

Packard Manse Conserving a Suburban Oasis



In the heart of heavily developed Stoughton, Mass, lies 15 acres of field and forest that will remain a natural sanctuary forever. This property is the site of an ecumenical center, host to a great variety of spiritual traditions for over fifty years. During this time it has seen much social activism, from the civil rights and peace movements to support for women's rights to concern for all those at the margins of society. The group's philosophy of social action and spiritual consciousness has evolved during the last decade

to include great concern for the natural environment.

In 1998, the remaining few residents of this religious fellowship, now called Packard Manse, began to discuss ways to give concrete expression to their desire to protect the environment. Their land is one of the last open spaces in the area, a sanctuary for all living things and a peaceful refuge from the ever-increasing busyness of the world. The property also protects Stoughton's drinking water supply, as it is located within a groundwater protection area that includes 6 town wells. It is these qualities that make the land worthy of permanent protection, which could be accomplished via a conservation restriction.

Creating a conservation restriction (CR)¹ requires careful planning and a strong, trusting relationship between landowner and conservation organization. The folks at the Manse had been investigating their options for several years when the Religious Lands Conservancy Project (RLC) became involved in this effort. The years that followed presented some challenges...

- A conservation organization, usually a land trust², must partner with a landowner in order to create a conservation restriction. A number of conservation organizations showed some interest in the Manse property, but practical considerations or conflicting objectives cropped up to curtail the involvement of each. RLC joined with the Manse in taking a leap of faith that a qualified and willing land trust would be found.
- A conservation restriction requires legal work similar to any transfer of rights in property. RLC found a pro-bono lawyer to begin the required legal work. An encroachment on the property boundary was discovered that had to be resolved before the project could proceed.

¹ A conservation restriction is the legally-binding agreement that establishes the terms under which the property is preserved forever.

² A land trust is a nonprofit organization that works with landowners and the community to conserve land.

- Then, with no land trust to drive the process, the project seemed stalled. But the threat of a large development in the neighborhood renewed concerns for the future of the property. Neighbors rallied to support the efforts of the Manse.
- RLC found an experienced consultant to continue the work, to determine and record the conservation value of the property and to create the CR document to reflect this value and the Manse group's wishes.
- Finally, in the fall of 2006, the Wildlands Trust of Southeastern Massachusetts agreed to partner with the Manse and hold the CR, working quickly to obtain approvals from local officials and the state, and meet an end of year deadline. The goal was in sight.

In spite of the lengthy process, the discouraging effect of each setback and the limitations of their scant financial resources, the Manse community remained steadfast in their conviction to conserve the property throughout this experience. They sought no recompense for giving up much of the monetary value of this property, for agreeing never to sell these acres for development. In fact, they did much of the fund-raising necessary to pay the cost of creating a stewardship endowment for the property.

The Packard Manse Conservation Restriction was legalized by signature of the Massachusetts Secretary of Environmental Affairs on Dec 29, 2006. By this act, these acres of mature white pine and pink and white trillium, home to the Elderberry Long-horned Beetle and valuable protection for the town's water supply, will remain in this natural state forever.



2008 Update

Time has not stood still for the Manse since their Conservation Restriction was completed. They have formed a relationship with Spirit in Nature (SPIN), a nonprofit group dedicated to creating and tending paths where people of diverse spiritual traditions may walk, worship, meet, meditate, and help to promote action toward better stewardship of this sacred Earth. SPIN completed a first trail through the property early in 2008, and hosted a celebration in the spring. Activities such as this have revitalized and strengthened the connection between the Manse and their neighboring community.