

NBLT History

Decades of Dedication, Acres of Impact.

The driving force at the start of what became North Branch Land Trust was **love of the land.**

A leader in conservation and natural resource protection in Northeastern Pennsylvania,

North Branch Land Trust protects thousands of acres from development in eight counties.

The organization ranks number eight among 68 similar conservation groups in Pennsylvania in acreage protected according to the 2023 Pennsylvania Land Trust Census report by We Conserve PA.

The accomplishments are a long way from the humble, grassroots aspiration of residents who, 30 years ago, were troubled by increasing residential and commercial development.

They dreamed of something better...

COMMUNITY EFFORT

In the late 1980's, Dr. James Ryan, Executive Officer of Penn State Wilkes-Barre held public meetings encouraging local citizens to become active in the community.

From that came the Back Mountain Citizens Council where members discussed issues from recycling and Earth Day activities to legislative hearings on a wetlands bill and concerns about pollution around the Huntsville Reservoir.

"After one particular meeting of the Citizens Council many of us were frustrated by so many pro-development discussions and little thought for conservation," recalled Rob Lewis. "I recall a conversation in the parking lot after one of those meetings when Charlie Wasserott said ... that we needed to form our own non-profit organization to address the need for conservation. In my mind that was the initial inception of our land trust."

In October of 1992, a questionnaire was sent to all council members regarding interest in creating a land trust. Within a month, Tom Kerr, executive director of Wildlands Conservancy and chairperson of the Pennsylvania Land Trust Association (now WeConservePa), spoke to a forum of 33 people. Kerr suggested partnerships between groups, encouragement of land and wilderness preservation, acquiring easements rather than owning property and developing specific conservation projects such as greenways and bike paths.

The energy was evident.

At a meeting of the new Back Mountain Regional Land Trust in April 1993, discussion included the need to draft a mission statement, a name for the organization, an inventory of local natural areas, nature tours and an election of officers. In June and July there were discussions about acquiring the bird sanctuary in Dallas. (Years later, the Land Trust acquired that sanctuary, Forest Echo.) A walk was planned to tour former trolley tracks in Dallas. Speaker Randall Arendt was invited to speak in November about Creative Development Design to protect open space, an event that was a rousing success.

Before the year ended, The Back Mountain Regional Land Trust applied to the Pennsylvania Dept. of State to incorporate as a nonprofit corporation. The application was signed by William Conyngham, President; Robert Lewis, Secretary; and Thomas Winter, Treasurer. Officers and members of the Board of Directors also included: Douglas Ayers, Vice Pres.; Rick Allan; Alene Case; Lawrence Law; Maureen Lucchino; Paul Lumia; and Samuel Rhodes. Early members and advocates also included Wasserott, Margaret Bakker, Sarah Carr, Liz Lloyd, Fred Valentine and Ellen Ferretti.

The application was approved, effective February 1, 1994.



It's Official

■ **BMRLT Achieves Non-Profit Status**

The Back Mountain Regional Land Trust has received tax-exempt status as an organization described in section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code in a letter dated August 31st from the Internal Revenue Service. Specifically, the

trusts of the Back Mountain Regional Land Trust. We have been invited to visit two rural properties, one north of Dallas, the other south, the owners of which are seriously interested in affording their land long term protection. We have also been made aware of another landowner who is considering establishing a "Nature Preserve" as a memorial to a loved one. Granted these are all very preliminary discussions but, as they say, "The longest journey begins with a single step."

My main message is to invite your support and involvement in our efforts if you are not already doing so. We can always use enthusiastic, committed individuals to help us move forward. Certainly we would love to talk to you if you own land that you might want to see protected from development. So come to one of our nature hikes, attend a board meeting or just call up one of our

FROM IDEA TO ORGANIZATION

Efforts proceeded on many fronts: Engage additional board officers. Attract new members. Staff a booth at the fall fair. Create a newsletter. Get publicity in newspapers. Explore interest in other counties. stage nature walks and kayak trips, hold potluck dinners and organize an annual dinner to raise awareness and money.



