

By Wei-Huan Chen

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## Needham Land Trust to acquire, preserve land

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Residents concerned with preserving Needham's natural environment are forming the town's first-ever private land trust.

Founders said the group would be an alternative to town conservation groups and that it would work toward preserving Needham's privately owned open space in its natural state.

"What we've seen over the years is that towns' preferences will change. One decade they will want a piece of land to preserve its forests, another decade they will want it for playing fields and hunting," said Roy Cramer, the clerk and one of the founding members of the newly formed Needham Land Trust. "This land trust is to preserve land in perpetuity."

The trust's goal will be to acquire and preserve conservation land in Needham. Founders hope landowners with open space might choose to work with the land trust in turning their fields or forests into conservation land, instead of turning it over to developers.

On the other hand, giving open land to a town group for conservation would require a public process that might make landowners uncomfortable, said founders. Using a private trust to conserve land would also guarantee the space isn't used for other town interests, said President Sam Bass Warner, who is a member of the Needham Planning Board.

"Towns have the propensity to turn land into sports fields," he said.

The group was officially formed in August 2012 but is still awaiting its official 501(c)3 nonprofit status. Members plan to host the trust's first meeting on Jan. 15.

Cramer, who served on Needham's Conservation Commission for 24 years, said he always wanted to form a land trust in order to involve more residents in conservation efforts and to have a separate group with the sole mission of conservation that's more flexible than the town commission.

"We've wanted to have this land trust for years," said Warner.

Rather than competing with the town groups, Cramer said the land trust provides a great opportunity for a public-private partnership. Cramer and Warner said they hope to help the town's Community Preservation Committee oversee some of its properties.

State law requires a third party to monitor CPC property, and many town-independent groups charge a fee to do so, said Cramer. Needham Land Trust aims to provide that service for free.

"We're not in it to make money," he said. "We're in it to preserve land."

Director of Land Protection at [Mass Audubon Society](#) Bob Wilber said there are many benefits to forming a local land trust, which include providing information sessions, attracting private philanthropy, accessing both government and private grant funds and giving landowners a "quiet and safe" way to give their land to conservation.

Conservation options for landowners can sometimes even give them a “net return in dollars that is fully comparable to development options,” said Wilber. Rather than turning a parcel of land into a suburb, a landowner could benefit from a variety of tax reductions and deductions by guaranteeing the land’s conservation, said Wilber.

Communities under the pressure of housing development should not only look at protecting the natural habitats and species in the community, but also preserving the things that define its character, such as trails, gardens and fields.

“It depends on what you cherish about your community and what steps you’re going to take to protect those elements,” said Wilber.

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