Accreditation Update

This year the Land Trust Accreditation Commission is gearing up for the pilot phase of their national program. Applications to participate in the pilot were taken through the end of November; the Commission is now selecting land trusts from those applications to begin the accreditation process.

A draft accreditation application form has been completed. Gathering Waters has been providing detailed feedback to the Commission on the form and process of applying for accreditation. Several land trusts have expressed concern about the time it may take to complete the application – we are working with the Commission to develop programs to assist land trusts through the process. For additional information about the accreditation program, visit www.lta.org or call our office.

Gathering Waters Conservancy – a National Leader

What does it mean when we say that Gathering Waters Conservancy is a land trust service center?

At the national land trust conference this year, I was reminded that there are as many different structures for land trust service centers as there are service centers. A survey of twenty-two organizations which provide resources to land trusts found twenty-two different ways of providing those resources. Some service centers are statewide land trusts that have taken on a coordinating role. A few are focused on advocacy work, others offer statewide conferences.

Among this diversity, Gathering Waters stands out. Our outreach materials, particularly In Their Own Words, are widely praised and replicated by other service centers. Many groups model our hands-on approach to our work with land trusts.

Yet while we innovate, we also learn from our fellow service centers. The Land Trust Alliance (LTA) organizes biannual meetings of service center staff for us to get together, learn what we are each doing and provide input to LTA from our more local perspectives. In October 2006, we met in Nashville. Here are a few things I learned from my colleagues nationwide:

• The New Jersey Conservation Foundation will litigate to prevent development of protected land, partnering with law school students and faculty.

• The Pennsylvania Land Trust Association offers a small grants program to assist land trusts in paying conservation easement related expenses.

• The Center for Land Conservation Assistance in New Hampshire has created a guide for local municipalities to develop and implement land protection funds.

These, and many other creative ideas are projects Gathering Waters would like to emulate. Land trust service centers may come in many colors and sizes, but we share in common our mission of aiding land trusts in accomplishing their land conservation goals.

~ Karen Bassler, Conservation Programs Director
From the President…

How do you know Gathering Waters Conservancy?

Are we a technical assistance resource? Is Gathering Waters an opportunity for you to invest in Wisconsin’s special places? Are the advocates engaging you in the campaign to reauthorize the Stewardship Fund?

Gathering Waters Conservancy is, of course, all those things. My own understanding of this organization has expanded significantly in recent months. I was elected President last year just as our board was charged with recruiting and choosing a new Executive Director. This search was exciting, and we met many superb candidates applying for the position. We are very pleased with the outcome, and welcome Michael Strigel to the helm.

During our search, I had the opportunity to work more closely than usual with our excellent staff and observe their many activities on behalf of our mission. Mike will oversee a very busy office, indeed! We are truly one of the most creative groups working for Wisconsin conservation. I’d like to share with you a snap shot – an aerial view of this organization. On any given day:

We strategize. As I write this, Vicki Elkin is likely meeting with other conservation leaders to craft the campaign for the Stewardship Fund’s reauthorization. Meanwhile, Althea and a savvy team of advisors are determining Gathering Waters’ policy agenda for the 2007 legislative session.

We nurture the grass roots. While our policy team discusses statewide action, Pam attends evening meetings of local farmers, lake association members and other citizens in the early stages of fostering a land trust to work in Dodge County. Sara works one-on-one to help other all-volunteer groups build membership and fundraising programs.

We collaborate. From those local grass roots on one side of the state to watershed-level conservation work on the other—our Conservation Programs Director, Karen, is facilitating conservation plans for the St. Croix Conservation Collaborative, a group of agencies and non-profits working to make sure conservation on the St. Croix River occurs in concert and attracts federal funding.

We educate. Last year our staff presented twice to conventions of Wisconsin assessors and worked closely with Department of Revenue staff to provide assessors useful information about evaluating conservation easements. We ran a credentialed workshop for attorneys. This year our staff will organize trainings for land trust staff, appraisers, and estate planning advisors.

