



YEAR IN FY2023 ANNUAL REPORT REVIEW



Western Reserve
Land Conservancy

land • people • community



OUR VISION

Thriving, prosperous communities nourished by vibrant natural areas, working farms and healthy cities.

OUR MISSION

To provide the people of our region with essential natural assets through land conservation and restoration.

Funding for this publication was generously provided by the Sandra L. and Dennis B. Haslinger Family Foundation.

Dear Friends,

Who will ever forget the extraordinary awe we felt when the total eclipse occurred on April 8th? Time stood still. Not individual awe, but a collective awe. Suddenly all of us, and all living things around us, were simply one, paused together in awe of something that inspired resonance with the divine. All of our differences disappeared.

For most of our lives we are immersed in the mundane. Chores. Walks. Work. Talking. TV. Driving. Shopping. Arguing. Writing. Reading. Tennis. Etc. Rarely do we experience the divine, the transcendent, the cosmic things that reveal deeper eternal truths and connections. That happened on April 8th, and it was extraordinary.

Western Reserve Land Conservancy is in the business of preserving cherished natural landscapes, conserving working farms, and restoring and protecting Cleveland's neighborhoods. Through collaborative efforts and the support of our dedicated community, we have achieved remarkable milestones in our mission to protect and enhance the places that make our region healthy and special.

This Annual Report serves as a testament to the collective impact of our work. From the successful completion of biodiverse conservation projects safeguarding critical habitats, to the expansion of urban greenspaces that enrich our communities, to the preservation of our region's precious prime soils and family farms, each achievement underscores our unwavering dedication to the health of our region, to our enduring prosperity.

As we navigate an ever-evolving landscape, both environmental and societal, the significance of our conservation efforts becomes increasingly apparent. Through strategic land conservation initiatives, innovative restoration projects, tree plantings, and

robust community engagement, we are not only safeguarding our natural heritage but also fostering resilience in the face of always emerging challenges.

None of this would be possible without the steadfast support of our partners, donors, trustees, volunteers, and staff. Your unwavering commitment to our mission fuels our progress and inspires us to push the boundaries of what is possible in conservation. As we look ahead, we are filled with optimism and determination. Together, we will continue to lead the charge in preserving the landscapes and resources that sustain us, ensuring a vibrant and resilient region today and for generations to come.

Thank you for your continued support and dedication and for being part of our team! The awe we all felt on April 8th is a reminder that we often neglect to appreciate the connection we have with each other, with all living things, and even with the entire universe. By taking care of nature, we take care of ourselves. Together, and only by coming together, we make the world a better place.

Warm regards,

Rich Cochran
President & CEO



Craig Owen White
Chair, Board of Trustees



STATEMENT OF Financial Position

ASSETS	2023	2022
Cash and Cash Equivalents	\$ 13,175,690	\$ 13,218,335
Pledges Receivable	4,311,518	4,088,645
Accounts Receivable	289,403	122,902
Notes Receivable	47,808	83,159
Conservation Property	5,053,353	6,395,065
Property and Equipment	10,588,135	10,758,977
Other Assets	16,428	47,680
Total Assets	33,482,335	34,714,763
LIABILITIES		
Loans Payable	8,800,000	12,325,000
Accounts Payable	415,179	192,367
Accrued Expenses	378,267	536,052
Total Liabilities	9,593,446	13,053,419
NET ASSETS		
Without Donor Restrictions	17,560,344	15,187,893
With Donor Restrictions	6,328,545	6,473,451
Total Net Assets	23,888,889	21,661,344
Total Liabilities and Net Assets	\$ 33,482,335	\$ 34,714,763

STATEMENT OF Revenue & Expenses

REVENUE	
Transfer of Conservation Lands	\$ 4,347,180
Other Program Revenue	11,232,613
LP Program Revenue	15,579,793
Foundation Grants	1,323,888
Individual Donations	2,514,250
Corporate Donations	232,023
Events Net Revenue	316,347
Philanthropic Revenue	4,386,508
Interest & Investment Revenue	385,794
Total Revenue	20,352,095
EXPENSE	
Program	16,703,582
Fundraising	729,002
Management and General	446,792
Operating Expense	17,879,376
Depreciation	245,174
Revenue Over (Under) Expenses	\$ 2,227,545

Creating thriving, prosperous communities for future generations is perhaps the most important thing we can do today. Your support helps us continue this work.



