



Conservation Partners Meeting Notes

Friday, February 27, 2026

Zoom Meeting

Attendees: Virtual attendees on record. (107 registered; at least 84 attended)

Staff Attendees:

- Robb Johnson, ED
- Barbara Chrenko, Programs Manager
- Lauren Berk, Development & Operations Coordinator

Handouts: (Virtual: emailed or on website: <https://massland.org/events/february-2025-conservation-partners-meeting>)

- Agenda for today's meeting on February 27, 2026
- Notes from meeting held on December 12, 2025.
- State Public Policy Update Feb. 2026
- LTA Federal Policy Update Feb 2026
- MLTC Staff Report
- LTA Updates

- 1) **Kathy Orlando**, Partner Engagement Chair, convened the CP meeting.
 - a) *Meeting Introductions and logistics.* Kathy welcomed everyone and asked everyone to introduce themselves. Participants introduced themselves first those present in person and then the ones over zoom as Kathy called their names.
 - b) *Review of December 12 meeting minutes:* Moved by Anna Wilkins, seconded by Rita Grossman. Approved by all.
 - c) *Next meeting:* Friday, June 12, 10 a.m. Hybrid. In-person at Blackstone Heritage Corridor Visitor Center, 3 Paul Clancy Way, Worcester, and via Zoom. There will also be an informal light lunch directly following the meeting to celebrate Robb and his work at MLTC. Register for the [lunch here](#). Register to attend [via Zoom here](#).
- 2) **MLTC Staff Report -- Robb Johnson, MLTC Executive Director** gave the following update
All slides will be posted on the website, including links.
 - a) Upcoming Events
The 2026 MLTC Conference is coming up, Friday March 13 at UMass Amherst, featuring a keynote on Nature and Health by Pooja Tandon, Pediatrician and Health Director at the Trust for Public Land. There are over 600 people already registered, with two weeks to go. Registration is still open at <https://secure.qgiv.com/for/2026maslanconcon/event/2026malandconservationconference/>
Robb thanked the Conference Planning Committee and the conference sponsors for their support. MLTC has been able to accommodate 24 of the over 50 workshop proposals submitted.

Robb also shared the pre-conference free webinars that are being made available. The full list is available on the Conference website, along with additional events running from March through May.

The Land Protection Tools and Techniques is a 10-week course on Thursday afternoons, beginning September 2026. Co-sponsored by UMass Extension, Mass Audubon and Wildlands Trust, it will be co-led by Christa Collins and Rob Warren, with guest faculty from around the state. It includes September launch in Easthampton and November retreat in Plymouth, with field experience. It carries a \$500 course fee, with scholarships available.

The next meeting on June 12 will include both the Annual meeting and Board elections for MLTC. It will be held as a hybrid meeting, at the Blackstone Heritage Corridor Visitor Center in Worcester. Following the meeting at noon, a light luncheon will serve as a little retirement party for Robb.

3) LTA Report – Mariah Fogg, New England Program Coordinator
All slides will be posted on the website, including links.

The LTA Advancing Conservation Excellence 2026 short course had 120 registrants, 70 participants participated live on average. Mariah thanked all the presenters that represented a wide group of land trusts from across the state.

The Pathways to Conservation Excellence is an upcoming grant program that is offered for MA land trusts to address organizational fundamentals, advanced risk management or accreditation preparation. These grants are from 10-15k, and application period will run from March 30- May 8, 2026. There are no match requirements.

The LTA Leadership Summit for Massachusetts Land Trusts is scheduled for June 24, 2026 at the Wildlands Stewardship Training Center in Plymouth. This is a one-day summit for MA land trust leaders including executive directors, members of staffed leadership teams, and board members. It will help strengthen skills, build network, discuss critical issues shaping conservation.

A Strategic Planning Short Course and a Stewardship Volunteer Management Webinar for Massachusetts land trusts will be offered in Fall 2026.

In terms of national programs, the Acquisition course offered March 2-5 in Albuquerque is sold out. A Stewardship Baseline course starts March 3rd and a long format stewardship course will run November 9-13.

LTA has started a new Executive Director Peer group for Executive Directors in their job for 3 years or less. The first session was held Feb 5th. These monthly 90 minute calls run generally first Thursday of the month and folks can still join.

All Federal updates can be found on the LTA website.

https://massland.org/sites/default/files/documents/ita_federal_policy_update_feb_2026.pdf

You can also learn more there about Tax Cases and Risk Management in Conservation. For more information, reach out to Diana Norris.

