

BEST FRIENDS OF LAND PRESERVATION

ORANGE COUNTY LAND TRUST • BY REED SPARLING



Linda Gette, development director of the Orange County Land Trust (OCLT), stands in front of the tree-shaded house at Clove Brook Farm in Cornwall and gazes out across an emerald-green field studded with cows that ends at the base of Schunemunk Mountain. “You could put a lot of McMansions in a place like this,” she says.

Fortunately, those houses will never be built here. The farm’s owners, Jan and Sandra van Heerden, generously donated the development rights of the 183-acre property to the trust in 2001, preserving an important viewshed for hikers and Sunday drivers alike.

Other parts of Orange County are not as lucky. Low mortgage rates and a desire to escape urban areas have pushed development pressures to the max, and farmland and other open space is vanishing at an alarming rate, faster than anywhere else in the region. It was in response to this threat, which was already becoming dire, that the OCLT was formed a decade ago. So far, the organization has protected 21 parcels of land — some through outright purchase, others through conservation easements — that add up to more than 1,300 acres of fields, forest, and wetlands.

Most of those properties — from a 25-acre apple orchard in Newburgh with stunning river views to a 138-acre preserve along the Bashakill Creek at the base of the Shawangunks — were purchased over the last five years, when the trust was in the midst of a five-year acquisition plan. “We were 90 percent successful,” says Executive Director John Gebhards. “I don’t think there is any business that can look back and say they’ve done that with their strategic plan.”

Gebhards admits that the OCLT’s task has gotten more difficult since it was founded by former Orange County Executive Louis V. Mills. “When we started up, we were re-active in 90 percent of the situations,” he says. Today, the group

is trying to identify land that needs to be protected *before* it is actually threatened, which “takes a lot more work than waiting for the phone to ring.” Some goals targeted in the trust’s next five-year plan, currently being drafted, include increasing access to rivers and lakes, protecting the county’s few remaining large forests, augmenting the size of already preserved wildlife habitats, and maintaining agricultural activity.

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Forever wild: the Orange County Land Trust’s Moonbeams and Hamptonburgh preserves. At right, Clove Brook Farm



The trust is a nonprofit organization with limited funds and an all-volunteer board, which works hard to encourage local villages and towns to get on the land-preservation bandwagon. “The percentage of land we can save is relatively small, but if we can work with the municipalities, if more and more towns can come up with a funding source and the county can come up with matching money, that can multiply many times the effect we can do ourselves,” says Gebhards. The trust was also instrumental in the formation of the Orange County Open Space Alliance, a consortium of 13 public and private conservation organizations that will coordinate preservation efforts throughout the county. Another OCLT project, the Wallkill River Task Force, is working to develop a plan for acquiring land along the county’s longest waterway.

Still, the “key thing” to the OCLT’s ongoing preservation efforts, insists Gebhards, is “bringing in the private sector. It’s a big decision for a landowner to put an easement on his property,” he admits, especially when developers are offering large wads of cash for the land. Part of the the OCLT’s job is selling the pros of opting for an easement. “Private individuals need to know what the tax advantages are,” Gebhards stresses.

Ramon Rueda is one farmer who is planning to take the OCLT up on its easement offer. He is close to signing off on a deal to protect 147 acres of his Tamira Amelia Farm in the town of Crawford, which he and his family purchased three years ago after moving up from New York City. As two coyotes sauntered across his fields one summer day, Rueda talked passionately about his reasons for approaching the OCLT.

“The history of these great farms is just being lost,” he says. “I’m going to make sure that this piece of property stays open space forever. Here again,

it is on the back of people like myself to do what the public should be doing.” Rueda, who raises alpacas, eventually hopes to build a small mill to process the animals’ wool. He also plans to start an education center where youngsters can come and talk to old-time farmers.

In stark contrast to Rueda’s mowed fields, the OCLT’s 130-acre Hamptonburgh Preserve looks positively primeval. Although covered with trees, most of the ground is under water, not a good thing for developers but great for birds. In just 10 minutes at the site, a dozen species,

including a green heron and several types of ducks, were spotted. It is home to a breeding pair of red-headed woodpeckers, a rarity in Orange County, as well as 30 great blue heron nests. (The trust just purchased an additional 77 acres of nearby forest through which it plans to put a trail connecting the preserve to the Wallkill River.)

Gebhards excitedly points out the birds and has a story to tell about each one. “It’s such a rich waterfowl breeding area that we thought it just had to be protected,” he says. Which just goes to show how enthusiasm can go a long, long way toward making the world a better place. ■

