

Redding Land Trust – Decade of Stewardship Master Plan

Inspiring the Next Decade of Stewardship

DRAFT Plan for Member Feedback

April 1, 2022

Redding Land Trust Mission

Redding Land Trust (RLT) is dedicated to protecting Redding's woods, meadows, wetlands and vistas for the benefit of our town's residents and visitors, our wildlife and natural resources, and for future generations.

Master Plan Goal

The Decade of Stewardship Master Plan identifies specific items for research, review, and implementation to further RLT's stewardship of the land and increase the diversity of use and access.

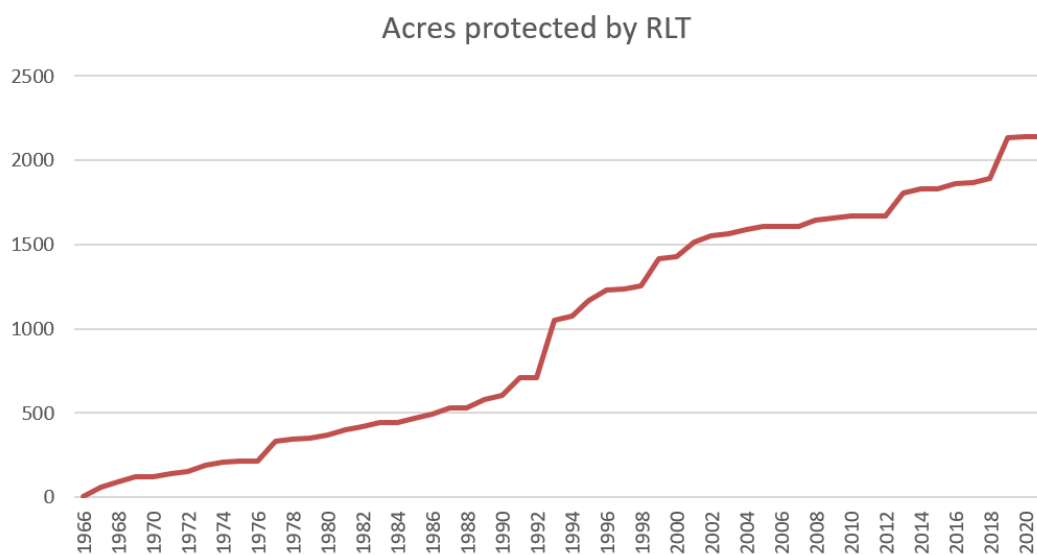
This is a living document - we welcome input from Land Trust members, our community, partners, and stakeholders.

Stewardship *noun*: the conducting, supervising, or managing of something, *especially*: the careful and responsible management of something entrusted to one's care

For our purposes, stewardship includes maintaining our properties in their natural state while, where possible, allowing access to those spaces. In keeping with our conservation mission, stewardship does not mean beautification.

Background

Our small town of Redding is indeed blessed with a Big Outdoors. Though there are many players contributing to open space in Redding, Redding Land Trust by itself proudly protects more than 2,000 acres. Thanks to the support of our membership, the generosity of donors, and the efforts of board members and community partners, we have been doggedly growing our open space since we were founded more than 55 years ago.



These increased holdings naturally lead to increased responsibilities. As 2019 drew to a close, the Board of Trustees decided that the 2020s would be a *Decade of Stewardship*, and this document lays out our goals for that decade.

General Responsibilities

Our property types and corresponding responsibilities can be divided into three categories:

Fee Simple:

We own outright about two thirds of our protected open space. We are responsible for these lands, including any stewardship and care.

We've acquired most of our parcels through generous donations from former landowners. In a few cases, most notably the Great Ledge overlooking the Saugatuck

Reservoir, we purchased the properties with the support of financial donations from our community.

Not all of our land holdings are in Redding. We own:

- 141 acres in Bethel, mostly at the Stephenson Preserve off Route 58
- 84 acres of the Alfred McCormack Preserve off George Hull Hill Road are in Danbury
- A small section of the Great Ledge property is in Weston
- The remaining 1,200 or so acres are all in Redding

However the land was acquired, our non-profit status and deed restrictions limit what we can do with the properties. We can't build houses or buildings or anything else, nor can we sell off a portion for someone else to build a house. These restrictions stay with the land in perpetuity - the lands will be forever natural.

