



2020 Annual Report

Rhode Island Land Trust Council is the state coalition of land trusts.

Our Mission: permanently conserve open and natural lands in Rhode Island by supporting land trusts, promoting responsible use and stewardship of conserved lands, and advocating for sound land conservation policy.

Executive Summary

In March 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic spread into the state, the Council's work and the land trust community changed dramatically. COVID precluded the Council from holding in-person workshops and limited the size of groups that land trusts could lead on walks and convene for activities. Fear of COVID kept many land trusts from organizing walks and other community engagement activities. Yet, when the Governor issued a shelter at home order to reduce the spread of COVID, this began a dramatic increase in the number of people using land trust properties and trails. People intuitively sought to spend time outdoors in nature as respite from the fear, anxiety and cabin fever caused by COVID. COVID demonstrated the importance of conservation lands and trails during a pandemic and revealed that Rhode Island does not have enough outdoor places to meet the demand for Rhode Islanders who want to get outdoors. The value of the work of land trusts has become more evident than ever.

Major Activities in 2020:

Though 2020 was a challenging year, the Council continued to:

- **Lead state policy advocacy for land trusts and land conservation.** The Council:
 - Worked with sponsors to have legislation introduced to:
 - help land trusts and municipalities safeguard and defend protected lands; and
 - authorize municipalities to establish a funding program for land conservation.
 - Advocated for state bond funding for land conservation and the Local Open Space Grants Program.
 - Supported legislation to give RIDEM authority to better manage invasive species and to prohibit the intentional release of balloons (two important stewardship issues for land trusts).
 - Submitted comments on RIDEM's proposed wetland rules and Forest Action Plan. We advocated to improve RIDEM's wetland permitting process for developing pedestrian trails on conservation properties.
 - Advocated for University of Rhode Island to permanently conserve the property at their Alton Jones Campus in West Greenwich.
- **Coordinate initiatives to increase the visibility of land trusts and promote public enjoyment of the special places they are conserving.** In particular, this year we

helped land trusts promote their trails as great places to get outdoors during COVID and provided guidance to help people safely enjoy conservation areas and trails. The Council's initiatives include:

- Land Trust Days to introduce more people to land trusts and their trails. 8 Land Trusts hosted 19 events. In response to COVID, the Council promoted Do it Yourself (DIY) walks and produced 8 short videos introducing a "feature trail of the week."
- ExploreRI.org is the "go to" website for trail maps, directions and other information about Rhode Island trails. In 2020, we added information for 33 trails so there are now 125 trail systems on ExploreRI.
- RIWalks.org website encourages people to take walks on land trust trails;
- Trail development and mapping assistance for land trusts. We helped Coventry Land Trust with trail planning and prepared trail maps for North Smithfield, Barrington (3 trails) and West Bay Land Trusts.
- Lending trail counters to land trusts so that they can track the number of people walking on their trails. In 2020, these counters provided great data about trail use for Aquidneck Island Land Trust, Smithfield Land Trust & Westerly Land Trust.
- Providing "How to Walk Outdoors Safely" COVID guidance to land trusts.
- Conducting a "Walking During COVID" survey.
- Help land trusts improve their ability to **implement best practices for stewarding the lands** that they are protecting. Programs include:
 - **Land & Water Conservation Summit**, held on Saturday, March 7, 2020, was attended by nearly 300 people. The inspirational keynote by, Dr. Mamie Parker, former Northeast Director for US Fish and Wildlife Service, "*A Change in Climate - Preparing the Next Generation with Passion, Inspiration and Excellence*," remarks by Senator Reed, and 30 "how to" workshops provided great learning opportunities and networking for Rhode Island's conservation leaders.
 - Computer based mapping to help land trusts get the boundaries of their conservation properties in a digital ArcGIS mapping system that they can use for monitoring and stewardship.
 - Providing technical assistance and consulting to help Land Trusts with stewardship. Coordinated a University of RI class for 14 students who prepared 12 baseline documents for 6 land trusts.
 - Surveyed Rhode Island's land trusts to document their collective conservation accomplishments, stewardship activities and need for stewardship assistance.
- **Improve the Council's capacity to support land trusts'** networking, collaboration, implementing best practices and improving their land conservation and stewardship. In 2020, we:
 - Adopted a new Strategic Plan in February that establishes the Council's goals, priorities and initiatives for the next 5 years.
 - Added a Stewardship Coordinator through the TerraCorps program to implement the Council's project helping land trusts use computerized mapping to steward their conservation lands.
 - Adopted a Development Plan in December that guides the Council's activities to raise the funding necessary to implement the Council's initiatives for increasing support for land trusts and their land conservation and stewardship work.

The Year in Review

RI Land Trust Council and our land trust members started 2020 like many previous years. We were enthusiastic about our plans for the year and our projects.

The Council was working with legislative leaders in the Rhode Island General Assembly to have legislation introduced to help land trusts defend their conservation lands. Another bill was attempting to replicate a very successful Massachusetts program, the Community Preservation Act, that authorizes municipalities to establish a funding program for capital investments in land conservation, parks, historic preservation and adaptation to climate change. Hearings were already scheduled for the three bills the Council initiated. The Council was also supporting two additional bills that would help land trusts with serious stewardship issues by authorizing RIDEM to better manage invasive species and prohibiting the intentional release of balloons.