LTA energy team has launched a new tool kit to help land trusts engage productively in the regulatory and legislative processes of siting new energy infrastructure in their areas.

The LTA advocacy days will run April 13-16 this year in Washington DC.

LTA jobs can be found at <https://landtrustalliance.org/job-board>; the New England Program Manager position will be posted next week. Rex Linville is also available for any questions.

Kathy asked for questions, none raised.

4) **State Agency Updates – Kurt Gaertner, Assistant Secretary for Environmental Policy, EEA; Lisa Primiano, Director of Conservation Services; Katharine Otto, MDAR Farmland Action Plan Coordinator; and other agency staff**

Kurt presented an update on three issues:

i) Open Space Act Regulations

Work on regulations implementing the Open Space Act is ongoing. A meeting is being scheduled with Robb (MLTC), Dot McGlinchy (Mass. Association of Conservation Commissions) and Senator Eldridge to provide an update on how public comments are being incorporated into final regulations.

ii) Massachusetts Integrated Land Use Strategy

All topical work groups (Conservation, Energy, Housing, and Economic Development) plus the Technical work group are progressing well.

The Conservation workgroup is currently evaluating conservation layers/factors and weighting criteria. Regional planning agencies and municipal stakeholders have been briefed. For next steps, a focus group discussion will be scheduled to review conservation criteria and weighting. A final integration discussion (conservation + housing + energy + economic development) will occur later in the process.

iii) State Budget Updates

The Operating budget:

Governor has filed the budget; hearing scheduled for March 10. The budget was described as fiscally constrained but proposed creative funding solutions can include:

- Use of Chapter 90 funds for DCR transportation infrastructure.
- Potential use of “Millionaires Tax” (Fair Share Amendment) revenue.

The Capital budget:

FY26 and FY27 capital budgets were previously posted together (this is not the usual practice). There is a significant reduction in land acquisition programs in FY27. Kurt indicated that:

- Published reductions may reflect accounting anomalies.
- Agency Land Protection line item (appears to drop by \$4M) is expected to move closer to level funding after revisions.

Advocates are encouraged to continue supporting conservation funding.

State Policy Update: https://massland.org/sites/default/files/documents/mltc_state_policy_update_feb_2026.pdf

Lisa and Sheri Widdiss presented updates on:

i) Conservation Restrictions (CRs) Current Status

220 applications are currently in review. Approximately 50% are with EEA -DCS review staff and the other 50% are with applicants, awaiting applicant signatures or responses. Of these, 31 recent submissions are tied to 2026 land grants (bulk submissions causing temporary bottleneck). Megan Gordon asked about the average review time right now to which Sheri responded that it is approximately 5 months with the goal to drop it down to 3 months.

ii) Model CR Working Group

A 23-member working group has been formed. It includes land trusts, municipalities, attorneys, and EEA legal staff. Next meeting is March 20. A feedback survey on the current EEA-DCS Model CR, is open through end of March. Everyone was encouraged to share widely (including municipal conservation staff). Kathleen Doherty asked about the timeline; Lisa said they are looking for feedback by end of March.

<https://app.smartsheet.com/b/form/952c9517d11947e7ac307dedafdf77>

iii) CR Tracking System (“CRTS”)

A Webinar is scheduled for March 3 at noon, to present the new system. CRTS will allow applicants to submit and track CRs online. The launch has been slightly delayed to ensure bugs are resolved. The webinar will be recorded.

Nick Pitel asked if there is an expedited process for CR amendments as opposed to new Conservation Restrictions. Lisa said that amendments generally follow the standard review timeline. Sheri said that DCS is developing clearer

amendment guidance. Applicants will be asked to provide confirmation of consistency with original conservation purposes, title updates and clear articulation of amendment type (amend vs. amend & restate).

iv) DCS Grant Program Updates (Lisa, Vanessa Farny, Melissa)

The application process has seen recent improvements with streamlined RFR templates, standardized appraisal and pre-acquisition language across programs and modified scoring criteria aligned with state conservation priorities.

Upcoming Deadlines:

- Drinking Water Supply Protection: April 13
- Landscape Partnership Grant: April 23

Vanessa also reported on the new Grant Management System. All applications are now submitted via new this new online system. The applicant entity must create an account and the account holder becomes the official contact for contracts and communications. Third-party submission functionality is under development.

