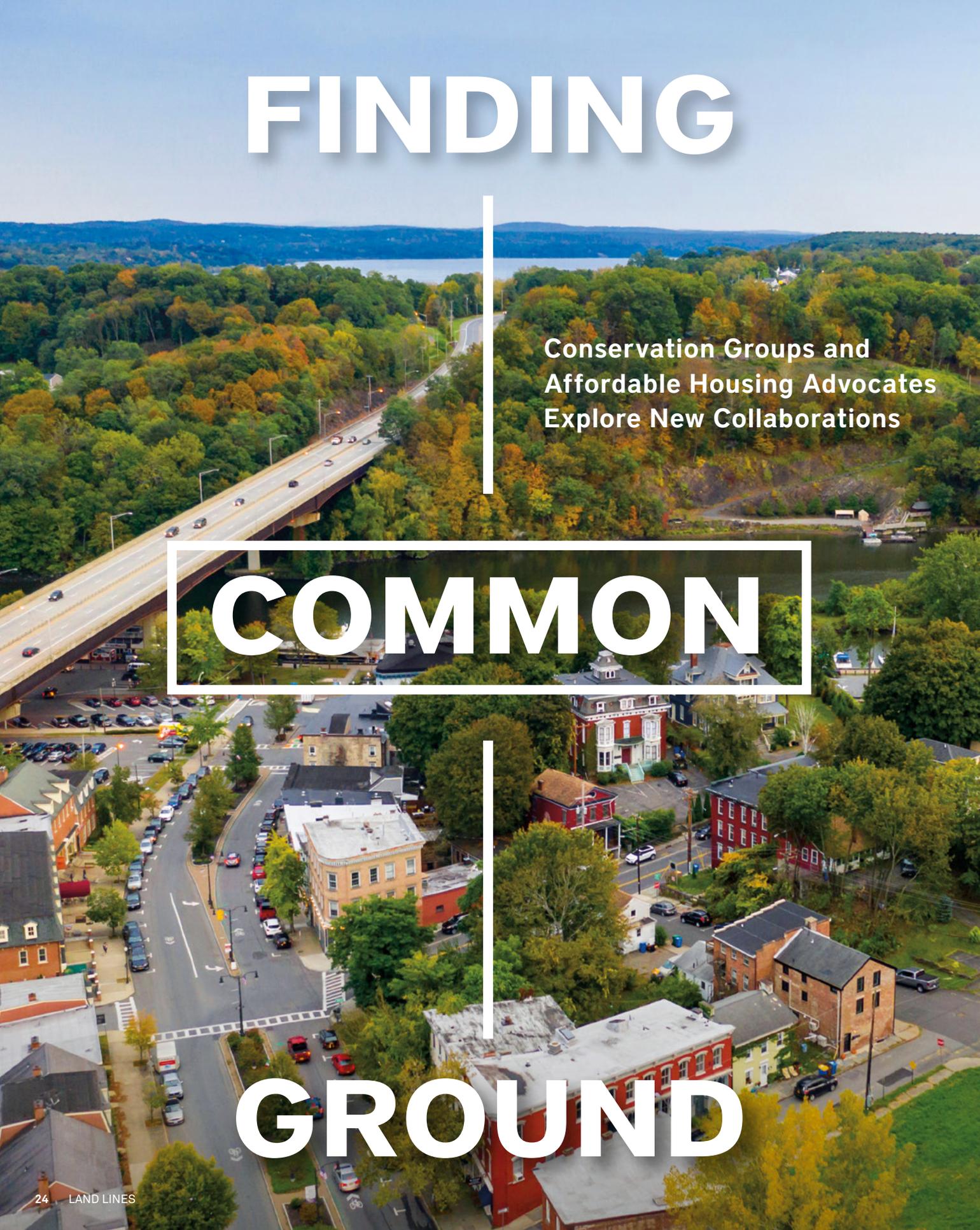


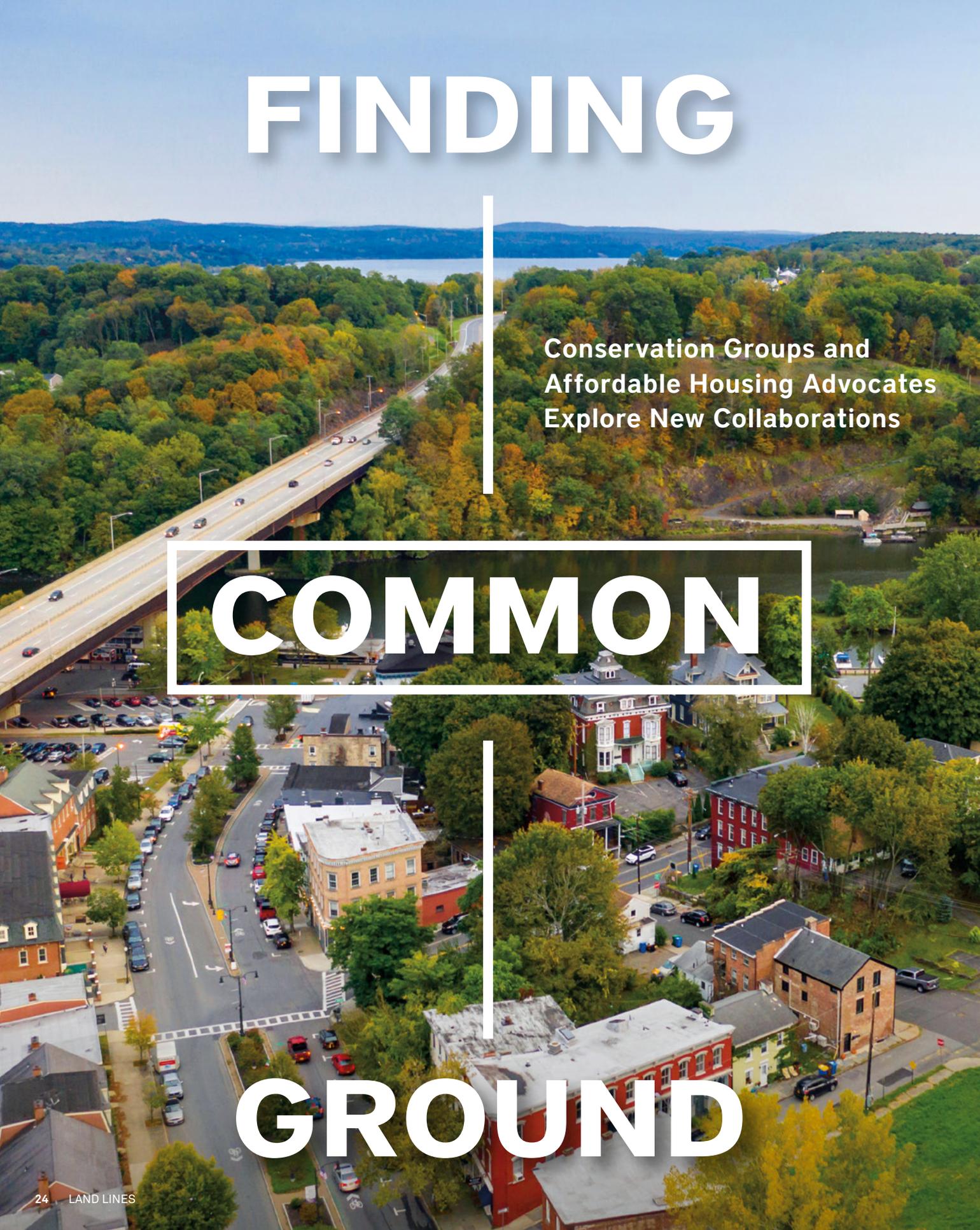
FINDING



Conservation Groups and
Affordable Housing Advocates
Explore New Collaborations

COMMON

GROUND



By Audrea Lim

IN HIS THREE DECADES leading the Scenic Hudson Land Trust, Steve Rosenberg saw waves of people moving from cities to the Hudson Valley following major events: 9/11, Hurricanes Sandy and Irene, even Chelsea Clinton's wedding in Rhinebeck. So when another wave arrived during COVID-19, part of the great migration of urban office workers to rural America, it wasn't exactly novel.

