

The Arlington Land Trust is a community-based nonprofit organization established in late 1999 to protect land in Arlington. As a membership organization, ALT accepts donations and welcomes volunteers to support its work.

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## Arlington Land Trust News

**Editor**  
Ann LeRoy

**Contributors**  
Carol Kowalski  
John F. Page  
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Clarissa Rowe



*In this special issue, we celebrate the 20th anniversary year of the Arlington Land Trust and reflect on its origins, accomplishments to date, and ongoing projects in land conservation, education and advocacy.*

## Origins & Mission

Like many grassroots initiatives, the Arlington Land Trust started at a dining room table. In the late 1990s, Clarissa Rowe and Carol Kowalski began meeting to share their mutual concerns about recent residential developments around town. As planning and design professionals, they recognized that many new houses and apartment buildings then being built, sometimes on subdivided lots, were out of scale with their neighbors and threatened the few small parcels of wooded and open spaces remaining in this densely developed community.

Clarissa and Carol were members of Arlington's recently established Open Space Committee and were also involved in other civic programs focused on natural resources and land conservation. However, they came to realize that a nonprofit land trust would have more flexibility than any public entity to negotiate with private landowners, raise funds, and enlist volunteers to work on projects to acquire and protect open space in Arlington.

They expanded their discussions with other residents and colleagues with similar concerns and expertise to establish a local land trust dedicated to raising awareness about the importance of open space for environmental as well as passive recreational benefits. Protection of the 17-acre Mugar property, located at the heart of the "great swamp" that once spread across the Alewife area, was at the time and remains a core motivation for action.

The Arlington Land Trust was formally incorporated as a private, nonprofit organization in October 1999. The first annual meeting and the first issue of *ALT News* were introduced in the fall of 2001.

# Accomplishments & Ongoing Projects

## LAND CONSERVATION

### Elizabeth Island

One of the Land Trust's goals has always been to acquire land in Arlington in order to permanently protect it as publicly accessible open space. Elizabeth Island in Spy Pond is the highlight of that aspect of our mission.

In July 2010, the Land Trust reached a deal to purchase the two-acre island from its former owner Elaine Sacco after several years of negotiations and with invaluable guidance from Bob Wilber, Mass Audubon's director of land protection.

The Campaign to Protect Elizabeth Island included several key elements: a proposal to the state's Conservation Partnership Grant Program, which awarded the maximum grant amount of \$85,000; support from the Arlington Conservation Commission for \$20,000 and from Cambridge Savings Bank for \$10,000; and a public fundraising appeal that raised more than \$100,000 to help cover the purchase price and associated legal and transaction costs. Within a matter of months, the campaign reached its \$265,000 goal, and the formal transfer was completed in December 2010.

The Land Trust owns the island, and the Conservation Commission and Mass Audubon co-hold the conservation easement that governs its long-term stewardship and management plan. Since 2011, the Land Trust has undertaken a number of modest maintenance projects to enhance the walking paths, build steps to prevent erosion on two slopes, and improve the landing area for small boats. Elizabeth Island remains a popular destination during all seasons.

The Boston skyline is visible in this fall view from Nora Brown Park at the top of Symmes Hill. © Richard A. Duffy



### Symmes Hospital/Arlington 360

The Symmes Hospital had been a landmark in Arlington since 1912 but, like many small, local medical facilities, was facing daunting challenges in the 1990s. In 1994 it became part of Lahey Clinic and HealthSouth, which later decided to sell the property. In 2001 Arlington voters approved a debt exclusion to allow the Town to acquire the entire 18-acre property in order to control its future. The purchase was completed in April 2002, and the property was put under the jurisdiction of the Arlington Redevelopment Board, which worked with the Symmes Advisory Committee created by Town Meeting to help establish guidelines for a redevelopment proposal that would retain public access to the sweeping vistas and woodlands of the site.

After a lengthy public process and delays associated with the 2008 recession, in 2012

a new owner, Arlington 360 LLC, began construction of a 164-unit apartment complex and 12 townhouse condominiums, and Shelter/Brightview Arlington broke ground on a 90-unit assisted living facility.

The development agreement provides permanent protection of 8.7 acres of open space including two public landscaped parks near the top of the hill, the Symmes Woods along Summer Street, and narrow buffer zones between the site and neighboring houses. The Land Trust and Conservation Commission were involved in these negotiations from the beginning and now co-hold and monitor a conservation restriction that governs the long-term maintenance of the open spaces in collaboration with the Arlington 360 management company. Several neighbors and other volunteers are part of a stewardship group for the property.

