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Land conservancy and CEO receive national recognition

Julie Hullett 10 hrs ago

The Western Reserve Land Conservancy recently earned national accreditation from the Land Trust Accreditation Commission, making it one of six conservancies in Ohio with this notable distinction. The conservancy, headquartered in Moreland Hills, is the largest land trust in Ohio.

“We saw this as a natural step,” Director of Land Stewardship Pete McDonald said. “This was the right time to do it, and we’re happy and honored to be accredited. It’s about proving our credibility to the public.”

Mr. McDonald led an internal team of staff members to achieve accreditation. He explained that there are 12 standards set by the Land Trust Alliance that apply to land trusts across the country. He said that during the accreditation process, the conservancy compares its practices, such as its internal policies, financial management and land stewardship, to the standards set by the Land Trust Alliance.

Accredited land trusts are expected to conduct business with high ethical standards, avoid conflicts of interest, hire skilled personnel and perform responsible stewardship, to name a few standards from the Land Trust Alliance.

“This accreditation program challenges land trusts to get better and all pull together to do this work throughout the country,” Mr. McDonald said. “It’s bigger than us. It’s a national movement.”

Rich Cochran, CEO of the Western Reserve Land Conservancy, discussed two challenges that the conservancy took on for accreditation. He gave an example with baseline documentation. The current size of the conservancy is the result of mergers with 12 other organizations over time. When the conservancy secures a conservation easement, employees must also complete a baseline document, which

describes the condition of the property at the time of the easement. The conservancy put together many baseline documents from scratch because they were not written when easements initially were obtained.

“We are the compilation of work done by 13 different organizations,” Mr. Cochran said. “Over 750 conservation easements alone had to be in compliance.”

Mr. Cochran said accreditation requires the conservancy to have a stewardship endowment, a separate fund set aside to uphold all of their conservation easements. The cost is \$5,000 per easement, and the conservancy did not collect that funding in a separate endowment. Rather, the organization pays for stewardship through its operating budget. The conservancy did receive the accreditation but must have between \$3 million and \$4 million in its endowment fund when the accreditation is renewed in five years, Mr. Cochran said.

“We’ve reached a tipping point where we have more than 700 properties and getting near 60,000 acres of land,” Mr. McDonald said. “We saw this as the right time to do accreditation and build a more robust funding program.”

In other news, Mr. Cochran was inducted into Marquis Who’s Who, a list of noteworthy leaders and achievers around the world. Mr. Cochran is a nationally renowned conservationist and became the first employee of the Western Reserve Land Conservancy in 1996. It was previously called the Chagrin River Land Conservancy, and it was comprised of volunteers. Mr. Cochran said that he determined he wanted to become a conservationist while on a backpacking trip. He first visited a protected national park, then arrived at a national forest where it is legal to do clear cut logging.

“We walked on the line between the two, and it was a massive dash across the landscape,” he said. “It was so shocking to me and my friends that it angered us and made us think about what we do to the world and how unhealthy that is.”

Mr. Cochran credits his team for the conservancy’s major accomplishments, including creating more than 170 public parks and preserves and raising more than \$440 million to eliminate blight in Ohio’s cities.

Chief Development Officer Stella Dilik said that Mr. Cochran is an admirable leader.

“It’s not just the growth of our organization over the years, our net assets have exploded,” she said. “He has a theme that everyone deserves a life that’s healthy and safe and in a flourishing community and that’s how we approach our work.”

Mr. Cochran said that he wants everyone to connect with nature in their daily lives. He gave an example with the conservancy’s current project to reforest the City of Cleveland and explained that he wants a child in the Kinsman or Central neighborhoods to step outside and connect with nature as quickly as a child in Shaker Heights or Chagrin Falls.

Julie Hullett

Julie Hullett has been a reporter for the Chagrin Valley Times since August of 2018 and covers Gates Mills, Hunting Valley, Moreland Hills, Orange, Pepper Pike and Woodmere. She graduated from John Carroll University with a journalism degree in 2018.