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July 1, 2006 - June 30, 2007

2007



Michael Strigel, Executive Director

From the Executive Director

I spent my first six months at Gathering Waters Conservancy on tour. I made a pointed effort to meet and sometimes share coffee or a meal with many of the people who have made this organization what it is – board members, founders, long-time supporters, leaders of partner organizations. I asked them why Gathering Waters Conservancy matters.

Over and over I heard that we matter because there is no other group working the way we do to help land trusts protect Wisconsin's special places. On this tour I also discovered, not surprisingly, a great collection of talent among people of all stripes who share one powerful, common interest. We all care a lot about land in Wisconsin.

The power of that passion for Wisconsin's special places fuels this organization. We have stirred up and captured it from supporters statewide in our Stewardship Campaign. It is the adhesive that brings together our collaborative projects in places like the Lake Michigan Basin and the St. Croix Watershed. Our staff visit land trusts across the state – some run out of dining rooms, others from staffed offices – and come back energized by the commitment of people determined to protect the lands that matter most to their communities.

I hope you are impressed, as I am, by this report and by what we've done with that collected passion for Wisconsin's great outdoors. As a member of our organization, your own commitment to conservation has powered our work to date. Thank you. This fall, Gathering Waters Conservancy will design a strategic plan for the next three years. We have ambitious goals to meet powered by Wisconsinites' love for outdoor places we visit with our families year after year.

I'm looking forward to our planning work this fall. As my infinite "tour" of Gathering Waters continues, if you have ideas about why Gathering Waters is valuable, feel free to contact me. I welcome the input.

Sincerely,

Michael Strigel

There are so many committed people working across the state to protect their special places. Pete Putnam, a retired engineer, assumed the land across the road from his house would be developed. It was for sale and slated for annexation by the neighboring village as commercial property. Pete regretted the inevitable bulldozing—he valued the view. He and his neighbors walked their dogs there in the evenings. Their daughters prowled the property amassing wildflower collections for biology class. It was home to a fascinating array of birds. It was disappointing to think the land was destined for strip malls.

Pete ventured to a few meetings about the future of the property. He learned that the vacant land was the single remnant of an ancient prairie that once stretched for miles across western Wisconsin. He learned that the DNR had tried to buy the land but couldn't meet the seller's price. He learned that several neighbors cared a good deal that the land be protected—though none could afford to purchase it alone. And he learned what an asset he had in his local land trust.

The Mississippi Valley Conservancy gave Pete and his neighbors an opportunity to save their prairie. With a grant from the state's Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Fund and the support of their members, the Conservancy offered a sizable portion of the asking price. In a landslide vote, town residents pledged tax money to make up the rest.

And Pete, who now knows that development of natural areas is not inevitable, is president of the Friends of Holland Sand Prairie and does much more than walk his dog on the land.

He and his fellow townspeople own it; school groups visit regularly; dedicated volunteers burn, collect seeds, cut brush and welcome hikers and birders to their 61-acre park.

The constellation of players who saved the Holland Sand Prairie is unique but not unparalleled in Wisconsin. Land trusts statewide catalyze community hope to protect the places that make Wisconsin special. Gathering Waters Conservancy works to keep landowners, communities, land trusts and their funders informed, well equipped and energized.

Our resolute campaign to see the state's Stewardship Fund reauthorized in the state budget is fueled by determination that all communities should be able to respond as the Town of Holland did when important lands are on the market. We share information with landowners in every county about their conservation options; we reach out to their lawyers and advisors, as well. Ten years ago Gathering Waters' staff met with committed citizens in La Crosse intent on forming a land trust. The Mississippi Valley Conservancy is now one of the largest land trusts in the state. Our ongoing technical service to Wisconsin land trusts remains the backbone of our mission to help communities protect their woods, farms, prairies and waterways.

To all those who have supported our efforts in the recent fiscal year, thank you. With your help, we are working toward a day when people in every community know that as their communities grow, they can turn to their strong local land trust to help safeguard the woods, prairies and local swimming holes that make us all come home to Wisconsin.