This does not mean that we can't touch the land. We can and do mow fields, tackle invasives, create hiking trails, and provide access parking on our fee-simple properties. This is the work anticipated in our *Decade of Stewardship*.

Conservation Easements:

Conservation easements make up about one third of our protected space. The landowner donates some of the rights associated with a property, but not the property itself. The donor and subsequent owners continue to own the land and, in most cases, remain responsible for its care. By donating a conservation easement to RLT, the owner no longer has the right to develop, subdivide, or significantly change the property from its current natural state.

These lands are not open to the public but are preserved in a natural state for enjoyment from afar and as wildlife habitats.

RLT has the responsibility to monitor these properties, and in rare cases, defend them in the event of an infringement. The work of monitoring these properties annually is done mostly by the Town of Redding Open Space Manager. The Town of Redding and the Redding Land Trust share the cost of this town employee.

Right of Way Easements:

Not all of our parcels have direct access to a road, and in a number of cases we own the rights to build trails or roads, or simply the right to cross land owned by others to get

to our parcels. We don't count these as protected open space, and our only responsibility is to maintain any access that we need.

Note that many of the open space areas in town contain parcels with varying ownership. An easy example is the Rock Lot & Scott Preserve between Peaceable Street and Seventy Acre Road. The northern 85 acres of this open space are owned by the Town, and the southern 121 acres are owned by the Land Trust. While we happily work with our open space partners, we're only responsible for our acreage, and the Town of Redding Conservation Commission is responsible for the town-owned open space. As you'd expect, we have no rights to or responsibilities for these other properties beyond what the general public has.

Ongoing Stewardship Tasks

Even though our Fee Simple open spaces are left mostly in a natural state, this does not mean there's no care required. We visit each parcel at least annually to assess any stewardship needs and address any issues that arise. Our ongoing tasks include:

Mowing: While most of our properties are forests and wetlands, we do maintain a number of open fields, most notably on the Brinckerhoff Preserve off Beeholm Road, but also Karraker Field on Route 58, and Crossfield off Cross Highway. Open fields allow our open spaces to attract a wider variety of plant and animal life and add to the diversity of our natural areas.

Encroachments: One of the challenges of owning space throughout town is that we're not there to watch it all of the time. Sadly, we have had a number of cases of abutting neighbors treating our lands as their own, dumping brush and fill, building a playset, cutting down trees, sometimes quite large trees, and so on. Between timely alerts from watchful neighbors and our annual monitoring visits, we've been able to address many of these encroachments, but it's a constant effort. If you see behavior on one of our properties that doesn't look right, please reach out to us.

Trail Maintenance: We are extremely lucky in Redding to have a dedicated team of Trail Tenders led by Stuart Green. The Trail Tenders create and maintain the many miles of trails in Redding, some of which cross Redding Land Trust properties. These volunteers (a few are RLT Trustees) keep the pathways clear of plants, cut up trees that block the trails, build the occasional bridge, update the trail blazes, and generally make hiking in Redding awesome. Special thanks to Aimee Pardee who has done a superb job of making the cedar trail signs with yellow lettering. Stuart is always welcoming new folks to the Trail Tenders, if you're interested in participating.

Bridges and boardwalks: These structures provide important access and habitat protection through our wetlands. We repair and replace on a continuous basis as needs are identified, for example through reports of Trail Tenders and annual audits by Trustees who identify areas for improvement. Special thanks to the Boy Scouts of Redding, who've led a number of projects over the years.

Removing trash: This can be simple litter, or larger items such as a rotting couch on the McCormack Preserve, or a makeshift obstacle course off Fire Hill Lane.

Fallen trees: Generally, fallen trees are left in their natural state. But in limited cases, trees are removed to restore access or views. Even when they are cut, the logs are typically left nearby to rot naturally, where they provide important services to the ecosystems.

Repairing and maintaining parking: Once established, most parking areas require little maintenance, except adding gravel and plowing as needed.

Adding and maintaining boundary signage: Signage helps welcome and inform our guests, and clearly communicates where our properties start and end.

Dam monitoring: We own a few man-made dams on our properties. Mostly we just clear spillway blockages to prevent dam damage.

All of these efforts are ongoing and supported by the generous annual donations of our membership. If you'd be interested in volunteering to help in these efforts, we welcome your participation.

