

LIVING

Preserving, protecting the open land Land Trust works to acquire undeveloped tracts for recreation, wildlife

By KEVIN FITZGERALD

For the Journal Inquirer

SOMERS — Whit Davis of the Five Town Land Trust recently took me on a guided tour of the Sky Line Scenic Refuge, a 45-acre nature reserve north of Bald Mountain. The refuge is a recent acquisition by the trust, and its crown jewel.

It was a peaceful hike of about a mile through maturing hardwood forest, along the bases of granite ramparts, and past boulders dumped by retreating glaciers near the end of the last Ice Age. The sides of the trail were decorated with white, orange, and purple toadstools and little clumps of multi-branched coral fungus. There were bunches of ghostly white Indian pipes — flowering plants that look and live like fungi.

The hike took us to a summit with an aerial view over forest and farmland, then the trail took an abrupt right turn and went downhill past a monstrous, flat-topped boulder upon which a small house could easily have been perched. I could hear the distant drone of traffic on Route 83, but surrounding me was silence and peace. The Five Town Land Trust had chosen



easement on private land entitles the owner to certain tax breaks, since the land's monetary value is lowered by its removal from development. Stage told me that most protected land in Connecticut is preserved through conservation easements, rather than outright purchase or transfer.

Land also can be donated to a land trust as a "living gift," a kind of living bequest in which the owner retains the right to continue living on the land, also entitling the owner to tax breaks. Sky Line Scenic Refuge was granted to the Five Town Land Trust in this way. Other methods of acquiring land include bequests and fund-matching. In the latter method, the state will donate funds to acquire land matched by equal donations from grass-roots fund-raising efforts.

"We have several hundred acres of property likely to be coming to us, that we're working on through gifting and a variety of means," Stage said. The trust is also in line to possibly purchase a parcel of land along the Shennipit Forest on the lower slopes of Bald Mountain. "We're not anti-development," said Stage, "but we think that there ought to be clear priorities set in

Instructional hikes serve dual purpose

It's obvious, given human nature, that people aren't motivated to save land unless they see some value therein which affects them personally. This is the reasoning behind the trust's organizing instructional hikes on the land in its area. "We thought that a good way to sensitize people to the resource that's here is to find some reason to get them out in it," said trust board member Jerry Stage, who holds a Ph.D. in entomology (the study of insects). He has been leading nature walks since he was a high school student, and now leads them for the land trust.

The first advertised outdoor event hosted by the trust was an interpretive nature walk on Soapstone Mountain in July, led by Stage. Some 70 people, not counting children, showed up. Stage and others of the trust were impressed by the large turnout.

Line.

The trust's members hope that more acreage will be added to the reserve in the near future. The trust also owns another 7-acre parcel of forested land in Ellington and is working on acquiring other tracts of land.

Land trusts are non-profit organizations that acquire and protect land with agricultural, natural, historical, or scenic value. Nearly every town in Connecticut has a land trust society or has individuals who are part of a society involving several towns.

Founded three years ago

The Five Town Land Trust, which serves East Windsor, Ellington, Enfield, Somers, and Stafford, was started three years ago by George Grant, a farmer whose family has lived and farmed in East Windsor since 1825.

"Development was picking up in this area in 1987," Grant said. "Several properties went up for sale here. My sister called up and asked 'isn't there something we can do (to preserve land)?' My cousin called with the same question. We considered several possibilities and decided that a land trust was the best route to go."

Grant and others contacted like-minded people throughout the five-town region, including members of a disbanded land trust in Somers. The individuals who became directors and members of the Five Town Land Trust are mostly landowners and farmers "in touch with the land, who keenly feel the loss of open land."

Though the original intent of the trust was to preserve farmland, the goal was expanded to include wildland and properties with his-



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A path through Sky Line Scenic Refuge, a 45-acre nature reserve owned by the Five Town Land Trust.

torical significance.

"Our desire is to protect land, any way we can, and there are a few ways," said trust board member Jerry Stage, a financial planner for IDS Financial Services. The surest method is outright purchase, but this is limited for the Five-Town Land Trust, recently formed and still far from having large funds at hand.

"We don't have megabucks behind us," Grant said. "We don't have money to buy up large amounts of high-priority land." In one case, the trust made a bid for a parcel of undeveloped land up for sale but was unable to afford the purchase price. The Connecticut Chapter of the Nature Conservancy, a large organization that acquires land to save endangered species and vital ecosystems, did purchase the parcel. "Which was fine with us," said Stage. "We just wanted to see that land protected."

Conservation easements

Another method of acquiring land is to urge a private landowner to acquire a conservation easement for his property. This is a legal contract undertaken by a property owner with a land trust or similar group, by which the property remains undeveloped, open only to low-impact activities like hiking, monitored by the land trust. The land is closed to development, and the easement remains in perpetuity. Granting a conservation



Getting to Sky Line

The Sky Line Scenic Refuge is open to all for hiking. To get there, take Route 83 north through Somers; north of Somers center about two miles, take a right onto Wood Road (just after Grist Mill Road on the right; Route 83 bends left at this point). Continue on Wood Road about two miles; left onto Root Road to Stafford Road; left on Stafford Road about 200 feet, look for the large wooden sign on the right reading "Sky Line Scenic Area." Park by the sign, off the road; parking space is limited to two cars.

extensive undeveloped areas that remain multi-use for recreation, wildlife, and so on." Stage stresses the trust's goal of acquiring continuous tracts of land rather than isolated scraps, as corridors for wildlife and for hiking trails.

"As the population grows, the pressure for wild space, the need for it, becomes greater, and the pressures against it are greater," Grant said. "And someone's got to fight for that, especially in the east, where there are so many people."

Population density in Connecticut is 600 people per square mile, as compared to relatively sparsely settled states like Wyoming and Alaska, where the population density is still under four people per square mile.

Shenipsit State Forest

One high priority for the trust is filling in interrupted spaces in Shenipsit State Forest, now a checkerboard of public land, private state-owned land, and areas subjected to logging. Lumbering, including clear-cutting, selective cutting, and cutting for firewood, is allowed on some state forest land, with permits, but large-scale logging is seldom overseen by the forest service and is often overdone and destructive. Acquiring land around Shenipsit Forest would protect at least some land from logging and development.

"People might look at Shenipsit Forest and say that 20 years will pass before development really makes an impact, so why worry?" Grant said. "I don't think we have that much time."

Other priorities of the trust include preserving the Sky Line Hills of Somers and Ellington (of which the Sky Line Scenic Preserve is a part), and preserving wetlands in

spruce bog, a rare and unique type of ecosystem, in Ellington. Earlier this month, the trust held an easy hike on land along the Scantic River in the East Windsor area, led by trust member Al Grant through a 231-acre parcel of land already acquired by the state for the eventual state park in this area. On Oct. 17, the trust will hold a canoe trip on the Scantic River, above Somersville Dam, led by Donald Smith, chairman of the trust's board of directors. Details are still being worked out. For more information, call Smith at 749-9550.

Membership open

The Five Town Land Trust holds public meetings, board meetings (open to the public), and fund-raising events, along with hikes and outings. Membership in the trust is open to all interested persons. For more information on membership, events, and the trust itself, call Smith at 749-9550.

the five-town area.

The trust is also working on preserving wildland along the Scantic River. The state already has taken steps to acquire Scantic River watershed land in order to eventually create a state park. The trust is helping this effort by involving itself and other organizations in various aspects of the preservation process, and educating the public on the issue. The trust has also urged the state to restock the Scantic with salmon.