



The system of private ownership of land, which once led to high productivity and personal independence, has become a major source of economic and social inequity. More people own private homes today, but the land is increasingly held and controlled by relatively few hands, and land costs keep rising. Those prepared to use the land productively, but who lack financial resources to pay inflated and speculative land prices, are hardest hit.

Land in Franklin and Hampshire counties was to a large extent once farmland--in recent years much of this has been lost to development. Between 1950 and 1969, 58% of the farmland in the lower Pioneer Valley was lost to other uses. There has been considerable loss of local and regional self-reliance; 85% of the food consumed in Massachusetts is now imported from out of state, and food costs are 6 to 8% above the national average.

Farmland is not all that is being lost; the entire integrity of the land has been affected. Land's highest value has become its market value price, rather than what it can produce through labor upon it. Land is increasingly inaccessible to people who would like to use it in a variety of productive, ecologically sound ways.

The concern for land use and land availability grows out of a broad perception of the problems of this region, for the use of land affects all aspects of society. Traditional means to combat problems of inappropriate land use, such as purchase of development rights or zoning, do not go far enough in their response to the problems. The community land trust (CLT) restores the concept of land stewardship or trusteeship. It creates an institutional alternative to existing practices of landholding based on a more ethical pattern of distribution and use.

HISTORY OF THE VALLEY COMMUNITY LAND TRUST

A committee of people from Franklin and Hampshire counties has been meeting since April, 1976, to compose a charter for a local CLT, and to handle incorporation. This group grew out of a public meeting held by an informal seminar group which had been meeting since early in the year to study the idea of land trusts.

The charter of this corporation covers some things specifically, such as the structure of meetings, composition of membership, and forms of decision-making. It gives some specific policy guidelines, such as requiring that land be mortgaged or sold only under extraordinary circumstances--which circumstances are enumerated. But it also states more general goals which will depend on the dedication and creativity of the membership for implementation. It is the hope of the originators that ways will be found to "acquire...land not as private or public property, but in trusteeship... for present and future generations by keeping said land from the pressures of speculation" within the framework of the charter.

Other basic purposes of the corporation which are enumerated are to provide more widespread access to land; to encourage sound management of land and resources; to support community based institutions; and to work with radically democratic methods of decision making.

"The Corporation shall encourage participation of individuals from a wide variety of...backgrounds." Essentially, anyone with a genuine interest and desire to join may do so. There are two types of membership, supporting and active. The active status requires the completion of an education and waiting period.

General membership meetings will usually be held in October and April. Anyone wishing to become a member should come to a general meeting, or contact the registered agent.

Copies of the charter may be seen at the Greenfield Public Library (ask at the main desk), Jones Library in Amherst, or Forbes Library in Northampton. Copies may also be obtained by mail from the registered agent for 50 cents.

THE COMMUNITY LAND TRUST

The community land trust is a legal entity and a quasi-public body chartered to hold land in stewardship for present and future generations while protecting the legitimate use-rights of residents on the land.

Land is held by a CLT in perpetuity--probably never to be sold. The CLT provides access through leaseholds for persons wishing to live on the land and put it to productive and sound use. Leases are long-term and restricted to the users of the land; absentee control is specifically prohibited.

A CLT removes a major obstacle in the way of low-income people seeking access to land by eliminating the necessity of obtaining mortgages. Leasing land can also allow a young farmer, a potentially important CLT constituent, to invest his or her limited capital in machinery, land improvements and buildings.

Both in concept and in practical operation, a CLT distinguishes between the land with its natural resources and the improvements by people thereon. The land is held in trust; homes, stores, and industrial enterprises created by the residents are owned by them, either cooperatively or individually.

A CLT may acquire land from older farmers near retirement, absentee owners, or others wishing to remove their lands from the pressures of the marketplace. It can then lease them to others and/or back to the original occupants for settlement and use.

Some land will be acquired for free or for less than market value through friends of the CLT. Conventional mortgages can be used as well as money made available through revolving loan funds set up by the CLT. Cooperative and individual homesteads, agricultural and forest development, low-income housing, and community-based business and industry may all grow from the land trust.

SPECIAL THANKS TO: The Community Land Trust, Robert Swann et al., International Independence Institute, West Road, Box 183, Ashby, Mass. 01431.

ADDITIONAL SUGGESTED READINGS: Maine Land Advocate (Maine Community Land Trust Newspaper), P.O. Box 653, Bangor, Maine 04401; Progress and Poverty, Henry George, 1940; The People's Land, Peter Barnes, ed., 1975; Who Owns The Land, Peter Barnes and Larry Casalino.

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I am interested in the Land Trust movement. Please notify me of general meetings.

I would like to become a member of the Valley Community Land Trust.

I am enclosing fifty cents for a copy of the charter.

I would like to talk with someone about putting land in trust.

I am interested in leasing land from the land trust.

Special interests, skills, resources:

Name:

Address:

Phone number:

Send to:

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Betsy Corn Kehler
Registered Agent
Valley Community Land Trust
Whately, Mass. 01093