Beyond this legislation, the Governor was proposing a large “green bond referendum” as part of the state budget. During a budget hearing in late February, the Council and land trust leaders asked the House Finance Committee to add funding to that Bond to continue the state’s Local Open Space Grants program. These grants provide critical funds for land trust and municipal land conservation projects.

The Council’s land conservation and stewardship consultant was teaching a class at the University of Rhode Island (URI) in the Spring 2020 Semester. 15 students from URI’s Natural Resources Program were enrolled in this class and learning how to prepare baseline document reports for conservation properties. The students were each paired with a land trust and land trust property for the semester. Their class project was preparing a baseline document for that property. This is a win - win program that the Council coordinates. Students get real world work experience, learn about land trusts and have a professionally finished document that they can use as an example of their work during their job search after graduation. Land trusts get a professionally prepared baseline document prepared for a conservation property. After taking this class, several students have joined a land trust’s board or staff.

Since fall 2019, the Council had been working with partners to organize the Land & Water Conservation Summit to be held on Saturday, March 7. We had recruited an inspiring speaker for our keynote. Senator Reed confirmed that he would join us and speak during the lunch plenary session. We had a great line-up of 30 “how to” and informative workshops where land trust leaders could learn the skills and information they need to more successfully conserve and steward the special places in their communities. Over 300 people were registered to attend the Summit.

In February, the Council’s Board was making the final edits to our new 5 year Strategic Plan. This was finished just in time to present it during our brief annual meeting held at the Summit. The Plan culminated a year-long effort to set the Council’s priorities and craft initiatives to increase support for land trusts’ conservation and stewardship work.

The Saturday, March 7, 2020 Land & Water Conservation Summit was a great success! It had the usual buzz and energy of our annual conference. During the Summit, the Council introduced our new RIWalks website designed to encourage people to take walks and spend time outdoors in nature for their mental and physical health (we previously called

this program ParkRx). Summit attendees signed up to participate in the Council’s new computer based mapping initiative to help them monitor their conservation properties.

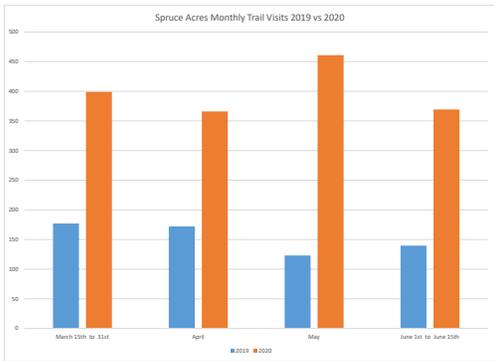
In hind sight, we were fortunate to hold the Summit! Signs of the changes that were about to dramatically impact everyone’s lives and the activities of land trusts and the Council were already evident. On March 6, we learned that our peers - the state coalitions in Massachusetts and Connecticut - were “postponing” their annual conferences scheduled a week after the Summit. More people than usual who were registered for the Summit were “no shows” because of fears about the deadly new virus that was circulating.

On March 9, Rhode Island’s Governor declared an emergency due to the COVID pandemic. In the coming weeks, she issued a shelter at home order and closed businesses, schools, offices, and places of worship. URI closed their campus, students were sent home and the spring semester class that we were coordinating, was suspended. The Rhode Island General Assembly suspended their 2020 session and all work on legislation stopped.

Yet, as the state closed, more people were going outdoors, taking walks and bicycling. In response to the shelter at home order, fear, anxiety and resulting cabin fever caused by COVID, people intuitively sought refuge and respite by taking walks and spending time outdoors in nature. Land trusts across the state experienced an unprecedented increase in the number of people visiting their preserves and walking their trails. The Council has three trail counters that we loan to land trusts so that they can tally how many people walk on a trail. Data from these trail counters documented that the number of people walking on an Aquidneck Land Trust trail from mid-March - June 2020 was nearly 300% higher than the number of people walking this trail during the same period in 2019. The number of people who used the Council’s ExploreRI website to get trail maps, directions and other information about trails also increased in March - June 2020 to nearly 3 times the use during the same months in 2019. The COVID pandemic revealed the value of, and need for, land conservation. There were not enough parks, land trust preserves and other open space lands to meet Rhode Islanders’ need for places where they could get outdoors and take walks.

Monthly # of people walking
Aquidneck Land Trust
Spruce Acres Trail
March - June 2019 (blue)
March - June 2020 (orange)

*Graph courtesy Aquidneck Land Trust
Data from RI Land Trust Council Trail Counters*



The unprecedented impacts from COVID and “shelter at home” orders caused challenges. Land trusts wrestled with serious issues: Should we keep our trails and preserves open? Is it safe for people to be walking on our trails? How do we manage impacts from heavy trail usage? How do we manage crowded parking in parking lots and along roads by trailheads? These challenges and questions were amplified when the Governor closed the state parks on April 3 and many municipalities followed the state’s lead. State and municipal park closures further increased the use of land trust properties and trails.