Initiatives

Besides ongoing stewardship tasks, we also occasionally tackle bigger projects. A recent example was the property off Dan Beard Lane. A US Department of Agriculture (USDA) grant your donations, plus volunteers from the Boy Scouts and the community, were all pulled together to allow us to restore the area, including clear invasives, building a new trail, and creating a wonderful little sitting area, which we featured in our *Soiree by the Stream* event in 2019.

We've identified several priority initiatives that we would like to tackle in the coming years, with your support. These projects are designed to improve the natural habitat, make some locations easier to access and enjoy, and to remove invasive species that are crowding out native flora and fauna.

Initiative 1: Enhanced Management of Invasive Species

While most of our properties contain some invasive plants, a few have become covered in species such as Japanese Barberry, Bittersweet and Multiflora Rose. What would otherwise be a nice stroll in the woods becomes an impassable mess. Japanese Barberry, in particular, is also associated with increased deer tick populations and associated tick-borne illnesses, which we'd all like to mitigate if possible.

While the Trail Tenders do an excellent job of keeping paths clear, they typically do not have the time or capacity for larger-scale clearing of invasives. We look to launch a multi-year effort of mechanical removal of dense invasive species, in the hopes of returning these parcels to a more natural state.

Parcels identified for attention include:

- *Little River North*: Entrance has long suffered from a huge encroachment of invasives at the entrance off Pheasant Ridge.
- *Limekiln*: The Accessway Trail has become a tight single lane with barberry attacking from both sides. Opening this will make for a much more pleasant beginning.
- *Lottie Fields*: A 4-acre portion of this property on George Hull Hill Road has become impassibly covered with barberry.
- *158 Lonetown*: This parcel at the corner of Lonetown Road and Putnam Park Road has become covered with invasives. We have contracted out the project and hope to have the area opened by the spring of 2022.

- *345 Newtown Turnpike*: About 20 or so acres of dense barberry infestation needs attention. While poison ivy isn't technically an invasive, its overwhelming presence at a few of our fields makes them more difficult to enjoy. We will be exploring non-chemical management techniques to manage these areas.

Resources Required: Invasive removal efforts will require volunteer or contracted labor, investments in renting or purchase of equipment, and volunteer training.

In addition, in 2020, RLT approved its first grazing agreement at a property on Redding Road as a means to combat invasive species and promote sustainable agriculture in Redding. With the first season of grazing complete, we are seeing the natural maintenance by animals. To learn more about regenerative agriculture in our area, including the merits of grazing, we are co-sponsoring a community discussion at the Mark Twain Library on April 21, 2022 at 7:30 pm.

To better understand how and which invasive species threaten our lands, we have hosted and co-sponsored a variety of learning opportunities. For example, with the CT CIPWG (Connecticut Invasive Plant Working Group), in September 2021 we co-hosted a walking tour at the McCormack Property. We plan on continuing this effort in the coming years and would look to partner with others on this effort, such as the Redding Garden Club and the Conservation Commission.

Initiative 2: Enhanced Trails & Access

While all of our Fee Simple properties are open for meandering, with or without marked trails, we aim to enhance the accessibility and diversity of the hiking trails on our properties with the following efforts

Creating Interconnections: We are always looking for opportunities to connect various parcels and existing trails. Thanks to the generosity of a neighboring landowner, we recently connected the Lottie Fields Preserve to the Poliak Preserve via the new Furlough Trail. We are also looking to connect the Ground Pine Preserve through the new trails on the Mahony gifts along to the Aspetuck Trail. Another initiative is to connect the Little River Preserve to Newtown Turnpike near Longmeadow Road to provide an alternate entrance.

Accessible mini trails: We love the short trail in the Centennial Watershed State Forest that goes from Newtown Turnpike near route 53 to a lovely spot overlooking the reservoir. One of our small parcels that leads to a lovely spot along the Saugatuck is

behind the West Redding Post Office. Another is a parcel at the end of Olmstead Road with a view over Ridgefield's Great Pond and Martin Park.

We think these smaller parcels would be great opportunities for shorter trails for those with limited time, less mobility, or small children. And we will continue to look for opportunities to increase accessibility to our trails.

Resources Required: These trail expansion efforts require volunteer or contracted labor, investments in equipment, and volunteer training.

Initiative 3: Improved Informational and Wayfinding Signage and Kiosks

Updated Signage and Kiosks: again with the Trail Tenders' help and our annual monitoring visits, we have been maintaining a database of trails that need new signage. We are also looking at small tree-hung kiosks to highlight maps and rules at lesser used trail heads.

