Founder’s Message

By Richard Bliss

I am occasionally asked how the Northern Virginia Conservation Trust got its start. Here’s the tale in a nutshell.

In 1992, after living in Northern Virginia for about 20 years, I was appointed to the Board of the Fairfax County Park Authority. Having served on various committees of the Board of the Great Falls Citizens Association, I was very familiar with the pressures of a rapidly expanding population and disappearing open space in the County and region.

One of the first questions I had for the Park Authority Board was, “What’s our plan for acquiring more ‘green space’ to protect our water, air and wildlife, as well as providing recreational opportunities?” I was surprised to learn that there was no plan, and no resources to put one into effect. Some of my Park Authority colleagues considered me semi-subversive for suggesting “banking land” and diverting resources from something we could pave.

However, many folks that I discussed this with at the time seemed in favor of preserving green space, but no government agency was specifically charged with that mission. I started thinking about a non-governmental solution, and became aware of the potential of a private land trust. I worked out an agreement with the Park Authority for it to cooperate in the formation of such an organization and recruited my friends Pat Coady and Dave Karmol to serve on our first board. The Trust was born in 1994. The first few years were truly a struggle for survival. We did attract a small core of true believers and supporters, most still there for us. These folks deserve a lot of credit for the land we were eventually able to protect.

Our initial efforts were focused on raising enough money to pay the rent and helping the Park Authority get authorization for bond initiatives to provide funding for more land. We also worked on inspiring political help in the acquisition of land, with some success. The County’s creation of the 52 acre Turner Farm Park in Great Falls, for example. Those initiatives kept us inspired.

However, the Trust had very limited funds, none for land purchases, and was ineligible to hold conservation easements under Virginia law until it had been in existence for five years.

The first real “coup” was our 1997 acquisition of a 70 acre site on the Crow’s Nest peninsula in Stafford County, home of one of the largest nesting sites for Great Blue Herons in the entire Chesapeake Bay area. NVCT owes this success to Hal Wiggins of the US Corps of Engineers and Stafford County, which provided us with the legal basis and economic resources for being able to purchase this property. Even though we have now preserved over 4,000 acres spread over more than 100 sites in the region, this is still one of our premiere holdings.

The Heronry project also helped us consider the importance of preserving nature as both a local and regional matter, and led us to begin work beyond Fairfax County to all of Northern Virginia. Once the Trust was able to hold easements, several jurisdictions, including Fairfax County, Arlington County and the City of Alexandria, began to provide financial resources to the Trust to help us expand our staff and reach. Local governments have seen how working with us accomplishes a very popular and important goal at minimal expense. With the federal and state tax incentives for owners of land with conservation value to grant conservation easements to land trusts, it’s usually a win-win combination for everyone.

I’m very proud of our Board, some of whom have been with NVCT almost from the beginning (our beloved Chairman, Jean Packard, for example) and our very professional staff who make the organization work so well. Also, this year (2008) NVCT was accredited by the Land Trust Accreditation Committee, one of only 39 land trusts so honored (thus far) out of 1700 land trusts currently operating in the US.

It has been a long journey, and there were many doubters and skeptics and bumps in the road. But we have now helped to preserve over seven square miles of land in a densely populated and growing metropolitan area, which frames our national capital. Knowing that NVCT’s “product” is a perpetual gift to our area, country and children, has made the trip very rewarding, if not always fun. But there’s still much to do!