RI Land Trust Council and our peers in other states researched the science - what was known about how COVID was spread? Is it safe for people to be walking outdoors? We learned that contact tracing in China (where the pandemic began) found that very, very few people were being infected by COVID when they were outdoors. In fact, it actually is safer to be outdoors. Further, the science literature predicted that the COVID pandemic would cause negative mental and physical health issues for many people. Vast research documents the extensive mental and physical health benefits from walking and from just spending time outdoors in nature. So we knew that land trusts' conservation lands and trails were one of Rhode Island's best assets to help people cope with the COVID pandemic. The best science available about COVID and guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and World Health Organization (WHO) indicated that it was safe to take walks outdoors just as long as people maintained a safe physical distance from anyone who did not live in their household.

The Council developed guidance for land trusts: "How to Walk Outdoors Safely During COVID." Our April 3rd enews included this guidance along with information about the value of spending time in nature and taking walks for mental health.

"Walking Safely" signs were distributed for land trusts to post at their trails.

Our key messages:

- **It is safe** to take walks **outdoors!**
- Taking walks in nature is a great way to stay active and maintain your physical and mental health as we "shelter in place."
- Keep visits short so there is room for everyone to take walks.
- Don't park on streets if lots are full.
- Support your land trust!

Photo courtesy of:
Warren Land Conservation Trust



Starting March 13, the Council made regular social media posts (Facebook, MeetUp, Instagram) promoting opportunities for people to visit land trust preserves and trails and encouraging people to take walks outdoors for their mental and physical health.

As spring progressed everyone slowly adapted to the constraints caused by COVID. The Council got a Zoom software license and learned how to hold virtual meetings. Board meetings were held on line. To help land trusts wrestling with trail stewardship issues caused by the extraordinary increase in use, the Council convened a meeting where land trust leaders could share ideas and discuss this challenge. The URI class to prepare baseline

documents resumed with remote learning. The questions the Council received from land trusts shifted to: “Can we lead walks or hold other events outdoors? How can stewardship be done safely in the context of COVID?” Land trusts also faced the challenge of trying to replicate the atmosphere and engagement of their annual events - auctions, farm to table dinners, trail races - while ensuring participants were safe and following state limits on the size of gatherings.

In late spring, the Council distributed a survey “Walking During COVID” to ask people: were they walking more frequently? Where were they walking? Who they were walking with and how did they find places to walk? The results of this survey strongly support land trusts’ work to have trails. The survey responses also documented a large opportunity for land trusts to recruit people who were walking as new members and volunteers.

RI Land Trust Council - working with land trusts - faced these challenges to organize and promote Land Trust Days - our annual initiative to help land trusts increase their community engagement and visibility. Due to COVID, we delayed the start of Land Trust Days until late August and continued them through mid-October. For the first time, we required registration and limited attendance and group size for Land Trust Days walks based on the state’s constantly changing rules. Everyone was asked to wear masks during Land Trust Days walks. Interest and registration for Land Trust Days demonstrated a large pent up demand from people with cabin fever and looking for an activity that they could join. At the same time that there was high demand for Land Trust Days walks, the number of people that could be accommodated was limited because fewer land trusts were organizing walks (due to safety and logistic concerns) and capacity of the walks offered was limited due to COVID restrictions.



Scituate Land Trust - 2020 Land Trust Days Walk

In an effort to address the high demand for Land Trust Days walks at the same time there was lower capacity, the Council tried a new strategy. Our social media posts encouraged people to take DIY (Do It Yourself) walks with family and friends. We pointed to information about trails on ExploreRI. And the Council started promoting a “feature trail of the week” with short videos to introduce people to a trail and encourage them to go for a walk there.

Overall Land Trust Days walks were well received and people leading and attending walks felt safe. Some land trusts provided a sequence of group starting times so that they could accommodate more people for their walks.

Other Council initiatives continued during the COVID pandemic. The Council submitted comments on RI Department of Environmental Management's proposed wetland regulations and Forest Action Plan. We advocated for funding for Local Open Space Grants during House Finance Committee hearings held in August for the proposed Green Bond.

Perhaps the Council's most exciting growth in 2020 was adding Eric Wuesthoff, a TerraCorps member, to our staff as a Land Stewardship Coordinator. With the additional staff capacity, the Council has been helping to set up land trusts around the state so that they can use computerized maps of their conservation properties for monitoring and stewardship. This project began in 2019 as a partnership with Greg Bonyng and Aimee Mandeville at the URI Environmental Data Center. The purpose is to develop and help land trusts use a computer based mapping system to improve monitoring and stewardship of their conservation properties. The Council's work helping land trusts prepare Baseline Document Reports revealed that one of the core challenges that land trusts leaders face with stewardship of conservation lands is knowing where the boundaries of these properties are when they are out in the field monitoring their properties. Esri, the company which owns the leading computerized mapping software ArcGIS, generously donated a group license for the software to the Council. This enables us to give each land trust two licenses to for their board members and staff to use.

