

Charleston land trust CEO leaving to take a national leadership role

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MAR 3, 2025



The Lowcountry Open Land Trust was involved in the [Fairfield Plantation II](#) easement that protected 254 acres along the s property is next to 480 acres that were previously shielded from development.

Thirty years ago, Ashley Demosthenes walked the expansive open spaces of protected, private lands as an intern for the then-Lowcountry Open Land Trust, documenting the value of conserving properties.

That experience shaped what has become a 25-year career, sealed in practice by her father's decision in 1998 to place the family's 310-acre property in the ACE Basin near Yemassee in protective easement.

"Reflecting on those years, the stars were aligning for my long career in land conservation, didn't know it yet," Demosthenes said last week.

She began her career at the Nature Conservancy in the ACE Basin, and in 2013 she returned to the organization that first sparked her joy in conservation, now the Lowcountry Land Trust director of conservation. In 2015, she was named president and CEO.

Now she's set to move on top a bigger stage.

Demosthenes is taking her preservation passion to the national level as incoming president and CEO of the Land Trust Alliance, a Washington, D.C.-based organization that supports nearly 1,000 land trusts throughout the country. Her first day on the job is March 17.

"It's a cool community of folks who love the outdoors, love nature, love wildlife and love what being outside does for your mind, body and spirit," Demosthenes said. "I love the opportunity to influence the land trust movement with the new (federal) administration and to talk about how



Ashley Demosthenes is leaving the Lowcountry Open Land Trust after about 25 years as CEO. She's been picked to lead a national organization based in Washington, D.C. FILE/PROVIDED

positive land conservation is. It serves everybody in the community, it protects resources that protect us as humans."

She has long been a close partner with her next employer in her current job and her past roles with the Nature Conservancy. She's participated in the group's executive director training cohort, served on a leadership council and has been on the board of trustees since 2022.

Demosthenes was selected as CEO from a pool of more than 200 candidates, according to the Lowcountry Land Trust, which called her its "fearless leader" in announcing her departure.

"I was told that my name had been suggested more than once as someone who should be considered for the role," Demosthenes said. "In that moment, I was struck by the numerous varied ways that the alliance has steered me through my 25-year career in land conservation and that perhaps I should heed the call to apply for the role, advancing my career to the national level."

She said she's excited to bring creative ideas to the fairly young land conservation sector, which is only about 40 years old.

Under her leadership, the Lowcountry Land Trust increased its acreage of protected lands by more than 60 percent, now totaling 163,000 acres across 17 coastal counties. They range from agricultural properties, hunting retreats, bottomland hardwood forests and others.

"We can love this place and not love it to death," Demosthenes said. "Boone Hall is a great example — that property is publicly accessible and was always privately owned."

"It easily could have gone to high-density development, but land owner before he died put conservation easement on it," she said, referring to the late Willie McRae and his family.

While rapid growth has made it a challenge to compete with developers, recent notable accomplishments by the Lowcountry Land Trust included the purchase of 35 acres surrounding the Angel Oak Tree on Johns Island, a deal that prevented a planned 600-home development. The groups also placed the 94-acre Grayson Oaks farm on Johns Island into a easement that allows the owner to continue to earn income farming while voluntarily agreeing to certain restrictions.

“Who doesn’t love to be on a farm, or walk through the woods or drive through the ACE Basin. It’s soul-filling,” Demosthenes said.

She also spearheaded the Lowcountry Land Trust’s community-centered conservation program, which places smaller-scale properties under easements. That has included the Rutledge Tomb in Mount Pleasant and 40 acres on Johns Island, which the trust gave to the Barrier Island Little League for baseball fields and walking trails.

Demosthenes also oversaw the creation of the Lowcountry Center for Land Conservation, which will house the local land trust's offices and serve as gathering space near Charles Town Landing in West Ashley. It's scheduled to open this summer.

Demosthenes credits robust state and local greenbelt funding for the Lowcountry Land Trust's success in securing more protected properties by being able to compensate some owners who put their properties into easements and, in some cases, to fund outright purchases.

“The land trust movement has gotten more sophisticated and innovative. It fosters creativity that fires me up,” Demosthenes said. “I’d love to see every state in the country have its own conservation program like (the S.C.) Conservation Bank. It’s such a powerful tool.”

The uncertainty of federal grants funding under the Trump administration, including federal grants awarded to conservation groups, is an issue that Demosthenes and land trusts across the country are watching closely.

“Land conservation is not a partisan issue and has been very heavily and happily supported by both parties,” Demosthenes said.

Bob Baldwin, chair of the Lowcountry Land Trust board of trustees, said she's leaving the organization on solid ground.

“The leadership she showcased here, and the stable and growing position in which she leaves the organization, will serve to strengthen the conservation of our country’s landscapes and waterways,” he said.

Sydney Cook, the Lowcountry Land Trust's chief operating officer and general counsel, will fill in as interim CEO while the board conducts what it called a "thoughtful" search for its next leader.