2,716
Total Acres
Conserved

33
Properties
Protected
in

29
Ohio
Counties

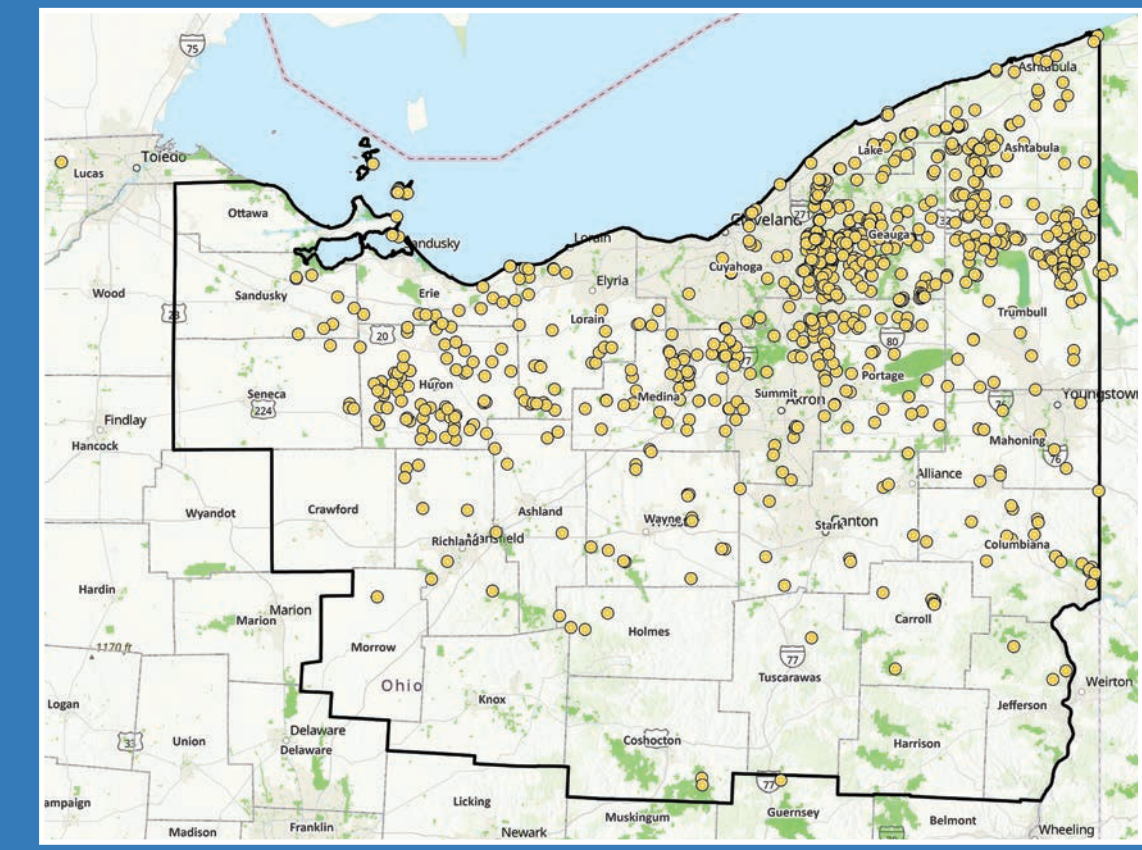
FISCAL YEAR RESULTS

20
23



County Conserved Properties

Ashland	5
Ashtabula	113
Carroll	7
Columbiana	22
Coshocton	2
Cuyahoga	111
Erie	21
Geauga	155
Guernsey	1
Holmes	4
Huron	71
Jefferson	3
Lake	40
Lorain	33
Lucas	1
Mahoning	9
Medina	41
Mercer	5
Morrow	1
Ottawa	5
Portage	63
Richland	9
Sandusky	8
Seneca	4
Stark	10
Summit	42
Trumbull	98
Tuscarawas	1
Wayne	13
Total	898



7,000

CONSERVED
ACRES OF PUBLIC
& PRIVATE
LAND IN OHIO



On a clear spring night in May, more than 2,000 supporters gathered along the shores of the Cuyahoga River at Jacobs Pavilion to enjoy an amazing performance by nationally recognized musicians in support of Reforest Our City. The second ROC in CLE concert and corporate breakfast events were even bigger than the first!

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to Scott and Julie Mawaka for their exemplary leadership, Kaulig Giving for their pivotal presenting sponsorship, and all our esteemed event sponsors, as well as the individual attendees whose collective generosity surpassed \$1.2 million. **Thank you!**

The festivities of ROC in CLE commenced on Friday, May 19, with a thought-provoking panel discussion at our Conservation Center in Moreland Hills. Guided by our CEO Rich Cochran, the discourse delved into the profound interconnection between our environment and our physical, mental, and spiritual well-being. Esteemed panelists from Calvary Hill Church, Case Western Reserve University, City of Cleveland, Cleveland Clinic, MetroHealth, and University Hospitals enriched the dialogue with their expertise.

On the ensuing night, May 20, the Nashville-based duo Brother Trouble electrified the audience with an invigorating performance, setting the stage ablaze for the headlining act: the legendary Rock & Roll Hall of Fame members, Lynyrd Skynyrd. Amidst renditions of their greatest hits, they graciously welcomed the Land Conservancy's CEO, Rich Cochran, to join them onstage for a rendition of "Sweet Home Alabama."

"We've only got one environment, and we need to do everything we can to protect it," said singer and frontman Johnny Van Zant to the audience. "We're so proud to be

here tonight representing the great work of Western Reserve Land Conservancy and their efforts to protect land and plant trees in Northeast Ohio!"

A sincere **thank you** to all who supported ROC in CLE!

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- | | |
|---|--|
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"We've only got one environment, and we need to do everything we can to protect it."

- JOHNNY VAN ZANT, LYNYRD SKYNYRD





Eastern Region Celebration

Out & About

Conservation Celebration

Conservation Celebration is an event where we celebrate landowners, current and past trustees, and donors with special awards. In 2023, we changed the format to celebrate an incredibly special accomplishment: the successful completion of our **Conserve, Connect, & Sustain** Campaign.

We launched the campaign in 2018 with the ambitious goal of raising \$35 million over five years. Not only did we meet this goal, we nearly doubled it, raising over \$62 million in philanthropic giving that we leveraged to raise an additional \$66 million in public and private funding — for a grand total of \$128 million. It was truly a cause for celebration. Nearly 90% of the funding secured was deployed during the campaign years to advance the strategic priorities of our campaign, including: Natural Lands Conservation, Farmland Conservation, Reforest Our City, Thriving Communities, Parks and Preserves, Trails and Greenways, and Stewardship.

We are grateful to our donors for their unwavering commitment and to the Campaign Co-Chairs, Campaign Cabinet, the Board of Trustees and staff for their generosity and leadership.

Regional Celebrations

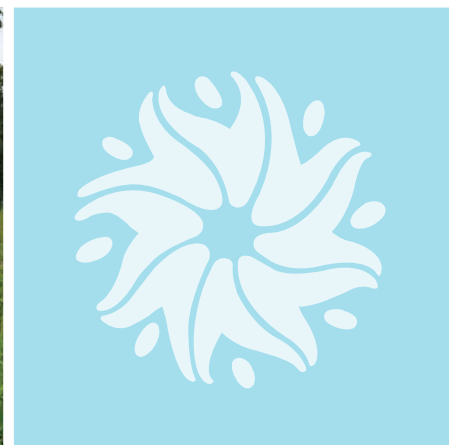
The Land Conservancy hosted three annual regional celebrations, bringing together owners of protected properties, donors, volunteers, and supporters to commemorate our collective efforts in land conservation. This past year, the Eastern Region Celebration took place at Blue Heron Preserve in Burton Township, Geauga

County. With over 140 attendees, the event marked the opening of this signature park, dedicated in Memory of Janet Franklin Foster. The park is owned and managed by the Land Conservancy and stands as a testament to our commitment to preservation and restoration. The gathering included landowners representing over 100 properties spanning 10,000 acres of protected land.

