Blue Mountain Land Trust

Acres of productive rolling farmland, abundance of diverse wildlife, and timbered watersheds are just a few of the many things we enjoy when we look out at the countryside surrounding the Blue Mountains. For many of us, this beautiful and bountiful backdrop serves as patches in the quilt that surrounds the communities we live in and love. However, as the population increases and the region becomes more popular there comes a threat of change.

There are many aspects to growth that are positive, but broken family farms turned for short term profit into smaller "ranchettes" and large subdivisions can be devastating to the landscape we cherish. This fear still lingers in the mind of some residents.

Thankfully, local citizens dedicated to preserving our communities natural resources assembled together to establish the Blue Mountail Land Trust (BMLT), a non-profit organization founded in 1999. The organization is made up of an thirteen member volunteer board and four part time employees. They work with landowners in southeastern Washington and northeastern Oregon interested in ensuring that their property is protected for future generations to enjoy.

The tool BMLT uses to assist property owners is a voluntary conservation easement. This allows an individual to continue to own and use the land, while creating sideboards for its future use. Tom Dwonch, Executive Director, works closely with interested landowners to draft the easement and identify what purpose they would like their property preserved for. Each easement is specific to the particular property. It takes into consideration farmland, range and wildlife habitat to decide what to protect and allow, as well as how to prohibit uses for the land.

"The landowner has to really want to place their land in easement," explains Dwonch, as the patience is necessary in a process that can take up to a year to complete. The approval process entails appraisal, development of conservation easement, baseline study, and stewardship plan,. There are currently six BMLT easements with five more closing within the year. However, the features and benefits of working with the BMLT have been spread primarily by word of mouth so there is hope that more landowners will take a closer look and opt in.

There are two ways for the landowner to get some monetary compensation for placing easements with the BMLT. The first approach is federal income tax deduction based on the difference of the appraisal leaving the land untouched and the value of the land after selling the development rights. For example if the difference was $100M between appraisals, the landowner could deduct this amount from their federal taxes over 15 years. To obtain tax deductions the conservation easement must meet IRS criteria.

The second approach is a cash purchase for the easement. If this is the option a landowner chooses, BMLT would seek grants of incremental value to preserve the farmland and habitat.

BMLT is a very important third party in assigning the easement process. Regardless of which approach the landowner chooses, to qualify they must enter into a legal agreement with a charitable organization such as BMLT. Once the easement is complete the organization, in this case BMLT, monitors the easement annually to verify compliance with the provisions outlined in the easement. BMLT is a member of the National Land Trust Alliance and maintains a high degree of reliability and credence.

Because the BMLT is a nonprofit organization, they rely on the local community for support and funding to cover their operating expenses. The Walla Walla Crush Walk/Run held in the fall, an annual appeal and business member program, a fund raising auction planned for April 2012, and generous grants from local foundations have helped raise the money necessary for this valuable organization.

The BMLT offers a tool that can be important in estate management and allocating the future uses of a property. They offer assistance in creating a perpetual conservation easement that creates a legacy for future generations to enjoy while offering financial incentive for landowners. Together, BMLT and landowners are working to protect that quilted landscape surrounding us that we all enjoy. That is enough to make us all feel warm inside.

For more information on the merits of the Blue Mountain Land Trust for your property, call Tom Dwonch at 509-525-3136