jersey cattle. They use the 52-acre preserved farm to produce hay, corn, soybeans, wheat and other foods for their dairy operation.

“We are proud to work with Western Reserve Land Conservancy and Mr. Sampson to secure this agricultural easement in Portage County,” said Amanda Bennett, program manager for the Office of Farmland Preservation. “Their collective efforts continue to support farmland preservation and the state’s number one industry – food and agriculture.”

Sampson permanently preserved the family farmland with a purchased conservation easement funded through the Clean Ohio Conservation fund, Local Agricultural Easement Purchase Program, administered by the Ohio Department of Agriculture (ODA). The competitive Clean Ohio Local Agricultural Easement Purchase Program provides funding to purchase agricultural easements from landowners who volunteer to keep their land in agricultural production in perpetuity.

“I think that the property becoming protected forever is at least as important as being paid for it,” shared Sampson. “I want there to be viable farmland for whoever chooses to live here.”

Alex Czayka, eastern field director for the Land Conservancy shared, “Don and Adriann are able to reinvest the funding received by ODA back into their farm operation, which not only benefits their family, but also benefits Ohio agriculture.”

He explained further, “Many townships and counties in Ohio rely on farms for nearly all of their economic activity. When we help a farmer invest in their business, we are engaged in land preservation and economic development.”
Land Conservancy records first conservation easement in Carroll County

Jerry and Barb Graham’s picturesque small cattle operation is indicative of most Carroll County farms: its rolling hills and knobs provide lush pastures and hay fields while the lowland areas remain largely natural providing ample wetland and stream habitat corridors.

But unlike most other Carroll County farms, it has been permanently preserved.

The Grahams granted Western Reserve Land Conservancy five separate but contiguous conservation easements on their 375-acre farm on Ming Road in November. The farm is located just northeast of the City of Carrollton in Washington Township and is the Land Conservancy’s first conserved property in Carroll County.

The property contains approximately 208 acres of agricultural pasture lands, 114 acres of mature hardwood forest – including oak, hickory, maple, beech, and black cherry trees – and 54 acres of wetlands. Farmland is bisected by Pipe Run, a small, cool-water stream that flows into the Tuscarawas River.

“We thank the Grahams for their perseverance and dedication to permanently conserving this beautiful property,” shared Brett Rodstrom, vice president of eastern field operations for the Land Conservancy. “Jerry and Barb’s leadership in the community is to be commended.”

Hoffman Forest MetroPark permanently conserved

Committed to conservation and environmental education, H. Lowell Hoffman, M.D., leased 40 acres of land to Erie MetroParks in 1995 to create Hoffman Forest MetroPark. With the lease set to expire at the end of 2015, Erie Metroparks began working with Western Reserve Land Conservancy to permanently acquire this community asset.

The Land Conservancy applied for and was awarded Clean Ohio Conservation Fund and Land and Water Conservation Fund grants on behalf of Erie MetroPark. The organization acquired the property on Huff Road and subsequently transferred it to Erie MetroParks for continued public park operation. The Land Conservancy holds a conservation easement – a legal document that permanently restricts future development – on the property.

“Permanently preserving Hoffman Forest ensures that this park will continue to support important habitat for rare plant and animal species, benefit the Old Woman Creek watershed, and provide impressive recreation and education opportunities for visitors for years to come,” shared Andy McDowell, vice president of western field operations for the Land Conservancy.

Hoffman Forest MetroPark features three distinct ecological communities: mature maple-hickory-oak forest, meadow that has been recently reforested, and creek valleys formed by two small, intermittent branches of Old Woman Creek. This diversity in habitat encourages species diversity; biological surveys identified several notable species on the property including 14 state-listed species like the Yellow-Bellied Sapsucker, Northern Harrier, and Box Turtle. The park is an important piece of the Old Woman Creek watershed, supporting the conservation of one of Ohio’s last remaining natural estuaries.

The park is open daily, from 8 a.m. to dusk, year-round. Approximately two miles of natural surfaced trails begin near the parking lot at 5313 Huff Road, Berlin Heights OH.
Survey continued

“It is our hope that this digital survey – the first of its kind in Cleveland – will provide decision makers and community leaders a fully documented picture of the city as it is now, neighborhood by neighborhood and property by property. This data will help civic leaders make informed decisions regarding the use of limited demolition and rehabilitation resources.” explained Jim Rokakis, vice president of Western Reserve Land Conservancy and director of its urban program, Thriving Communities.

The citywide survey began in June 2015 and was conducted by the Land Conservancy in cooperation with the City’s Department of Building and Housing, Cleveland City Council and local community development corporations. Information about each parcel – including its vacancy status, the condition of any structures on it and a photo – was recorded on a tablet computer. On-the-ground data collection for the survey of Cleveland ended in October 2015.