Wayfinding Signage: In order to more easily find our properties when driving past, we plan to add signage that identifies the many large preserves managed by Redding Land Trust. This will make it easier to locate preserves as you drive around town, whether or not the preserve has an established trail system.

Resources Required: These efforts require the purchase of materials, volunteer or contracted labor, and printing of maps and other materials.

Initiative 4: Additional Parking

Most Redding residents are fortunate enough to live within walking distance of one of our preserves. But it isn't always easy to find a spot to park when you head to another area of town or want to meet a group of friends at a favorite spot. While some of our parcels have ample off-street parking, a few are overly constrained. We wish to open up additional pull-offs and small parking areas to allow more folks to enjoy these spectacular preserves and to do so safely. The current focus areas are below, but we intend to expand this effort to other parking bottlenecks in the future.

- *Mary Anne Guitar Preserve:* This beautiful and historic parcel off Old Mailcoach Road is named after Mary Anne Guitar, one of the founders of the Redding Land Trust and an open space visionary. This more recently acquired parcel offers a

great trail along a stream and past the foundations of an old house, but parking is currently limited to just one vehicle. Working with the Town, we hope to have an enhanced parking area by the fall of 2022.

- *Brinckerhoff Preserve:* This gem on Beeholm Road has been part of RLT since 1967. Its trail system connects to The Nature Conservancy's Ordway Devil's Den Preserve and has been limited by its small two-car parking area. We hope to improve this in 2022.
- *Newtown Turnpike:* We own contiguous parcels between Newtown Turnpike and the Samuel E. Hill Little River Preserve off Cross Highway. Some new parking at the new trailhead would help access this varied terrain.
- *Lottie Fields:* Cutting a small parking area on George Hull Hill Road would improve access to the Saugatuck headwaters and a lovely picnicking spot on the river bend. It would also offer parking access to the Poliak Preserve off Simpaug Turnpike.

Resources Required: These parking expansion efforts require materials such as gravel, volunteer, or contracted labor, and may require renting specialized equipment.

Initiative 5: Explore Additional Recreational Opportunities

As hard as it might be to believe, not everyone is a hiker. We'd like to explore other opportunities for non-destructive recreation on our properties. A few ideas include:

Horseback Riding: Horseback riding is currently permitted in several areas in town, including sections of Limekiln, Brinckerhoff, Little River, Stormfield, and Topstone. Opportunities may exist to expand horseback access as we further connect existing trails.

Mountain Biking: With the addition of the large McCormack Property, and the wide trails already present on the property, we are exploring the feasibility of opening that area to biking on specific trails in 2024 when the area becomes open year-round. We are in contact with the New England Mountain Bike Association to advise us in laying out trail design and controlled usage.

Initiative 6: Land Acquisition

We are always on the lookout for open spaces in town to preserve. Certainly, if any large parcels become available, especially those identified in the Town of Redding Open Space Plan, we would eagerly explore that opportunity. Besides those, we

particularly look for parcels abutting or connecting current holdings in order to enlarge existing preserves, enhance wildlife corridors, or provide trail connectivity.

There are a number of ways to structure land acquisitions, including outright donations, discounted sales, and conservation easements, and most have some tax benefits to the donor. If you have open space that you'd like preserved for future generations, or know of a property that's becoming available, please contact us to talk about the options and how we might proceed.

Resources Required: Additional land conservation requires land donation or, potentially, cash expenditures from RLT funds or through financial donations to RLT.

Initiative 7: You tell us

- Where do you think we can improve our offerings?
- Are there interest groups in town, or in neighboring towns, that are being underserved?
- Are there educational program ideas using our properties' diverse flora and fauna?

Resources

Financial Resources

RLT is fortunate to have developed financial reserves over time that allow us to operate sustainably as a primarily volunteer organization while meeting our land stewardship goals. In following Land Trust Alliance best practices, we think of our existing financial assets in three groups.

Stewardship Reserves: We expect to own our properties forever, and there will be some baseline costs of ownership every year. We think of these assets as something like an endowment -- we leave the principal intact and spend a portion of the earnings. This covers the bare minimum and not any special initiatives. As our property portfolio grows, we need to keep adding to this fund from our annual donations.