But this time, things were different in the Hudson Valley, which runs along the Hudson River from New York City to Albany. Land and real estate prices were skyrocketing, due to the influx of new residents and the broader pressures of the market. In the region's cities and villages, gentrification had begun sweeping areas long marred by disinvestment, displacing low-income residents, posing a threat to Black and Brown communities, and making it hard to preserve and create affordable housing.

This "intense pressure on the land," Rosenberg says, was also making the job of conservation harder. Just a decade earlier, land trusts could more easily assemble three or four parcels of land to create a contiguous protected area that would help preserve wildlife habitat and build climate resilience. Now it would take 10 or 12 purchases to assemble a comparable amount of acreage, and conservation groups were more frequently being outbid.

As they vied with outside buyers for land, the region's conservation and housing organizations faced similar challenges, and some began to wonder if they could accomplish more by working together. At the same time, some conservation organizations, prompted largely by the Black Lives Matter movement, were exploring how they might better address racial justice, public health, and climate equity as part of a more community-centered type of land conservation. But housing and conservation groups also seemed to exist in parallel worlds, with different missions, goals, funding models, and governance structures.

Still, Rosenberg saw potential. When he retired from Scenic Hudson in 2021, he teamed up with Rebecca Gilman Crimmins, a Hudson Valley native and affordable housing professional in New York City, to convene a working group of five conservation land trusts and five affordable housing organizations in the region. The groups began learning about each other's work, identifying where that work intersects, and mapping potential places where they might partner. They combined census, biodiversity, and climate data with their knowledge about local officials, planning policies, and land use regulations (RPA 2023). "Healthy communities need to have both" open space and affordable housing, Rosenberg said. "They shouldn't be seen as mutually exclusive or in opposition to one another."

As real estate prices spike, the climate unravels, and America undergoes a racial reckoning, conservation and affordable housing groups are beginning to explore how they can work together.

As real estate prices spike, the climate unravels, and America undergoes a racial reckoning, conservation and affordable housing groups are beginning to explore how they can work together. In 2022, the Lincoln Institute convened practitioners and advocates, including Rosenberg and Crimmins, to discuss the potential for collaboration by conservation land trusts and community land trusts. Through a series of virtual and in-person discussions supported by the 1772 Foundation, participants from national, regional, and local groups explored the barriers that have gotten in the way of partnership—and the opportunities ahead.

The Hudson Valley community of Kingston, New York. The Kingston Land Trust is part of a new coalition working to protect open space and preserve affordable housing in the region. Credit: Chris Boswell/Alamy Stock Photo.

Shared Concerns, Separate Roots

America's first conservation land trust, The Trustees of Reservations, was dreamed up by landscape architect Charles Eliot, whose father was president of Harvard. Eliot saw the nation's cities yellowing with industrial pollution, and envisioned wild green pockets of open space in every city and town. The state enabled The Trustees to begin acquiring and protecting land in 1891. Today, America has 1,281 land trusts that have protected more than 61 million acres. Mostly operating in rural and suburban settings and often run by volunteers, land trusts protect wildlife habitats, critical ecosystems, and natural, historical, and cultural sites by buying and managing parcels outright or by holding conservation easements—voluntary legal agreements with landowners that limit development and other defined uses on a property.

Community land trusts (CLTs), by contrast, have more recent beginnings. In 1969, a group of civil rights activists led by Charles Sherrod set out to build collective wealth and power among Black farmers in southwest Georgia. They created New Communities, an undertaking that combined community ownership of land with individual homeownership, serving as a model for

today's CLTs. The organization was forced to foreclose on its land in 1985, after the USDA's discriminatory practices deprived it of crucial grants and aid in the wake of a devastating drought. But it's still operating as an educational organization, and it ignited a movement: today there are more than 300 CLTs in the country. CLTs are still oriented toward serving marginalized communities, and typically own land while giving individuals the opportunity to own the homes and businesses on top. Despite their rural origins, most CLTs now focus on providing permanently affordable housing in urban settings.

These distinct origins have led to an array of differences, as Katie Michels and David Hindin describe in a working paper prepared for the Lincoln Institute convening (Michels and Hindin 2023). Land trusts have tended to focus on and be led by wealthier, whiter, and more rural constituencies, while CLTs are more often geared to and governed by people of color. The resources available to the groups are also different.

