

GAINING GROUND

Protecting 60 million acres by 2030

LOCAL ACTIONS CAN HAVE GLOBAL IMPACTS when people come together to support conservation land trusts. In the U.S., land trusts have saved more than 61 million acres of land—an increase of 15 million acres since 2010. Recently, the Land Trust Alliance, a national organization that represents more than 950 land trusts, announced a bold initiative. Named *Gaining Ground*, its goal is to conserve another 60 million acres by the end of the decade. Working together, Openlands joins land trusts across the country in increasing the pace and scale of conservation in our region to achieve this vision of conserving 30% of U.S. lands and waters by 2030.

This ambitious goal can’t come a moment too soon. The recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report published in April 2022 urged that time is running out for world leaders to act. At the same time, they underscored a big reason for hope — **that we have the tools necessary to mitigate and adapt to climate change TODAY.**

Among these tools are nature-based solutions, or natural climate solutions, which prioritize land and water restoration, protection, and sustainable agriculture and development to fight and make communities more resilient to climate change. In the U.S., local and state land trusts are leading the way forward, contributing 70% of the growth in land protection since 2015. In this region, Openlands has conserved an estimated 70,000 acres since 1963 through its land and water conservation, policy, community, and farming initiatives.

Reaching this goal will take collective action. As Openlands joins land trusts big and small in meeting the needs of communities through partnerships, engagement, and outreach, individual action is key to our collective success. In priority landscapes across the region, you can participate by voting, volunteering, and supporting conservation. Together, we ensure a healthier, more equitable, and resilient region.

Let’s keep gaining ground.

BACKGROUND: Bartel Grassland, part of the Forest Preserves of Cook County. Openlands partnered with the Forest Preserves, Audubon-Chicago Region, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Thorn Creek Audubon Society and the Bartel Grassland Volunteers to restore Bartel. Today, it is a haven for birds and a designated Illinois Nature Preserve.

WHAT IS A LAND TRUST?

A land trust is a charitable organization that acquires land and/or holds conservation easements. It protects and stewards the land to achieve one or more conservation purposes. At Openlands, we acquire land to transfer to other government entities, hold conservation easements, and help restore the land to good health. We also commit to protecting the land from threats along the way, such as roads or development. Openlands is proud to be an accredited land trust. Openlands first became a member of the Land Trust Alliance Member in 1983. In 2013, it was accredited for the first time by the Land Trust Accreditation Commission, an independent program of the Land Trust Alliance.

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VOTE YES FOR CLEAN AIR, CLEAN WATER + WILDLIFE

Local Forest Preserve and Conservation Districts are vital entities that can protect natural land and restore it to good health, help reduce flooding, keep our streams, lakes, and rivers clean, and mitigate the increasing effects of climate change. Land trusts like Openlands work in close coordination with these districts, extending tax-payer dollars by assisting in protecting and restoring thousands of acres of land. In Cook County, the opportunity to advance conservation and access to nature close to home for more residents is now. On November 8, 2022, Cook County voters will have the chance to support the forest preserves with the Vote Yes for Clean Air, Clean Water, and Wildlife ballot referendum.

The first ballot referendum since the 1930s for the first and largest forest preserve district in the nation, the money generated from its passage will go towards protecting and restoring land and water, increasing access to and maintaining amenities of existing preserves, and more than doubling the Forest Preserve job and scholarship opportunities for people across the county. The Vote Yes for Clean Air, Clean Water, and Wildlife ballot measure comes on the heels of record usage and increased need. In 2020 and 2021 alone, visits to the Forest Preserves of Cook County almost doubled, with over 100 million visits each year.

As a trusted partner of the Forest Preserves of Cook County since our founding almost 60 years ago, we know this referendum is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to increase conservation in the most populated urban area, where natural, undeveloped land is in short supply. The referendum will allow the Forest Preserves of Cook County to protect more land, especially on the southeast side of Chicago and Cook County, where access to nature is limited. Estimates show that over 2,000 acres can be protected from development for people and wildlife with a winning referendum. Forest preserve acres in active restoration will also expand with a successful passage, from the current 15,000 acres to 35,000 acres, which will clean air and water, and protect wildlife in the region. And for people—programs and events, scholarships, and job opportunities will grow. Job and scholarship opportunities for youth, mainly on the south and west sides of Cook County, will increase from 200 to 500 positions through the district's Conservation Corps.

Openlands has a long history of supporting forest preserve and conservation districts. In 1972 Openlands worked on the referendum that successfully created the McHenry County Conservation District, a close partner ever since. Across the region, Openlands supported other successful measures in Lake, McHenry, DuPage, and Will County, all in the last 20 years. Now, Openlands is proud to be part of the coalition advocating for the referendum's successful passage in Cook County.

