

WESTPORT LAND
CONSERVATION TRUST
STRATEGIC PLAN

2008 TO 2013

Background

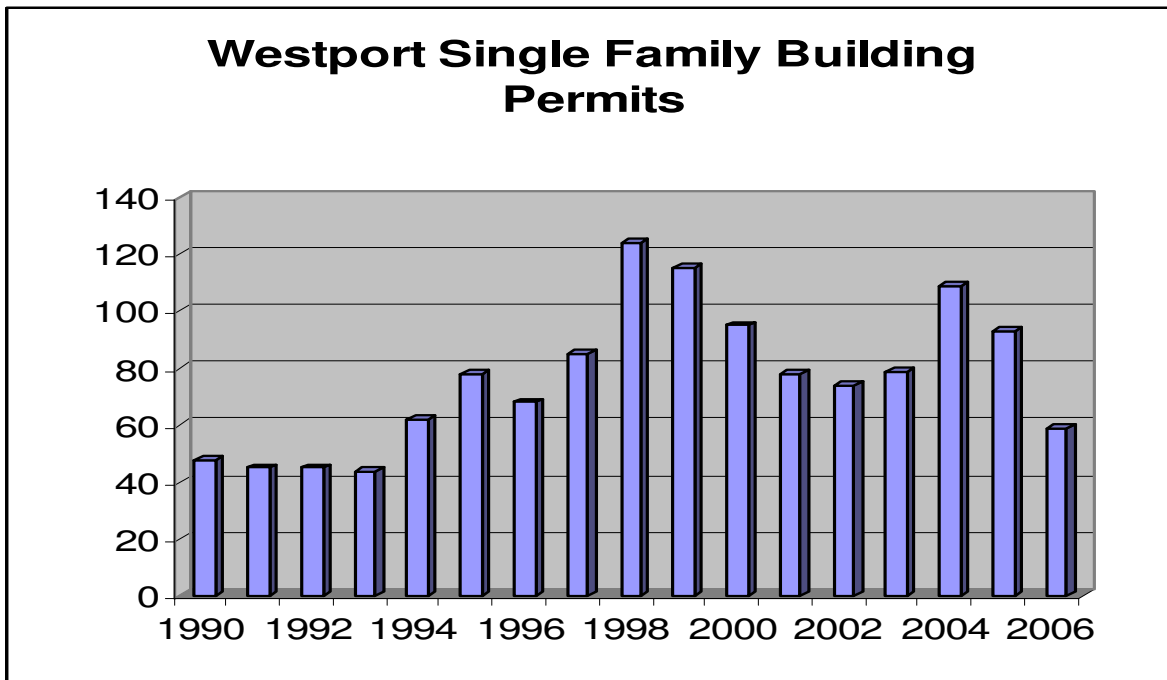
During the past five years, the Westport Land Conservation Trust (WLCT) has grown from an all volunteer organization with a small annual operating budget and a low profile in the community to an important and visible force for land conservation efforts in Westport. The WLCT is in the process of closing out its five year strategic plan (2002 to 2007) which will have resulted in the protection of 2,000 acres of open space in Westport along with a significant increase in organizational capacity.

The WLCT has professionalized its operation and has brought itself into compliance with the earlier (pre-2004) Standards and Practices of the Land Trust Alliance. The WLCT has grown from a membership of 185 in 2001 to approximately 1,225 members in 2007. Currently, the joint WLCT/Trustees of Reservation Westport office houses 4 professional staff. Over \$12,300,000 has been raised from private, town, state, and federal sources to preserve land in Westport. The WLCT is now responsible for approximately 1,100 acres of open space that it either owns outright or on which it holds or co-holds conservation restrictions.

It is against this backdrop of success and growth in which this new strategic plan is put forth.

The Challenge

Residential and commercial development continues to accelerate in Westport and a relatively small percent of the town's open space is protected. For example, as of 2007 only 13 % of available land was under some form of permanent protection versus over 25% in neighboring Dartmouth and 50% in Fall River. One only needs to drive the roads of Westport to see the housing developments that have sprung up in all parts of town over the past few years.



And while the WLCT has managed to save a number of important farms in recent years, economic pressures continue to threaten the farming community and major farm properties. Land prices have greatly escalated over the past five years increasing the cost of protecting new acreage. Town and state funds that have played an important part in protecting land over the past five years may continue to be available, but are not assured in the future. Federal funds will probably be in shorter supply during the next five years.