“Compared to CLTs, land trusts may be wealthier organizations with greater access to political power and financial resources,” Hindin and Michels write, noting that public and private funding is usually dedicated to conservation or housing, but not both. Because both groups need land to fulfill their mission, they add, “some local conservation and community land trusts have

Charles Sherrod (on porch steps) canvassing for the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee in 1963. Sherrod would later cofound New Communities, which inspired the nation's community land trust (CLT) movement. Credit: Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University.





In coastal Maine, a land trust and community land trust (CLT) are partnering on a joint effort to protect wetlands and build affordable workforce housing. Credit: Mike Perlman, courtesy of Island Housing Trust.

had negative experiences with each other and may view the other as competitors.”

But that’s beginning to change. “We’re starting to see some conservation land trusts and CLTs really trying to figure out how to work together,” said Beth Sorce, vice president of sector growth at Grounded Solutions Network, a national nonprofit that promotes affordable housing solutions and grew out of a network of CLTs. As cities metastasize and affordable parcels grow scarce, conservation and affordable housing organizations are beginning to see past their differences, says Sorce, who participated in the Lincoln Institute convening: “We have a common goal of a really healthy, livable place. Maybe instead of everyone trying to acquire land individually, we could work together to figure out how to do this in a way that makes our community green.”

Land trusts across the country “are providing so many benefits to our environment and to people’s lives and well-being,” said Forrest King-Cortes, director of community-centered conservation at the Land Trust Alliance (LTA), a national coalition of conservation land trusts. LTA hired King-Cortes—who also participated in the Lincoln Institute convening—to lead its efforts to put people at the center of conservation work, and he sees “more opportunity to have dialogue with other movements like the affordable housing movement.”

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LINCOLN INSTITUTE COLLOQUIUM ON CONSERVATION AND COMMUNITY LAND TRUSTS

During 2022, the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy led a yearlong research effort on the potential for collaboration between conservation land trusts and community land trusts (CLTs). With the support of Peter Stein of Lyme Timber Company and a grant from the 1772 Foundation, the institute convened a core group of experts in conservation and affordable housing for a series of meetings, culminating with a colloquium and working paper (Michels and Hindin 2023).

The colloquium has informed ongoing efforts to advance land conservation and affordable housing priorities. In February, working paper coauthors Katie Michels and David Hindin advised the Connecticut Land Conservation Council’s summit for advocates and leaders in the conservation and housing sectors to consider shared agendas and future policy goals. In March, Jim Levitt, director of Sustainably Managed Land and Water Resources at the Lincoln Institute, moderated a keynote panel titled “Affordable Housing and Land Conservation: Not an Either/Or” at the annual meeting of the Massachusetts Land Trust Coalition; the panel included a colloquium participant.

“To thrive, communities need permanently affordable housing and permanently conserved land that provides green space, natural infrastructure, and biodiversity-friendly habitat,” says Chandni Navalkha, associate director of Sustainably Managed Land and Water Resources at the Lincoln Institute. “By working in greater collaboration, these communities of practice have unique potential in leveraging their decades of success and experience to implement multigoal, multibenefit projects that address communities’ most pressing challenges.”

