

A man wearing a green helmet, glasses, a light-colored long-sleeved shirt, and khaki pants is rappelling down a rock face. He is holding a yellow carabiner and a blue rope. A red water bottle is attached to his gear. The background shows a scenic view of a mountain valley with a town and a golf course.

TRUSTED PARTNERS

Collaborating with local land trusts helps park departments and camps protect and connect properties for public use

BY BRIANNE SANCHEZ



Across the country, partnerships with local land trusts facilitate projects with long-term environmental, economic, and social impacts. Expertise in land acquisition, fund development, environmental stewardship, and community engagement can catalyze solutions.

When a shrinking school district left Cleveland, Ohio, with surplus land, city leaders sought partners to reimagine vacant properties. In 2021, the City of Cleveland and Cleveland Metropolitan School District issued a request for qualifications (RFQ) to redevelop former school sites. They envisioned strategic sales that could revitalize neighborhoods while improving equity.

This transformational opportunity intrigued Western Reserve Land Conservancy (WRLC). Better known for projects that protect natural habitats, the accredited nonprofit also aims to provide public parks for recreation and education. Permanently protecting a parcel in the formerly redlined Hough neighborhood would fill a gap, improving residents' access to greenspace.

“We do a lot of urban reforestation, and this school site particularly jumped out at us because it was right next to a community center,” says Isaac Robb, the Land Conservancy’s vice president of planning, research, and urban projects. “We’re trying to flip the model and bring resources into the dense urban core, which hasn’t seen the same level of investment as other parts of our region.”

WRLC involved neighbors in a participatory process to establish a collective vision for the 2.6-acre Hough Community Green Space. Purchased in a bargain sale with a combination of grant funding and other investments, the park will be overseen by the City of Cleveland. It’s a success story that can serve as a model, showcasing the power of partnerships with land trusts.



Serving Varied Community Needs

According to the Land Trust Alliance (LTA), a land trust or land conservancy is a community-based, nonprofit organization that actively works to permanently conserve land. In some cases, land trusts acquire land outright. It also partners to conserve land that remains the property of willing landowners, using a tool called a conservation easement. Additionally, land trusts manage or restore land once it has been conserved.

Although land trusts often operate in specific geographies, they share a common goal of saving special places. Building relationships with accredited land trusts can boost local capacity to address important issues, like protecting rivers and estuaries for clean drinking water, preserving affordable housing, and connecting trail systems.

“Land trusts, big picture, are helping to knit together landscapes and communities,” says Forrest King-Cortes, director of community-centered conservation for LTA.

King-Cortes, who previously held a shared role with Chicago Park District and the Nature Conservancy, says collaborations between nonprofit and municipal partners can involve on-the-ground support. Stewarding natural areas requires a specialized

skill set that is different than general park maintenance. Shared prescribed burn crews could be one cost-saving solution.

Beyond cross-pollinating technical ecological expertise, partnering with land trusts can deepen engagement and bolster coalition building. They can handle the “dirty work of land acquisition and restoration,” as Robb says, and convene sector-spanning conversations.

“Sometimes the stars align and [partner organizations happen upon] a great project opportunity,” King-Cortes says. “What’s been really cool to see is land trusts partnering with municipal entities, parks departments,



health departments, and other nonprofits to take a proactive planning approach.”

Building Strategic Coalitions

In Estes Park, Colo., open communication between town and land-trust staff boosts collaboration. They jointly pursued grants to develop the Estes Valley Open Space Plan, which was finalized in 2020.

Travis Machalek, Estes Park town administrator, served on the project’s Steering Committee. He says both formal master-planning processes and casual chats at the coffee shop keep momentum going. The town has 11 conservation easements held by the land trust, of which three are open to the public.

“There’s an old saying ‘you can’t make friends when you need them,’” Machalek says. “Maintaining and fostering those relationships allows things that are outside the box to happen. When you understand each other at an individual and an organizational level, I think it minimizes friction on projects.”



One such project was Thumb Open Space, a popular but privately owned hiking and climbing destination. Although already covered by a conservation easement, the out-of-state landowner’s intentions to build a home on the property raised concerns about long-term access. Estes Valley Land Trust renegotiations with the landowner resulted in amendments prohibiting development. A subsequent sale to the town recognized historic climbing uses and allowed Thumb Open Space to be operated and managed as a public park.

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public park land, can look like.”

For Estes Valley Land Trust executive director Jeffrey Boring, listening is a big part of expanding the organization’s partnership potential.

“We keep conversations going and opportunities arise,” he says. “We talk about parks, we talk about transportation projects, we talk about housing. . . . A park is one community need, but there’s a variety of community needs, and there could be a role for the land trust to play in meeting some of those.”

Fueling “Forever Partnerships”

“I think if the town had tried to do this as a traditional park project, the resistance that we would have encountered—and we did encounter resistance—would have been much more galvanized,” Machalek says, citing community concerns around parking and human interference with habitat.

“We recognize any time that people access a space, it’s going to have an impact on nature within that space,” he says. “The presence and the philosophy and approach that Estes Valley Land Trust brings to the table helps us engage a broader set of perspectives about what park land, especially

Organizations that hold camp properties can also benefit from land-trust partnerships. In most cases, conservation easements are donated. But easement sales on especially valuable properties can generate financial resources for capital projects while protecting natural assets.

Sempervirens Fund, which seeks to protect high-conservation-value lands in the Santa Cruz Mountains,



recently worked with YMCA Camp Jones Gulch on a \$9.625-million conservation easement. The purchase provided funds for improvements at the camp, which was established in 1934, while permanently protecting its 928 acres of crucial landscape, including an invaluable stretch of redwood forest.

“Early on in the easement negotiations, it became apparent that they wanted and needed help with landscape-level land stewardship,” says Laura McLendon, Sempervirens Fund director of landscape conservation. “We knew how special this property was for its conservation value. I think there are seven different ecosystems; it’s spectacular. We partnered with [the YMCA of San Francisco] to pledge over \$400,000 in stewardship funds.”

This will allow a coalition to care for the forest and its surroundings in consultation with the San Mateo County Resource Conservation District, the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band, and Muwekma Tribal Band.



Creating Land Use Solutions In Every State

Protecting Cleveland’s neighborhood greenspace, Estes Park’s climbing routes, and the “Valley of Giants” surrounding Camp Jones Gulch are just three examples among many outcomes that land-trust partnerships enable. According to the 2020 National Land Trust Census, 80 percent of land trusts provide public access to their protected lands, which adds up to 1.2 million acres of land and 9,761 miles of trails.

Visit landtrustalliance.org/land-trusts to find a land trust operating in your location. **PRB+**

Brianne Sanchez is a full-time freelance writer, mom, and outdoor enthusiast based in Des Moines, Iowa. She loves to write about people making a positive impact in their communities.



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