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we help people
protect the places
that make
Wisconsin special

Pete Putnam taking a break at the Holland Sand Prairie



Stewardship Matters

Gathering Waters Conservancy is determined to see the broad public support for conservation of Wisconsin's special places echoed in public policy. So, this year we launched a campaign on behalf of the state's **Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Fund**. After successfully defending the Stewardship Fund against attempted cuts in past years, Gathering Waters went on the offensive. Our goal is to see lawmakers extend the Stewardship Fund well beyond its current expiration date of 2010. Thanks in large part to our efforts, the Legislature is considering a proposal to renew the Stewardship Fund through 2020 and increase funding so that Stewardship can keep pace with rising land values. We plan to continue this campaign past the current budget negotiations to ensure that the Stewardship Fund is on solid bipartisan ground and off limits to political sparring in the future.

Thanks to all the land trusts and individuals who have participated in our campaign for the Stewardship Fund and to the following for contributing financially to this multi-year effort.

Foundations

Brico Fund
McKnight Foundation

Organizations

Baraboo Range Preservation Association
Cedar Lakes Conservation Foundation
The Conservation Fund
Door County Land Trust
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In Fiscal Year 2007, Gathering Waters Conservancy...

Strengthened our Core

We hired Mike Strigel as Executive Director. Rooted in Wisconsin conservation, he brings 8 years experience leading a statewide non-profit; we're lucky to have him aboard.

Advocated for Conservation

We campaigned to see the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Fund reauthorized, blanketed media with pro-Stewardship articles and letters and ushered over 400 people through the Capitol to meet lawmakers directly. We published and distributed over 15,000 copies of *Stories of Stewardship*, a booklet celebrating places protected with Stewardship funds.

We supported local and statewide farmland preservation efforts. We worked with the Department of Revenue to revise the *2007 Wisconsin Assessors Manual* to include information about conservation easements. We spread news of expanded federal tax incentives for conservation gifts and continue to lobby our Washington delegation to make those incentives permanent.

Shared Expertise

We spoke to landowners statewide – at least one a week – about their conservation options and educated their financial planners, attorneys and accountants through accredited trainings about conservation tools and tax law. We addressed over 70 Wisconsin Assessors about evaluating conservation easements. We introduced land trusts to new audiences including builders' associations, county conservationists, village boards, lake associations and estate planning councils.

Strengthened Wisconsin Land Trusts

We connected land trust practitioners to current news, knowledge and trends by co-hosting a seminar by a national tax law expert, serving on the program committee for the Midwest Regional Land Trust Conference and by holding the 2007 Wisconsin Land Trust Staff Retreat. We consulted one-on-one with over 15 land trusts and conservation groups. Our staff led a workshop, "Building a Robust Membership Program," and authored resources for land trusts on site conservation planning and preparing for accreditation.