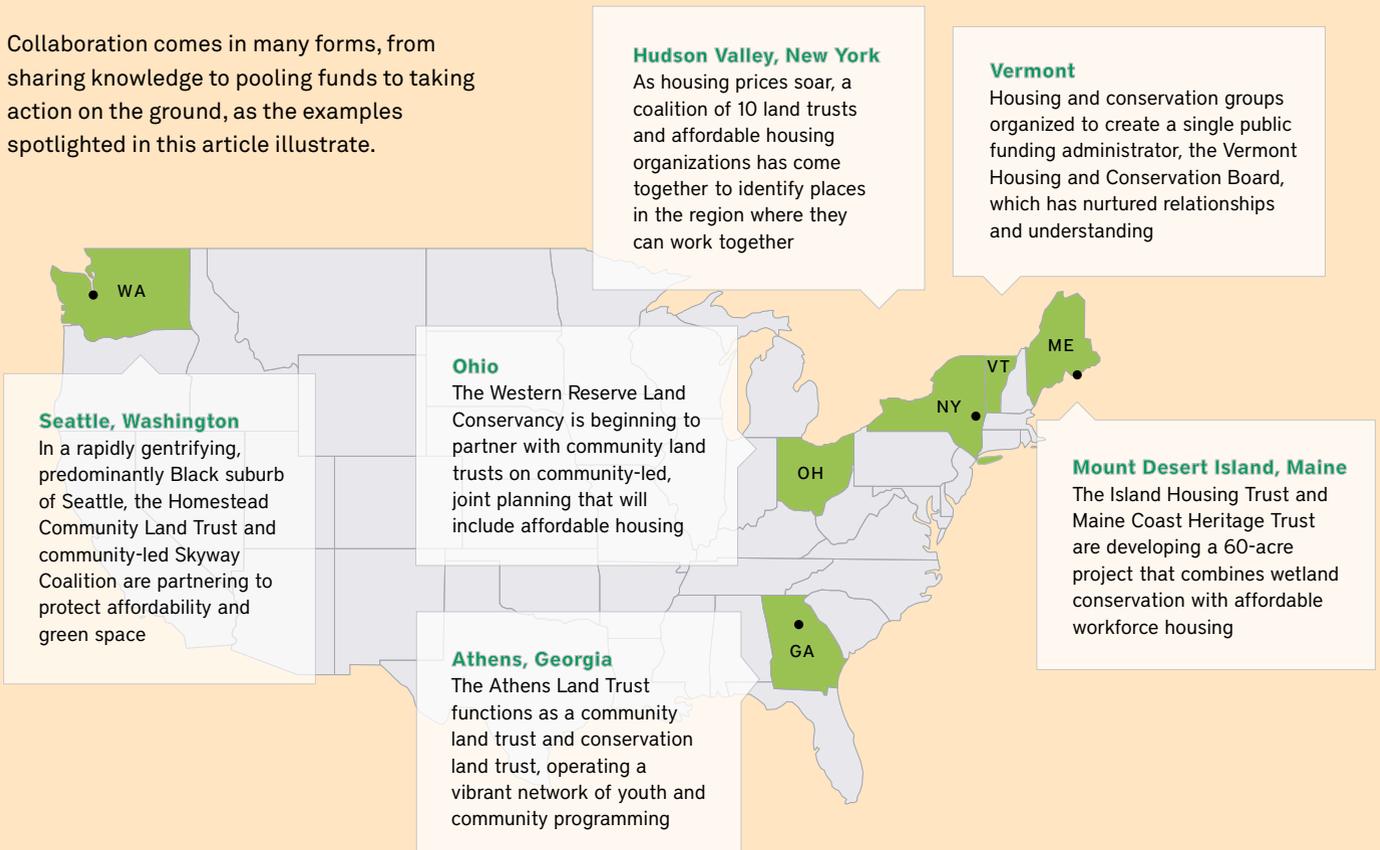
As these conversations continue, participants are identifying many possible forms of collaboration, from exchanging ideas and information to jointly pushing for policy reform. In some cases, groups are taking action on the ground. In Ohio, the Western Reserve Land Conservancy, which has long worked with local land banks to acquire properties for public green space, is beginning to partner with CLTs on community-led, joint planning that will include affordable housing. On Mount Desert Island in Maine, where housing constraints and costs lead 54 percent of workers to live off-island, the Island Housing Trust, a CLT, is partnering with the Maine Coast Heritage Trust on a 60-acre project that combines wetland conservation with the

development of affordable workforce housing. And in a rapidly developing, predominantly Black suburb of Seattle, the Homestead Community Land Trust and community-led Skyway Coalition are partnering to protect affordability and green space as they stave off gentrification.

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COLLABORATION IN ACTION: CONSERVATION AND AFFORDABLE HOUSING GROUPS WORKING TOGETHER

Collaboration comes in many forms, from sharing knowledge to pooling funds to taking action on the ground, as the examples spotlighted in this article illustrate.



A Collaborative Model in Athens, Georgia

While conservation and affordable housing advocates explore opportunities for collaboration, they can learn from organizations that have built both goals into their mission. The Athens Land Trust is considered by many to be the shining light at the intersection of these worlds.