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# Mugar Property

**M**ore than 17 acres of undeveloped land abutting Route 2 and Thorndike Field in East Arlington has long been recognized as not only the last large remaining open space tract in Arlington, but also as a critical wetland resource in a FEMA-designated floodplain. Since the 1950s, the property has been owned by the Mugar family, former owners of Star Market. They originally eyed the site for a shopping center near the fast-developing Alewife area, though that plan never came to pass. During the next several decades, they proposed other developments, including a three-tower apartment complex and office building in 1970 and a much larger office complex in 1999.

All of these projects failed for a variety of economic, environmental and transportation-related reasons, but the 1999 proposal was one of the catalysts for the Land Trust to get involved with Town officials to try to negotiate with the Mugar family on a strategy to protect the open space. Among those early efforts were establishment of a Mugar Advisory Committee and Town Meeting votes in 2000 and 2001, both of which overwhelmingly endorsed acquisition of the property for conservation and flood control.

The Mugar family resisted many subsequent attempts by Town officials and others to negotiate a land transfer, and continued to pursue various development options. In 2009 the Mugar family began working with Oaktree Development of Cambridge and initially focused on a possible private school facility for the site. They later sought to gain approval for a housing complex under the state's Chapter 40B statute, which requires local Zoning Boards of Appeals to approve affordable housing developments under flexible rules if at least 20–25 percent of the units have long-term affordability restrictions.

Despite continued objections from Town officials, the Land Trust and many residents, in 2015 the project was deemed “eligible” by MassHousing, the state agency that has oversight of Chapter 40B. The developer then submitted its application to the Arlington Zoning Board of Appeals for a “comprehensive permit” and initiated the public hearing process as required. The Coalition to Save the Mugar Wetlands was formed in 2015 by a group of East Arlington neighbors to organize opposition to the development.

The Town asserted to the state Housing Appeals Committee that it has met one of the “safe harbor” thresholds (1.5 percent of eligible land devoted to affordable housing) that could limit the negative impacts of the 40B development. The appeals process continued until October 2019 when HAC rejected the Town's claim. The required next step was for the ZBA to reconvene its hearings on the comprehensive permit for Thorndike Place, which it did in December.

In March 2020 Oaktree submitted an extensive set of architectural plans and environmental studies, but the Covid

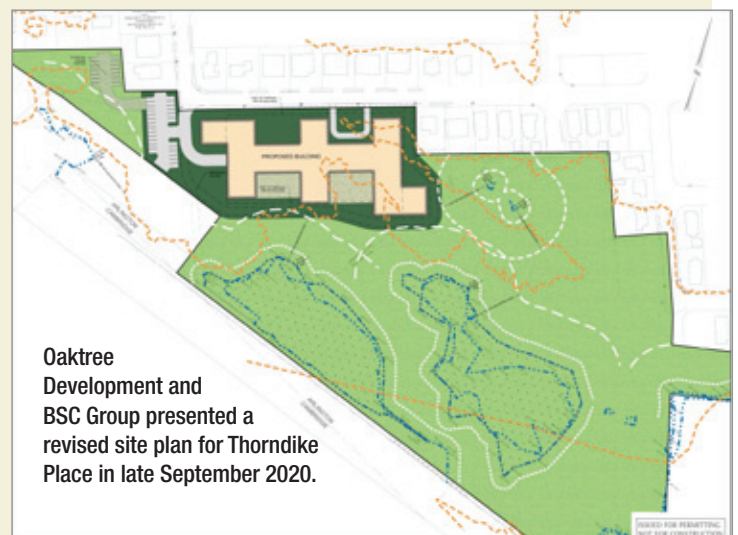


The Mugar parcel in 1951 was viewed from Concord Turnpike toward Dorothy Road, when the marshy site was being considered for a shopping center.

pandemic forced the cancellation of public meetings during the spring and Oaktree requested numerous postponements during the summer. The first substantive hearing in August 2020 focused on procedural issues and laid out a schedule for subsequent hearings on specific topics, starting with wetlands and stormwater management in October.

Before the formal ZBA review of the original March 2020 proposal could be commenced, however, Oaktree submitted a significantly revised site plan in late September and presented it at a Conservation Commission meeting on October 1. The new plan reduces the building footprint and paved parking areas, thus expanding the amount of open space in the most sensitive delineated wetlands. More comprehensive plans and site analyses were submitted by the Oaktree team in November, and the hearings resumed. Many concerns remain unresolved and these hearings are expected to extend well into 2021.

The Land Trust continues to advocate for the permanent protection of this parcel as conservation land.