There’s more, of course, as this newsletter illustrates. I don’t think I know another organization engaged so many fronts. If you are reading this, then you are also engaged in some way—as a supporter, practitioner, or partner—in conservation success in Wisconsin. Please join me in welcoming our new Executive Director to this busy, innovative, and determined organization.

– Art Harrington, President

Welcome Aboard

Gathering Waters Conservancy is thrilled to welcome Michael Strigel as our new Executive Director. Mikie comes to us most recently from nine years at the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts, and Letters, where he served as Executive Director since 2003. Happy about his accomplishments and colleagues at the Wisconsin Academy, Mike is now looking forward to returning to his conservation roots with this position at Gathering Waters. Previously, he served as Blufflands Project Director with The Prairie Enthusiasts. After completing his master’s degree in land resources at the UW-Madison, he worked as publications editor for the University of Wisconsin Arboretum. With his proven background in non-profit leadership and long commitment to Wisconsin’s natural places, Mike is sure to provide valuable vision for the future of conservation in our state. It is an honor to have him join the Gathering Waters community. Many thanks go to the Gathering Waters Board of Directors, especially Joy Gottschalk, hiring committee chair, for their long hours invested in the hiring process and commitment to an excellent staff.
Calling All Stewardship Fund Supporters

• Would you contact your legislators to let them know how important Stewardship is to you?
• Would you be willing to write a letter to the editor about the Stewardship program?
• Would you add your name to a list of individuals, organizations or businesses that support the Stewardship Fund?

The future of the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Fund is uncertain, and we need your help.

The Stewardship Fund will cease to exist in 2010 unless the Legislature and Governor vote for it to continue. Unfortunately, some politicians have argued that Stewardship is a luxury we cannot afford. In fact, the 2006 Republican Party platform even called for an end to the Stewardship program altogether.

The Stewardship Fund was founded in the spirit of bipartisanship, and we believe that Stewardship can be restored to its rightful place as a program celebrated by Republicans and Democrats alike. Our goal is to see Stewardship renewed and strengthened by our representatives at the state Capitol.

We'll need your help sooner rather than later.

Although the Stewardship Fund technically doesn’t expire for another three years, there may be an attempt to renew the program in the 2007-2008 legislative session. The outcome of the recent elections, which put the Governor’s office and Senate in control of the same political party, makes this possibility more likely.

Please add your name to our growing list of Stewardship supporters. We’ll be calling on you to contact your legislators, promote the Stewardship program in your communities, or write letters to the editor.

For sample letters to the editor and legislators and other Stewardship Campaign information, visit www.gatheringwaters.org/Stewardship.

Mark Your Calendar

The Wisconsin League of Conservation Voters’ Conservation Lobby Day is Wednesday, February 21st.

You can help make sure our legislators address top conservation priorities like reauthorization of the Stewardship Fund. Join other conservation-minded citizens for one-on-one meetings with your state legislators. Visit www.conservationvoters.org for more information. We’ll see you at the Capitol!

Sneak Preview

We are excited to share a sneak preview of Stories of Stewardship: Tales from Wisconsin’s Big Backyard. This forthcoming publication is filled with stories highlighting connections between people and land protected by the Stewardship Fund. Look for it later this spring.

Tracing the Ice Age  

an excerpt from Stories of Stewardship

By Barbara & Jerry Larson

We began hiking the Ice Age Trail in southern Wisconsin in 2002. Somewhere in the Kettle Moraine forest, we made the decision to hike the entire trail. We set a goal of finishing the trail for our 50th wedding anniversary in September 2006, and thus began our incredible foot journey of over 600 miles across our beloved state of Wisconsin, following the terminus of the last glacier.

We’re very proud of our Ice Age Trail, one of only eight National Scenic Trails in the country. In Wisconsin, we have the best set of different Ice Age glacial formations anywhere in the world; geologists from around the world come here to study the effects of glaciation.