Celebrated Conservation Success

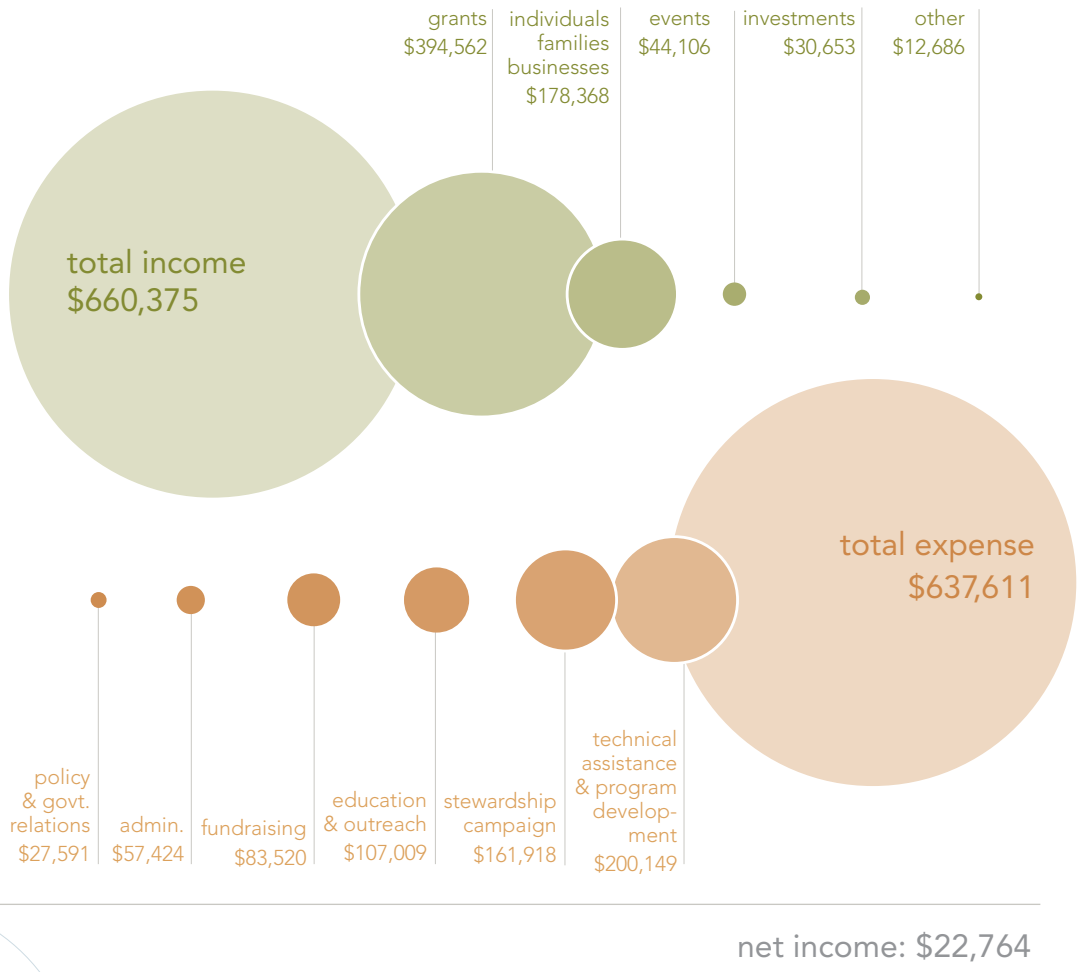
We promoted field trips on protected lands. We honored notable conservation achievements with our annual Land Conservation Leadership Awards. We helped Wisconsin Public Television film a half-hour *In Wisconsin* special on land trusts and appeared in *Wisconsin Trails* and *Madison Originals* magazines, on Wisconsin Public Radio's Larry Meiller show and Madison's WORT radio.

Cultivated Collaboration

We guided the creation of the *St. Croix River Watershed Conservation Report*, funded staff for the Milwaukee County Conservation Coalition, represented land trust interests to state and federal funding programs and continued to convene the Lake Michigan Shorelands Alliance.

Encouraged Future Leaders

We provided long-term internships in outreach, public policy and membership development.



Land Legacy Society

We are grateful for the leadership of the following contributors:

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we help **people**
protect the places
that make
Wisconsin special

"We've never really felt we own the land...it found us and we're interim caretakers. The conservation easement felt like an obvious, right thing to do for this incredible place." - Mariana Weinhold

Permanently Protected

In 2004 Frank and Mariana Weinhold visited Gathering Waters' office to learn about conservation options. They owned incredible property on the Wisconsin River. The land, known as Louis' Bluff, includes over a mile of undeveloped shoreline, a prominent wooded sandstone bluff and a patch of bluff-top prairie. The Weinholds felt compelled to make sure that those natural treasures outlasted their ownership. We explained the legal tools that might keep the property undeveloped and urged them to call the Natural Heritage Land Trust.

"The Weinholds came to us very well informed," explains Natural Heritage Land Trust Executive Director Jim Welsh. And in May 2007, the land trust used a grant from the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Fund to purchase a conservation easement protecting Louis' Bluff forever.

Whether in person, on the phone or via our web page, we at Gathering Waters share information about private land conservation with people statewide. When they call us, we introduce them to their local land trusts. All our supporters can be satisfied that our collective efforts help people like the Weinholds protect the places that make Wisconsin special.



The Wisconsin River from atop Louis' Bluff,
photo Natural Heritage Land Trust