



## **Land Conservation and Affordable Housing**

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Does permanent land conservation significantly impact the availability of land for workforce housing?

A concerned citizen brought up this question after I gave a Zoom presentation in the winter of 2022 about a land conservation project I started in South Toe, a valley about 45 miles northwest of Asheville, North Carolina. South Toe is one of the world's most beautiful places, and people are noticing. There has been a rapid rise in the number of people moving to the valley, and with this population increase, large green spaces are being fragmented.

As more people move to the valley, not only does the amount of forested land decrease, but so does the availability of land for housing. Residents of South Toe were concerned that conserving more land would only make access to housing more competitive. They supported the idea that land should be conserved but were wary about how conserving land might affect those looking to find accommodation in the valley. Having been unable to find my own housing in the valley, I understood the issue. Not having an answer to the question at the time, I sought to find it. I have worked closely with three land trusts over the past year and hope to continue this work, so I approached the issue from their perspective.

How can a land trust conserve land while helping to address the challenges associated with access to housing? This paper provides concrete examples of how land trusts have successfully addressed this issue. There are several reasons why housing is becoming an issue, many of which I will not be addressing, but I have included a number of additional questions that might influence the accessibility of affordable housing at the end of this paper. For the purposes of this paper, the term ‘affordable housing’ refers to a broad spectrum of earned incomes in a community, not just the statistical demographic median as it is usually referred to in government sponsored affordable housing.

The best approach for conservation land trusts looking to get involved in affordable housing issues is to partner with a community land trust. Community land trusts (CLTs) are non-profit organizations that aim to provide long-term affordable housing by separating home ownership and land ownership. To achieve its goals, a CLT acquires permanent ownership of a piece of land. Existing housing or homes that are newly built on land purchased by a CLT are then leased, often for 99 years, essentially a lifetime lease. Shorter leases may be used as well. In

either case, the homeowners have the option to sell the house back to the CLT. Separating land and home ownership helps ensure that housing prices never rise too high.

The goals of community land trusts and conservation land trusts converge in one key area: they both serve the purpose of conserving and stewarding land for future generations. One protects land from development and habitat degradation and preserves it as a natural landscape both for ecological benefit and for the surrounding community. The other protects land and housing from development pressures and gentrification and serves the community directly by providing permanently affordable homes to those who need them.

Calling itself a combination of a community and conservation land trust, Athens Land Trust (ALT) in Georgia has set out to make land conservation beneficial and accessible to low income communities. ALT's Director of Conservation Justin Merrifield says that the organization's goal is to listen to community members and meet community needs. ALT's conservation efforts focus on working with farmers and farm-to-table operations, helping protect farmers' land and encouraging farming and farmers' markets. The trust also has several community gardens around Athens that allow residents to grow food.

Most of the land ALT has conserved is through conservation easements on farms in the area. A recent project, Williams Farm, is an excellent example of where ALT has "hit every box," including affordable housing, farmland protection, and green space. The farm is a twelve-acre property near downtown Athens that the trust split into three sections: a two-acre plot for future affordable housing development, a five-acre farm, and a five-acre woodland preserve. ALT has worked with the American Conservation Coalition (ACC) to build a network of trails through the woods and is also starting an incubator program on the farm. Community members can rent rows on the farm and use them as a launching point to create their own more extensive

farming operations. Athens Land Trust demonstrates that affordable housing development and land conservation can be done simultaneously.

The Island Housing Trust is a community land trust on Mount Desert Island in Maine. Its mission is to “promote viable, year-round island communities by advancing permanent workforce housing on Mount Desert Island, Maine.” The trust has provided forty-seven housing opportunities and served over 140 individuals. While a drop in the bucket in relation to the entire island, these are decent numbers for one organization. The trust is currently working on constructing a housing complex called Jones Marsh in partnership with the Maine Coast Heritage Trust (MCHT).

Housing is a significant problem on Mount Desert Island. Acadia National Park attracts tourists from around the world who take advantage of the many Airbnbs and hotels scattered around the island. There are also many large mansions on the island that are used as summer retreats by the country’s more affluent citizens. People from out of state own about half the properties and homes on the island. These large summer homes remain empty for most of the year, leaving a great deal of unused stock in the available housing. Many year-round residents of the island find it extremely difficult to find housing at all, let alone something affordable.