In the early 1990s, Nancy Stangle and Skipper StipeMaas were developing a rural intentional community, Kenney Ridge, on 132 acres in Athens-Clarke County, Georgia—about 200 miles north of Albany, where the CLT movement was born. The plan was for Kenney Ridge to consist of private lots for homeowners, a community farmhouse and gardens, and common, conserved open space. But as they laid out the development, they realized that setting aside more land for conservation also made the private lots more expensive, because the costs of building roads, water lines, and sewer lines were divided between the lots, and more conservation amounted to fewer lots—and fewer lot owners to bear the costs. “They were seeing this tension between environmental-type development and affordability,” said Heather Benham, the Athens Land Trust’s executive director. And it was pricing out some of their friends.

Around this time, Stangle was taking her kids to the zoo in Atlanta when her car broke down. A woman pulled over and offered to take Stangle to her office, where she could use the phone. The woman worked at a community land trust, the Cabbagetown Revitalization and Future Trust.

After reading up on the CLT model, Stangle and StipeMaas decided to create an organization that would function as both a land trust and a CLT, and the Athens Land Trust was born.



Homeowners at an Athens Land Trust house in Athens, Georgia. Credit: Athens Land Trust.

For the first few years, the Athens Land Trust functioned mostly as a conservation land trust. Then in 1999, one of its board members bought a vacant lot in a historically Black neighborhood of Athens and donated it to the group. The local government provided an affordable housing grant, and the organization built its first house.

The two wings of the organization continued to grow—the trust came to hold over 20,695 acres of conservation easements, from farms outside Athens to pine plantations and mountains in north Georgia, and it built and rehabbed homes inside the city—but they remained practically separate. “Basically, when we answered the phone, it was pretty clear if somebody was calling for one thing or the other,” said Benham. The callers were typically either low-income Black families interested in housing, or white farmers wanting to protect land they had owned for generations.

In the early 2000s, these parallel strands of work began to intersect. A board member mentioned that drug activity was taking place on a vacant lot in their neighborhood. Could the

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land trust turn it into a community garden? “It didn’t seem like such a far leap to do gardens when you’re protecting farms,” said Benham. “That became a project, and then it just kept growing.”

Other neighborhoods began reaching out about starting similar projects. The group partnered with the local university to create a network of community gardens, and an urban farm where neighbors could grow food to sell, supplementing their income. A USDA grant provided funds, and the city also offered some land. To maximize the community’s benefit from the land, the Athens Land Trust began running gardening classes and farm workdays, youth programming around agricultural skills, and a farmers market in a low-income Black neighborhood. These activities support the Athens Land Trust’s goals of fostering economic development and community empowerment, Benham says. “The economic opportunity around the farmers market and the small business development,” she says, weaves the parcels into the “neighborhood ecosystem and economy.”

Where Conservation and Justice Meet

As the urban work of the Athens Land Trust grew, its leaders began applying an equity lens to their rural conservation work too, identifying populations underserved by previous efforts to protect farmland. In April 2023, the land trust was close to reaching a deal for the first conservation easement on a Black-owned farm in Georgia. Throughout the United States, 97 percent of farms and 94 percent of farm acreage belongs to white farmers. Many Black landowners lack clear title—a legacy of unjust property inheritance rules—and are unable to donate or sell easements on their land, while

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Athens Land Trust programming includes the Young Conservation Stewards (left), Young Urban Builders, and Young Urban Farmers, who maintain a network of community gardens including Williams Farm (right). Credit: Athens Land Trust.



those who have fought to gain clear title may be understandably hesitant to sign over any rights. Benham adds that the scoring mechanisms used by the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service to determine whether to conserve a parcel tend to favor farms located on prime agricultural soils. “Well, surprise, surprise—most Black farmers didn’t get the most prime lands,” she notes.

Benham believes the Athens Land Trust has managed to straddle both worlds because its fundamental goal is to give the community control over lands and development. Eschewing tunnel vision toward either housing or conservation, the trust and other similarly minded organizations “might have more shared framework, vocabulary, practices, and ways of engaging” with the environmental justice movement than conservation land trusts do, she said. That’s reflected in philanthropy too: the funders who seem to understand how the trust’s conservation and housing work align are the ones who recognize their environmental justice—like “sustainability work in low-income neighborhoods.”