Meanwhile, the Western Region Celebration took place at Hawkes Meadow, nestled in Norwalk Township, Huron County. Hosted by David and Susan Cannon, guests explored the meadows, forests, and ravines of this privately protected property. Attendees received updates on our shared successes, while the Cannons emphasized the importance of safeguarding their land.

Lastly, the Southern Region Celebration took place at Plain Township Veteran's Park in Stark County. Attendees hiked the property that was recently protected. Discussions with Land Conservancy staff, township, and park representatives underscored the significance of our collaborations with public partners.

These annual gatherings provide invaluable opportunities to learn more about protected properties, welcome new landowners, reconnect with familiar faces, reflect on the achievements of the past year, and highlight the collective impact we have in preserving and stewarding our natural landscapes for generations to come.



Out & About

Stewards Event

The 2023 Stewards Event recognized the impact that Jim and Myrna Spira have had on conservation in Northeast Ohio by presenting them with our prestigious Art of Caring Award. Created in 2015, the Art of Caring Award pays tribute to a Western Reserve Land Conservancy White Oak Legacy Society individual or family who exemplifies the art of caring through their leadership, passion, and vision.

Jim, a former CEO of American Greetings, has been a board member since 2004. He played a critical role in leading the Land Conservancy through its merger of eight local land trusts in 2006 – still the largest merger of land trusts in the nation – to become Western Reserve Land Conservancy.

Jim and Myrna's leadership and commitment totaling more than \$1.5 million in cash and planned giving to Conserve, Connect, & Sustain – our largest comprehensive fundraising campaign ever – inspired many donors like them to give to the campaign and ensure the long-term future of land conservation in Northeast Ohio.



Jim Spira



Land Protection

Western Reserve Land Conservancy preserves land for future generations, protecting our food and water supply, purifying our air, providing wildlife habitat, and strengthening our communities. Over the most recent 20-year period (tracked from 2002 to 2022), an average of 51% of agricultural land was lost to development in the state of Ohio. This doesn't include land lost in natural areas or urban environments. Why is this important? With every acre of land lost to poorly planned development, we diminish our connection to nature, wipe out family farms, destroy valuable wildlife habitats and rob future generations of access to nature. Less land means less habitat for plants and animals and less food for our nation. Western Reserve Land Conservancy is doing something about that.

Carbon Credits

The Westlake-based Nordson Corporation purchased carbon credits that will help preserve over 130 acres of Ohio forest in an effort to offset their carbon emissions and combat the impacts of climate change. By investing in a local carbon sequestration project, the company is preserving land that its customers and employees can experience and enjoy. Western Reserve Land Conservancy is leading a national effort to identify projects that corporate partners can invest in to reduce carbon emissions.

325 Acres of Farmland in Richland County

Two Richland County family farms will be preserved forever thanks to our conservation efforts. A 206-acre farm in Franklin Township and a 119-acre farm in Jackson Township are both examples of our commitment to conserving working family

farms. Agriculture is Ohio's biggest industry, creating one in six jobs in Ohio. Therefore, preserving Ohio farmland is critical to our state's economy. The Franklin Township farm contains nearly 8,000 feet of Brubaker Creek, which eventually makes its way to the Black Fork of the Mohican River. The Jackson Township farm contains nearly 27 acres of forest and is comprised of Prime Farmland Soils, as defined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Shiverick Preserve

Western Reserve Land Conservancy finalized a complex conservation project, known as Shiverick Preserve, in the Chagrin River Valley. The project involved multiple landowners, state and federal funding sources, individual donors, and thousands of hours of staff time. This historic property, located in the Village of Hunting Valley, is a natural oasis tucked inside this thriving suburban community. Protecting this land and the natural resources it contains from future development is a conservation victory for the entire Chagrin River Valley and neighboring communities. Our staff worked for decades to raise the remaining funds needed to complete the acquisition of the property and cover project costs. With three successful public funding grants through the Clean Ohio Conservation Fund, the federal Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, and Governor Mike DeWine's H2Ohio program, as well as with the generous support of private donations from neighboring landowners and members of the community, the Land Conservancy was able to complete this significant conservation project.

61-acre Medina County Farm Preserved

Bob Rohrer, owner of Rohrer Farm in Guilford Township and a current and long-standing township trustee in Guilford Township, preserved his 61-acre farm with Western Reserve Land Conservancy. The farm is located in southeast Medina County, about halfway between Seville and Wadsworth. It is a designated Ohio Sesquicentennial Farm by the Ohio Department of Agriculture, one of three designations provided by the agency that honor farming families for "their enduring legacy to our state." In the case of the Rohrer Farm, it has been in the Rohrer family since 1836. The property's tillable land is a combination/rotation of corn, soybeans, wheat, hay and occasionally oats. The farm also contains a couple of woodlots that are predominantly beech-maple compositions, both with vernal pools and one with over 800' of a tributary to the Tuscarawas River called Tommy Run. The farm is also home to a small herd of Belted Galloway beef cattle.





Stewardship

It's a promise to protect and care for the land, a promise often passed down from generation to generation. Being stewards of our land is challenging yet vitally important, and our efforts play a critical role in supporting our communities, economy, and the environment.

Western Reserve Land Conservancy is the largest land trust in Ohio, which means we complete more annual visits to permanently protected properties than any other organization in the region. Conservation easement stewardship has been the core of our stewardship work since we were founded in the 1980s. This type of stewardship work is extremely important because the conservation restrictions placed on properties last forever. Importantly, 70% of our protected properties are privately owned, which means our relationships with private property owners are critical to conservation efforts in the region.

Blue Heron Preserve



Stewardship

Our conservation easement stewardship work is the way we uphold our promise to landowners, supporters, and the general public, ensuring that land will stay protected in accordance with the wishes and dreams of the original landowner. If we were to abandon this program or allow significant changes to conservation easements that are not permitted, trust in our organization and the conservation restrictions would quickly erode. Our dedicated conservation easement stewardship team has over 50 years of collective experience with the organization, and we remain the voice for the land no matter who owns the protected property. In Fiscal Year 2023 the team visited over 850 properties totaling over 64,000 acres of land. We also completed over 30 reports for newly protected properties documenting the conservation values of the land; we recorded dozens of changes on properties; and we met with over 20 new owners of protected properties that were sold to successor owners.