The ArcGIS system requires land trust property and conservation easement boundaries to be digitized and put into the computerized mapping database. Once that step is done, land trust leaders and volunteers can use an App on an iPad tablet, along with a sensitive GPS device called a "Bad Elf," to locate the boundaries of their conservation properties when they are walking in the field. They can also use the iPad to take photographs and monitoring notes for their properties.

Computerized mapping systems are complex and require extensive training to learn how to digitize and upload property boundaries. In spring and summer 2020, RI Land Trust Council had an intern working with Greg on a pilot project to digitize and upload Narrow River Land Trust's boundaries into the ArcGIS database. In September, Eric Wuesthoff joined the Council's staff as our Land Stewardship Coordinator. Eric is a TerraCorps member - a specialized AmeriCorps Program focused on providing support for land conservation organizations. Eric is scaling up the GIS project from the pilot and worked with leaders from 10 land trusts in 2020 to digitize and upload the boundaries of their conservation properties in ArcGIS. While workshops to train land trust leaders on the use of the App were postponed due to COVID, they are already finding the computerized maps very helpful. Workshops on use of this program to help monitor conservation lands will take place in 2021.

2020 Activities & Accomplishments - The Details

The following provides details of these accomplishments and RI Land Trust Council's work in 2020.

Advocating for State Legislation, Policies & Land Conservation Funding

The Council represents the state's land trusts and the interests of the land conservation community in legislative and state policy discussions. We work to improve laws to defend protected land, foster sound stewardship, and support land trusts and land conservation. The Council also keeps vigilant watch for legislative proposals that threaten or undermine the status of conservation lands.

In 2020, the Council advocated for state bond funding for land conservation and we initiated and advocated for three bills in the RI General Assembly:

State Bond Funding for Land Conservation. In 2019, the Council began discussions with the Governor's staff about including land conservation funding in the Green Bond referendum. When the proposed state budget was released in February 2020, the Green Bond proposed in the budget did not include any funding to continue the Local Open Space Grants program. The Council organized testimony by land trust leaders for the House Finance Committee hearing on the Bond. The Council worked with a sponsor to have a separate bill introduced that would place a \$4 million Open Space and Forest Conservation Bond on the ballot for voter consideration. In mid-November, the General Assembly finally approved bond referendums including a **\$74 million Beach, Clean Water & Green Bond Referendum** for consideration by voters at a special election on March 2, 2021. The Green Bond included \$3 million for Natural and Working Land conservation. This continues funding for the state's farmland protection program and for the first time extends funding for forest conservation. However, in spite of the Council's and land trusts' advocacy the bond did not include any funding for the state's local open space program. On March 2, 2021, over 78% of RI voters approved the Green Bond.

Legislation to defend conservation properties and provide funding for conservation. The Council worked with sponsors to have legislation introduced that would:

- **Authorize municipalities to dedicate parks and other conservation lands as public trust properties.** This is enabling legislation that authorizes municipalities to declare conservation properties that they own as "being held in the public trust." This legislation will help cities and towns reassure residents that their parks and other conservation properties are permanently protected for future generations and will not be sold or developed.
- **Defend conservation lands protected by conservation easements.** This legislation amends RI Conservation Easement Enabling Legislation to clarify legislative intent that Conservation Easements (sometimes called Conservation Restrictions) are in the public interest. This change will help to ensure that if there is ever a dispute about a conservation easement, courts will defend the conservation values that land owners intended to protect when they recorded the conservation easement.
- **Authorize municipalities to establish dedicated funding for land conservation - the Community Resiliency and Preservation Act.** In 2019, the Council revived discussions about enabling legislation to establish a version of a very successful Massachusetts program which creates a funding stream for land conservation in municipalities that

adopt the program. This enabling legislation would authorize municipalities to seek voter approval for a surcharge on property taxes to fund conservation, historic preservation, park development and adaptation to climate change.

Other legislation supported. The Council supported bills to: prohibit the intentional release of balloons and authorize RIDEM to better manage invasive species. Balloons and invasive species are a serious ongoing stewardship problems for land trusts.

Due to COVID, state legislative work came to a halt in March 2020 as the RI General Assembly stopped meeting and the three bills that the Council initiated in 2020 stalled. The Council continued advocating for bond funding for land conservation.

Other Advocacy Activities in 2020.

- The Council began working with Narragansett Land Conservancy Trust - a municipal land trust - to develop ordinances that the town council can adopt to safeguard properties held by the land trust.
- The Council encouraged the University of Rhode Island (URI) to permanently protect their property at the W. Alton Jones campus. COVID caused URI to close the campus and terminate their conference center and the environmental education camps held there. This action raised concerns that the University might sell or develop the 2300 acres. Discussions with the University are continuing to explore options for permanently protecting this important property.
- The Council participated in hearings and submitted comments on rules and regulations for two RI Department of Environmental Management (RIDEM) programs that impact land trusts and land conservation:
 - Wetland Regulations which impact trail development and maintenance. The Council is asking RIDEM to streamline the permitting process for land trusts that are developing pedestrian trails on protected properties.
 - RIDEM Forest Action Plan. This five-year plan guides federal funding for forest management and conservation in Rhode Island.