In December 1995, the organization put 42 acres of William Hosler in Salem Township, Luzerne County under easement, a first for the “new” land trust. “For almost three full years, our board has been working diligently to get to the point where we could actually do what land trusts are meant to do – save land,” said President Will Conyngham in the Back Mountain Regional Land Trust newsletter. “If that sounds like a long time, and it does to me too, you might be surprised to hear that ... land trusts around the country told (us) that three years from first meeting to first easement is comparatively brief.”

Initially the land trust met monthly in the conference room H205 of Hayfield House at Penn State Wilkes-Barre, discussing possible future projects and plans. Accomplishments were slow until January 1996 when Linda Thoma was hired as an administrator.

“A framework had to be built. It took a long time, but it was eventually done,”

said Thoma, who was at the land trust for 19 years.



The land trust eventually moved to an office at 11 Carverton Road in Kingston Township. And by the end of 1999, easements were placed on four additional properties totaling 129 acres in Luzerne, Wyoming and Susquehanna counties.



The organization changed its name in 2000 to North Branch Land Trust to reflect the interest in conservation in the broad region of the Susquehanna River watershed. And as the land trust's reach expanded, its reputation was validated. The NBLT was recognized in 2008, with accredited status by the Land Trust Accreditation Commission, assuring the public that the organization and its systems and policies received an extensive, external review.

The accomplishment was capped in 2009 with the completion of a 1,880-acre conservation easement in Bear Creek Township, PA., pushing the total protected lands in Bradford, Columbia, Lackawanna, Luzerne, Sullivan, Susquehanna, Wayne and Wyoming counties over the 10,000-acre mark.

SIGNIFICANT ACHIEVEMENTS



Through the next decade, North Branch Land Trust put more properties in Bradford, Luzerne, Susquehanna counties under easement. People who loved their land recognized the lasting legacy of conservation.

“Northeastern Pennsylvania's farms and forest and watershed lands – our food, our drinking water, our flood protection – are threatened by poorly planned development and other activities,” founder and advocate Doug Ayers told The Times Leader in 2008.

“It's now more important than ever to have a strong and dedicated organization that gives landowners a way to conserve their lands forever for the benefit of future generations.”

Sadly, Ayers, a founder and one-time president of the land trust, died in 2017.

The conservation and that guiding spirit persevered.



Through the Land Trust, about 182 acres was sold from private owners to the Pennsylvania Game Commission expanding State Game Lands 91 in Bear Creek Township.

In 2022, the 670-acre Howland Preserve in Wyoming County, willed to North Branch Land Trust nearly 20 years before by Ernest E. Howland, was deeded to Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (PA DCNR) Bureau of State Parks to become Vosburg Neck State Park, the first state park in Wyoming County.

The following year, 1,400 acres around the Hanover Reservoir was conserved by NBLT and deeded to Pennsylvania's Bureau of Forestry. And from 2020 to 2025, North Branch Land Trust conserved six additional easements of 1,140 acres in Columbia, Luzerne, Schuylkill and Wyoming counties.



The conservation effort came home, 30 years after that first easement, when the Land Trust, with a grant through PA DCNR Bureau of Recreation and Conservation with funds from the Keystone Recreation Park and Conservation Funds (Key '93), and a generous donation by PA American Water Company, completed a 220 acre conservation easement on the lands on the Huntsville Reservoir. The easement, which is in Dallas Borough and Lehman Township, was completed in May 2025 and is an inaugural effort of the water company, permanently protecting the drinking water for more than 30,000 people and land loved by residents of the Back Mountain community.

“The Huntsville Reservoir easement is a spectacular addition to existing conserved lands in the region,” said Executive Director Ellen Ferretti, who was an early land trust member and board member. “Conserving the conifer forest and wetland along the northern, upstream portion of the Huntsville Reservoir protects this land that acts as a buffer around the reservoir, enhances the quality of the fresh water we drink and reduces the risks of soil erosion, runoff pollution, and regional flooding. The community values the beauty and significance of the reservoir and North Branch Land Trust is thrilled to conserve this resource