In addition to our traditional conservation easement stewardship work, we made big advancements in our Signature Parks and Preserves program. To name a few things, we installed new infrastructure in our public parks including trails and pavilions; we planted pollinator habitats; we restored wetland habitats; and we started a sustainable forestry program.

Blue Heron Preserve Clean-up

Established in memory of Janet Franklin Foster, Blue Heron Preserve is a gorgeous 116-acre park between Newbury and Burton Townships in Geauga County. The property is located in the Cuyahoga River watershed and much of the land was used as a sand and gravel mine for 26 years

before the Land Conservancy acquired the property and restored the site to a more natural state. The reclamation of the mine not only restored the property's beauty but also helped provide an inviting environment for a diverse array of native plants and animals. Visitors to the preserve can expect to see plant species such as turtlehead, bur-reed sedge, and great blue lobelia, as well as birds such as Great Blue Herons, seasonal warblers migrating through Northeast Ohio, Common Loons, Sandhill Cranes, and Bald Eagles. An overlook provides an incredible view of the ponds, the large wetlands complex to the east, and the West Branch-Cuyahoga River valley to Burton Hill. When improvements are complete, the preserve will offer scenic hiking trails, a shelter area and observation deck, and tremendous fishing opportunities with public access.

Our staff was pleased to partner with Budget Dumpster to host a clean-up as we prepared to welcome the public back to the stunning property in late summer 2023. The team spent the day cleaning up litter and construction debris, completing trail maintenance, weeding, treating invasive species, performing tree maintenance, and more. Budget Dumpster generously donated a receptacle to hold all the unwanted materials, including delivery and pickup of the container. Many thanks to Budget Dumpster for making our clean-up a big success!

Grand River Clean-up

Three dozen staff and volunteers from Western Reserve Land Conservancy, the Ohio Department of Natural Resources, Division of Natural Areas & Preserves, Scenic Rivers Program, Lake MetroParks, the Lake County Soil & Water District, the Ashtabula County Metroparks and

the Ashtabula Soil & Water District continued the annual cleanup of trash and debris in and along the Grand River, one of Ohio's designated Scenic Rivers. From the shore and on the water, 30 volunteers kayaked and canoed along two eight-mile float sections to collect and remove approximately two tons of trash and several used tires.

The Grand River is one of only three rivers in Ohio — along with Conneaut Creek and Little Beaver Creek — designated as both a State Scenic and Wild River. Northeast Ohio boasts seven of the 15 State Wild, Scenic and Recreational rivers. Like other Lake Erie tributaries in Northeast Ohio, the Grand is noted for its steelhead and muskellunge fishing.

By partnering with public and private landowners, the Land Conservancy has permanently protected 14.5 miles of land along the Grand River at 36 properties, including 1.2 miles of the river in the Ashcroft Woods Conservation Area, a 379-acre publicly accessible nature preserve that includes 103 acres of uninterrupted upland and floodplain forests.

“Clean water begins on the land,” said George Warnock, eastern region land steward with Western Reserve Land Conservancy. “By permanently protecting land along the Grand River and other Ohio waters, we’re creating a buffer not only for the trash and debris you can see, but for the pollution and runoff you cannot see. I hope this annual tradition will continue for many generations to come.”

Haley's and Adam's Run Clean-Up

On April 21, dozens of associates from Air Enterprises and LKQ Corporation joined together with Keep Akron Beautiful,

community volunteers, Akron City Council representatives, and Land Conservancy staff to celebrate Earth Day by participating in the annual Haley's and Adam's Run Clean-Up. This trail, located in the City of Akron, was the Land Conservancy's first venture into urban park creation. Beginning in 2008, the Land Conservancy and its partners — notably, Lockheed Martin — restored Haley's Run, a toxic ditch laden with PCBs and dioxins, into a thriving greenway featuring a free-flowing stream lined with native trees, shrubs, and grasses. In 2020, Adam's Run also underwent a stream and wetland restoration as part of a mitigation project. Visitors can enjoy a walk, run, or bike ride along the 0.8-mile trail, and students have a safe route to walk to Hatton Community Learning Center.

Haley's and Adam's Run is a critically important asset for the community, as the neighborhood in which the trail is located has limited access to other parks and green spaces. These restored streams and wetlands provide scenic beauty, natural habitat for wildlife, an area for groundwater recharge, and a shaded walking trail where residents and visitors can immerse themselves in nature. Our annual cleanup event and others visiting the trail assist in addressing litter, fallen trees, and other issues that pop up throughout the year. We depend on volunteer support to help monitor and maintain this keystone property and are grateful for the longstanding support of our Akron-area partners.



“Clean water begins on the land.”

– GEORGE WARNOCK,
Eastern Region Land Steward
with Western Reserve
Land Conservancy

Garden of Eleven Angels Clean Up

In 2023, we marked the second anniversary of our annual Mother's Day Garden of Eleven Angels (G11A) community clean up. This occasion holds profound significance as we pay tribute to the memory of the 11 women—mothers and daughters—who tragically lost their lives at this location.

Joined by the families of the honored women, local residents, Burten, Bell, Carr Community Development Corporation, and other passionate volunteers, we united to spruce up and enhance the site. We tended to the planting beds, removed weeds, planted new flowers, spread mulch over flower and tree beds, and cleared litter and debris. Our efforts extended beyond G11A to nearby streets, including the former Lafayette school site, which unfortunately has become a hotspot for illegal dumping.

This highlights the progression of our urban initiatives, where newly established green spaces evolve into ongoing stewardship endeavors with active community involvement.

We remain dedicated to maintaining this site, ensuring it remains a fitting tribute to those we have lost. Our commitment also encompasses our mission to provide top-notch green spaces for the urban core, reflecting our dedication to the community's interests and welfare.

Restoration Projects

Vermilion Comfort Station

In December 2022, the City of Vermilion and Western Reserve Land Conservancy celebrated the grand opening of a new comfort station at Vermilion's Main Street Beach. The comfort station is the centerpiece of a comprehensive plan to upgrade and revitalize the area's signature attraction and enhance public access to Lake Erie. This amenity had long been requested by residents to enable all-day recreation and increase visitation. The building features restrooms with changing tables, changing rooms, outdoor showers, and a new home for Main Street Vermilion's Shore Thing.

