

# What Is Stewardship? What Does It Involve?



GREAT WORKS  
Regional Land Trust

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**Stewardship** is the long term monitoring and protection of the natural resources on a parcel of property. The caring for and conservation of natural values is one of the primary services that the Great Works Regional Land Trust (GWRLT) offers to landowners. The donation of a conservation easement is a major decision for any landowner. Whenever the Trust accepts a conservation easement it assumes a commitment of the legal responsibility to carry out the donor's intentions by upholding the terms of the agreement. This responsibility of the Trust lasts forever.

After a conservation easement agreement is signed the protection of the land itself has just begun. The condition of the land is documented in the compiling of the baseline data (maps, photographs, reports) that reflect the resources present and to be protected. The Trust has the legal obligation to monitor the land and to enforce the restrictions if they are violated. Trained volunteers visit the land to monitor its condition at least once each year. These visits are by plane, on foot, or both. The visits help assure that the use of the land is consistent with the restrictions placed on it by the landowner. A report is prepared after each site visit and sent to the landowner and a copy kept by the Trust.

Although it is unusual for the grantor of an easement to violate the terms of the easement, the likelihood that a violation will occur increases as time passes and the property changes hands. If a violation is found the trust contacts the landowner, discusses the situation, and works to find a solution. If necessary the Trust can take legal action to uphold the terms of the easement. When there are new owners of the land or when questions arise about the restrictions the Trust takes time to ensure the understanding of the agreement.

To cover the costs associated with stewardship, the GWRLT has a "Stewardship Fund." The establishment of a stewardship account for each easement is an important step in assuring the long-term fulfillment of the Trust's responsibilities to the landowner. It helps to guarantee that money will be available to cover the costs of gathering baseline data, annual monitoring, and the enforcement costs associated with any violations. It is used solely for those purposes. If a violation does occur

the Trust has available the entire amount of the Fund to support whatever action is needed. This allows all obligations to be defended equally and to the fullest extent that the GWRLT resources allow.

A seldom necessary but very important advantage to having a Stewardship Fund established for each Protected Parcel is in the event the GWRLT finds it necessary to transfer the responsibility for the easement to another similar organization. The fact that a fund would follow with the obligation would make it much easier to reach an agreement for assuming the responsibility.

The Trust requests a tax-deductible donation to the Stewardship Fund from each easement donor to establish an account for that property at the time the easement is donated. If a donation is not possible at the time of the easement gift, landowners are asked to consider pledging a future contribution which may be donated over several years. The amount of the requested donation depends on the size of the property, access, the restrictions the Trust is responsible for, and whether there will be new owners in the immediate future. For a general guideline the suggested amounts are \$1000 for parcels up to 50 acres and \$1500 over 50 acres. These suggested amounts reflect a situation where the landowner placing the easements will continue to own the land and all the development rights have been transferred to the Trust. Larger gifts are encouraged and are used to build up a reserve and help the GWRLT work with landowners who are not able to make a financial contribution.

A donation to the Fund is not a condition for the Trust to accept a conservation easement. The Trustees will take into account the availability of funds when deciding to accept an easement responsibility. The Trust can elect to raise the funds necessary if it is justified by the situation. In summary, the Stewardship Fund acts as an insurance policy providing assurance that the land will indeed be protected forever.