Western Reserve Land Conservancy
OUR LAND. OUR LEGACY.
www.wrlandconservancy.org

Fall 2011

Landline

A Western Reserve Land Conservancy newsletter celebrating land conservation in Cuyahoga, Summit and Stark counties



STAFF SPOTLIGHT

Jim Rokakis

Growing up in Cleveland's Archwood-Denison neighborhood, Jim Rokakis saw first-hand how neighbors helping neighbors could strengthen an entire community.

Today, after a career in public service that spanned three decades, Rokakis is lending his innovative skills to the Land Conservancy as director of its Thriving Communities Institute, an urban land reutilization initiative. A national expert who has testified before Congress on the foreclosure crisis, Rokakis is now helping counties throughout northern Ohio establish land banks.

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Foundation kick-starts Summit Co. land bank

Akron Community Foundation has awarded the Land Conservancy and its Thriving Communities Institute a $15,000 grant to help Summit County establish a land bank.

The funds will be used to help set up the Summit County Land Reutilization Corp. – the land bank – as a tool to enable the county to proactively acquire vacant and abandoned properties.

Summit County is struggling to manage a rapidly growing number of abandoned and foreclosed properties. The city of Akron has more than 2,000 properties targeted for demolition, but no funding to raze them. In addition, approximately 500 additional properties are foreclosed in Summit each month, adding to the vacancy problem that threatens both the safety and stability of neighborhoods.

"We have received strong support from Summit County residents – including political and civic leaders – to start a county land bank in Summit County," said Jim Rokakis, director of Thriving Communities. "This grant will enable us to begin that work, and I deeply appreciate the Akron Community Foundation's support."

In May, members of the Summit County Council approached Thriving Communities for assistance in establishing a land bank. Rokakis has been working closely with community leaders to educate government offices whose work will be affected by the creation of this new entity.

Rokakis has said there is an immediate need to begin acquiring vacant and abandoned properties in Summit County in order to stabilize housing prices and the tax-base.



Volunteers help clean up Akron's Adam's Run, the Land Conservancy's first urban project. The establishment of a land bank in Summit County is expected to create additional opportunities to reimagine land use in Akron.

Akron Mayor Don Plusquellic, State Rep. Zach Milkovich, and members of Summit County Council are fully supportive of Thriving Communities' work to establish a land bank in Summit County.

Thriving Communities will also reach out to local neighborhood groups, including East Akron Neighborhood Development Corporation, University Park Alliance, The Nazareth Development Corporation and Alpha Phi Alpha Homes, Inc.

LTA president praises Land Conservancy's work

One of the nation's top conservationists described the Land Conservancy as "an extraordinary civic institution" and applauded the preservation work done by the organization in northern Ohio.

Rand Wentworth, president of the Washington, D.C.-based Land Trust Alliance, of which the Land Conservancy is a member, spoke Sept. 9 at EverGreen EverBlue, the Land Conservancy's annual benefit. This year's event, which was held at the recently preserved Stoneybrook Farm in Hunting Valley, drew a crowd of more than 600 people.



Rand Wentworth spoke at EverGreen EverBlue.

LTA is a national organization representing more than 1,700 land trusts.

"(The Land Conservancy) is at the top of the list," Wentworth said.

Wentworth had earlier toured some preserved properties with Rich Cochran, the Land Conservancy's president and CEO. The properties included the Adam's-Haley's runs urban greenway project in Akron, farmland and some of the preserved land in the Chagrin River valley. Wentworth said the formation of the Land Conservancy through the merger of eight local land trusts in 2006 and the addition of Grand River Partners three years later "bore extraordinary fruit."

He added, "It is just amazing to see what you are accomplishing."

Wentworth, who was vice president of the Trust for Public Land before joining LTA in 2002, is a graduate of Yale University and holds an MBA in finance from Cornell University. He told the EverGreen EverBlue audience that the preservation of our natural areas and working lands is "the greatest legacy any of us can leave." The Land Conservancy, he said, is an example of "neighbors working with neighbors" for the community's good.

Rokakis

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As treasurer of Cuyahoga County for 14 years, Jim was instrumental in getting state legislators to streamline the foreclosure process for abandoned properties and to allow for the creation of land banks, which have become vital tools for those reshaping urban areas in the region. Rokakis calls it "an opportunity to create new cities form the ashes of the old."

Local and national organizations have recognized Jim for strengthening neighborhoods and communities. In 2007 he received the NeighborWorks America Local Government Service Award, the Leadership in Social Justice Award from Greater Cleveland Community Shares and was named the County Leader of the Year by American City and County Magazine.