Community Outreach & Engagement

Increasing Visibility & Connecting People with Land Trusts

The Council has several initiatives to increase the visibility of land trusts and the special places they are protecting. Our goals are to increase the number of Rhode Islanders and visitors who: enjoy and value the places land trusts are protecting; and support land trusts as members, volunteers and donors.

Land Trust Days. Land Trust Days 2020 was significantly impacted by COVID. State limitations on the number of people that could attend outdoor gatherings, we limited groups to 15 people. We required registration and required everyone attending Land Trust Days activities to wear a mask. The Council prepared signs and sign in sheets for land trusts to use so that they could easily comply with state rules for hosting activities during COVID. Warren Land Trust hosted a kick-off walk on two days at Haile Farm Preserve. Because of COVID, fewer land trusts offered walks than in past years (8 instead of 29 in 2019) - and there were many fewer Land Trust Days events in 2020 (19 compared to 63 in 2019).

When the Council saw high demand for walks despite our limited offerings, we initiated a “**Feature Trail of the Week**” campaign and used our social media to encourage to take “Do It Yourself” walks. We posted photos & short trail introduction videos on FaceBook, Instagram and MeetUp. During Land Trust Days we had 8 “Feature Trails of the Week.” The number of people who watched these videos ranged from 70 to over 300. We know anecdotally that the feature trail of the week and videos did get people to explore new trails. Land trusts that participated in the feature trail of the week videos were:

- Conanicut Island Land Trust (2 trails) - Godena Farm & Parker Farm
- Cumberland Land Trust - Mercy Woods
- North Smithfield Land Trust - Rocky Hill Conservation Area
- Sakonnet Preservation Association - Guild Property
- Scituate Land Trust - Westconnaug Meadows
- South Kingstown Land Trust - Duval Trail
- West Bay Land Trust - Knight Farm Trail

Feature Trail of the Week videos engaged a few new land trusts that had not hosted Land Trust Days walks in past years.

The Council uses social media to promote land trust trails, walks and other activities. We post activities on a Land Trust Days MeetUp group that has 3885 members (an increase of 15% in 2020); Facebook page that has 2781 followers (an increase of 20% in 2020) and Instagram that has 991 followers (an increase of 17% in 2020).

ExploreRI Website. The Council is continuously working to get every land trust trail and other walking trails in Rhode Island mapped and posted on ExploreRI’s so that they are easy for people to find and enjoy. The Council has been contacting municipalities so that we can add more trail maps and trail information for municipal trails. In 2020 we added information for 33 trails and ExploreRI currently has trail maps, directions and other information for over 125 trail systems.

As previously mentioned in this annual report, due to COVID many more people are using ExploreRI to find information about places to walk. Use of the ExploreRI website increased by nearly 300% in March through June in 2020 compared to the same period in 2019.

RI Walks. At the start of 2020, the Council launched RIWalks -- an online platform where individuals can set a goal for spending time outdoors, keep track of the walks they take & rate trails. RIWalks was launched publicly at the Land & Water Summit on Saturday, March 7, 2020. RIWalks is the Council’s initiative (previously called ParkRx) to motivate people to

get outside and take walks. Because of COVID, we have not yet been able to promote RIWalks to health care providers nor have we been able to have walk leaders lead regular walks. We worked with artists at the *Steel Yard* to develop 30 different “creatures” - cut steel sculptures - that land trust will place on trails in 2021. We will use these creatures to develop gaming to motivate people to go out and take walks to find the sculptures.

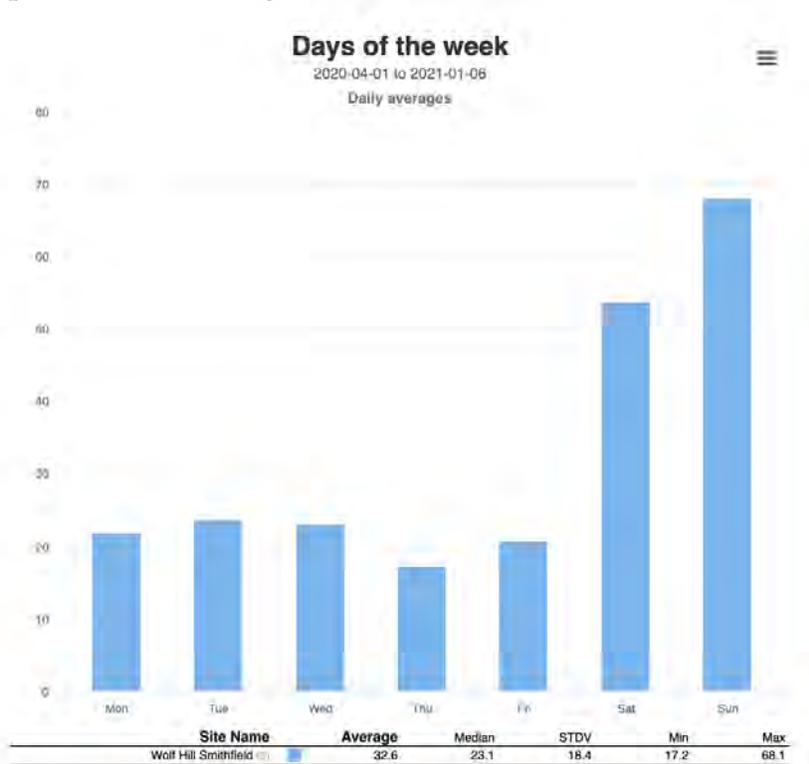


Cut Steel Sculpture Creatures to be Installed on Land Trust Trails for RI Walks Challenge