<https://www.mass.gov/info-details/grants-management-system-gms#create-a-user-profile---help>

Melissa said that the Land & Water Conservation Fund saw a strong application round. State recommendations are going to the Secretary and Governor's Office and decisions will be made by the end of March. Federal approval is still required after state selection. Nick Pitel asked if there is a favorable time to revisit the Landscape Partnership acreage requirements. Vanessa responded that the minimum acreage thresholds was revised about 3 years ago. Nick requested they revisit the Berkshire/Western MA thresholds. DCS will review with GIS team.

v) Farmland Action Plan & Partnership Program (Katharine Otto)

- 2025 Farmland Action Plan Progress Report released in December just after the last meeting. <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/massachusetts-farmland-action-plan#updates-and-progress-reports>
Highlights most relevant to Land trusts: Leveraging federal and non-federal funding.
- Increased awareness of farmland protection programs.
- Increased applications.

Upcoming Events

- APR Listening Sessions (March; 3 in-person, 2 virtual). Learn more on APR Program Review webpage. <https://www.mass.gov/apr-program-review>
- Urban Farming Symposium – March 28 (Boston). <https://www.urbanfarminginstitute.org/mass-urban-farming-symposium>

Farmland Partnership Program

A total of \$1.9M has been awarded to 7 groups to implement 29 projects statewide.

Key initiatives relevant to land trusts include:

- Chapter 61A training and Right of First Refusal education.
- Municipal farmland protection plan templates (Western MA).
- Farm viability integration into farmland protection.
- Engagement with lenders and financial entities.
- MLTC-led project: expanding pool of conservation attorneys, appraisers, surveyors.

Resources:

www.mass.gov/info-details/massachusetts-farmland-action-plan#updates-and-progress-reports
www.mass.gov/info-details/farmland-partnership-program

5) **Featured Topic: Robb Johnson, MLTC Executive Director**

MLTC seeking input on two projects supported with State funding: one is to fill in gaps and correct mistakes in the MassGIS open space datalayer; the other is to expand the ranks of appraisers, surveyors and attorneys qualified to work on conservation projects.

Improve MassGIS Data Layer

Robb outlined the purpose to be two-fold:

- Improve accuracy of state Open Space GIS layer.
- Support tracking progress toward the 30x30 (30% protected by 2030) and 40x50 land conservation goals.

The problem is that some protected parcels are missing from state data, particularly common for:

- Nonprofit fee-owned lands.
- Municipal lands.
- Properties not acquired with state funding.

The method to make these improvements would include using the Lincoln Institute’s national registry-based database. They will conduct a gap analysis comparing registry ownership to state GIS layer. Land trusts will receive a web-based tool to verify ownership, confirm protection status and submit required data. The CR data is generally strong since every CR is submitted for EEA approval; thus our initial focus is on fee-owned lands. If funding is extended to FY27, MLTC will extend this work to identify municipal parcels missing from EEA’s open space data layer. Existing corrections, which could also include correcting land improperly listed as protected, can be submitted directly to MassGIS via Benjamin Smith using an official submission form.

Service Provider Expansion Project (MLTC)

The goal: Increase the number and quality of appraisers, surveyors and attorneys to overcome the shortages causing project delays and quality issues.

Robb proposed the following actions:

- Survey conservation professionals and land trusts.
- Develop training and mentoring programs.
- Partner with bar associations, appraisal organizations, and surveyor associations.
- Expand and improve MLTC Service Provider Directory.

Land trusts are encouraged to

- Recommend professionals.
- Encourage participation in directory.
- Suggest potential trainers/mentors.

Service Provider Directory: <https://massland.org/resources/service-provider-directory>

6) MLTC Policy Priorities Update- Robb Johnson, MLTC Updates on MLTC’s administrative and legislative priorities (link on website)

The Committee discussed ongoing advocacy efforts related to the state’s Operating Budget, with particular concern that environmental programs continue to fall below the long-standing benchmark goal of 1% of the overall state budget. Despite increased awareness of climate resilience, land conservation, and environmental justice needs, funding allocations have not kept pace with demand or with previously articulated funding milestones. The priorities advanced by the ELM Green Budget Coalition were referenced by Robb, and members were encouraged to familiarize themselves with the coalition’s recommendations and to advocate in alignment where appropriate.

With respect to the Capital Budget, there is a year-to-year volatility in funding levels for conservation and environmental programs. This inconsistency creates challenges for long-term planning and project implementation. The importance of establishing a more stable and predictable funding mechanism was emphasized to ensure continuity of conservation initiatives and to avoid disruptions caused by fluctuating appropriations.