Many Wisconsinites may not know that the Ice Age Trail is only about 50 percent completed. Much of the proposed trail runs through privately owned land. The Stewardship Fund will be crucial in helping willing landowners allow the trail to pass through their property or for buying the land outright. We were only able to hike the completed segments of the trail, as the paved roads connecting the finished segments are not as kind to older joints as the “good earth.” It will be truly wonderful when the Ice Age Trail is completed at over 1,000 miles and long stretches of road are not part of the trek!
Partnering with Municipalities

Glacial Lakes Conservancy in eastern Wisconsin aims to establish at least one local farmland preservation program in each of the five counties where they work.

In Sheboygan County they have already met success. The Conservancy is partnering with the Town of Mosel to fund a PDR program through an innovative arrangement of their zoning code. Called the Bonus Lot Preservation Plan, this voluntary tool will allow developers to create several more lots in proposed subdivisions than zoning would normally permit. Developers agree to donate the sale proceeds of half those bonus lots back to the Town to be used to purchase development rights on high priority farmlands.

This plan boasts a great list of advantages:

• Developers keep the profits from half of these bonus lots.
• The Town can fund a PDR program without taxpayer investment.
• The plan encourages increased development density, cutting down on the expense of extending services to new subdivisions.

The PDR fund will purchase development rights from willing landowners on high-priority farmlands. As in the Town of Dunn, the land trust will co-hold conservation easements. The program is designed to help farmland protection keep pace acre-for-acre with growth.

For more information please visit: www.glaciallakes.org.

Farming On the Urban Fringe

In Dane County the Town of Dunn and the Natural Heritage Land Trust recently purchased development rights on a property connecting a five-farm corridor of permanently protected land. Funding for the protection of this 162-acre farm came from the Town’s Purchase of Development Rights Program (PDR) and the federal Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP—see p. 5).

Concerned about losing farms as Madison expanded, the Town of Dunn launched its PDR program in 1996. Residents contribute to the program, which has protected 21 farms—about 2,700 acres—through property taxes that leverage grant funds from other sources. The Natural Heritage Land Trust co-holds most of the Town’s conservation easements and shares monitoring and enforcement responsibilities. The Land Trust's partnership ensures that even if the Town changes its program, the farms will remain protected as the landowners and the Town envisioned. Through this program, the Town is successfully maintaining a rural landscape on the edges of Madison.

For more information please visit: www.nhlt.org.

“The Schommer family

“Farms near cities will become increasingly important as transportation costs rise and the demand for locally produced food increases. So farms in Pierce, St. Croix and Polk Counties are high on our radar screen.”

— Rick Gauger, Executive Director, West Wisconsin Land Trust

Attracting Federal Dollars for Farmland Protection

On the other side of the state, the West Wisconsin Land Trust has leveraged funds from the Federal Farm and Ranch Land Protection Program (FRPP) to purchase conservation easements on over 1,000 acres of working farms over the last four years. They recently closed a deal on a 160-acre family farm in Pierce County.

The Schommers have owned their farm since it was homesteaded in the 1850’s. Gene and Jane Schommer have raised seven children on the farm. “We want another generation of our family to be here, too,” Gene explains. Their agreement with the Land Trust will allow the 5th generation of Schommers to continue the family’s farming tradition, and the land will be available for agriculture forever. The land will also support wildlife habitat and clean water. The farmstead includes woodlots and two ravines which flow directly into the Big River, a Class I trout stream.

The addition of the Schommer Farm brings the total farmland protected by WWLT to nearly 5,000 acres.

For more information please visit: www.wwlt.org.
Statewide PDR for Wisconsin?

Last year, the Working Lands Initiative Steering Committee, a group of advisors convened by the Secretary of Agriculture, concluded that current land use policies in Wisconsin should be, but are not, preventing the fragmentation of working farms.

