

Conservancy group provides game land

By ERIC PADDOCK
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It's land only a conservationist could love.

You can't build on it; the timber isn't especially valuable, and it floods every spring. But it's just the kind of land that John Young and a couple of his friends are looking for.

Young, an attorney who makes his home at Bonny Brook on Minard Run Road, and three other area men decided last fall that such apparently worthless land does indeed have a value.

In an effort to preserve that value, Young, Jeff Duke of Duke Center, Philip Schuler of Bradford, and Bill Franklin of Coudersport formed the Seneca Highlands Conservancy.

The conservancy is getting close to its first success, providing some 500 acres to the Pennsylvania Game Commission for a new state game land.

The land in question is between Coryville and Larabee and is located in a flood plain near the confluence of

Potato Creek and the Allegheny River.

It's the kind of land Young and his associates see as a valuable resource and hope to save from waste with the help of the Game Commission.

The Coryville land project and the idea of a conservancy itself actually began late last summer when Young and friends bought 11 acres along the Allegheny near Coryville with the intention of locating a canoe landing there. It was then that they looked around the area and decided to do what they could to preserve and manage the land for the public good.

That idea turned into a non-profit corporation, originally aimed at securing tax-exempt status and some government grant money to preserve undeveloped land.

Since then, however, the conservancy has shied away from the bureaucracy involved in tax exemptions and grants, preferring to act only as an intermediary between property owners who want to dispose of such land and state and federal agencies.

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Conservancy

In fact, the conservancy itself owns practically no land, Young said, although its founders have purchased parcels on their own with an eye toward eventual inclusion in a conservation effort.

"We've had a bunch of ideas," Young said, noting the conservancy has been investigating the possibility of purchasing an old railroad grade near Coudersport for a trail or bicycle path.

"We're hoping to put something together along Tuna Creek" between Lewis Run and the Degolia area, he said. "It's awful nice land."

The conservancy is particularly interested in flood plain areas, which under state law cannot be developed. Ironically, flood plains provide a unique habitat for wildlife.

Young said lowlands along rivers and large streams harbor lush growth and sustain large bird populations and food sources for a variety of mammals, including deer.

That fact isn't lost on the Game Commission, which Young said has restricted its private land acquisitions this year to flood plain areas.

"There is a lot more you can do with the Allegheny River than just back it up with 15 Kinzua Dams," Young said.

Young said the Game Commission has realized that by buying flood plain land it can acquire property with a lot of wildlife potential at a relatively low price.

The Game Commission has already expressed interest in the Larabee-Coryville property, but would prefer a larger piece. With that in mind the conservancy is negotiating for another 100 to 200 acres north of the 400 acres it already holds an option on.

When options are acquired for sufficient land and after final approval from the Game Commission (possibly in June), the conservancy would transfer its purchase options to the commission.

What would prompt a landowner to sell property to the Game Commission, usually at something less than market value?

Often it's a way to get out from under a tax obligation on land that can't be developed. There are even tax advantages in some cases.

Young said that if a landowner sells property at less than market value to the commission, a tax-exempt agency, often the seller can deduct the difference as a gift to the commission.

While the game lands project is paramount for the conservancy now, large expanses of wide open spaces are just part of what Young sees as the real need for land conservation.

Young said he is also concerned about open space in urban areas and has privately purchased a parcel of less than an acre on Kendall Avenue in Bradford. The lot is extremely steep and probably could never be developed, "but as open space it's a good use." The same is true of another small lot on Chestnut Street that was purchased recently.

Although not affiliated with the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy, the Seneca Highlands group has been in contact with that organization and other conservancies for assistance.

He said the conservancy has no set geographic boundaries to its interest, but is concerned mainly with land in the McKean and Potter counties areas and just across the state line in New York State.

The conservancy isn't knocking on doors and acquiring purchase options pell mell, but if someone is looking for a way to donate land the group contains enough legal expertise to help the process.

"We're not trying to save the world," Young said, "but if people want to contact us about some property" the conservancy is available.