In the South Bronx, New York, a community land trust launched in 2020 operates with a similar hybrid model, working to preserve housing affordability and protect open space, including the neighborhood’s network of community gardens. The South Bronx Community Land and Resource Trust grew from the work of local community development corporation Nos Quedamos (We Stay), which started in the 1990s as grassroots resistance to an urban renewal plan that would have displaced a low-income, mostly Latino community. Committed to “development without displacement”—development driven and controlled by the community—Nos Quedamos now has a portfolio of affordable housing. It launched the CLT to “create and support a healthier community by bringing into balance land use, affordability, accessibility to services and open space, environmental sustainability and resilience, community scale and character.” It is designed to be a centralized, community-owned entity.



Volunteers with Nos Quedamos, a community development corporation in the South Bronx that recently launched a community land trust to promote affordable housing and sustainability. Credit: Imani Cenac/Nos Quedamos.

Julia Duranti-Martínez, who works with CLTs at the national community development organization LISC and is a board member on the East Harlem/El Barrio CLT in New York City, recommends that conversations about collaboration “defer to the groups who come out of environmental justice organizing.” In a real estate market where land is expensive and scarce, housing and conservation groups vie for parcels, and new parks are often seen as harbingers of gentrification, the community development projects that have navigated these tensions most successfully have been driven by the same fundamental goal as the environmental justice movement, she says: ensuring that “Black, Indigenous, and communities of color are really the ones in a decision-making role.”

Duranti-Martínez adds that the framework of CLTs has historically shared more in common with environmental justice groups than with the conservation movement. “They are promoting these community stewardship models not in opposition to affordable housing,” she said, but simply because “a healthy community” has “all kinds of different spaces: dignified and affordable housing, affordable commercial space, green space, and community and cultural spaces.”

Moving Forward

Despite promising ideas for collaboration and enthusiasm for these initiatives, ideological and cultural hurdles remain. Success, for land trusts, has historically been measured in the number of acres protected and dollars leveraged, but these conventional measures “don’t really capture the full impact” of smaller or more complex projects, said Michels. Protecting green space and building housing on five acres could take the same time, effort, and resources as conserving 10,000 rural acres, she notes, which means there are some ideological frameworks on the conservation side that have to shift.

Potential collaborators also need to proceed purposefully and thoughtfully; meaningful and inclusive community engagement will be key to the success of combining affordable housing and open space goals, say many involved in this work, whether that effort is happening inside a single

organization or as part of a collaboration between groups. “Conservation has a lot to learn about building community stakeholders in as decision-makers within our organizations,” says King-Cortes of LTA. Despite growing interest in broadening the movement’s work, “many of us are not ready, I would say, to jump into partnership with affordable housing groups until we’ve done our homework: until we’ve learned about the roots of the affordable housing movement, the ties to the civil rights movement.”

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This map illustrates the network of affordable housing and community gardens developed in the South Bronx by Nos Quedamos. Increasingly, proponents of healthy communities view affordable housing and open space as complementary, not opposing, causes. Credit: Nos Quedamos.





With funds including a bond administered by the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board, Twin Pines Housing Trust built an energy-efficient, mixed-income housing complex in White River Junction, Vermont, that includes community gardens and transit access. Credit: Twin Pines Housing Trust.

Yet conservation groups also have a wealth of resources and expertise to offer. For CLTs, “by far the biggest inhibitor to being able to scale is access to land and money,” said Sorce of Grounded Solutions Network. Partnerships often help fill that gap, and conservation groups could help with this too. “They could team up to acquire a larger parcel, some of which is going to be conservation, some of which is going to be housing.”

In fact, this kind of partnership could benefit both sectors. “Everyone’s struggling to fundraise,” said King-Cortes. “Everyone’s trying to make the most of what we’ve got. But by working together on planning, I think both movements can get more done and maximize resources.”

Succeeding at that will take some effort, because most funding for conservation and housing has historically been separate, as Michels and Hindin noted. “All of the public policy-supported programs and funding are totally siloed,” Rosenberg confirmed. A housing group that wants to build a development with trails, parks, or community gardens can typically only get funding to build the housing, while on the flip side, conservation groups can’t get funding to do anything besides conserve land.