The results of the property inventory indicate that 71 percent of Cleveland’s residential, commercial and industrial parcels of land contain occupied structures. Approximately 8 percent of parcels were found to have vacant structures. An additional 18 percent of parcels were vacant lots.

Of the 112,897 parcels containing occupied structures in the City of Cleveland, over 84 percent were graded A (Excellent) or B (Good). These structures are considered to need only minor improvements, if any, and appeared to be cared for and well maintained. Of the 12,179 parcels containing vacant structures in the City of Cleveland, 37 percent were graded D (Deteriorated) or F (Unsafe or Hazardous). These structures may exhibit characteristics including major cracking; rotting wood; broken or missing windows; missing brick and siding; and open holes.

Demolition of blighted properties is known to help stabilize neighborhoods by restoring value to surrounding homes. While the Land Conservancy does not demolish houses, it does advocate for the removal of vacant and abandoned homes. It found that the number of vacant and distressed residential properties was 32 percent lower than the 2013 estimate of properties produced by the City of Cleveland Department of Building and Housing.

“This reduction represents a significant positive finding,” shared Frank Ford, senior policy advisor for the Land Conservancy’s urban program. “We believe there are fewer vacant and distressed properties today given the significant reduction in foreclosed and abandoned properties, as well as the concentrated demolition activity that has occurred in the City of Cleveland. Nearly 11,000 properties have been demolished by the city and Cuyahoga Land Bank since 2007.”

The Land Conservancy is now analyzing additional data, including home sale, health and crime statistics, alongside the property survey results. This analysis will be made available on the Land Conservancy’s website where you can currently access an interactive map of data collected through the Cleveland Property Survey.

Funding for the citywide property survey was generously provided by The Cleveland Foundation; Cleveland Cavaliers, Quicken Loans and Rock Gaming; and Cleveland City Council. Community development corporations across the city provided work space for the survey team throughout the project.
Families preserve additional farmland in Huron County

The Butts and Seidel families not only share a passion for farming, but they also continue to work with Western Reserve Land Conservancy to permanently preserve farmland in Huron County.

Both families recently worked with the Land Conservancy to preserve additional farmland by donating agricultural easements on their properties. The voluntary easements restrict the ability to develop a particular property, thereby keeping it available for agricultural production. Easements are permanent and run with the land.

Scott and Kathy Butts most recently granted an agricultural easement in Hartland Township on a 47-acre parcel adjacent to 173-acre parcel the couple preserved with the help of the Land Conservancy in 2014. The properties produce various rotations of soybeans, corn and wheat as part of the Butts’ grain farm operation that spans both Huron and Lorain counties. The family began working with the Land Conservancy in 2013 and has preserved 800 acres to date.

Maple Lawn Farm most recently granted an agricultural easement in Greenwich Township, on a 65-acre parcel containing mostly active agricultural land, as well a tributary to the Vermilion River. The farmland is part of the Seidel family’s diversified farm operation which produces various row crops as well as hogs, beef cattle and broiler chickens. The multi-generational farm family began working with the Land Conservancy in 2010 by preserving 200 acres through the Ohio Department of Agriculture’s Agricultural Easement Purchase Program; they plan to preserve additional acreage in 2016.

“We thank the Butts and the Seidels for their continued commitment to land conservation,” shared Andy McDowell, vice president of western field operations for Western Reserve Land Conservancy. “We are seeing more and more farmers understand the value of conserving their land and commit to preserving more of it. Some landowners find value in preserving family farmland, others find value in the significant federal income tax benefits that have a major, positive impact on their bottom lines.”

Hardest Hit Funds to help Ohio communities

The Hardest Hit Fund was first created in February 2010 to provide critical funding to states hit hardest by the housing crisis. Each state designs and administers locally-tailored programs to assist struggling homeowners in their communities; in Ohio, programs have not only helped homeowners avoid foreclosure, but also provided funds to remove vacant and blighted structures which pose threats to public safety and local economic well-being.

In a strong bipartisan action, Congress authorized the U.S. Treasury Department to transfer up to $2 billion to the Hardest Hit Fund through the omnibus appropriation bill. Jim Rokakis, vice president of Western Reserve Land Conservancy and director of its urban program, Thriving Communities, thanked Sen. Portman as well as Sen. Brown and Rep. Joyce for their leadership, making sure this funding was included in the year-end spending bill. “This was an amazing bipartisan effort to help struggling communities,” he shared. “It is our hope that the Land Conservancy’s work to establish land banks and conduct municipal property surveys across the state will better enable Ohio communities to maximize the impact the Hardest Hit Funds they receive.”