A key component of that committee’s recommendations was a statewide Purchase of Development Rights or “PDR” program that would provide matching grants to land trusts and local governments to buy the development rights on working farms. The goal of such a program would be to keep farmland and farming financially viable in Wisconsin communities.

A state PDR program would accomplish much:

• Offer farmers an alternative to selling land to developers by compensating farmers for protecting their land.
• Keep farmland in private ownership—by selling only development rights, landowners retain the ability to farm, lease, sell and bequeath the property.
• Keep farmland affordable as it is transferred from one generation to the next—the federal estate tax system includes generous benefits for land protected by conservation easements.

The program would also attract more federal money than Wisconsin land trusts can attract themselves. PDR grants would be eligible to match funds from USDA’s Federal Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program. Wisconsin land trusts use this program now, but it has demanding eligibility requirements that are difficult to meet without a PDR program providing local matching funding.

Across the country 27 other states and over 50 local governments run PDR programs. They are well-tested tools. It’s a natural fit that Wisconsin, a leader in the agricultural economy, might implement one. Supporters of the idea have worked to include a PDR program in the state budget this year. Cross your fingers! Better yet, call your representative.

The Working Lands Initiative will host a series of public workshops on February 26, 27 and 28 to discuss how Purchase of Development Rights programs protect working lands. For more information about those workshops, or the status of a PDR proposal in the state budget, visit the policy section of our web page: www.gatheringwaters.org.
Office Notes

The View from Milwaukee

Last fall, Gathering Waters hired Natalie Easton to serve the Milwaukee County Conservation Coalition (MC3), an independently-funded project of Gathering Waters Conservancy. Natalie has updated the MC3 communications systems, convened regular coalition meetings, and researched funding options for the group.

She reports: “Though ‘conservation’ and ‘environmental concern’ may not be the first things Wisconsinites think of when they think ‘Milwaukee County’, we are a strong body of determined, active folks. MC3 is working to hone the efforts of this urban environmental community.”

“MC3 is a coalition of individuals, environmental organizations, and neighborhood groups who have come together to speak with one voice about common environmental concerns. People intent on achieving a healthy environment in a thriving city face substantial challenges. Often, those who are most negatively affected by poor environmental quality are also those most alienated from the processes that determine that quality. MC3 will continue to work from the grassroots to include all community members with a stake in protecting valuable natural resources.”

Note: our MC3 Advocacy Coalition Coordinator is currently on maternity leave – congratulations, Natalie!

Staff and Board News

The end of an era. Bud Jordahl, a founding member, past president and tireless supporter of Gathering Waters Conservancy finished his last term on our board in December. Bud’s leadership has been fundamental to our successes. We’re pleased to report that while Bud certainly earned his “retirement” from Gathering Waters, he is still engaged on board committees and with our Stewardship Reauthorization Campaign. We continue to be honored by his commitment to our organization and to Wisconsin conservation. Thank you, Bud!

Natalie Easton is on board to coordinate the Milwaukee County Conservation Coalition. Her background includes teaching philosophy, working for poverty- and homeless-relief programs and the Milwaukee State Public Defender’s office.

The fight against exotic species has gained a savvy strategist and skilled grant writer. Julia Solomon left Gathering Waters to become the Aquatic Invasive Species Coordinator for UW Extension.

We also bid farewell to intern Aaron Ruesch who has joined the Center for Sustainability and the Global Environment (SAGE) to work on a new online forum, the “Earth Collaboratory.”

“My experience at Gathering Waters was that crucial ‘first step’ in joining the environmental community. It provided the exposure I needed to participate in an informed, conservation-minded dialogue. Go GWC!”

~ Aaron Ruesch
Taking our president’s advice, Gathering Waters Conservancy hosted a breakfast at the Milwaukee Athletic Club last October to highlight innovative conservation programs in the Milwaukee area. The attending group of friends and supporters got an inside look into how unique public-private partnerships and the Stewardship Fund created the Mequon Nature Preserve.