Defense Reserves: The experience of other land trusts is that the more land parcels they have, and the longer they own them, the more likely that they'll need to defend the land from bad behavior. This can take the form of encroachment, where neighbors start treating our land as their own, neighbors destroying plants and trees they don't like, or folks dumping debris. While we'd like to think "that wouldn't happen in Redding," it does. In most cases, a simple request to the neighbor solves the issue, but we have had to engage attorneys more often than we'd like. The Land Trust Alliance has a calculator for estimating reserves that we should have for future defense needs. This, too, needs to continue to grow as we increase our number of properties and hold them longer.

Unrestricted: What's left over after the reserves is what we have available for initiatives and acquisitions. We'd always like to have a healthy amount here, but if the right open space opportunities arise, we could and would utilize these assets to move quickly. Years ago, we raised money specifically to purchase the Great Ledge overlooking the reservoir. In that case, we were lucky to have a patient landowner who gave us time to raise the funds needed. We don't expect to be that fortunate every time.

So while we have unrestricted funds available to fund our Decade of Stewardship initiatives, our goal is not to diminish our ability to act if a strategic acquisition opportunity arises.

Funding Opportunities

We are grateful to all our members, who make the Land Trust's mission possible, and we rely on our annual appeal each fall to 'replenish the coffers' and build up our reserves. We thank each and every one of you for being members and donating to RLT.

We are also sometimes eligible for government grants, such as the one we used to successfully rehabilitate our property off Dan Beard Lane. We continue to explore these options, but currently don't expect them to be a primary source of funding.

- We are considering a number of avenues to raise additional funding for the Decade of Stewardship, especially from those who might be interested in a specific initiative. Examples include: Campaigns to support specific access priorities such as mountain biking and horseback riding.
- Opportunities to support education partnerships and projects to engage the next generation of stewards.
- Named gift opportunities related to enhanced parking, new signage, information kiosks, and benches.
- Sale of Redding Land Trust branded merchandise.

We welcome ideas and feedback on our fundraising goals. Are there any projects you'd like to sponsor?

Volunteer Opportunities

For its size, Redding Land Trust is quite rare in one particular way - most land trusts of our size and complexity have paid executive directors and other paid staff. Our all-volunteer board manages all of the operations of the Land Trust. We welcome your participation, whether it be offering specific expertise, liaising with other like-minded groups, leading a specific project, or just being available when help is needed.

Our committees (Stewardship, Finance, Governance, Outreach, Development) have traditionally been staffed by board members, but we welcome others to participate. Committee meetings aren't as bad as they sound, and you could help shape our planning and participate in our progress. If you are interested in volunteering, please email info@reddingctlandtrust.org.

Our Partners

Since its founding, Redding Land Trust has worked with other groups to achieve our shared goals. We will continue to partner on key projects and offer learning opportunities to benefit the community and to raise awareness of land conservation and other key environmental issues. Here are some of the groups we've come to rely on.

Town of Redding: Our long-standing partnership with the town's Conservation Commission has been invaluable. Not only have they taken an active role in leading the Trail Tenders, but they have continually worked with us on stewardship issues. We have also worked with the Board of Selectmen, most recently on the joint purchase of the Mary Anne Guitar Preserve on Route 107 near Route 53, and with the Planning Commission in identifying open space parcels.

Neighboring land trusts: It's always good to get ideas and learn from those with the same challenges. We work with The Nature Conservancy, Aspetuck Land Trust, Bethel Land Trust, Highstead Arboretum, The Connecticut Audubon Society, and others that own land near us.

Community organizations: We have always been lucky to have the support of the Mark Twain Library, the Redding Garden Club, New Pond Farm, scout troops, Neighbors & Newcomers, and Friends of the Norwalk River Valley Trail.

Abutters: Although we consider all of Redding our neighbors, we have over 400 private property owners that directly border one of our parcels. Often they are our 'eyes and ears,' at individual properties, and we welcome their input and assistance.

The community at large: We've been using our newsletters and annual meetings to communicate our plans and progress to our members and friends. But with the demise of the Redding Pilot, we've lost a way to reach most everyone in the community regularly. How do you want to be kept informed? What can we do to reach those who, miraculously, are unaware of Redding Land Trust?

This Stewardship Master Plan is a working document, one that we update as we hear from our neighbors and members and hear about new opportunities and address emerging challenges. Overall, our goal is to improve the health of and access to all of the open space in Redding that we own or manage.

We welcome your ideas, suggestions, helping hands and your support, financial or otherwise.