



MASSACHUSETTS
LAND TRUST
COALITION

**Conservation Partners Meeting and
MLTC Annual Meeting
Meeting Notes**

Friday, June 20, 2025

Hybrid: Zoom and at Brewster's Woods, Balls Hill Rd, Concord

Attendees: Virtual attendees on record. (98 registered; at least 60 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/june-2025-conservation-partner-meeting>)

- Agenda for today's meeting on June 20, 2025
- Minutes of meeting held on March 14, 2025
- Quarterly Massachusetts Land Trust Coalition (MLTC) and Land Trust Alliance Public Policy 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 March 14 meeting minutes:* Moved by Buzz Constable, seconded by Rob Warren. Approved by all.
- c) *Next meeting: Next meeting: Friday, September 12, 10 a.m.* (Hybrid: location: MassWildlife headquarters, Westborough and via Zoom)

2) **MLTC Annual Meeting (Election of Trustees) – Kathy Orlando**, Partner Engagement Chair

Robb and Kathy thanked the outgoing Board Members-

- Rita Gibes Grossman (2011 – 2025)
- Kristen Sykes (2019 – 2025)

Robb presented the slate of nominees for members of the MLTC Board of Trustees, with slides sharing bios of the new members:

- Current members up for reelection to new 3-year terms beginning July 1, 2025: Cormac Collier (Nantucket Conservation Foundation), Anna Wilkins (North County Land Trust), Emily Myron (Mass Wildlife)
- New 3-year terms beginning July 1, 2025: Laura Johnson, Colin Novick, Kathy Sferra, Rob Warren.

Rita moved to accept the slate as proposed and Cynthia seconded to move the slate to a vote. The election poll was held with a show of hands for those in the room, and a zoom poll for those participating online, with only MLTC members participating with one vote per organization. All voting were in favor of the slate except for two abstaining; none were opposed. The Slate voted in:

3) **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: <https://massland.org/events>

- 2025 Field Trip Programs are being held Fridays & Saturdays now through October. The events are free, but registration is required. Register at massland.org/events
- Land Protection Tools and Techniques is a 10-week course that starts in September 2025. It will be co-led by Christa Collins and Rob Warren, with guest faculty from around the state. So far 25 people have enrolled with more on the wait list. Robb thanked Christa and Rob for coming back again as faculty members.
- The 22nd Annual Land Trust / State Agency Retreat will be held on October 8-9, 2025 (Wednesday/Thursday). Stay tuned for more details.
- Save the date for the MLTC annual conference. It will be held on Friday March 13 at UMass Amherst. A special thanks was shared with the Conference planning committee members that include Buzz Constable, Tessa Dowling, Vanessa Farny, Abby Hardy-Moss, Amy Henderson, Cynthia Henshaw, Vanessa Johnson-Hall, Bridget Likely, Nick Rossi, David Santomenna, Vidya Tikku, Barbara Chrenko, Robb Johnson and Lauren Berk.
Staff are already researching a location for the 2027 conference, hopefully more central within the state. The feedback about hosting the conference on a Friday has been great, but it is not a permanent decision. He called on everyone to sign up for the committee to assist or simply offer ideas on possible alternate locations.

b) Other programs in Development

- Indigenous allyship initiative
- Land trust sustainability project

- c) Janet Milkman, MLTC Board Chair, announced Robb will be leaving MLTC in June 2026. She thanked him for giving us a long lead time. A transition committee is already in place to help find a successor. Janet thanked him for his leadership and vision and asked for everyone's support to help us look for our next leader. Robb announced that he will stay in touch with the organization and will continue consulting in some capacity.

4) LTA Report- Jen Plowden, New England Program Manager
All slides will be posted on the website, including links.

Advocacy Days 2025

Jen thanked all those who participated. A total of 168 people from 40 states, including MA, participated. Over 200 congressional meetings were held. Jen was not present this year, but the meetings included Markey and Warren – so it was a successful gathering, and Jen received a lot of good photo updates. Many people were able to talk about their work with legislators. Participants included: Greater Worcester Land Trust, Kestrel Land Trust, Berkshire Natural Resources Council, Barnstable Land Trust, North County Land Trust, Sheffield Land Trust, and the Sheriff's Meadow Foundation

Federal policy

Jen provided a policy update that has been already circulated and will be posted on the MLTC website. Robb confirmed it has been posted.

Advancing Conservation Excellence Program & Partnership with the coalition

The Leadership Development Training Program was held with 8 virtual sessions and a close out retreat held in-person in Worcester. A total of 11 leaders graduated. Leadership and management skills imparted will help graduates in their professional careers. Jen congratulated all that participated. Thanks to Greater Worcester Land Trust for hosting at their beautiful Patch Reservoir Environmental Field Station.

Grant Opportunities

- 10 land trusts will be selected to participate in organizational assessment and implementation grant packages. They will receive up to \$10k in implementation grant funding and coaching support.