This November 8th, the opportunity to keep gaining ground will be on the ballot for Cook County residents. And by simply voting "yes" at the end of the ballot, residents can impact health, access, and opportunity for generations to come. To learn more about the ballot referendum, why it's essential, and how you can help, visit **VoteYesForestPreserves.org**.

VOLUNTEER TO CREATE HACKMATACK NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

When people come together to protect and care for the land in their communities, even something seemingly large and out of reach, like a National Wildlife Refuge, can become a reality. Steve Beyer, Nancy Williamson, and Pete Jackson are good examples of volunteers' transformative impact. The three are leaders of Friends of Hackmatack, a volunteer-run nonprofit, and a longstanding partner of Openlands. In 2004, they dreamt about establishing a large, protected landscape that could be a refuge for grassland birds threatened due to habitat loss. Meeting with partners at the Illinois Department of Natural Resources and McHenry County Conservation District to determine if it was possible, Ed Collins, who serves as Director of Land Preservation & Natural Resources at the District, thought to bring in Openlands. As he puts it, "from the very beginning, Openlands was there."

Hackmatack National Wildlife Refuge, which celebrates ten years since its official establishment in 2012, has grown into a unique partnership of diverse conservation organizations, government partners, and engaged individuals, who have protected over 9,000 acres and counting for wildlife and people. The partners work toward a vision of the Refuge, located on the border of Wisconsin and Illinois in McHenry County, that could someday include over 30,000 acres of protected healthy land and water.

Volunteers are essential to reaching 30,000 acres of protected land. As Openlands and other partners acquire land, it needs restoration. From removing invasive plants and other infrastructure to planting native plants or even helping re-meander streams to their natural courses, people that give anywhere from an hour to hundreds of hours towards restoration efforts ensure the sustainability and growth of the Refuge into the future.

For Friends of Hackmatack Board Member Pete Jackson, one of the best examples of the impact that volunteers make at Hackmatack is the ongoing work at Tamarack Farms East—an area acquired and currently owned by Openlands for transfer in the next few years. "We've been working there for over two years, and we've put in over 825 hours of volunteer time. Tamarack Farms has a savanna that was severely degraded with overgrown brush. We were able to complete the clearing of that site, and we're doing follow-up work now." Over the next few years, Friends volunteers will continue working on an additional 165 acres at Tamarack Farms West near Glacial Park Conservation Area within the Refuge, restoring prairie, wetlands, and headwater streams contributing to the Nippersink Creek.

Jackie Bero, the volunteer coordinator at the McHenry County Conservation District, explains that volunteers do more than manage land. The volunteers who work with the Conservation District and Friends of Hackmatack are teachers and advocates who educate others about the importance of conservation. Without the help of volunteers, the scope of work necessary to keep Hackmatack restored would not be possible. "We can't do it all ourselves; there's too much land to cover. Frankly, we're inspired by what volunteers can and will do," Bero explained.

Like many places in the region, volunteers are integral to land trusts' success, from the acquisition to restoration and long-term protection. As Openlands' Restoration Specialist Linda Masters puts it, "A vibrant volunteer community is really the eyes and ears on the ground—they are constituents and voters. They will write to their legislators and ensure that these places remain and are not bulldozed or developed, that they are cared for."

There are numerous opportunities to volunteer at Hackmatack and across the region with Openlands and other conservation organizations. For more information on how to get involved, visit **Openlands.org/volunteer**.



**SUPPORT HERITAGE, COMMUNITY
+ NATURE IN THE CALUMET**

Investment in local conservation efforts is transformational to the community, and its impact can also ripple across the region when partnership and community voices are centered. That ripple effect is part of the vision for the Little Calumet River and the larger Calumet Heritage Area.

Encompassing the south side of Chicago and following the Little Calumet and Grand Calumet River systems across northern Indiana, the Calumet Heritage Area is home to nationally significant natural, industrial, and cultural assets. For ten years, Openlands has been a part of the Calumet Land Conservation Partnership, which includes eight other member organizations who strategize and coordinate their work to conserve thousands of acres in this multi-faceted area of the region.

While the Calumet Land Conservation Partnership coordinates strategy across over a million acres of land, Openlands currently focuses on the Little Calumet River area on the south side of Chicago. Openlands’ work along the Little Calumet River and in the larger Calumet Heritage Area exemplifies how coordinating networks, organizations, and residents is essential to increasing the use of nature-based solutions throughout the region.