The project is a culmination of work which partners began in 2007 to transform Main Street Beach. Initial phases involved acquisition and demolition of the vacant Wakefield Mansion and Inland Seas Museum and two private homes to expand the beach and long term protection of lakeshore property with conservation easements that will ensure the site remains a public park for future generations. Other park amenities to complement the new facility include a loop trail, scenic overlooks, improved parking, native plantings, and lakeside seating on nearly four acres of permanently conserved property. A new plaza is planned for 2024/2025. When complete, the newly revitalized Main Street Beach will not only attract daily visitors, but also be used for special downtown events. It will be a powerful tool to boost tourism, foster community relationships, and enhance city and small business revenues – supporting an already thriving Vermilion.

Creation of this stunning community asset is being made possible through public and philanthropic funding sources totaling \$2.5 million. Many thanks to the more than one hundred donors who supported this initiative.

Oberlin Boardwalk

Western Reserve Land Conservancy dedicated a new boardwalk and wetland overlook at Oberlin Preserve, one of the organization's Signature Parks and Preserves. With a budget of \$20,000, funded by Lorain County Public Health and the Ross Foundation, the overlook is built along a public access right-of-way and future hiking trail.

In 2015, Western Reserve Land Conservancy acquired the 63-acre property located in the City of Oberlin on the south side of West Hamilton Street. The Oberlin Preserve includes established prairie, woodlands, wet sedge meadow, and forested vernal pools. The site has been host to scientific research as far back as 1888, according to records.

Oberlin Preserve was once owned by John and Delilah Copeland, who were free people of color who left North Carolina and moved to Oberlin in the 1840s. John and Delilah's son, John Anthony Copeland, took part in two nationally significant anti-slavery events in the years leading up to the Civil War, including the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue of 1858 and the raid at Harpers Ferry in 1859, for which he was executed. The Land Conservancy planted an "Underground Railroad Freedom Garden" that features native trees and plants that may have played a role in the lives of Passengers along the Underground Railroad.

"Oberlin Preserve offers much to the people of northern Ohio," said Andy McDowell, vice president of western field operations at the Land Conservancy. "Its rich history, beautiful prairie, and diverse flora and fauna make this an ideal public access preserve in Lorain County. We are proud to have played an important role in building this space for the public to enjoy."



Kister Mill

Beginning in 2012, the Land Conservancy began exploring the possibilities of purchasing and restoring the historic Kister Water Mill in southwestern Wayne County. Through the generosity of dozens of individual donors and local foundations to augment a state grant, the Land Conservancy finalized the purchase in 2018. Fundraising for the restoration of the site was on a similar timeline but actual work was delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and kicked in to high gear starting in 2021 with restoration work through most of 2023. The final phase is currently under way with the rebuild and replacement of the 18' waterwheel.

Mariola Construction from Wooster, Ohio was selected as the lead contractor for the restoration phase of the project. The restoration was like peeling an onion. Nothing was plum or square with this 200+ year old industrial structure. From the roof to the electrical, nearly everything in the mill was replaced or restored. We also added an ADA accessible ramp to the front entrance. The mill ponds and mill race were re-dug to ensure the power source – water – would be there to power the water wheel when complete. Lastly, a water well had to be drilled and a small-scale waste water treatment plant had to be placed on site in order to provide restrooms and running water for visitors. We look forward to inviting donors, partners, and friends to a grand opening in the fall 2024.




Restoration Projects

Sugar Island Preserve

Sugar Island Preserve is a conservation and restoration project that spans more than 11 years. Located in Trumbull and Ashtabula Counties, the 1,560-acre Sugar Island Preserve was created by the Land Conservancy through five different property acquisitions. The first in 2012 and the most recent in 2023. Sugar Island Preserve is located in a key wetland conservation corridor one mile north of the Ohio Division of Wildlife's 9,000-acre Mosquito Creek Wildlife Area.

Historically, the project site is part of what was known as "Bloomfield Swamp." Surveys and documents mention the existence of a large peatland that originated near State Route 87 east of Bloomfield and ran north to State Route 322 east of Orwell. This large wetland area was dominated by tamarack (*Larix laricina*) highbush blueberry (*Vaccinium corymbosum*), sphagnum moss, and other bog species. The formation of this peatland originated when the glaciers retreated ~10,000 years ago allowing a glacial lake to drain. The draining of the lake formed what is now referred to as the Grand River Lowlands, a flat area composed primarily of clay soils that do not allow surface water to escape, leading to an abundance of wetlands. The Grand River Lowlands are composed of a diverse array of wetland types including swamp forest, marsh, sphagnum peatlands, and sedge meadows. The property lies in the eastern extent of the Grand River Lowlands and contains areas with a thick peat layer, a unique soil type in Northeast Ohio. In 1913, Snyder Ditch and most of the headwater tributaries that now drain into Snyder Ditch were dug to drain the Bloomfield Swamp to exploit the rich nutrient soil for vegetable farming. For nearly 60 years, the property was managed as a large scale vegetable farm owned by the Ruetnik family (Ruetnik Gardens). Later, it changed hands, and peat was mined from certain areas and sold as potting soil. From approximately 1990 to 2008, the property was used for grain farming and managed as a hunting club known as Grand Valley Ranch.

The goal of the restoration efforts is to restore 210 acres of wetlands by lifting the landscape and redirecting 2.5 miles of water flowing through Snyder Ditch back across the landscape. This effort so far has included spreading out



Restoration Projects

1.8 million tons of soil that ran along Snyder Ditch, regrading and stabilizing 3.5 miles of roadway, removing 15 agricultural drain pipes that were previously draining the landscape into Snyder Ditch, removing 410 linear feet of old oil and gas pipeline, installing 6 ditch plugs, and two outlet control structures which during storm events will direct flows through these outlet structures back into Snyder Ditch. In addition, restoration efforts also installed two road weirs and three wetland weirs to ensure water could flow between wetland cells, as well as planting more than 600 trees.

This landscape is home to more than 15 state listed species including the Ohio Endangered Northern Harrier (*Circus cyaneus*), fireweed (*Epilobium angustifolium*), Sandhill Crane (*Grus canadensis*), and American Bittern (*Botaurus lentiginosus*).