- Targeted micro grant funding opportunity coming up. These are modest grants with \$1k-2.5k grant awards to support specific projects that help with organizational development or activities that sustain the land trust work. Grants will look to support strategic low-cost improvements; there are no match requirements. Applications open in August and close in September. More information will be posted on the LTA website.

Leadership summit 2026 - Building the bench: 2026 Staff leadership Summit

This will be a one-day summit that will convene a group to network, build connections, and dive into emerging and existing challenges. A discussion on what would feel meaningful to all was led by Jen that also included format, location and potential content. There was a discussion on who from each organization may want to join – other staff, managers or board members. Jen shared a QR code for people to scan and learn more.

Kathy asked LTA to consider including non-staff for trusts that are volunteer-run and would like to participate. Jen and Robb have discussed this, and maybe even a Board summit. She will be working with their funders to see what may be possible. Carol Entin asked about the meaning of “building a bench” and Robb described it as “leadership succession”.

The 2025 LTA Rally

It will be held in Cleveland this year from September 3-6, 2025. Early bird pricing ends July 21st – approaching quickly, so sign up soon.

LTA Job Boards

<https://landtrustalliance.org/job-board>

New jobs and resources that have come out have been posted to the website. These include:

- A dignified and lawful approach to encampments on conservation land
- Best Practices to guide land trusts engagement with appraisers. A Conservation Easement Valuation Appraiser Checklist is also posted on the website now.
- Partnerships for Indigenous Land Access and Return. Diana Ruiz, MLTC Board member and ED of Native Land Conservancy, is a co-author on this.
- National webinars coming up from our national education team.

- 5) **Featured Topic: What conservationists need to know about pending state regulations for energy facility siting and permitting – Michelle Manion, Vice President of Policy and Advocacy, Mass Audubon; and Steve Long, Director of Policy and Partnerships at The Nature Conservancy in Massachusetts.** (Slides will be posted to the Conservation Partners meeting website.)

Mass Audubon is strongly behind siting clean energy and planet mitigation – an example of this is the solar installations at Boston Nature Center in Mattapan. They are net zero at that sanctuary and continuing this effort at other sites. The next decade is very critical, both clean energy and nature must play a big part for the emission goals through 2050. They will have ongoing emissions from Biogen combustion, industrial, transportation and electricity.

MA has been a leader on smaller energy producing projects. Massachusetts is a national leader in equitable community solar and low-impact solar siting:

- o #1 in Landfill solar projects
- o #2 in Distributed solar per capita
- o #3 in Community solar per capita

MA’s solar incentive program (SMART) continues to support deployment of urban infill, community solar, and distributed solar projects. This is the next generation program to support the 2050 goals. They’ve received support from the federal government via the Inflation Reduction Act, which is under threat right now- especially the tax credits offered for solar rooftops. They are waiting to see what the Senate does with the IRA funds. Residential solar 30% tax credit is to be phased out right away while incentives for larger

utility-scale solar may last through 2029. The large-scale projects have not, however, received guidance on where they might get sited. The footprint for these projects is where a private landowner and an energy provider can come to an agreement. With each of these sites confirmed, the tax benefits start kicking in. Proximity to sub stations or a transmission line really dictates where a developer can site these projects. Since 2010, large-scale solar has consistently been sited on many high-value forests and farms.

MA has significant additional solar potential on rooftops and parking lots. 55k acres of rooftops are available for solar equipment. In Worcester, well over 10k acres are available. The question is how to make this less expensive and do what we can in these places. Sites chosen for grid upgrades and expansions may be the single most important decision for natural resources. MA should aim to capture 50% of statewide technical potential for solar: ~21 GW of rooftop solar potential ~10 GW of canopy solar potential. Sites chosen for grid upgrades/expansions may be single most important decision for natural resources

Policy opportunities:

Steve Long thanked Robb for the shift at MLTC, as the organization is now willing to step into this policy space. Zack Sheldon is TNC's new staff person responsible for policy issues. There is a paradigm shift- as conservation and energy development needs are being assessed by EEA. There are two policy opportunities:

- **SMART Program:** Program where the state provides incentives to solar developers to attempt to drive them to the built-environment - buildings, parking lots, plant builds, brown fields, etc.
- **Siting and Permitting Infrastructure Commission:** Covers transmission and battery storage and some other forms of clean energy.

Steve has spent nearly 70% of his time on these two opportunities over the last 2 years, including working to establish siting criteria for these two processes. A lot of effort has gone into the solar incentive program. Over the last two years, the focus has been to reduce the conversion of forest land. There is a real paradigm shift with this. The state is trying to take an integrated approach to land use, looking at conservation needs as energy facility development ramps up. EEA is taking this on with the integrated and holistic land use strategy and plan. This is manifesting itself with the MBTA communities' program, affordable housing, and energy. The program is trying to establish the criteria that account for priorities of the conservation community. Conservation and biodiversity and forest carbon are all on the radar screen in terms of energy development – which will hopefully translate into other pieces of policy re: development and conservation.

