

Making Ripples

Conservation Easements Protect History, Ecology and More

by Amanda Bancroft

Conservation easements come up fairly regularly in the life of a conservationist. But for many people outside that field, the term is new and puzzling, evoking feelings of muted happiness, confusion, or distrust. Northwest Arkansas residents and the land they love are benefitting from conservation easements, so it's good to know how they're working in the background to save land.

Conservation is usually understood on at least an environmental level, yet many conservation easements protect much more than what's considered an "environmentalist's agenda." Farmers and history buffs are often among the beneficiaries, and drinking water is among the top priorities of some of our local protected lands. Hunters and wildlife advocates alike can both be appeased with an easement on important habitat. Family culture or critical ecosystems and green space can all be preserved. It isn't just going to the birds, so to speak. But birds are certainly singing more thanks to these protections.

A landowner may want to preserve something on their land, be it ecological, historical, or cultural value. It could be a working farm that needs to be kept going, or a wildlife sanctuary for the study of environmental sciences, or an important drinking water source, or even simply the beautiful view. Often, a land trust wants to protect that land, too. The landowner works with a land trust to write down exactly what they want done (and *not* done) on their land in the future. They sign a legal agreement, called a conservation easement, which stays with the land forever, even if it is sold or inherited multiple times throughout generations.

The land trust is legally responsible for protecting that land from anything that might threaten it in the future, such as new real estate development, and they must also inspect the property each year to keep it healthy and maintained according to the rules the landowner made in the conservation easement. They take on the legal fees for protecting the property in court if someone should intend to harm or alter the landscape anytime in the future. They may also have special projects like stream restoration or invasive species removal, to keep the land in great condition forever.

But "the hand doesn't reach far from the grave," you might say. Well, even if the land trust holding the conservation easement were to vanish, the easement would not. It may be transferred to another land trust or non-profit.

The financial benefits to the landowner, such as a potential reduction in income, estate, and property taxes, can result in the owner paying fewer taxes for years after an easement has been

placed on their land. Tax benefits vary based on many factors, such as the size of the property. Anyone interested in learning about which conservation options would be best for saving their land should contact Terri Lane of the Northwest Arkansas Land Trust at (479) 966-4666 or tlane@nwlandtrust.org

Amanda Bancroft is a writer, artist, and naturalist building an off-grid cottage for land conservation on Mt. Kessler. She and her husband Ryan blog about their adventures and offer a solar-hosted online educational center on how to make a difference with everyday choices at: www.RipplesBlog.org.