Regional factors will also continue to drive development in Westport. A proposed casino in Middleborough may establish the region as a major tourist destination. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts has made completion of the commuter rail to Fall River and New Bedford an important goal and this would increase the attractiveness of Westport as a bedroom community for Boston-bound workers.

In short, the WLCT will find itself operating in a challenging environment over the next five years. We expect this period to be marked by continued development pressures, more farms threatened with conversion to residential housing, higher prices for conserving land and tough competition for preservation dollars at the local, federal and possibly state levels.

While operating in a difficult environment to continue to preserve important open space parcels, the WLCT must meet the growing challenge of being a good steward to the increasing amount of property that it either owns outright or on which it holds conservation easements. The risks of being a poor steward are high. Conversely, the benefits to stewarding the land in a positive way are great in building community support for the WLCT's mission.

And while the WLCT has grown markedly in members and visibility in Westport, the vast majority of Westport residents still have little understanding of the WLCT, its mission or the benefits of land preservation to their quality of life. Building a better foundation of community wide support for the WLCT's mission will be a key challenge over the next five years.

Meeting the Challenge

While the challenges are substantial, the WLCT is a much more capable organization now than when it embarked on its last strategic plan. Over the past five years, the WLCT has developed and nurtured a number of proven resources. We will need to continue to grow and focus these resources (as well as to partner with other organizations having particular experience and expertise) if we are to successfully meet the challenges that will confront us over the next five years.

These resources include:

1. A robust partnership with The Trustees of Reservations (TTOR) that extends our ability to undertake and manage complex projects.
2. A capable and seasoned staff.
3. An active board and committee structure and a growing network of volunteers.
4. A proven record of being able to raise large amounts of private capital as well as the ability to leverage town, state, foundation, and federal conservation dollars.
5. A proven reservoir of support for land preservation in the broader Westport community.

WLCT will need to tap all of these to continue its vigorous program of land preservation, expand its efforts in land stewardship, provide greater public access to its properties, and promote increased awareness of its mission and achievements.

Our Five Year Vision

IMPORTANT AGRICULTURAL, SCENIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL LAND PRESERVED:

- ❖ That the WLCT continues to be the leading force behind land preservation and preserves important amounts of open space with high agricultural, scenic, and environmental value.

ENHANCED STEWARDSHIP AND PUBLIC ACCESS:

- ❖ That in five years time the WLCT offers public access and recreational opportunities on three to five additional properties throughout Westport.
- ❖ That the WLCT stewards all its properties in a professional way to ensure their long term preservation and their enjoyment by the public as well as to encourage further land preservation efforts.

BROADENED CONSTITUENCY:

- ❖ That the WLCT be a well known and highly regarded member of the Westport community, recognized for its efforts to preserve land for the benefit of the town.
- ❖ That a large number of Westport residents both young and old have direct involvement with the WLCT as members, volunteers, visitors to our properties, or attendees at WLCT social or educational events.

PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATION:

- ❖ That the WLCT operate under the highest “industry” standards which may culminate in the WLCT applying for and receiving accreditation through the Land Trust Accreditation Commission.
- ❖ That the WLCT continues to have a vibrant and close relationship with the Trustees of Reservations.

Meeting our Vision: WLCT Strategic Plan

Goal #1: Continue to Preserve Important Parcels of Agricultural, Scenic and Environmentally Significant Land.

The primary purpose of the WLCT is and will continue to be the protection of farmland, natural resources and wildlife area for the use of present and future generations.

During its first strategic plan from 2002 to 2007, the WLCT set an ambitious goal of saving 2,000 acres of prime agricultural, scenic, and environmentally important land in Westport. As 2007 comes to a close the WLCT is in the process of completing this ambitious goal.

Over the next five years, the WLCT will continue ambitious efforts to preserve important parcels of open space but will not be bound by a specific numerical target. This should not be seen as diminishing the importance the WLCT places on continued land preservation efforts over the next five years.