Nature inspired “Creatures” for RIWalks Challenge. Cut steel sculptures of these creatures will be installed on land trust trails around the state. We will encourage people to go find them, take selfies, collect photographs of them all.

Trail Development & Trail Mapping. The Council’s volunteers continue to assist land trusts in creating and mapping their trails. One of the trail systems being developed & mapped with Council assistance is on Coventry Land Trust’s Beaudoin Property. In 2020, the Council’s Stewardship Coordinator developed trail maps for North Smithfield Land Trust, West Bay Land Trust and three for Barrington Land Conservation Trust.

Trail Counters. In 2020, the Council purchased 3 trail counters - equipment that enables land trusts to count the number of people walking/running on their trails. The Council loans these trail counters to land trusts so that they can obtain data about the use of their trails. The trail counters were first installed on a few of Aquidneck Land Trust’s trails with great results. The counters provide information about the number of people that walk/run a trail each day and over the course of each month. The data provided by these counters documents the importance of land trust trails to the community. For example, the graph below illustrates daily average trail use at Smithfield Land Trust’s Wolf Hill Trail from April 2020 to January 2021.



Average Daily Trail Use

**Wolf Hill Trail
Smithfield Land Trust**

April 2020 - January 2021

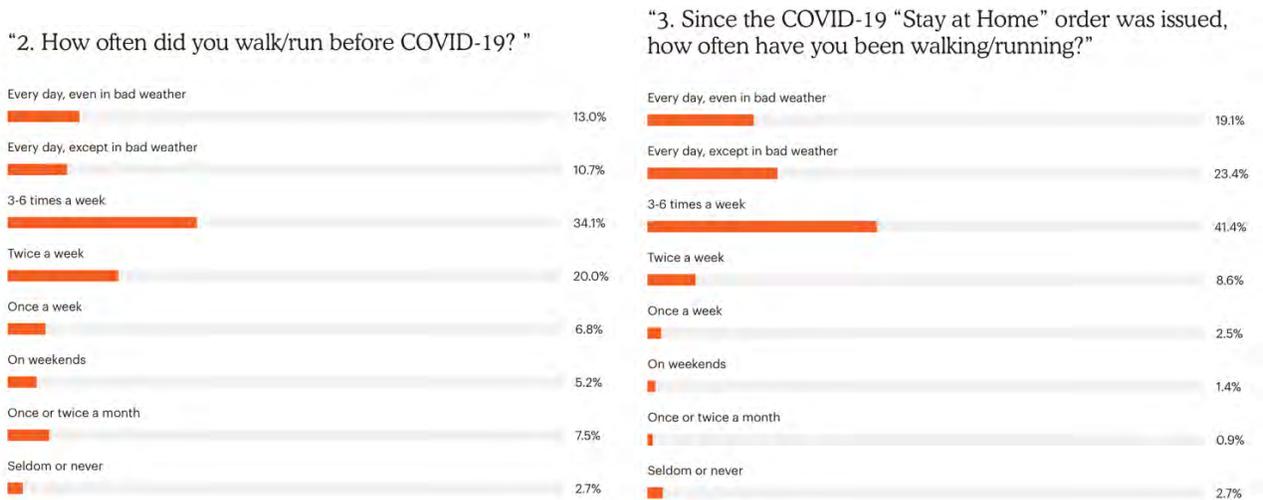
As of February 2021, the counters have been used on 6 different trails -- in Westerly, Smithfield, Cumberland, South Kingstown, and Aquidneck Island. A Council volunteer, Bruce Payton, is coordinating our trail counter program. Bruce helps the land trusts install a counter and then visits them periodically to retrieve data about trail use which the Council provides each land trust.

Note: The Council’s trail counters were purchased with a generous grant from the van Beuren Charitable Foundation. The Council is seeking funding so that we can purchase additional trail counters.

COVID Guidance & Assistance for Land Trusts. When the COVID “shelter at home” order caused a dramatic increase in the use of trails, RI Land Trust Council sent information to land trusts about ‘How to Walk Safely During COVID-19’. This included signs that the land trusts could post at trailheads. The Council also held a Zoom meeting for land trust leaders to discuss challenges in managing increased trail use during the pandemic and share strategies they were adopting. This Zoom meeting was attended by over 45 people. The Council’s work to support land trusts’ trail use during COVID was nationally recognized in an article in the Land Trust Alliance’s magazine.

