



## Land Trusts: Preservation Through Conversation

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If you are feeling fed up with partisan politics, or the widening gulf between the “red” and the “blue,” rest assured: there are great examples of collaboration and accomplishment in our region led by local land trusts.

A land trust is a nonprofit that conserves land by working with landowners and the community on land or conservation easement acquisition, and they often provide stewardship of such land or easements into perpetuity.

It’s been a privilege for Collins Group and for me personally to work with two regional land trusts in recent years who understand that reaching beyond supporters and building a true “community vision” is not only possible, but that it can set the stage for transformative conservation efforts.

Guided by the belief that not all private land can or should be protected, the Methow Conservancy completed a \$20 million campaign last year for conservation to protect the Methow Valley’s best habitat, working soils, and scenic views using conservation easements. Their successful campaign represented more than 1,500 gifts! Located in a valley where the full-time population is just about 5,000, the campaign truly inspired widespread community support.

The Methow Conservancy determined that to maximize impact through a campaign, it had to be grounded in a vision that resonated beyond one isolated project or one constituency group. They took the time to do their due diligence by conducting a Community Needs Assessment that provided real data they could share with the community and guidance for their plans. They also brought people together, over and over, in small groups and large, to understand what people value about the valley.

“When we asked simple questions – *What do you love about this place? What do you want to ensure your children or grandchildren experience?*—it was very illuminating how much even the most diverse stakeholders had in common,” recalls Sarah Brooks, Associate Director of the Methow Conservancy. The Conservancy used these conversations and discussions to help shape their plans. Developing campaign plans was a multi-year effort, but it ultimately led to a success that will be felt by all who live in or visit the valley for generations to come.

Over the past two years, the Chelan-Douglas Land Trust partnered with The Trust for Public Land, Chelan County, and the City of Wenatchee to convene a community-wide planning effort to chart a common vision and future for the Wenatchee Foothills. In doing so, they involved hundreds of local citizens and interest groups as diverse as sportsmen, realtors and developers, and equestrian and recreation enthusiasts.



In addition to a shared vision and goals, the Wenatchee Foothills Community Strategy also outlines proposed on-the-ground projects for the Land Trust. This direction, resulting from such an inclusive process, provides the type of community buy-in and support the Chelan-Douglas Land Trust needs to conserve prioritized areas.

Working with the City of Wenatchee, the Chelan-Douglas Land Trust currently has an opportunity to preserve Saddle Rock, one of the most iconic, well-loved, and well-used properties within the Wenatchee Foothills. For over one hundred years, the city and citizens' groups have sought to protect this 325-acre natural area with its four miles of trails and sweeping views of the Columbia River. Today, the Land Trust is raising the final dollars needed for the sale and stewardship of the property to close on its purchase by May 31.

What can we learn about creating a community vision from these land trusts?

1. Do the research, collect the data, and share unbiased assessments in determining community need
2. Invite diverse stakeholders together, ask questions, and listen to their concerns, interests, and priorities
3. Be transparent in decision-making processes and resulting plans
4. Focus on values and opportunity to find common ground

In both cases, these land trusts are relatively small and young, yet they have created collaborative, community-supported conservation that will benefit generations to come. Their work reminds me of an African proverb: "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together." It also demonstrates that diverse leadership is critical to helping communities take the long-view, especially in difficult times.