The “Nature for All” proposal seeks to dedicate a portion of the existing sales tax collected on recreational vehicles and sporting goods to support conservation funding. This proposal is a major priority for MLTC and represents a potential pathway toward creating a dedicated, sustainable revenue stream for land protection and

outdoor access initiatives. The strategic importance of advancing this proposal and the need for coordinated advocacy efforts in the coming months was emphasized. There is a legislative pathway, but at this point it appears unlikely to pass. Thus there is increased emphasis on a ballot initiative that will bring this question directly to voters in November 2026. See the State Public Policy update for details and links.

Robb reminded everyone of several upcoming engagements and follow-up responsibilities. The Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs (EEA) will convene a focus group session to further discuss the criteria and weighting related to the PILUS framework.

Everyone was encouraged to submit their responses to the Model Conservation Restriction survey by the end of March and to attend the Conservation Restriction tracking webinar scheduled for March 3. Organizations that have not yet done so should create accounts in the DCS Grant Management System to ensure timely access to funding opportunities.

Robb asked folks to review and submit any necessary corrections to the Open Space data layer to ensure accuracy. Recommendations for service providers to be included in the MLTC directory should be forwarded as appropriate. Finally, everyone is encouraged to review the ELM Green Budget fact sheet in detail and to advocate for its priorities through their respective networks and legislative contacts.

See the Feb 2026 State Public Policy Update for the latest news on MLTC's top priorities:

- The Nature for All Bill (H.901/S.597, Rep Blais, Rep. Montañó & Sen. Feeney)
- An Act increasing the conservation land tax credit (S.2083/H.3147, Sen Tarr and Rep. Jones)
- Environmental Bond Bill
- FY27 State Operating Budget
- FY27 State Capital Budget

And on other bills supported by MLTC:

- An Act investing in natural and working lands (H.1005/S.549 Rep. Meschino & Sen. Comerford)
- An Act relative to uniform partition of heirs property (H.1964/S.1239,, Rep. Roy, Rep. Worrell, Sen. Lovely)
- An Act accelerating wetlands restoration projects (H.1052, S.557, Rep. Shand, Rep. Kassner, Sen. Crighton)
- An Act to reimburse the George L. Darey Inland Fisheries and Game Fund (S.579 Sen. Durant, H.1066, Rep. Vieira)
- An Act relative to Urban Farmland, (S.61/H.121, Sen. Gómez, Rep. Duffy)
- Proposal for a legislative amendment to the constitution relative to agricultural and horticultural lands (S.11/H.71, Sen. Comerford, Rep. Blais)
- An Act to report payments in lieu of taxes for state-owned land (S.1939/H.3032, Sen. Comerford, Rep. Blais)

MLTC has posted some resources on [its website for federal grantees and others seeking information about the impacts of federal actions](#). As things continue to evolve, they'll share relevant updates on that page.

7) Committee and Working Group Updates

- a. Early Career Conservation Network (ECCN) – Julia Fitzpartick, Greenbelt
The ECCN supports professionals within their first ten years in the conservation field. The network is led by a volunteer organizing committee and supported by MLTC.
<https://massland.org/resources/early-conservation-career-network>

Upcoming events include:

- Annual Pre-Conference Gathering

The ECCN's annual pre-conference event will be held on Thursday, March 12, from 4:00–7:30 PM at Arcadia Wildlife Sanctuary in Easthampton. This is the network's largest annual event and provides an opportunity for members to connect prior to the MLTC conference.

Participants will hear from Mark Wamsley, Conservation Director at Kestrel Land Trust, who will present on an affordable housing and conservation project. Attendees will have the opportunity to walk the sanctuary trails before gathering at Tree House Brewing Company for continued networking. Participants may attend part or all of the event. Mentors participating in the ECCN mentorship program are also invited this year.

- Lunch & Learn: Eliminating Overwhelm

A virtual Lunch & Learn session will be held on Friday, April 3, from 12:00–1:00 PM via Zoom. The session will focus on mindfulness and stress management for conservation professionals and will be facilitated by Dominique Day Hunter, an Afro-Indigenous storyteller, author, speaker, and environmental and social justice advocate. This event is limited to ECCN members and capped at 30 participants. If space remains closer to the event date, participation may be opened to the broader community.

Additional events are under development for the year include programming on vernal pools on Cape Cod, foraging in MetroWest, and mindfulness birding in the Berkshires.

