

by Erica Jamieson

Calling All Landowners

Protection and Conservation Options in the Butternut Valley

There are a number of actions that residents of the Butternut Valley can take to protect and conserve the natural splendor of this region. For landowners in particular, introducing riparian forest buffers and putting property into a conservation easement present two options for enhancing water quality, improving natural habitats and safeguarding undeveloped land for future generations.

The Upper Susquehanna Coalition (USC) unites 22 soil and water conservation districts across the Chesapeake Bay headwaters region. Headquartered in Owego, the Coalition's overall conservation goals align with those of the Chesapeake watershed: to limit the amounts of nitrogen, phosphorus, and sediment entering waterways. Locally, their goals along the Butternut Creek focus on increasing habitability for creatures native to the valley and its waterways including river otters, hellbender salamanders, eels and trout.

Enter riparian forest buffers. Simply put, introducing a riparian forest buffer involves transforming the strip of land on either side of a stream into a forested area. Once established, a riparian buffer zone is referred to as an ecotone, or transition area, between aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems. Thus, riparian forest buffers support and attract a cornucopia of animals and birds that rely on access to both land and water, such as weasels and kingfishers.

"We can really do a lot to increase the habitability of those areas [along the Butternut Creek] not just by reducing the nutrients that are hitting the water, but also by creating habitat with



These tubes protect young saplings planted as part of soil-erosion mitigation efforts.

canopy cover from trees and by adding large woody debris," explained Lydia Brinkley, Buffer Coordinator at USC. Charged with identifying and developing new buffer programs in the region, Lydia works with districts, landowners and other partners to convey the benefits of riparian forest buffers and support their introduction.

To start, space must be cleared to introduce the buffer zone. In unused, fallow, or grazing pasture this process is quite simple. Invasive species are removed to create room for saplings, plants and organic debris indigenous to the region.

For cropland and areas with ongoing agricultural practices, such activities need to be distanced from the waterway. Buffer zones not only provide room for animals and birds to thrive, but also reduce the amount of agricultural runoff entering the stream which

improves water quality. "It's a very simple, very cost effective practice to reduce the amount of nutrients and sediments reaching the stream and the water system," said Lydia.

Meanwhile, adding tree canopy cover over the stream surface decreases water temperatures and improves oxygen levels, breathing life for fish and macroinvertebrates like insects, snails and mussels. Tree roots interrupt the flow of stormwater to reduce flooding and protect river banks from erosion. After heavy rains, trees can also help slow the flow of water, preventing large and potentially destructive objects from being carried downstream. These factors not only conserve the waterway and the creatures that call it home, but also protect surrounding lands and property.

The Coalition is a resource for any landowner looking to introduce riparian forest buffers along their waterways.



24

Annual Meeting
Saturday, 4:00 p.m.
See website for Zoom link



12 & 13

Art on the Trail
Saturday - Sunday
Texas School House State Park



21

Summer Harvest Festival
Saturday, 2:00-6:00 p.m.
Guy Rathbun Park, Morris

USC facilitates the entire process from planning through to implementation and can even support landowners with riparian forest buffer maintenance via its Buffer Steward Program. “People will not be left hanging. We will not plant the trees and leave. We will be around to help it come to fruition,” Lydia was keen to emphasize.

Join Lydia Brinkley of USC for an on-line presentation about riparian buffers. Wednesday, March 24, 7 p.m. Visit the BVA website for the webinar link.

The Coalition underscores remaining flexible, nimble and responsive to landowner goals and will adapt its model to generate creative solutions to particular needs. For instance, buffer zone work may include creating habitats for certain organisms or introducing edible and medicinal plants.

Most importantly, buffer zone work can often be achieved at low or no cost to the landowner, thanks to USC’s extensive partners and knowledge of state and federal funding options. By offering financial and logistical support, the Coalition hopes to engage as many partners as possible in this watershed conservation effort.

“We have all of these really large goals for the Chesapeake Bay. In New York state, for the watershed implementation plan, those goals are thousands upon thousands of riparian forest buffer. Realistically we can’t get to that goal without engaging the entire community within the Chesapeake Bay headwaters in New York state,” said Lydia.

Another option for landowners seeking to preserve and maintain natural habitats such as wetlands, forests and agricultural land is by implementing a conservation easement.

Deeds of conservation easements are unique to the particular property and are typically broken into three zones: building, open and natural area.

In the building area, residential structures are permitted and at times new buildings can be constructed. The open space area may include forest, wetlands, agricultural lands or recreational spaces. Easements are designed to protect their inherent open nature. Often, a forest management plan and, depending on the land’s use, a harvest management plan are written to prevent destructive practices.

Finally, the natural area is most protected. New developments are strictly prohibited, although hiking trails, fishing and hunting may be permitted. At times, natural areas are home to riparian forest buffer zones or wetlands.

Land under conservation easement remains private property and is protected from being overly divided and developed in perpetuity; however, almost all easements allow subdivision and development, with limitations. A deed of conservation easement remains with the property even as it is bought and sold or inherited by a family member.

“That’s basically the biggest driving reason for landowners to want to do a conservation easement,” explained David Diaz, Interim Executive Director at the Otsego Land Trust (OLT), “to protect the land that they love, and then also know that they’re doing this for future generations, because there will be forests, there will be agricultural lands.”

Since its founding in 1988, the Otsego Land Trust has protected over 11,000 acres, of which 10,000 of that is in conservation easement. OLT also preserves land for public access. Its flagship property, Brookwood Point in



Erosion areas such as this one documented during the creek assessment carry large amounts of sediment downstream and further destabilize the creek bank.

Cooperstown, spans 22 acres and is open to the public for hiking, fishing, paddling and picnicking. The Trust also engages in educational programming and outreach and works with elected officials on related legislation. Otsego Land Trust supports landowners through the easement process so that they may create and ensure the continuity of their vision for the land they love.

There are also tax incentives. Proprietors entering into conservation easement may typically choose between a one-time federal charitable tax deduction, spread over 16 years, or an annual 25% state property tax refund up to \$5,000 per year. The latter option, offered by New York state, remains with the property permanently.

“It’s easy living in a more rural area to say, ‘Ah! Look at all the forest we have, look at all the farmland we have’, but populations are going to continue to rise. More and more people are looking to move out of cities. Rural areas are a hot commodity,” cautioned David, “We need to set apart some of it so that it doesn’t all get sliced and diced.”

For more information, contact Lydia Brinkley at lbrinkley@u-s-c.org or David Diaz at David@OtsegoLandTrust.org



In extreme instances, erosion can lead to severe flooding such as occurred near Olds Road this past Christmas Day rainstorm.