ACTIONS

1. Continue to identify and preserve projects with landscape wide impacts including major agricultural tracts as well as other parcels having important scenic, recreational or environmental value.
2. Review and update the criteria for the selection of land for preservation efforts.
3. Review how we communicate with landowners in terms of a proactive or reactive approach.
4. Research, review and evaluate strategies for maximizing the protection of farmland as the price of farmland continues to appreciate.
5. Where appropriate and consistent with the WLCT mission, work with others to assist the Westport farming community in continuing to farm and attracting new people to farming.
6. Evaluate and implement programs to increase the amount of land donated outright to the WLCT or preserved through conservation easements.
7. In conjunction with the TTOR, continue to nurture relationships with Massachusetts State agencies involved with land and agricultural preservation such as the Agricultural Preservation Program, Fisheries and Wildlife, and the Department of Environmental Management.

8. Work with the Finance and Fund Raising Committees to determine an appropriate “budget” for land acquisition projects.
9. Review policies and procedures to ensure compliance with the Revised, 2004 LTA Standards and Practices.”

Goal #2: Enhance Stewardship of WLCT Properties and Expand Public Access to Properties.

Enhancing our stewardship of WLCT properties and expanding public access to them serves to bring residents and members in closer contact with our mission and strengthen their connection to open space and the town's agricultural heritage. Showing we are good stewards of existing properties also encourages and motivates additional land preservation efforts.

Our first strategic plan saw a very successful effort to preserve major agricultural, scenic and environmentally important tracts. This updated plan proposes an ambitious effort to better steward these protected properties while expanding public access to these properties.

ACTIONS

1. Consider adopting a policy of placing a certain amount of money (donated by the land owner and/or raised through the land protection campaign) in a stewardship fund when a fee property is accepted or acquired.
2. Increase professionalism in our annual monitoring of fee-owned and CR properties.
 - A. Categorize the level of monitoring necessary for each property.
 - B. Contract with a professional to monitor and maintain properties.
3. Develop a Management Plan for all WLCT properties which at a minimum maintains the current level of maintenance and prioritizes properties for improvement.
 - A. Ensure that baseline documentation, monitoring and enforcement meet national standards.
 - B. Educate and involve the board in property management issues.
 - C. Communicate land management plans to the general public.
 - 1) Communicate what we do with the properties we protect and directly address concerns about the future of the properties.
 - 2) Use outside expertise – for example, Mary Hallene re invasives – for board education and public programs.
 - 3) Put information on the WLCT web-site about land management, resource protection and “green” practices.

4) Share techniques and standards as well as specific property plans with owners of adjoining lands.

5) Develop and publicize the Town Farm as an example of stewardship and management.

4. Increase public access to preserved properties.

A. Prepare maps of each accessible trail and property with pertinent information and maps available at each site.

B. Publicize information about each accessible property.

C. Put maps, history, ecology and management plan for each property on the WLCT web-site.

D. Offer guided trail tours on each major property at least once per year.

E. Make a CD of property walks.

F. Put videos of property walks on the WLCT web-site.

G. Work with school officials to host outside education trips for Westport 3rd and 4th graders.

H. Work with owners of properties under CR to secure some form of public access, i.e. walking.

I. Continue to build connections with other groups (for example the WRWA) to promote educational and recreational opportunities on our properties.

5. Create major walking trails.

A. Research the experience of Block Island.

B. Attempt to secure agreements to cross properties adjoining ours on a license basis.

C. Publicize trails through our web-site, DVD's and printed materials.

6. Develop and execute a plan to finance the enhanced stewardship efforts.

A. Explore grant opportunities through foundations such as PEW.

B. Establish an annual stewardship budget sufficient to cover the increased efforts and identify sources of funds.

C. Implement a plan for growing the Howland Memorial Stewardship Endowment.

7. Work with the TTOR to develop the Town Farm as a hub of efforts to connect Westport residents with the land and its agricultural heritage.
8. Review Policies and Procedures to ensure compliance with the Revised, 2004 LTA Standards and Practices.

Goal #3: Broaden the WLCT Constituency by Increasing the Number of Members, Volunteers, Visitors to our Properties and Events, “Virtual” Visitors to our Web-site and Supporters of our Mission.

The WLCT has seen tremendous growth in terms of both its membership and visibility over the past five years. Still, there are many Westport residents who share our vision that have little knowledge of or connection to the Land Trust. To better carry out its mission the WLCT needs to build even broader and more direct connections with the Westport community.

