

# New River Land Trust

## Conservation Initiatives Underway

Several conservation initiatives are under way around the New River Valley.

One of the most exciting is the strong interest by Montgomery County's government in conserving open space and farmland as it drafts its new comprehensive plan. Land Trust Director Beth Obenshain, Director of Stewardship Michael Van Ness and Board member Dylan Jenkins spoke to the Board of Supervisors about using conservation easements as a land protection tool. Easements drew strong support from the county's consultant as an effective means of preserving this county's natural character. Working through land trusts to promote donation of easements was listed as one of "the best and cheapest" options for the county. Our thanks to County Planning Director Joe Powers and

the Board of Supervisors for their work.

We're also working with landowners and with state agencies on possible easements on several significant properties:

- \*A Montgomery County site that includes several farms as well as historic houses
- \*A Pulaski County farm site with a building dating to pre-Revolutionary War days
- \*A mile-long stretch of the Little River in Floyd County
- \*A scenic riverbottom farm near the headquarters for the state's showcase New River Trail State Park. This easement will be completed this year.
- \*Habitat for an endangered butterfly and bog turtle in Floyd County.

## Conserving the New River

In Grayson County, the Land Trust has been working with Phillip and Charlotte Hanes to protect a 12-mile corridor along the New River with conservation easements. The river's recent fame as an American Heritage River has dramatically increased development pressure, land values and property taxes. Now landowners have asked the New River Land Trust to help them create agricultural/forestal districts so land will be taxed according to its agricultural and forestal use rather than at its development value. In the past year, property taxes on some farms have more than tripled.

Since December, NRLT's work with a handful of landowners has grown into a community initiative involving over 30

landowners. What started as one agricultural and forestal district application has turned into three separate applications totaling over 4,500 acres. These districts would protect the integrity of the first loop of the New River into Virginia, far in excess of the initial 12-mile river stretch that the Land Trust is working to protect.

A county review committee is now preparing a recommendation to the planning commission and the county supervisors. NRLT member Charlotte Hanes serves as secretary of the committee and Michael Van Ness, our Director of Stewardship, as facilitator. The Board of Supervisors will cast the critical vote on whether to approve or disapprove the districts at its December meeting.

## A Letter from our President:

Dear Land Conservation Supporters,

We're off and running. The New River Land Trust is already at work negotiating conservation easements on important scenic and farm property. We're leading an effort in Grayson County to save a pristine 12-mile stretch of the New River from development. Landowners there are organizing, with help from Director of Stewardship Michael Van Ness, to save their farms by creating an agricultural and forestal district. We've applied for grants to educate both landowners and the legal and accounting professionals who advise them on conservation easements. We're also working with local governments on revising land-use policy to protect open space.

## Conservation does pay -- in cash

Landowners for the first time this year can receive cash for donating a conservation easement. Virginia has allowed landowners to take a \$100,000 tax credit over six years. This year, pending a state tax ruling, it appears that landowners could receive tax credits of up to \$100,000 a year over six years. This could total \$600,000 on an easement valued at \$1.2 million or more. Banks and brokers are making a market to sell these credits. Landowners need to contact their tax advisers now for advice as there is no guarantee this law will be in effect past June 30, 2003.

Remember, a conservation easement can allow landowners to continue farming or harvesting timber on their land, to sell the property or transfer it to another family member and to reserve home sites for their children [or for sale] on large tracts. Contact the Land Trust for more information.

## Michael Van Ness a National Finalist

Michael Van Ness, NRLT's Director of Stewardship, was one of 34 community leaders selected from 1,500 applicants from around the nation as a finalist for the Ford Foundation's Leadership for a Changing World Award. The program recognizes extraordinary leaders or leadership teams across the United States who are changing lives and transforming communities — often against great odds.

"These finalists exemplify the thousands of leaders who, though they often go unrecognized nationally, represent the

true strength and the powerful diversity of our culture," said Kathleen D. Sheekey, president of the Advocacy Institute, which is also a partner in the program. The final winners will be announced in October.

## What's in a Name?

We're a land trust — one of hundreds in America dedicated to conserving land through conservation easements. We used the name "New River Land Alliance" when we first incorporated while we ironed out with the State Corporation Commission the use of the words "Land Trust" in our title. Thanks to the generous pro bono efforts of

Richmond attorney James Dimitri of McGuire Woods, the SCC reviewed our request and decided to allow us to use our original name. It's official — we're now a Land Trust in name and deed.