Blue Heron Preserve

Western Reserve Land Conservancy took ownership of the 116-acre Blue Heron Preserve property in September 2016. Located in Burton and Newbury Townships of Geauga County within the West Branch Cuyahoga River Watershed, it is directly adjacent to 19,000-acres of public land held by the City of Akron.

The western half of the property was the site of a former sand and gravel mining operation which closed between 2004 and 2005. The mining permit was transferred to the Land Conservancy in April 2015 with a bond posted with the State of Ohio. The Land Conservancy spent the next four years working to reclaim the site to the satisfaction of Ohio Division of Natural Resource (ODNR) Division of Mineral Resources. In October 2019, the State of Ohio released the bond and ODNR retired the mining permit.

In October 2016, the eastern 56 acres of the property were protected with conservation restrictions thanks to funding provided by the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency – Water Resources Restoration Sponsorship Program and a North American Wetlands Conservation Act grant.

The eastern half protects habitat that includes a 27-acre category 3 wetland characterized as a hemlock swamp forest which is one of the only known locations of this habitat type in Geauga County. A diverse community of emergent species is found along the margin of the open water wetland including bur-reed, narrow-leaf cattail, wool grass, arrow leaf, rice-cut grass, smartweed, common rush, swamp loosestrife, bull rush, and various sedges. In addition to the large wetland habitat, upland communities include scrub-shrub and wet meadow habitat that includes ironweed, great blue lobelia, turtlehead, Joe-pye weed, boneset, swamp milkweed, red-osier dogwood, silky dogwood, sensitive fern, New York fern, goldenrod species, jewelweed, ostrich fern, water hemlock, and arrowwood viburnum. Beyond the scrub-shrub and wet meadow areas there is hummocky boreal habitat made up of ferns, hemlocks, and yellow birch. The forest is dominated by red maple, beech, swamp white oak, cherry, staghorn sumac, cottonwood, black willow, shagbark hickory, and green ash. In addition to the hemlock swamp forest, the property is home to the State Endangered brownish sedge (*Carex brunnescens*) and both Sandhill Cranes and Trumpeter Swans frequent the preserve.

Given the past mining activities, the western portion of the property (60 acres) offered the potential for park improvements while leaving the eastern portion of the property, including the 27-acre wetland, in its natural state.

Given the significant population of Northeast Ohio, our conservation mission includes a focus on our cities and connecting urban residents to nature. Creating healthy urban environments through blight removal and re-greening is central to our work. Over the past decade, the presence of tens of thousands of vacant and abandoned homes in urban centers throughout Ohio drove down property values and become magnets for criminal activity. By demolishing these blighted structures, we've managed to stabilize and increase property values in many areas, paving the way for the next step in urban renewal: creating parks, enhancing green spaces, and planting trees. Through all our efforts, we aim to revitalize our city centers and restore the connection between residents and the natural world.

We believe that by transforming vacant land into vibrant gathering spaces, we can improve the quality of life for residents, reduce crime, and stimulate economic growth. We are committed to working with local communities, local governments, and other stakeholders to ensure that our efforts are aligned with the needs and aspirations of the people we serve.

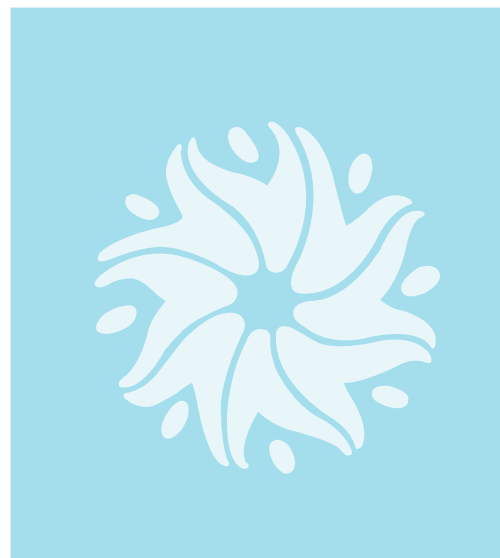
We also understand that our work has broader implications for the environment. By increasing green spaces in urban areas, we are helping to combat climate change by reducing the urban heat island effect and contributing to regional efforts to sequester carbon and remove pollutants from air and water.

The Reforest Our City initiative stands at the forefront of urban conservation in Cleveland, addressing the city's diminished tree canopy through volunteer-driven tree planting, free tree distribution to residents, and educating Tree Stewards about community forestry, tree care, and advocacy. This year, the program launched Reforest Our Block, a novel approach

targeting small areas within neighborhoods to magnify the impact of tree planting on private property, fostering community participation, and a bold, visible impact.

We celebrated the inauguration of three significant greenspace projects in Cleveland's Buckeye-Woodhill neighborhood. The Ubuntu Gathering Place, a vacant lot that was previously a Saab dealership, was transformed into a prominent park integrating public art and green infrastructure. The Woodhill Community Garden, a collaborative project with Calvary Hill Church of God in Christ, has turned vacant lots into a robust community garden, supporting gatherings for neighborhood clean ups, cook outs, and celebrations. The Grandview-to-Crestwood neighborhood pathway, a mid-block forested sidewalk, was a neighborhood upgrade long-desired by residents, who can now enjoy a shortcut to the corner store, a patio for block club meetings, and a safe place for children to play away from traffic.

Our efforts have extended beyond these projects to encompass broader strategies for improving vacant land challenges across Cleveland. Collaborations with the city of Cleveland and other partners have been pivotal in advancing our illegal dumping prevention strategies. We conducted two surveys encompassing over 14,000 parcels to identify and report instances of illegal dumping on vacant lots, sharing this data with city and county authorities for remediation and identifying dumping hotspots in need of surveillance. We also worked to enhance the efficiency and responsiveness of Cleveland Land Bank operations. The Cleveland Vacant Land Opportunity Tool (CLEVLOT) initiative brought together dozens of stakeholders, from residents to non-profits to city administrators, to identify common pain points and develop tools to facilitate the strategic redevelopment of parcels owned by the Cleveland Land Bank.



Brighton Park
Cleveland Metroparks
photo credit Kyle Lanzer

Finally, a comprehensive survey conducted with the city of Cleveland has provided critical insights into the state of over 162,000 parcels, revealing a decrease in vacant structures and an increase in vacant lots. This data-driven approach enables city departments to prioritize demolitions, rehabilitation, and proactive code enforcement, with a special focus on historically underserved neighborhoods.