Like many projects across the Calumet Heritage Area, Openlands’ strategy along the Little Calumet River is a community-led, multi-pronged approach with many partner organizations contributing. In 2021, Openlands published the Little Calumet River Conservation Action Plan with partners The Field Museum and Metropolitan Planning Council. This plan, which centers on a 7-mile river and greenway corridor, is one of four Conservation Action Plans, or CAPs, across the Calumet that coordinate protection efforts and engage existing landowners in restoring their land to good health. With the CAP as a guide, Openlands and Neighborspace are working with the City of Chicago and Cook County Land Bank to secure land for protection. Simultaneously, Openlands and The Field Museum are restoring Beaubien Woods. When complete, the restoration will make the trails more welcoming and increase access to the Little Calumet River. Throughout, community-based organizations like the Little Calumet Underground Railroad Project, We Keep You Rollin’ (Bike & Wellness Group), and Chicago’s Finest Marina work with Openlands and partners to ensure the efforts reflect community needs and vision.

Openlands land conservation efforts in the Calumet work in lockstep with cultural heritage preservation to ensure sustainable economic development that builds up from and benefits the existing community. This summer, Openlands will pilot a paddling and water trail guide internship for the African American Heritage Water Trail. Working with 15 young people from St. Sabina’s Church and the Forest Preserves of Cook County to help guide and interpret the trail and its vibrant history, Openlands and partners will host five training sessions and paddles, hoping to generate interest and pride in the area, and economic opportunities for Chicago southside youth and adults. While boat rentals and related infrastructure plans are still in development, the training program will introduce young people to conservation job opportunities.

Dynamic conservation efforts and the organizations that participate in and lead them need the support of a large community. Donors at all contribution levels help move work forward at the scale of the region. To help us reach bold conservation goals like Gaining Ground, or to find out how you can support Openlands in the Calumet and across the region, visit **Openlands.org/support**.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: A Pine Warbler stops at Palos Preserve; Nancy Williamson, a volunteer with Friends of Hackmatack, stoops to remove an invasive plant from an unrestored area purchased by Openlands; two youths with St. Sabina Church and their mentor, Erica Nanton, kayak the Little Calumet; three teens walk the trail at Whistler Woods; paddle guides from Friends of the Chicago River, Openlands staff, and teens paddle the Little Calumet River as part of an African American Heritage Water Trail Event in 2021.

Celebrating the Sale of Casey Farm in Lake County

OPENLANDS IS PLEASED TO ANNOUNCE the sale of the 13-acre Casey Farm in Libertyville, Illinois, which was transferred to Farm Foundation in April. A partner of Openlands, Farm Foundation will transform the farm into its central Innovation and Education Campus.

Once a Civil War-era family farm, the Casey Farm property was acquired by Openlands when it merged with Conserve Lake County in 2018. Farm Foundation’s new state-of-the-art facility will create a space that continues to educate and inspire the community on the importance and potential of agriculture. The Campus will include new local, national, and international programming on regenerative food and agriculture, experiential learning for young food and farm entrepreneurs, and accelerated training and educational opportunities in a fully tech-enabled space.



While Farm Foundation owns the land, Openlands holds a conservation easement on the property that ensures the protection of the natural and cultural features of the site, including agricultural lands, native oak habitat, and nearby Bull’s Brook. A conservation easement is a legal agreement in which the landowner retains title to the property but voluntarily restricts uses to protect certain natural features. Under the easement, Openlands will periodically assess the property’s condition to ensure its natural integrity in perpetuity. Openlands holds 25 such easements in Lake County, mainly in the 5,000-acre Liberty Prairie Reserve, of which Casey Farm is a part, and 72 total conservation easements in the region.

Openlands is thrilled to welcome Farm Foundation to the Liberty Prairie Reserve and looks forward to future partnerships and collaborations to ensure healthy and sustainable agriculture for the region and world.

ABOVE LEFT: The barn and Bur oak at Casey Farm. The oak is part of a conservation easement Openlands holds on the property. BACKGROUND: The restored prairie at Bartel Grassland.

Save the Date for Openlands 2022 Annual Luncheon



Friday, October 21, 2022
Palmer House Hilton

2022 Conservation Leadership Award Recipient:
ADELE SIMMONS

JOIN OPENLANDS for the 2022 Annual Luncheon honoring Adele Simmons’ numerous contributions to environmental conservation in Chicago and worldwide. As president of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation from 1989 to 1999, Ms. Simmons led large-scale initiatives that preserved land on five continents. Through her work as president of the Global Philanthropy Partnership, she has spearheaded conversations on climate change that drive solutions that continue to change our world. Ms. Simmons has been a life-long champion for the environment and an early and consistent voice addressing climate issues critical to Openlands’ mission to connect people to nature.

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OPENLANDS
25 East Washington, Suite 1650
Chicago, Illinois 60602-1708

Telephone 312.863.6250
openlands.org

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**3 actions YOU can take
to ensure everyone has access
to natural places.**

Plus, a special Get Outside Map!