



The Chinese Temple is among the standout features of the Greenspace grounds. Courtesy photo

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Greenspace guide to functions and benefits of land trusts

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As I was raking leaves the other day at the Greenspace Creekside Reserve on Center Street, I thought about all the people who made preservation of that space possible. So many individuals and families donated to its purchase and to restoring the historic Chinese temple that now stands near its original location on the property.

The reserve is a haven of peace in a busy downtown, where you can eat lunch by a tricking fountain or sit on the banks of Santa Rosa Creek. Here, you can feel for a moment like you're back in Cambria's early days, listening to the ghosts of Swiss Italian dairy families, Mexican and Portuguese cowboys, Chinese miners.

If this place had not been saved, those old voices would be silent now. But it was saved, along with the Fiscalini Ranch, San Simeon Cove, Strawberry Canyon and many other local parcels of land, because of the work of land trusts and conservancies.

What is a land trust?

Land trusts are nonprofit organizations that provide opportunities for local property owners to preserve undeveloped or agricultural parcels during their lifetime and for the future. They also may be called conservancies or even foundations. More nimble than government agencies, land trusts can accept land gifts and/or easements, purchase land, advise landowners about preserving properties, negotiate conservation transactions and provide environmental education.

Land trusts or conservancies help to ensure long-term land protection in two basic ways. First, conservancies and some trusts offer conservation easements — legal agreements that permanently limit development on a property or portion of it. Donating development rights to a land trust or conservancy has tax advantages for donors, who can deduct the difference in value of the land with and without development rights as a charitable contribution. In addition, a conservation easement passes to the owner's heirs and can significantly reduce inheritance taxes.

Second, owners can donate or sell property to a land trust. Gifting a mortgage-free deed to a land trust enables the donor to use the property's full value as a charitable donation. Land trusts often ask donors to include a cash or investment endowment with the gifted property, in order to provide for ongoing maintenance. The endowment also is considered a charitable donation for tax purposes.

At least four land trusts or conservancies have property interests in Cambria and the North Coast region. The Nature Conservancy holds a conservation easement on the Covell Ranch; the San Luis Obispo Land Conservancy holds easements in the Fern Canyon area; the American Land Conservancy holds the conservation easement on the Hearst Ranch and helped to broker the purchase of the Fiscalini Ranch; and Greenspace — The Cambria Land Trust owns several protected parcels that have been donated or purchased outright (Greenspace does not hold conservation easements).

What is the purpose of land trusts and conservancies?

First, they set aside open space for ecosystem protection and often, for public enjoyment. Second, they protect vulnerable lands from problematic development. Their staffs are knowledgeable about environmental costs of overdevelopment and experienced in conserving local ecosystems. Land trusts carefully consider each easement, donation or purchase opportunity to determine the benefit for the local area, its human residents and native plant and animal populations.

What sorts of property are land trusts interested in?

First-priority lands include undeveloped properties with large tracts of native vegetation, natural watercourses and lakes, shoreline, etc. Particularly valued are lands with intact wildlife corridors that enable native animal species to access traditional migration paths, food sources and clean water. Top priority properties often adjoin existing protected

land, such as conserved private property, state parks, BLM land and national parks and forests.

Another priority is multigenerational ranch and farmland holdings in sustainable agricultural use, and property with historical and cultural value. Third, land trusts seek rural and urban properties that can be retired from potential development to enhance local communities' environmental health and scenic value.

When an owner approaches a land trust about a conservation easement, land gift or sale, negotiation begins with land trust staff evaluating the property for its location, habitat and historical value and condition.

Land trusts usually consider a parcel that is isolated from other open space or requires major ecological remediation only if it has an important natural or cultural feature or is a critical piece in a key ecosystem. If a donor doesn't own the parcel outright or, in the case of a proposed conservation easement, doesn't have a mortgage subordination, the land trust probably won't accept it until those issues are addressed.

In the Cambria area, conserving open space and heritage agricultural lands is crucial not only for us but also for California and the nation. This stretch of beaches, forests and pastureland is among the last intact pieces of rural coastal California. It shelters countless plants and animals that live nowhere else. It harbors a unique way of life.

If we build hundreds of McMansions on this land, it is gone. It won't come back. I grew up in rural coastal San Diego County. I saw my family's ranchland, hundreds of acres by the sea, disappear. Today, it bristles with malls, roads and tract houses. In those days, there were no land trusts, no way to prevent the loss, as land was pirated from families who had tended it for generations.

We're lucky here in Cambria. We still have the chance and means to protect our beautiful land from a similar fate. If you want more information about keeping your land rural and beautiful for generations to come, please contact Greenspace at 927-2866. While we currently accept only outright land donations with endowments, I'd be happy to help you connect with another trust or conservancy if you're interested in a conservation easement.