Woodhill Community Garden

The Woodhill Community Garden hosted its grand opening and ribbon cutting in June of 2023. The completion of the garden, that was several years in the making, was initiated by the late Jacquie Gillon, and her colleague at the time Jay Westbrook, who began the early outreach and conceptual designs in partnership with Calvary Hill Church of God in Christ. In 2015, church pastor Ernest Fields and his First Lady Iris expressed their vision of relocating and expanding the garden from its much smaller location in the parking lot of the church to the corner lots where the garden exists now. They had a goal of producing enough fresh food to supply residents in the neighborhood. It took until 2020 for the Land Conservancy to really make progress with the fundraising to create a community garden, outdoor classroom, and space to teach horticulture. With the help of funding from the USDA; Saint Luke’s Foundation; Burten, Bell, Carr Development, Inc.; Habitat for Humanity; Whole Foods; and Cleveland Neighborhood Progress, we were able to bring to life one of the premier community gardens on Cleveland’s eastside. The Woodhill Community Garden includes a 7-foot fence to protect the garden from predators, a brick patio, pavilion, electricity, regraded soil, landscaping, and perimeter clearing of unwanted debris and overgrown plant material, an on-site watering system, installation of 12 raised beds, two wash

stations, a compost bin, ADA accessible pathways, a garden shed, and a BBQ smoker (donated by Western Reserve Land Conservancy Trustee Julie Visconsi) for use at events.

Ubuntu

The Ubuntu Gathering Place officially opened with fanfare and celebration as Cleveland Mayor Justin Bibb, Cleveland City Council President Blaine A. Griffin, representatives from East End Neighborhood House, Western Reserve Land Conservancy, and local community leaders welcomed neighbors to enjoy the newly constructed public park at the corner of E.103rd Street and Shaker Boulevard.

What was once an auto dealership turned vacant lot has been transformed into a beautiful 0.5-acre public space and includes walkways, newly planted trees, bioretention cells that will mitigate stormwater runoff, an outdoor education space, locally commissioned art walls, and a plaza with a depiction of the continent of Africa. Ubuntu is a Nguni Bantu term meaning “humanity,” sometimes best translated as “I am because we are.” It symbolizes the powerful connection that can exist between people who are open to seeing each other in each other.

Project partners include Environmental Design Group, New Vista, LAND Studio, and Burten, Bell, Carr Development, Inc. The project was made possible thanks to generous seed funding from the Saint Luke’s Foundation that enabled the Land Conservancy to leverage major funding from the National Fish & Wildlife Foundation’s Sustain Our Great Lakes program, The Funders Network – Partners for Places, Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District, Cuyahoga County, Bank of America, Reinberger Foundation, and Fifth Third Bank.



Mayor Justin Bibb at Ubuntu Grand Opening



Woodhill Community Garden Opening

The community that will be served by the Ubuntu Gathering Place has faced tremendous challenges with high poverty rates, unemployment, poor health outcomes, crime, and racism. More than 95% of the neighborhood is African-American, more than 58% of residents live below the poverty line – the median household income is \$15,000.

The green infrastructure component of the project includes a serpentine series of bioretention cells stretching throughout the property, which removes approximately 244,000 gallons of stormwater annually from the combined sewer system. The micro-graded cells will ultimately filter water to the final vegetated infiltration basin that will serve as the centerpiece of the Green Infrastructure Outdoor Classroom within the Ubuntu Gathering Place. East End Neighborhood House also plans to use the outdoor classroom as an educational tool for the development of environmental stewards among the community’s youth.

Earth Day Tree Planting

Over 40 volunteers and staff arrived at the Calvary Hill Church of God in Christ to plant one dozen trees in celebration of Earth Day and the ongoing effort to Reforest Our City and rebuild Cleveland’s dwindling tree canopy.

Western Reserve Land Conservancy joined Cleveland City Councilwomen Deborah Gray (Ward 4) and Jenny Spencer (Ward 15), volunteers from the Davey Tree Expert Company, Calvary Hill Church of God in Christ, and the Scott & Julie Mawaka Foundation at the tree

planting on the corner of Shaker Boulevard and Woodhill Road. Volunteers planted five redbuds and five dogwoods on the church's property.

The location is one of many sites in Cleveland that has experienced significant tree loss and decline. But in partnership with the church and the nearby East End Neighborhood House, Western Reserve Land Conservancy has worked to transform vacant and abandoned properties into healthy urban greenspaces that benefit the entire community.

Cleveland Property Inventory

Western Reserve Land Conservancy strengthened our relationship with the city of Cleveland by completing the second citywide comprehensive property inventory. The team, built with city of Cleveland building and housing inspectors and representatives from each Community Development Corporation's Healthy Homes Initiative, surveyed more than 162,000 parcels from October 2022 to April 2023.

Surveyors visually inspected properties to determine if a structure exists, identified both occupied and vacant and/or abandoned properties, and made assessments using an A to F scale. This was accomplished by using baseline data from local sources such as existing city and county data, utilities data, and the parcel-level data tool Regrid. Surveyors also collected data on conditions of sidewalks, street trees, ADA ramps, fire hydrants, illegal dumping, and lead contamination. All data will be available through the NEOCANDO database managed by Case Western Reserve University.

According to the data:

- 66.6% of structures in the city of Cleveland are occupied.
- The number of vacant structures decreased from 8% in 2015 to 5.7% in 2023.
- As a result of demolishing vacant structures, the proportion of vacant lots increased. Surveyors documented 20.7% of Cleveland parcels are vacant lots.
- 94% of occupied structures are in the "A - Excellent" to "C - Fair" condition. This is a decrease from 98% in 2015.
- 52% of vacant structures are in "D - Deteriorated" to "F - Hazardous" condition. Less than 6% of occupied structures are "D - Deteriorated" or "F - Hazardous."
- While out-of-state owners only own 7% of parcels in Cleveland, they are not giving the same level of care to their properties as in-state owners. Out-of-state owners have fewer "A" and "B" properties, but more "C," "D," and "F" graded properties than in-state owners.
- More than 80% of vacant lots in the city have no trees in the tree lawn.