However, there are exceptions to that rule. In Vermont, housing and conservation groups organized in 1987 to create a single public funding source, the Vermont Housing and Conservation Trust Fund, administered by the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board (VHCB). Michels, who worked at VHCB for several years, says it demonstrates a potential model for collaboration. It has nurtured relationships and understanding between the two communities, and both practitioners and policymakers have come to see the dual goals as complementary, not competitive—reinforcing an almost 100-year-old land use tradition of compact settlement surrounded by a working landscape.

Every year, a coalition of affordable housing and conservation groups lobbies the state legislature for VHCB funding. The result is “a lot of relationship building across those communities of practice, and they each know what the other is working on,” Michels said. VHCB has invested in projects with both elements in many towns, ensuring that affordable housing and open space are both available. “There’s a version of collaboration that doesn’t involve working together

on a single parcel,” but pulling for the same outcomes, Michels said; when an opportunity does present itself on one parcel, it is widely embraced.

Back in the Hudson Valley, Rosenberg’s working group is also eyeing Massachusetts’ Community Preservation Act as a model. Voters in Massachusetts can opt for their municipality to apply a surcharge on property taxes, which can then be used to fund conservation, affordable housing, outdoor recreation, and historic preservation. New York’s legislature has authorized some municipalities to vote for a local real estate transfer fee to create a community preservation fund, but the proceeds can only support conservation, not housing.

Identifying policy reforms that could help accomplish its work and agreeing on a statement of shared purpose have been priorities for the Hudson Valley group, which has continued its explorations with support

from Regional Plan Association, the project’s fiscal sponsor, and the Consensus Building Institute. “There are actually some collaborations that are already beginning,” said Rosenberg. The Kingston Land Trust, which has been studying and promoting the community land trust model since 2017, has partnered with the regional affordable housing group RUPCO to launch a CLT as part of its Land for Homes initiative. The organization also worked with graduate students at Columbia University and Bard College to develop a regional housing vision and a guide for collaboration between conservation and housing groups (Kingston Land Trust 2021). The Chatham, New York–based Columbia Land Conservancy, meanwhile, is serving as the fiscal sponsor for another new CLT.

And within the working group, one of the conservation land trusts identified a 113-acre farm parcel for sale in the town of Red Hook that “defines the gateway to the community,” Rosenberg said. Red Hook has a community

The Kingston Land Trust has partnered with a regional affordable housing group to launch a community land trust as part of its Land for Homes initiative. The organization also worked with graduate students at Columbia University and Bard College to develop a regional housing vision and a guide for collaboration between conservation and housing groups.

With housing prices and non-local property ownership on the rise in Kingston, New York, graduate students from Columbia University worked with the Kingston Land Trust on a project that envisions new affordable housing models on communally owned property, including medium-density apartments with shared amenities (right) and tiny homes (facing). Credit: See facing page.





Credit (facing and above): “(E)CO-Living: Towards a More Affordable and Green Kingston” by Yiyang Cai, Kai Guo, Lingbei Chen, Wenyi Peng. Urban Design Studio II, Spring 2021, Graduate School of Architecture Planning and Preservation, Columbia University. Faculty: Kaja Kühl coordinator, with Lee Altman, Anna Dietzsch, Shachi Pandey, Thaddeus Pawlowski and Associates, Zarith Pineda, Victoria Vuono. Local Partner: Kingston Land Trust. <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/db865dfff929442c8414b596aa753f18>.

preservation fund to support conservation, and Scenic Hudson and other groups have long been active there. But having recently expanded its public sewer system, Red Hook was also looking to develop more affordable housing—and, in the case of this property, to fend off private buyers who were interested in developing the whole parcel.

Conditions seemed favorable. So two of the working group’s housing organizations and two of the land trusts met with local officials to discuss collaborating with the town on a project that would achieve both goals: conserving farmland and building some affordable housing. The town now plans to purchase the land, working with one of the land trusts to place a conservation easement on most of it and setting aside the rest for homes to be built by one of the affordable housing groups. “That project is not done, but it is moving forward,” said Rosenberg. “That’s really exciting.” 📌

Audrea Lim is a writer in New York City whose work has appeared in the *New York Times*, *Harper’s*, and the *Guardian*. Her book *Free the Land*, on the commodification of land and alternatives in the United States, will be published by St. Martin’s Press in 2024.

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