Christine Nuernberg, mayor of Mequon, offered an inspiring account of how the Preserve, the brainchild of long-time Mequon resident Dick Paddock, was built through combined efforts of the City of Mequon, the Ozaukee Washington Land Trust and the Greater Milwaukee Foundation. Attorney John Lhost shared the details of Mequon’s new Transfer of Development Rights program, which will complement the Preserve by concentrating development in areas where growth makes the most sense.

Gathering Waters Conservancy is proud to highlight conservation success in Wisconsin. We hope Mequon’s example will seed other similar partnerships around the state.

~ Art Harrington, Gathering Waters Conservancy President

Did you know you can name Gathering Waters Conservancy, Inc. in your estate? For more information call 608.251.9131 x 10.

A Unique Giving Opportunity
Congress recently enacted new legislation creating an attractive tax incentive for making charitable gifts from IRA accounts. Donors can now support Gathering Waters Conservancy using distributions from their retirement accounts tax free.

This unique opportunity is a great way to support Gathering Waters Conservancy, but it is only available through 2007. Here are more details:

• Donors must be 70 ½ or older.
• Tax free contributions can be up to $100,000.
• Any amounts, up to the $100,000 maximum, donated in this manner count toward the IRA minimum distribution requirement for the year.
• Gifts must be transferred directly to the qualified charities from IRA or rollover IRA accounts.

To take advantage of this opportunity and make a contribution to Gathering Waters Conservancy with IRA funds normally subject to taxation, call your IRA custodian to arrange for a direct transfer.

Thank Yous
Joy Stiegelz Gottschalk for many dedicated hours of work as chair of the Executive Director Hiring Committee
Geoff Maclay for hosting Vicki and Liz in Milwaukee
Mel Raatz & Dave Steiro for help with Assessors presentation
Ed Ritger & the Sheboygan Area Estate Planning Council
Daniel Mortensen for making awards stands
1000 Friends of Wisconsin for recognizing Wisconsin Land Trusts
John Lhost & Christine Nuernberg for speaking at the Milwaukee breakfast
John Torinus for co-hosting our Awards Celebration
Bill Sieger for donating pictures of Parade of Preserves field trips
Mississippi Valley Conservancy for photos and Robin Chapman for her poem in our Thanksgiving card
Sonya Newenhouse for photography at our Awards Celebration
Brenda Haskins for answering Ask an Attorney question in Currents
Kim Wright for participating in Executive Director interviews
Bill Pielsticker, Cate Harrington, & Jeff Hastings for photos for the new Stewardship brochure

For information about endowment gifts, the Land Legacy Society, or giving in any form to Gathering Waters Conservancy, please contact Sara DeKok, Member Relations Director at 608.251.9131 x 10.
As Seen on TV!

Gathering Waters Conservancy has been working with Wisconsin Public Television to develop a series of television segments on land trusts. In this series WPT highlighted land trust activity on the Bois Brule River, in Chippewa, Bayfield and Door Counties and, most recently, a show on land trusts in Milwaukee. Featured on the show In Wisconsin, which airs on WPT Thursdays at 7:00 p.m. and Sundays at 5:30 p.m., the segments are also available for viewing online. Visit our webpage for a link.

Honoring Conservation Leaders: A Call for Nominations

It’s true that our Awards Celebration is months away, but it’s already time to collect nominations for our Land Conservation Leadership Awards. The awards recognize outstanding accomplishments of individuals, policy makers, and land trusts who work together to conserve the places that make Wisconsin special.

The awards honor the power of committed citizens and offer inspiring examples of conservation success. Visit our webpage for descriptions of past winners. We are seeking nominations for:

- Land Trust of the Year
- Policy Maker of the Year
- Conservationist of the Year and/or Lifetime Achievement Award

We invite you to nominate an individual or a land trust that has demonstrated leadership protecting Wisconsin’s natural resources. For nomination forms and more information about our awards, visit our website: www.gatheringwaters.org/awards.

The deadline for all nominations is May 26.