For the first time, properties surveyed were also assessed for potential lead hazards by looking at risk factors such as the condition of porches, windows and doors, and noting whether the property has exposed bare soil. In addition, the survey results will help multiple city departments deploy resources proactively. The condition of sidewalks, curbs, fire hydrants, and streets were also assessed so that proactive maintenance can be prioritized. The goal of the survey is to triage the needs in each neighborhood and address conditions to deploy resources strategically to achieve the most benefit.

The Reforest Our City initiative stands at the forefront of urban conservation in Cleveland, addressing the city's diminished tree canopy



Conservation Education & Outreach

Each year, the Land Conservancy offers a seasonal collection of educational opportunities for children and adults. These experiences are designed to expand knowledge of the natural world and grow appreciation for natural areas, family farms, and urban greenspaces we've conserved.

During the year, we offered 29 in-person field trips. Twenty-five field trips were geared towards adults engaging a total of 589 participants and four field trips attracted 66 children for Nature Quests, which are fun, free-formed outdoor activities.

Field Explorations are a series of hikes for adults that focus on a particular nature event or species. In August, we visited the Little Beaver Creek in search of Hellbenders. In March, participants spent an evening listening to American Woodcock at our Sugar Island Preserve. And our collaboration with the Ohio Mushroom Society featured events focused on the diversity of fungi at two conservation easement properties. These extremely popular mushroom forays opened our eyes to an amazing array of mushroom species.

Nature Quests are hikes for kids that focus on a seasonal nature happening. In July, we hosted a dragonfly hike on a conservation easement property where our young adventurers learned all about these dazzling insects and had opportunities to see them up close. In the fall, we spent a morning hiking the natural areas surrounding the Medina Raptor Center, followed by an opportunity to meet their resident owls and hawks. And in the winter, we walked the trails at Forest Ridge Preserve, gathering items in nature to create personalized, one-of-a-kind conservation critter crafts.

In addition to our in-person field trips, we offered a series of thought-provoking virtual programs. Our webinars have attracted a wide audience with participants tuning in not only from Ohio, but from New England and throughout the Mid-Atlantic region. We offered 15 virtual programs attracting over 11,800 registrants. These educational presentations have garnered over 10,000 views on our YouTube channel.

Our evening Zoom into Nature series featured topics such as Orchids of Ohio, the benefits of goldenrods and asters, mushrooms, tiger beetles, and fall garden maintenance—encouraging homeowners to leave their leaves to provide food and shelter for the myriad of critters living in our leaf litter. In addition, our Conservation Awareness series featured a presentation on hunting. It was intended to dispel myths and improve our understanding of the sport of hunting.

For the second year in a row, we hosted “Inviting Biodiversity into Your Garden” — a five-part virtual symposium designed to inspire homeowners, horticulturists, naturalists, educators, landscape designers, and others to embrace the value of using native plants and trees to establish and maintain healthy habitats. Delivered in partnership with the Cleveland Pollinator and Native Plant Symposium and Nature Spark, the series featured nationally and regionally renowned experts to help attendees create vibrant, ecologically resilient gardens and greenspaces that benefit pollinators and wildlife.



Sporting Circle

Many of our modern-day conservation practices have their roots in the hunting and angling communities and today, those individuals are some of the most dedicated conservationists. Several years ago, Western Reserve Land Conservancy sought to better engage the hunting and angling community. This resulted in the formation of the Sporting Circle. Now, several years into its existence, the Sporting Circle is as strong as ever, providing exceptional experiences and expanded opportunities for its members and beyond.

The Sporting Circle had a fantastic year full of memories created afield. We kicked off the year by hosting a field pheasant hunt in March at the Sugar Island Preserve, a 1,500-plus acre conservation gem. Bird dogs yipped with excitement and pheasants flushed from the fields as around 40 hunters made memories that will last a lifetime.



Through the Sporting Circle, we have made it a priority to not only provide exceptional experiences to members but to use the platform to expand opportunities for others. As the crisp air of fall descended upon Sugar Island Preserve, the Land Conservancy was proud to offer the annual Veterans' Pheasant Hunt to veterans across the region. A continental-style pheasant hunt, this event was kicked off by a showing of parachuters flying the flags of each service branch along with the United States flag. The Land Conservancy ensured that each veteran went home with their harvest.

The Sporting Circle closed out the year with the annual Wild Game, Whiskey and Wine Dinner presented in partnership with Cleveland Field Kitchen. This event gives Sporting Circle members and their families an opportunity to enjoy a deliciously prepared wild game meal from the year's harvest. The evening included a presentation of the Land Conservancy's accomplishments followed by dinner and festive fellowship.

From the early 1900s when the modern-day conservation movement was in its infancy to now, sportsmen and sportswomen have been stalwarts in the conservation community. We are happy to have such a robust program engaging the sporting community that in turn helps produce conservation outcomes for Northeast Ohio.





Andy grew up working on his family's farm in western Pennsylvania which has helped him establish solid relationships with farmers across northern Ohio. McDowell is an avid outdoorsman who enjoys hunting, fishing, archery, canoeing, camping, and maintaining antique Farmall tractors, a hobby he picked up from his father who was a lifelong farm mechanic.

Land is one of the most valuable resources within the agriculture sector. In order to maintain Ohio's land-based industry and all its related benefits, the Office of Farmland Preservation educates the public about the importance of saving this precious resource. The office also assists farmers and local officials with their farmland protection efforts.

The office implements the Clean Ohio Local Agricultural Easement Purchase Program, the Ohio Agricultural Easement Donation Program, and provides technical assistance to communities implementing the Agricultural Security Area program.

Congratulations, Andy!

Andy McDowell appointed to Ohio's Farmland Preservation Board

Andy McDowell, vice president of western field operations, has been appointed to the State of Ohio's Farmland Preservation Advisory Board at the Ohio Department of Agriculture (ODA) for a three-year term.

McDowell has worked at the Land Conservancy since 2006, overseeing conservation easements, land restoration and farmland preservation primarily in the organization's western service area. He graduated from Slippery Rock University of Pennsylvania with a degree in environmental education and began his career as a Pennsylvania Bureau of State Parks naturalist. He later transitioned to the Great Lakes Science Center in Cleveland where he served as vice president of exhibits and building operations.



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