Mentorship Program

The 2025–2026 mentorship cohort launched in October and includes 14 mentor-mentee pairs. As part of the program, a recent Lunch & Learn session provided mentees the opportunity to ask mentors about funding opportunities, landowner engagement strategies, and skills relevant to stewardship in the Northeast. Appreciation was extended to mentors who participated in the panel discussion. ECCN members will also volunteer at the upcoming MLTC conference, supporting the newcomers' drop-in session, networking lunch, and other conference needs.

b. Amicus Committee – Buzz Constable (MLTC Board)

Buzz presented on 3 legal cases that the committee is working on.

i) Northeastern University vs Town of Nahant

The Supreme Judicial Court heard arguments on February 2 in a case involving the Town of Nahant's taking of a conservation restriction on property owned by Northeastern University. A lower court had ruled that the taking was pretextual and intended to frustrate development. MLTC joined an amicus brief led by the CLF, alongside ELM, Mass Audubon, APCC, CRWA, and others. The brief argues that conservation is a legitimate public purpose for eminent domain. The outcome of the case remains pending.

ii) White Stadium Case (Emerald Necklace Conservancy vs City of Boston)

MLTC is preparing an amicus brief in advance of arguments scheduled for early April in a case concerning the redevelopment of White Stadium in Franklin Park. While MLTC's brief will not address the question of whether the stadium itself is Article 97 land, the brief will argue that easements for expanded utility and roadway access through parkland should be subject to Article 97 protections. The brief will argue that easements and road improvements crossing Article 97 land must comply with constitutional requirements, including a two-thirds vote of the legislature and review under the Open Space Act. The City has raised additional arguments suggesting that portions of the Emerald Necklace and other public lands may not be subject to Article 97. The SJC has indicated interest in hearing arguments on this broader issue.

The potential implications extend beyond Boston. If Article 97 protections are narrowed, infrastructure such as transmission lines, pipelines, or utility expansions could potentially cross protected conservation lands statewide without legislative approval. MLTC emphasized that the case may have significant ramifications for land trusts across Massachusetts. Greater Worcester Land Trust and Kestrel Land Trust have indicated their intention to join the brief, pending review. Buzz invited other land trusts to participate.

iii) A case in Petersham concerning a large-scale solar installation and the scope of local zoning and planning board authority was noted. MLTC is not currently involved in that matter.

c. Agriculture- Kathy Orlando (Sheffield Land Trust), Kathleen Doherty (American Farmland Trust)

The Agriculture Committee announced its next networking call, scheduled for May 13. Those interested in participating were encouraged to contact MLTC staff.

The Model Conservation Restriction (CR) review process is underway, and the working group is seeking input on agricultural-specific language. Members were invited to submit strong sample language for consideration.

The committee recently held a well-attended meeting with nearly 20 participants. Discussion focused on identifying useful trainings and seminars, sharing documents and CR language, and building expertise among members. The committee is working toward a more formalized structure and is soliciting input on its charter. A meeting of the committee is planned for April. Interested participants were encouraged to reach out to MLTC staff for more information.

Upcoming conference programming will include a workshop on farmland protection and farm viability featuring representatives from Greenbelt and The Carrot Project.

Additional resource links:

Mass Farmland Protection Options guide: <https://farmlandinfo.org/publications/massachusetts-farmland-protection-options-guide/>

Topsfield workshop for farmers: <https://www.ecga.org/post/essex-county-farmers-and-farmland-owners-invited-to-free-planning-workshop>

MDAR Ag Resource Fair (in-person on March 6th): <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/agricultural-resource-fair>

Next MLTC Ag networking Zoom (May 13): <https://massland.org/events/agriculture-quarterly-networking-zoom-0>

8) Other announcements/ questions

Daniel Leahy gave a shout out to Emily Myron for an article she wrote in the most recent issue of MassWildlife magazine. The article focuses on the MassWildlife Land Protection Program.

The next meeting will be held on Friday, June 12, 10 a.m. Hybrid. In-person at Blackstone Heritage Corridor Visitor Center, 3 Paul Clancy Way, Worcester, and via Zoom. There will also be an informal light lunch directly following the meeting to celebrate Robb and his work at MLTC. Register for the [lunch here](#). Register to attend [via Zoom here](#).

Vidya Tikku moved to close the meeting, Anna Wilkins seconded.

Kathy thanked all for their participation and closed the meeting.

Respectfully submitted,
Vidya Tikku, MLTC clerk