Survey: Walking During COVID. The Council distributed a survey in Spring 2020 about people’s walking habits during COVID. The responses document that many people are walking more now than before the pandemic. Many people are also walking in new places. The survey found that many people who responded were not members of a land trust or other conservation organization. Further, many who completed the survey reported that they believe it is important for people using trails to “give back” by making a donation to a land trust or volunteering. Thus, the growing ‘constituency’ for land trusts - trail users - is an opportunity for recruiting volunteers and soliciting support.

Walking During COVID - Survey May 2020



Land Trust Capacity Building, Stewardship Assistance & Networking

Several Council programs help land trusts implement best practices, improve their stewardship, grow, and network with each other.

2020 RI Land & Water Conservation Summit.

The 17th Land & Water Conservation Summit was held on March 7, 2020, which was the last weekend of events before COVID began spreading widely in Rhode Island. The inspiring keynote was presented by Dr. Mamie Parker, former Northeast Director for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service “*A Change in Climate - Preparing the Next Generation with Passion, Inspiration and Excellence.*” Senator Reed spoke during the lunch plenary session. The Summit had 30 “how to” workshops for land trust and other grassroots conservation leaders and a wonderful buzz that always happens due to the networking that takes place during the day. The Summit was attended by nearly 300 people and post-Summit evaluations were overwhelmingly positive.

Providing Technical Assistance to Help Land Trusts with Stewardship.

The Council continues to contract with Carol Lynn Trocki to help land trusts prepare baseline document reports (BDRs) and develop stewardship plans for their properties.

The Council also contracted with Carol to lead the Baseline Documentation course at URI in Spring 2020. This course enrolled 14 students which were paired with a land trust and property for which they would prepare a Baseline Document Report as their semester project. Although COVID shifted how this course was taught beginning in March, the course was successful and baseline documents were prepared for 12 properties conserved by 6 land trusts. This course has also been successful in getting students involved with land trusts and some have continued this work after they graduate.

The Council's stewardship assistance projects are funded by a generous grant from The Rhode Island Foundation, and the URI class by a generous grant from the Conservation Stewardship Collaborative Endowment at The Rhode Island Foundation.

Computerized GIS Mapping of Land Trust Property & Easement Boundaries to Help Land Trust Leaders Monitor and Steward Their Conservation Properties.

In 2019, Peter August, Greg Bonyngge and Aimee Mandeville at the University of Rhode Island (URI) Environmental Data Center began developing a tool to help land trusts find property boundaries in the field and monitor their conservation properties using a "Bad Elf" GPS receiver and an iPad. The project uses an online computerized mapping software ArcGIS. Esri, the company that developed ArcGIS, donated a group license to RI Land Trust Council for using the software. This enables the Council to set up a separate account for each land trust give them a license that they can use for stewarding their conservation properties. The Council started this project as a pilot and in 2020 with a URI student intern who worked with Narrow River Land Trust to upload property boundaries. Because of COVID, the intern and the land trust postponed use of the App and iPad for monitoring.

In late August 2020, the Council was fortunate to have Eric Wuesthoff join our staff as a Land Stewardship Coordinator. Eric is a TerraCorps Member. TerraCorps is a specialized AmeriCorps program for land trusts and land conservation that has been operating in Massachusetts. Since August, Eric has been working with land trust leaders to digitize and upload the boundaries of land trusts' conservation easement & fee properties onto an ArcGIS database. This enables land trust leaders to use an App and an iPad tablet or smartphone to find property boundaries in the field and monitor properties. Eric will also coach land trust leaders on the use of this App to monitor their protected lands.

13 Land trusts for which the Council digitized their property boundaries and uploaded them into the ArcGIS computerized mapping system in 2020:

- Barrington Land Conservation Trust
- Burrillville Land Trust
- Charlestown land Trust
- Coventry Land Trust
- Foster Land Trust
- Gloucester Land Trust
- Land Conservancy of North Kingstown
- Narrow River Land Trust - *pilot project participant*
- North Smithfield Land Trust
- Richmond Rural Preservation Trust - *pilot project participant*
- Scituate Land Trust
- South Kingstown Land Trust
- Warren Land Conservation Trust

The Council is working with many additional land trusts on this initiative.

Esri generously donated a group license for their software so that the Council can provide this stewardship “tool” for member land trusts at no cost. A generous grant from the Conservation Stewardship Collaborative is enabling the Council to have a TerraCorps member serving as a Land Conservation Coordinator. The Council’s ArcGIS project is a partnership with URI Environmental Data Center and Audubon Society of Rhode Island.

RI Land Trust Council’s ArcGIS Project Empowers Land Trust Leaders to Use Computerized Property Maps and an iPad App to Monitor Their Conservation Properties



Land Trust Excellence Survey. In fall and winter 2020, the Council conducted a survey of Rhode Island’s land trusts’ land conservation accomplishments and stewardship practices. This survey will document the number of properties and acres of land that Rhode Island land trusts are conserving. The survey will also help the Council understand land trusts’ need for stewardship assistance such as the number of conservation properties that need Baseline Document Reports, land trusts that want help designing and implementing a monitoring programs, etc. The Council will use the information from this survey to set priorities for developing workshop and stewardship assistance programs for land trusts.