"Meadow Sky" reflects the beauty that photographer Harvey "Bud" Coté found in Arlington's Great Meadows. © Harvey Coté



Former ALT president Jen Ryan helps visitors on their way to explore Elisabeth Island. © Ann LeRoyer

## COLLABORATION AND STEWARDSHIP

### Arlington Conservation Land Stewards

The Land Stewards program was initiated in 2002 under the auspices of the Conservation Commission to enlist volunteers who help monitor and maintain conservation lands throughout town, including Cooke's Hollow, Meadowbrook Park, and Mount Gilboa. In partnership with the Land Trust, the Commission also established the Arlington Conservation Stewards Fund as a vehicle to receive donations to underwrite ongoing projects.

### Arlington Reservoir

A state-mandated dam reconstruction project started in 2002 to assess the condition of the earthen dam at the eastern edge of the Reservoir, creating much community concern about the potential loss of trees and other impacts on the wooded perimeter. The Reservoir Committee, established in 1999 as part of Vision 2020 (now Envision Arlington), worked closely with the Department of Public Works, Park and Recreation Commission and the consultants, Weston & Sampson. The engineers developed

an award-winning solution that addressed public safety concerns by installing steel sheets to reinforce the base of the dam while minimizing tree loss and building a new bridge and spillway.

After construction was completed in 2006, a landscape plan was developed with new trees and native plants in and around the beach, parking lot and perimeter pathway. Space on both sides of the bridge was later allocated for a Wildlife Habitat Garden, which was launched with an anonymous gift to the Land Trust for a native habitat of wildflowers, grasses and shrubs to attract birds, butterflies and other wildlife. Design and planning work began in 2010 and native plantings were introduced in 2011. Volunteers and members of the Reservoir Committee continue to maintain the garden with donations for new plants and other materials raised through the Arlington Conservation Stewards Fund.

### Arlington's Great Meadows

The largest parcel in Arlington's open space inventory is a 183-acre wet meadow located in East Lexington, but owned since the 1870s as part of a land transaction to establish a public water supply linked to the Arlington Reservoir. The water system failed to fulfill its promise, but Arlington has maintained ownership of the land.

The Friends of Arlington's Great Meadows was established in 2002 to organize stewardship projects, educational programs and field trips, and resource management projects including trail signage, upland meadow restoration, removal of invasive plants, and boardwalk construction and repair. The Land Trust serves as the fiscal sponsor for FoAGM so it can raise funds to support this work.

### Spy Pond

Spy Pond in East Arlington is a 100-acre kettle hole pond formed by the glaciers more than 15,000 years ago. It is largely surrounded by private residences, but, in addition to the Land Trust through its ownership and stewardship of Elisabeth Island, Spy Pond has two active groups watching out for its future. The Spy Pond Committee of Envision Arlington focuses on the health of Spy Pond's water quality, shoreline vegetation and wildlife habitat, and the Friends of Spy Pond Park is dedicated to the multi-use park on the northern shore.

Since 2011, the Land Trust has been an integral part of the Friends' Spy Pond Fun Day. In collaboration with the Arlington-Belmont Crew Team, we provide free boat trips out to Elisabeth Island and guided tours by Land Trust volunteers. Between 150 and 200 visitors, usually about half children and half adults, are thrilled to see the island, usually for their first time.



## Community Outreach

Central to the Land Trust's mission has been the sharing of information about the importance of land conservation and ways it can be accomplished at the local level. Among our many outreach activities over the past 20 years have been participation in Arlington's annual Town Days, occasional EcoFest events, and Spy Pond Fun Days, as well as in statewide programs such as the annual Massachusetts Land Trust Conference.

The Land Trust's annual meetings have featured public lectures by noted Arlington residents and conservation experts on a wide range of topics, including climate change challenges and strategies, the Town's renewable energy goals and policies, coexisting with coyotes, and historical talks on Elizabeth Island, Symmes Hospital and the Mill Brook Corridor.

## Private Land Conservation

One of the Land Trust's motivating concerns has been to advise landowners about options for protecting their own property from future development. Outright donation or a "bargain sale" donation of land for specific conservation purposes can ensure that a recipient conservation organization or public agency will assume ownership and management responsibilities. Donation of a conservation restriction (CR) on one's property means that the landowner retains full ownership and the ability to sell or convey it, but only under the terms of the CR document, which must be approved by both state and local officials.

Land conservation decisions can involve complex and interrelated issues in property law, estate planning, real estate and conservation management. Landowners interested in pursuing the donation of land or any restrictions on the future use of their land should consult with an attorney, appraiser, financial planner and other advisors experienced in land transactions.

