

# Dutchess Land Conservancy Protecting the Land We Love

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## Dutchess Land Conservancy *Protecting the Land We Love*

*Working tirelessly to preserve the natural beauty of Dutchess County for all of us.*

Story by ML Ball

Photos: Courtesy of Dutchess Land Conservancy

What if there were no Dutchess Land Conservancy?

Well, for one thing, that stunning open vista that speaks to your soul every time you take it in would likely be gone, replaced with condos. The babbling brook meandering through your neighbor's woods? Dammed up to make way for a shopping center. And the 100-acre dairy farm that's been there for three generations? Sold as high-density lots in a residential development.

In short, if there were no Dutchess Land Conservancy, there would be no Dutchess County as we know it. Sure, the area it occupies on a map would still be there, but the deeply loved essential beauty of it would be lost, probably forever.

Fortunately for those of us who live and work in this part of the world, the Dutchess Land Conservancy came into being in 1985 and today is stronger than ever. Considered a national leader in land conservation, the DLC has worked over the years with more than 397 private landowners to preserve over 40,850 acres of vital farmland, water sources, wildlife habitat and scenic views. To accomplish this, it partners with landowners, farmers, realtors, townships, county and state agencies and a host of other conservation-minded groups to preserve the scenic, agricultural and environmental resources of Dutchess County for the benefit of us all, as well as generations to come.

"We were founded, like many grassroots organizations, because of a threat," explains Becky Thornton, the Dutchess Land Conservancy's president. "In the early 1980s, there was a proposal for a major multi-lot development in Stanford along Bangall Amenia Road. That galvanized a group of people to realize that town zoning was not going to protect what they so dearly loved: the rural quality and beautiful landscape of the area. So they got together and formed the Dutchess Land Conservancy, modeled after the Brandywine Conservancy in Pennsylvania, which really got the ball rolling on land conservation in this area. And it snowballed."

That snowball has paid off in spades. At one point, the DLC was touted by the Land Trust Alliance Northeast Office as one of the top land trusts in New York, protecting land at a rate that far surpassed other organizations in the state.

What's actually involved in preserving and protecting land? As with most things in life, it starts with relationships.

"We spend a lot of time talking to landowners to educate them about conservation as an option," Thornton says. "This is so important because when it comes to people's land, they often think their only option is to sell it if they need money, or if their children aren't interested in farming it in the case of a family farm. But then they have no control over what happens to it in the future."

Alternatively, when the Dutchess Land Conservancy gets involved, "we show them that by protecting their land, they do have a say in what happens to it," Thornton says. "It can stay like it is now forever so they can come back in 25 years and it hasn't changed. Sadly, we hear stories all the time about a family that owned a farm or a parcel of land and they go back to it years later and it's ruined."

If landowners want to preserve their property, the best way to do that is with a conservation easement—a legal restriction that spells out what can and cannot happen to that land in the future. Yet, as Thornton points out, putting a conservation easement on your land does not mean that you can never sell it, lease it or even develop it. What it does mean is that you are giving up some development rights while keeping others. For example, you could put houses and outbuildings on your land, but they would have to be in keeping with the easement agreement, meaning that they would need to preserve the natural resources and scenic beauty of the property.

As a further incentive—beyond the satisfaction that comes with knowing your land will never be drastically altered—there are additional benefits to conservation easements that go beyond the aesthetic: federal and state income tax deductions. This holds true if a landowner donates a conservation easement to the Dutchess Land Conservancy as long as the donation benefits the public in some way, such as protecting a scenic view, a water resource, a natural habitat or tillable farmland.

While some people might think that land protected by conservation easement comes off the local tax rolls, this is not the case. Landowners still pay property taxes on it, and local towns still receive the tax revenue.

And what if that conservation-minded landowner is a farmer? All the better. Says Thornton, "Farmers typically don't have the financial ability to donate an easement to the Dutchess Land Conservancy, but they can sell one to us. We work with lots of different farmers to buy their development rights, which is a great opportunity for them. They still own the property, it can still be used as a farm, it can still be sold, it can still be mortgaged—it just can't be developed. This arrangement benefits everybody. They get an influx of cash to help with their farm business, and irreplaceable farmland gets preserved."

As well as working diligently with landowners and farmers to protect open spaces and farmland, the Dutchess Land Conservancy can also partner with towns that want to preserve a parcel of land within their municipalities for passive recreation, such as walking, hiking and fishing.



"We can work with towns to buy and protect land, as we did with Dover Stone Church in Dover Plains," says Thornton. "Working together with the town and Friends of Stone Church, the DLC was instrumental in raising funds to buy the land to be preserved. Its highway and recreation departments maintain the preserve, and we oversee the stewardship of it."

The DLC has also helped Dover add more land to the original parcel, including buying adjoining land and transferring it at no cost into the town's ownership. What started as 58 acres in 2004 is now 180 acres, with public walking trails, stunning rural views and abundant natural habitats. "This a perfect example of what a township and the Dutchess Land Conservancy can accomplish when we work together," Thornton says. "It really gets to the heart of conservation."

To keep that heart beating strong, two groups play a major role in guiding the Dutchess Land Conservancy's present business practices and helping it plan for the future. The first is the Land Trust Alliance, a national umbrella organization which provides valuable standards and practices guidance for conservation organizations nationwide. It also offers an accreditation program that certifies that an organization meets national quality standards, upholds the public trust and ensures that conservation efforts are permanent.

The second important entity is the New York Land Trust Alliance Advisory Board, which Thornton chaired for several years and of which she is still a member. Its purpose is to bring together organizations across the state on conservation strategy, policy and education.

Another way the Land Trust Alliance assists conservation organizations is with Terrafirma, a conservation defense insurance program it formed in 2011 that helps fund the cost of litigation and provides expert advice when land trusts go to court in the unfortunate event when a landowner violates his or her conservation easement. While violations are rare, Thornton asserts, having this type of support helps promote public trust that land trusts will have the financial wherewithal and support to uphold the conservation easements in its care.

As a nonprofit, the Dutchess Land Conservancy receives the majority of its income from individual donations and private foundation grants, as well as federal, state and county grants for farmland protection projects. It also holds two fundraising events each year: the Spring Barn Dance and the Fall Patrons' Lunch.

But if you're still wondering what the Dutchess Land Conservancy does exactly, just stroll or hike or bike through Dutchess County one day and look around you. Chances are that what you'll see are unspoiled views, diverse natural ecosystems, grazing livestock, abundant wildlife, multiple working farms and maybe even a bog or two.

What you won't see are belching smokestacks, endless asphalt, cookie cutter shopping centers and unchecked urban sprawl. And for that, you can thank the Dutchess Land Conservancy.

For more information about the Dutchess Land Conservancy, visit [www.dutchessland.org](http://www.dutchessland.org).