Jim earned his undergraduate degree at Oberlin College and his Juris Doctorate degree from Cleveland-Marshall School of Law. The Rocky River resident married Laurie Shafer, and they have three children, Doug, Christina and Eleni.



Thomas



Owen



Davis



Leslie



Boehnlein



Schiffman

Bob Owen promoted

Bob Owen has been named the Land Conservancy's new general counsel, replacing the retiring Ed Meyers. Owen, who lives in Chesterland, has been on the Land Conservancy legal staff since 2006. He is a graduate of Hiram College and Cleveland-Marshall College of Law.

The Land Conservancy also welcomes:

- Die-hard Florida Gators fan and Shaker Heights resident **LeAnn Davis**, our new conservation attorney. The Florida native worked for six years as a real estate attorney at Thompson Hine in Cleveland.
- **Robin Darden Thomas,** land bank program director for Thriving Communities Institute. The Parma resident's career in public service includes stints as interim treasurer and chief deputy treasurer of Cuyahoga County.
- Conservation project manager **Jeffery A. Schiffman**, who has worked in site acquisition in the private and public sectors. Jeffery was raised in Oberlin in Lorain County and now lives in Shaker Heights.
- Medina County native **Paul Boehnlein**, our new GIS and conservation planning specialist. Paul comes from the Muskingum Watershed District, where he was a GIS Technician.
- **Joe Leslie** of Aurora, our new land acquisition specialist. Joe comes to us from Howard Hanna, where he created a successful real estate practice.

Kids in the Creek

July 17, 2011, West Geauga Commons



More than 70 people turned out for the 13th annual Kids in the Creek, a Land Conservancy event in which people of all ages get to explore a river and its inhabitants.

Practice on the Preserve

August 14, 2011
Orchard Hills Park

A morning rain could not stop more than 170 yogis from practicing at the Geauga Park District's Orchard Hills Park. The third annual event, co-sponsored by Cleveland Yoga and the Land Conservancy, had to be moved indoors but was a huge success. A special thanks to Patterson Fruit Farm and the Patterson family for helping us make the event fun for all.







Friends greet Ed at a surprise retirement party at the home of Trustee Kathy Leavenworth.

One of the good guys takes down his shingle



Ed Meyers

Ed Meyers, who in 2003 left private law practice to head the legal team for what would become the largest land conservancy in Ohio, has retired.

Meyers had been a partner with the law firm of Arter & Hadden for 30 years before joining the staff of the Chagrin River Land Conservancy, one of eight local land trusts that merged in 2006 to form Western Reserve Land Conservancy. As the Land Conservancy's general counsel, he headed the legal team that oversaw the protection of more than 23,000 acres.

"It is impossible to express how grateful we are to Ed," said Rich Cochran, the Land Conservancy's president and CEO. "He has been a stalwart at the Land Conservancy. He and (his wife) Fran are part of our family in a deep and special way."

Have you remembered the Land Conservancy in your will?

White Oak LEGACY SOCIETY

Find out how you can make a lasting commitment to future generations by including Western Reserve Land Conservancy in your estate planning. For information on our White Oak Legacy Society, call (440) 729-9621, e-mail rkoonce@wrlandconservancy.org or visit www.wrlandconservancy.org.

CONSERVATION CALENDAR

- **Oct. 15, 5-8 p.m.:** The Medina Summit Chapter's annual Hoot 'n' Harvest Festival at the Hill 'n' Dale Club, 3605 Poe Road, Montville Township. Bring a potluck dish to share; the Land Conservancy will provide hot dogs and fixings. There will be hayrides, pumpkin-painting and a campfire, as well as an owl walk. RSVP khibhler@wrlandconservancy.org.
- **Oct. 26, 7-9 p.m.:** Rocky River Watershed Council presents information on the current status of land protection in the Rocky River Watershed and future priorities for preservation at the Cleveland Metroparks Rocky River Nature Center, 24000 Valley Parkway, North Olmsted.
- **Nov. 12**: 'Fly the Alley' fly fishing expo at The Lodge at Geneva-on-the-Lake, 4888 North Broadway (state Route 534), Geneva-on-the-Lake. Day passes are $15; weekend packages are available through the lodge. Visit www.flythealley.com.

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Our mission, our vision

Western Reserve Land Conservancy seeks to preserve the scenic beauty, rural character and natural resources of northern Ohio. We want to help create a network of interconnected natural areas, working land and green space throughout the region. We envision northern Ohio as a stunningly beautiful and healthy place to live, work and play.