MCHT purchased a sixty-acre plot of land at the head of the island, about half of which was a wetland called Jones Marsh. Wetlands are among the most diverse ecosystems, so MCHT wanted to take the opportunity to protect this one. The other thirty acres of the property were uplands, a lower



priority for permanent protection, so MCHT chose to sell the thirty-acres of upland to the Island Housing Trust. The Jones Marsh project is taking place on that piece of land.

If done correctly, this model is promising for land trusts looking to get involved in affordable housing. The key is to have an organization protecting the land and/or the housing in perpetuity. If no organization is responsible for preserving a piece of land, then the land or the housing may succumb to the ebbs and flows of private development. For example, in 1985 a land trust in Massachusetts purchased a one hundred-acre property and gave ten acres to a local developer. The developer built twenty-five homes, fourteen of which were considered affordable housing. However, as with most things in the private sector, the affordability controls on this housing lapsed after a few years and the homes eventually returned to full market pricing. Without an entity that can hold the land for housing in perpetuity, such as a community land trust or an agency with a similar mission, it will not remain immune to the pressures of the real estate market.

A community land trust stands to benefit from partnering with a conservation land trust, since housing with access to open spaces is an asset to a community. Affordable housing is often located in places that have been neglected for years and have little or no access to outdoor spaces. For example, the city of Waterville, Maine, has seen a decline in housing quality over the years, with many homes abandoned or in foreclosure. The Waterville Community Land Trust (WCLT) has addressed some of the resulting issues by “supporting neighborhood preservation and improvement through the development of affordable housing and other community assets.”

WCLT knows the importance of housing that also provides residents with access to green spaces, but it can be hard for community land trusts like WCLT to get involved in land conservation work. They tend to operate in areas where their land coverage is small to begin

with, and their budgets are not lavish. But WCLT persevered, acquiring a piece of land with three run-down houses that the trust then tore down. The original idea was to build one or two homes on the two-acre property, but WCLT chose to turn it into a park instead, hoping that preserving this small piece of land would allow people living in the area to have an open space they would appreciate. WCLT has shown that CLTs can help provide green spaces for their communities.

Organizations like the Kennebec Land Trust in Winthrop, Maine, can't take on affordable housing issues independently, because their resources are earmarked for their original mission, which is to conserve land. But that doesn't mean they can't play their part. Because land and the community's needs are central to the goals of both types of land trusts, the two types can make great partners. Many conservation land trusts have service areas that give them access to large parcels of land; community land trusts often do not. As in the examples above, a possible partnership model calls for a conservation land trust to give or sell portions of its fee land to a community land trust at a bargain price. The community land trust can then take responsibility for developing affordable housing on that property. The conservation land trust could have a series of criteria to use in assessing which portions of a given property would be best suited for housing development, e.g., adjacency to a road, lack of a wetland, low potential for habitat, etc.

This paper is not intended to be a comprehensive guide to solving all affordable housing issues. Several big questions remain to be answered, such as: What is the role of zoning in affordable housing? What are the challenges that low-to-moderate income families face when they purchase homes? Is rental housing or homeownership the better way to integrate affordable housing with a land trust? Are affordable housing efforts best focused in areas with access to

employment opportunities and community services, and how can such housing also have access to open green spaces?

Separating the cost of land from the purchase price of a home is key to keeping housing affordable. While conservation land trusts may not be the most effective vehicle for tackling affordable housing issues, several trusts around the country are taking on housing projects. This paper features a few of them, but it is far from exhaustive. Others include Terafirma in Seattle, the Stowe Land Trust in Vermont, the Vermont Land Trust, and the Kingston Land Trust in New York. The Kingston Land Trust model is similar to that of the Athens Land Trust, that of a combination community and conservation land trust. Recently Kingston has conducted extensive research on how conservation land trusts can best partner with affordable housing developers to build eco-friendly communities. Kinston Land Trust compiled its research into a document called “An Affordable Eco-Dwelling Road Map.” It’s a great place to start for any conservation land trust trying to get involved in affordable housing issues. Along with other resources, it is linked below.

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## **Resources for Land Trusts**

[LTA: At Home on the Land](#)

[356: Building Community One Stick of Wood, One House at a Time](#)

[STL: Housing and Land Conservation: Community Needs Both](#)

[Kingston Land Trust Homepage](#)

[Affordable Eco-Dwelling Roadmap](#)

[Athens Land Trust Home Page](#)

[The Center for Community Land Trust Innovation](#)

[The Grounded Solutions Network](#)

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