Funding allocations were being determined at the time of this publication; updates can be found at www.wrlandconservancy.org.
Giving

Just like tributaries flow into larger rivers or lakes, so too do Western Reserve Land Conservancy interns: young men and women make their way through our internship program, picking up knowledge and gaining professional experience before entering into the larger work world.

The Land Conservancy offers a variety of internships each year in all of our program areas. Interns are instrumental in helping us accomplish our mission through their participation in independent work in the field, planning and implementation of projects and joining in on team meetings. Our internship program has inspired many to pursue full-time study and work in the conservation field. Indeed, interns at the Land Conservancy have brought us many talented employees including Kendrick Chittock (Project Manager), Pete McDonald (Director of Land Stewardship) and Lizzie Votruba (Manager of Membership, Volunteers and Special Events).

Unfortunately, not all of our internships are paid, and we feel that many students do not apply for an internship with us because they need that paycheck.

In 2013, Stanley and Hope Adelstein donated $25,000 (with an additional gift through their estate) to fund the Stan and Hope Adelstein Internship Program. This designated internship fund enables the Land Conservancy to provide a paycheck for one full-time intern each summer.

We hope that you agree that a hands-on experience with the Land Conservancy is worth its weight in gold to both the intern and the Land Conservancy. We welcome you, our friends and supporters, to match the Adelstein’s gift in order to build the Tributaries Internship Fund and support up to five additional interns each year with modest stipends for their work.

Education and experience helps young adults explore all that’s around them so that they can make informed decisions about their future! If interested in helping the Land Conservancy attract the very best talent through our internship program, please call Angela Rincon at 440-528-4166 or email arincon@wrlandconservancy.org.

Internship opportunities will be posted on the Land Conservancy website this spring.

The Land Conservancy thanks the Marianna Luxenberg Trust for its support and recognizes them for their generous gift in Fiscal Year 2015.

Events

The Land Conservancy hosted its inaugural White Oak Legacy Society Dinner in October 2015. At the event, the Land Conservancy honored Sue Grimm (left) with the Art of Caring Award, a beautiful painting created by Carol Prior (right).

Members of the Medina-Summit Chapter engaged trick-or-treaters in spooky and educational activities at Trick or Treat on the Trail, a Halloween celebration at the former Crowell-Hilaka Girl Scout camp.

Through the support of Dominion, Western Reserve Land Conservancy launched the Watershed Mini Grant Program this year to serve organizations working to protect and improve land around rivers, lakes and streams throughout Ohio. In October 2015, Dominion and the Land Conservancy awarded $35,000 in grant funding to fifteen Ohio watershed groups for general operating, marketing and specific project costs.

The Land Conservancy teamed up with over 300 volunteers from Cleveland Cavaliers, PricewaterhouseCoopers, Davey Tree, Holden Arboretum, Cleveland Metropolitan School District and Cuyahoga Metropolitan Housing Authority to plant Trees for Threes. One tree for each 3-pointer the Cavs made last season – 320 trees in all – at Anton Grdina Elementary School.
EverGreen EverBlue, the popular annual benefit put on by the nonprofit Western Reserve Land Conservancy, took root this year in an extraordinary urban setting – Cleveland’s Rustbelt Reclamation. The event will return to a more natural setting on August 27, 2016.

The Land Conservancy’s Young Professional Group visited the Murch Canopy Walk at Holden Arboretum for their Fall Happy Hour.

Each year, the Land Conservancy recognizes landowners who have permanently conserved their land with regional celebrations; this year’s Eastern Landowner Dinner took place at Lake Erie Bluffs.
Landowners can take advantage of enhanced conservation easement tax incentives

Western Reserve Land Conservancy applauds Congress’s vote making permanent enhanced federal tax incentives for those who preserve land with a conservation easement.

A conservation easement is a voluntary legal agreement in which a private landowner can permanently retire the development rights to his or her property, thereby preserving natural resources and keeping farm, forest and ranch lands in productive use. The property remains in private ownership, and future owners are bound by the easement’s terms, ensuring the property remains as it was when first preserved.

When landowners donate a conservation easement to permanently preserve their land from future development, they give up part of the value of their property. Under previous law, they received little financial benefit for donating what may be their family’s biggest asset.

The enhanced incentive essentially enables landowners to deduct a larger portion of their income over a longer period of time. The enhanced incentive:

- Raises the deduction a donor can take for donating a voluntary conservation agreement from 30 percent of his or her income in any year to 50 percent;
- Allows farmers and ranchers to deduct up to 100 percent of their income; and
- Increases the number of years over which a donor can carry forward remainder amounts of the tax deductions from 5 to 15 years.

Individuals interested in learning more about conservation easements and the enhanced tax incentive should contact Western Reserve Land Conservancy at 440-528-4150.