The Land Trust remains available to work with residents regarding these and

## Community Preservation Act

The Community Preservation Act (CPA) is state legislation, passed in 2000, that helps Massachusetts cities and towns plan for sustainable growth and raise funds to achieve their plans. CPA allows communities to approve a small surcharge on the property tax, matched by state funds, to create a permanent stream of support for major public investments in open space and outdoor recreational facilities, historic preservation and affordable housing projects.

CPA in Arlington was adopted in 2014 by a large majority in Town Meeting and in a town-wide election in November. The program is expected to raise an estimated \$1.5 million in funding annually via the tax surcharge and state matching funds.

The first round of grants was awarded in 2016, and since then many of the Town's major open spaces have benefited from CPA funding, including Robbins Farm Park, Spy Pond for a shoreline stabilization and restoration project, Wellington Park and the Mill Brook Corridor, Arlington Reservoir, the Robbins Town Gardens, and Whittemore Park.



CPA funds contributed to new flood control and landscaping improvements along the Mill Brook corridor in Wellington Park. © David Mussina/MyRWA

other options for protecting their land and to offer advice on next steps. ALT is a member of the Massachusetts Land Trust Coalition, which also has extensive resources to assist landowners in conservation planning.

## Town Planning

Land Trust Board members, and many other dedicated members, are actively engaged in Town Meeting and serve on various town committees and Friends groups to ensure that land conservation and sustainable development goals are fully incorporated into Arlington's future planning.

For example, Carol Kowalski served as Town Planner from 2009 to 2013 and started the Master Plan process, which was completed in 2015; Clarissa Rowe was an elected Select Board member from 2006 to 2012 (along with later interim appointments) and serves on the Community Preservation Act Committee; Brian Rehrig was a long-time member of the Capital Planning Committee; Ann LeRoyer chairs the Open Space Committee, which produces the Open Space and Recreation Plan; and former Board members Nathaniel Stevens and Cathy Garnett serve on the Conservation Commission. We thank them all for their service.

# Thank you!

The Arlington Land Trust thanks its members and friends for their generous contributions received over the past two years between mid-November 2018 and mid-November 2020.

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Spy Pond Fun Day visitors enjoy walking around Elizabeth Island.

© Susan Stamps

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Springtime beckons exploration of the Hill Path and other trails at Arlington's Great Meadows. © Harvey Coté

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#### **Memorial Gifts**

The Land Trust acknowledges with thanks many donations made to the Friends of Arlington's Great Meadows Fund in memory of Harvey "Bud" Coté, a noted photographer and Arlington resident.

## ALT Membership Renewal

If you have not yet renewed your ALT membership or sent a contribution for 2020-2021, please respond to our annual mailing, go to the website ([www.arlingtonlandtrust.org](http://www.arlingtonlandtrust.org)) to download the contribution form, or sign up at [www.networkforgood.org](http://www.networkforgood.org) to renew online.

Thank you again for your continuing support. If you have any questions, please contact ALT at [info@arlingtonland-trust.org](mailto:info@arlingtonland-trust.org).

## UPCOMING EVENTS

### Land Trust Annual Meeting

#### Land Conservation in the Time of Climate Change

Bob Wilber, Director of Land Conservation, Mass Audubon

**Tuesday, January 19, 2021, 7:00 pm**

Zoom (registration information will be sent via ALT email)

Land conservation has always been an important activity to protect diverse habitats for animals and plants and to provide opportunities for people to experience the wonders of the natural world firsthand. During the last decade, the immense human health benefits of spending time in natural settings have been well documented. More recently, the convergence of two other critically important issues—the need for impactful responses to climate change and the need for environmental equity and justice for all people—has elevated the priority of strategic land conservation to an altogether new level. In this presentation, Bob Wilber will seek to put the work of the Arlington Land Trust, Mass Audubon, and other organizations in proper current context.

### Massachusetts and Rhode Island Land Conservation Conference

#### Building a Stronger Land Movement through Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

**Friday & Saturday, March 19–20, 2021**

For this year's annual conference, Massachusetts and Rhode Island are joining forces and going online with a user-friendly platform for access to workshops, exhibitors and networking opportunities. The conference content will be spread over two days, with session recordings available for an additional three months. Workshops on all aspects of land conservation, stewardship, and land trust operations will be viewed through the lens of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion. Topics will include Climate Responses; Land Management and Stewardship; Land Protection Tools and Techniques; Legal, Tax and Compliance Matters; Organizational Management and Fundraising; and Urban and Community Conservation.

For more information, contact the Massachusetts Land Trust Coalition, (978) 443-2233, <https://massland.org/conference>.