## New River Land Trust Board

The Land Trust has expanded its board this year to represent our full region and include a variety of backgrounds. Our members now include:

President Joyce Graham — a landowner along the historic Elliston Straightaway, a former Radford University professor & now an eco-friendly Blacksburg developer

Vice President Dixie Leonard — a Carroll County farmer whose family farm adjacent to the New River Trail is now protected by a conservation easement

Secretary Lesley Howard — a former regional planner from Blacksburg, a founding board member & a dedicated conservationist & community activist

Treasurer Diane Green — a CPA in Blacksburg who has experience working with conservation easements

Board Members:

Dick Barnett — a farmer & landowner in Elliston who is a director on the Skyline Soil & Water Conservation Board representing Montgomery County

Britt Boucher — a professional forestry planner committed to sustainable forests with headquarters in Blacksburg

Liza Field — a noted environmentalist & educator from Wytheville who initiated the effort to save the Big Survey

Tom Greene — district conservationist who has worked

with farmers across the New River region with the Natural Resource Conservation Service

Dylan Jenkins — an extension forester & forest landowner educator at Virginia Tech who lives in Catawba

Andy Kegley — a Wythe County farm owner & executive director of Mountain Shelter Inc., a nonprofit housing agency

Bob Miller — retired principal from Auburn Middle & High School who lives on his family farm in Montgomery County

Jerry Moles — an environmentalist with worldwide credentials in sustainable agriculture & forestry whose family owns land along the “smart” road, former moderator of the Spotted Owl negotiations in Northern California

Jane Shaw — a specialist in sustainable agriculture who lives in Floyd County and works with the Natural Resource Conservation Service & as facilitator for the New River Roundtable

Jeff Waldon — Assistant Director of Virginia Tech’s Conservation Management Institute

Carol Wampler — a member of the State Water Control Board & resident of Pulaski County, former Vice President and General Counsel of the Virginia Manufacturers Association

## Land Trust Names Executive Director

Elizabeth Obenshain, who recently retired from a 20-year career as an editor and writer with The Roanoke Times, began work as the Land Trust’s executive director on July 15. Beth received several awards for her environmental writing while at The Times. Her task, as director of a new nonprofit, is to establish an organizational and financial base for the land trust, while also proceeding with NRLT’s mission: to conserve the natural and historic heritage of this valley. It’s been a busy summer with requests from landowners for help with conservation easements, filing a major grant application and working with local governments on land conservation issues. Beth is working out of the NRLT’s new office at 900 South Main Street. Visitors welcome!



Caption describing picture or graphic.

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The New  
River Land  
Trust is  
dedicated  
to  
conserving  
the natural  
and  
cultural  
heritage of  
Virginia's  
New River  
region.

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## Bond Referendum puts Land Conservation at Stake

The future of land conservation in Virginia is at stake. Please vote Nov. 5!

Passage of the \$119 million bond issue for state parks and natural areas would give Virginia \$13.2 million to conserve important natural areas, including several in Montgomery and Floyd counties. The parks money would establish three new state parks, purchase natural areas, and improve facilities at the New River Trail, Claytor Lake and other state parks.

How citizens vote on this bond issue will also send a signal to legislators on whether voters are willing to fund

conservation. A defeat could shatter efforts now under way to win legislative support for increased conservation funding to conserve land in the New River region and statewide.

Also critical for our region is a \$900 million bond issue for construction at our colleges and universities. Support from Southwest Virginia voters is particularly important because potential opposition to regional tax referenda in Northern Virginia and Tidewater could result in negative votes on all bond issues in those populous areas. So please, turn out to vote for conservation on Nov. 5.

### A Poet Conservationist

Board Member Liza Field, a noted environmentalist, educator, poet and artist from Wytheville, has published a book of poetry, "Healing Nature," with 80 pages of local mountain/New River poems and hiking prayers. The book, made possible by a grant from the

Virginia Commission for the Arts, is now available for \$15 through the New River Land Trust. Liza is generously sharing her proceeds with the New River Land Trust. It's a great Christmas idea for your eco-friendly relatives. Liza's book promotes saving land and recycling — her book.

#### *What you can do ...*

We need your support if land conservation is to succeed in the New River region. Membership dollars and your donations will support our staff and our outreach efforts to landowners and local government. Join us now in working to conserve the farmland and the scenic

views in the New River region.

We also need volunteers for everything from addressing envelopes and computer work to save-our-land parties. Contact us at (540)951-1704 or at [nrlt@newriverlandtrust.org](mailto:nrlt@newriverlandtrust.org).