Networking & Information Sharing. The Council continues to foster networking and communications among land trusts with a periodic e-news newsletter. The e-news is distributed to over 700 land trust board members, staff, volunteers, and others interested in land trusts and land conservation in Rhode Island. The Council's Executive Director regularly sends additional emails to land trust presidents, chairs and executive directors to share time sensitive information such as grant opportunities, policy activity and important meetings, hearings and workshops.

Council Operations

The Council grew in 2020 with three major accomplishments:

- Adopted a new **5-year Strategic Plan** that establishes the Council’s Guiding Principles, Goals and Strategies that build on our strong track record and expand programs and partnerships to empower and support land trusts so that they can be more effective, achieve their land conservation goals, and ensure sound stewardship and permanent protection of the special places they are conserving.

- Adopted a **Development Plan** with strategies for increasing funding to expanded the Council's programs that empower and support land trusts and their land conservation and stewardship work.
- **Added a TerraCorps Member to the Council's staff as Land Stewardship Coordinator.**

A generous grant from the Conservation Stewardship Collaborative is enabling the Council to have a TerraCorps member serving as a Land Conservation Coordinator.

Generous Rhode Island Foundation Organization Development Grants funded consultants who facilitated the Board's development of the new Strategic Plan and Development Plan.

How We Accomplished This Board, Staff, Grants & Funding Support

The work of the Rhode Island Land Trust Council is made possible through hundreds of hours of volunteer time from the Council's Board members and land trust leaders. We receive generous contributions from our member land trusts, foundations, organizations and individuals.

2020 Board of Directors

Alex Chuman
Meg Lee
Edward "Ned" Levine
Bob Marshall
Dennis Migneault
Debra Mitchell

Roy Najecki
Barbara Rich
Tom Rogers
Chris Ryan
Jennifer Suellentrop
Jeremy Wintersteen

Staff

Rupert Friday - Executive Director
Candace Powning - Program Coordinator
Eric Wuesthoff - Land Stewardship Coordinator (TerraCorps Program, began Sept. 2020)

2020 Dues Paying Land Trusts - Our Members

Aquidneck Land Trust
Audubon Society of Rhode Island
Barrington Land Conservation Trust
Block Island Conservancy
Block Island Land Trust
Borders Farm Preservation
Bristol Land Conservation Trust
Burrillville Land Trust
Charlestown Land Trust
Conanicut Land Trust
Coventry Land Trust
Cumberland Land Trust
East Providence Land Conservation Trust
Exeter Rural Land Preservation Trust
Foster Land Trust
Glocester Land Trust
Historic New England

Hopkinton Land Trust
Land Conservancy of North Kingstown
Little Compton Ag. Conservancy Trust
Narragansett Land Conservancy Trust
Narrow River Land Trust
Neutaconkanut Hill Conservancy
North Smithfield Land Trust
Prudence Conservancy
Pocasset Pokanoket Land Trust
Richmond Rural Preservation Land Trust
Sakonnet Preservation Association
Scituate Land Trust
Smithfield Land Trust
South Kingstown Land Trust
Southside Community Land Trust
Tiverton Land Trust
Tiverton Open Space Commission

Warren Land Conservation Trust
Warwick Land Trust
Watch Hill Conservancy
Weekapaug Foundation for Conservation

West Bay Land Trust
West Greenwich Land Trust
The Westerly Land Trust

Grants & Donations

- Arthur H. Carr Fund
- Abby Brooks
- Alex Chuman
- Ted Clement
- Conservation Stewardship Collaborative
- Judith & Murray Danforth
- Mike Doyle on behalf of Anne & Thomas Doyle
- Esri
- Lee Fieder
- Rupert Friday
- Elaine Fontaine & Allen Clawson
- Zachary Gold
- John Gwynne & Mikel Folcarelli
- Hazard Family Foundation
- Michael & Cheryl Iannotti
- Edward Levine & Isabella Porter
- Anthony Maione & Dori Gerhardt
- Bob Marshall
- Kevin McDonough
- Dennis Migneault & Priscilla Purinton
- Debra Mitchell
- Cindy Mulvey
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- Peter Pare
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- Prince Charitable Trusts
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- Christopher Riely
- Thomas Rogers
- Paul Roselli
- Christine Ryan & Walter Brown
- Sand Dollar Foundation
- Sharpe Family Foundation
- Kate Smith
- Linda Steere & Edward DiLuglio
- Heather & Mike Steers
- Jennifer Suellentrop
- Trish Sylvester
- Carol Lynn Trocki
- URI Environmental Data Center
- Van Beuren Charitable Foundation
- Nancy Weinstein
- Holly Williams
- Shawen Williams
- Jeremy Wintersteen
- Woodcock Charitable Trust
- Connie Worthington
- Anonymous donors (4)

Thank YOU!!

For supporting the Rhode Island Land Trust Council's Work!

Barbara Rich
President

Rupert Friday
Executive Director