ACTIONS

1. Get more members and the public onto WLCT properties.
 - A. Provide consistent baseline services for all accessible properties including signage, bulletin boards and trail maps.
 - B. Provide property information on WLCT web-site.
 - C. Host themed walks on selected WLCT properties.
 - D. Outreach to other organizations to encourage use of WLCT properties.
 - E. Encourage volunteers to get involved in stewardship opportunities.
2. Continue to nurture relationships with the Town entities such as the Trust Fund Council, Ag Committee, and CPA through attending appropriate meetings and serving as an open space resource for these entities.
3. Develop a public relations strategy for press releases, articles, appearances on local cable shows, etc. communicating a consistent message about the land trust and its work.
 - A. Create and distribute a document entitled, “10 Important Reasons to Preserve Land.”
 - B. Focus publicity on raising awareness of how land protection enhances the quality of life in the community.
 - C. Obtain press coverage on key conservation issues and achievements at the local and regional level.
 - D. Participate in local business round tables, community forums, etc.
 - E. Create an exhibit bulletin board (s) suitable for banks, schools, fairs, etc.

- F. Communicate stories of our work that express the fundamental values of our mission.
4. Improve communication with members through various media.
 - A. E-mail
 - B. Interactive web-site
 5. Develop public relations strategies that address community criticisms of land preservation efforts such as complaints that land preservation removes land from tax roles, is for the enjoyment of the wealthy, etc.
 6. Train staff, executive board, committee members and volunteers to speak effectively as a “voice” for conservation and to develop opportunities for them to speak.
 7. Involve more volunteers and improve management of volunteers.
 - A. Determine appropriate roles, purposes and goals for volunteers.
 - B. Implement a program of volunteer cultivation, appreciation and management.
 - C. Establish training programs to prepare volunteers for specific roles.
 - D. Provide volunteers with the information for them to represent WLCT.
 - E. Evaluate volunteer strategies in the areas of:
 - 1) Stewardship
 - 2) Speakers/Public Relations
 - 3) Office Tasks
 - 4) Identification of Properties
 8. Determine responsibility for volunteer management within WLCT.
 9. Involve school children and youth scouts on properties.
 - A. Develop program of annual 3rd and 4th grade walks.
 - B. Develop program for youth scout work on properties.
 10. Further develop WLCT Web-site as a hub of information on WLCT and preservation efforts in Westport including interactive features.
 11. Emphasize positive impact of land preservation on overall environmental quality including the positive impact on global climate change.

Goal #4: Continue to Professionalize Operations, Consider National Accreditation, and Strengthen Financial, Governance and Administrative Systems.

The WLCT must continue to professionalize and update its operations in order to manage its increased land holdings as well as to continue its role as a hub of land preservation efforts town-wide. As the Land Trust Alliance accreditation process evolves, the WLCT should consider the pros and cons of accreditation. The accreditation process would touch upon all aspects of the WLCT work and require the sustained commitment of both staff and board to achieve.

ACTIONS

1. Annually review the pros and cons of becoming a nationally accredited land trust through the Land Trust Accreditation Commission.
 - A. Task the Executive Committee to develop an annual review process as well as a time frame and plan for achieving national accreditation if and when appropriate.
2. Strengthen governance.
 - A. Clarify and articulate the responsibilities of board members versus staff.
 - B. Establish board procedures for annually reviewing WLCT programs and activities to determine whether they are consistent with the mission of the WLCT and its strategic plan and to make necessary decisions about the expenditure of potentially limited staff and financial resources.
 - C. Develop and oversee an annual work plan that sets forth specific goals for the organization.
 - D. Review policies and procedures to ensure compliance with Revised, 2004 LTA Standards and Practices.
3. Maintain and develop financial oversight.
 - A. Continue the development of internal financial controls and planning tools.
 - B. Develop investment strategies as needed.
 - C. Research and implement a staff benefit program.
 - D. Review policies and procedures to ensure conformity with LTA Standards and Practices.

4. Efficiently allocate staff resources.
 - A. Evaluate current staff allocation including allocation to Executive Director and Administrative Assistant.
 - B. Task Executive Committee to evaluate organizational capacity to reflect increased attention to land stewardship and outreach and educational tasks.

Goal #5: Build Upon Positive Relationship with the Trustees of Reservations (TTOR).

For the past five years the WLCT has enjoyed a very productive relationship with the TTOR that has allowed it to achieve many goals that it could not have on its own. To achieve the ambitious goals of this strategic plan, the WLCT will need to continue to work closely with the TTOR.

ACTION

1. Plan annual meeting with Trustees to review status of working relationship and explore ways to evolve and improve upon relationship.