- The Commission on Energy Infrastructure, Siting and Permitting lifted the scales from the eyes of the solar developers and some of the energy agencies. They educated the people who will set these criteria. Geospatial mapping showed where these conservation priorities exist in the Commonwealth, and how they tie in with the roadmap and next generation bill helping to put these issues on the radar screen.
- The solar incentive program showed a pendulum swing. Over the last two years, the SMART Program became more restrictive, allowing no incentives for projects in critical and natural landscapes. This helped reduce the amount of forest conversion. Solar developers pushed back, stating they needed access to more land. This issue had to be navigated as part of the SMART Program and the Siting and Permitting Infrastructure Commission.
- There were proposals from the Department of Energy Resources on what SMART version 3.0 may look like: Stakeholdering with the solar developers and conservationists, and separate sector engagements. The Department of Energy Resources staff were updated on the topics and will work with them on mapping. In the proposal, the top 20% of the most carbon rich forests would be ineligible. This included state and nationally protected lands, Article 97 lands, and a whole host of other lands, where the resource areas would be off limits. Of the areas that were not cited, solar developers will not oversee the analysis. An external third party will do the analysis, which is being built into the program.
- A one-time mitigation fee is in the works, which will be paid up front by solar developers. This fee will then go to help conserve additional land. This is another paradigm change whereby solar developers who used to pay an annual penalty for having developed open space land would instead pay an upfront fee. This leads to predictable costs, which the developers also like. The staff are also working to align the upcoming

regulations under the new facilities siting and permitting law with what's happening in SMART. The Department of Energy Resources (DOER) will look at the program and make adjustments on an annual basis.

- The Energy, Infrastructure, Siting and Permitting Commission met for many months, and many of its recommendations made were enacted into the law that passed last year. Regulations are now in development and are due by spring 2026. The key components that will be covered are clean energy generation, storage, and transmission. The commission has pushed for a front-loaded process. The developer has to engage in site suitability and then with the community, which brings science and community preferences together.
 - Local (smaller scale) projects – 12 months to review and consider permit.
 - State (larger scale) projects – 15 months to review and consider permit.
- DOER is starting up a brand-new division of siting and permitting, which will help support communities.
- Site suitability is similar to SMART. The criteria that are woven in include biodiversity, forest carbon, climate resilience, Department of Fish and Game, Department of Conservation and Recreation. The mitigation hierarchy, which is similar to SMART, is a scoring system based on the impacts of land use, which will determine the amount of the mitigation fee that the developer must pay. The EEA will work with the communities to develop how to assess that mitigation fee.
- Site suitability guidelines are to be determined, and draft regulations to be available sometime in the fall.
- Green Communities Program - funding in the bond to help DOER do this work. 99.9% of solar projects will be permanent at the local level. The state site suitability guidance, that will be used by towns and cities, will create a score that the towns can use judge a project, which is going to be the real innovation.

Colin Novick (Greater Worcester Land Trust) raised the idea that in urban areas, energy projects can be built on green spaces for less money than on buildings and parking lots and we have to flip incentives so that green spaces are not targeted for conversions. In the proposed exclusion lists shared, he asked where urban areas fall into any of that. Unless it is an intentional choice, he expects that urban areas will never get picked.

Buzz Constable congratulated the presenters on the idea, and said it is applicable to other areas as well. It is better to go with some state sanctioned local mitigation ideas that would be the way to go, even for the MBTA. He wondered if larger projects like national gas pipelines could get solved perhaps with more ease? Steve Long said that it is focused currently on clean energy and doesn't include the national gas pipelines yet.

Kristen Sykes added that ultimately the towns should have a very clear role, providing permits etc. and provide uniform guidance for the decision-making process. Michelle Mannion added that she thinks the State will support this role for the towns. Kristen also suggested that one can also look at growing crops under solar panels, even though it is not as effective. Steve said there are some laws on agriculture land they have not discussed yet, but the implementation pieces will probably focus on the urban areas.

6) State Agency Updates – Kurt Gaertner, Assistant Secretary for Environmental Policy, EEA; Bob Wilber, Director of Conservation Services; Katharine Otto – MDAR Farmland Action Plan Coordinator; Ron Hall -- MDAR APR Acquisition Lead; and other agency staff

Kurt announced that Lisa Primiano is the new Division of Conservation Services Director replacing Bob Wilber, and Lisa introduced herself at his request. He also offered the following updates:

- The state is embarking on the production of the integrated land use strategy, addressing how the Commonwealth can site a lot of renewable energy and housing, while also preserving priority open space. It has set a goal of 222k housing units by 2035. They have also stated 40% of conservation goals by 2050. All of these require land use, and the Commonwealth is establishing:
 - *Conservation Working Group*: This will focus on areas where conservation is most important - direct solar energy, housing, and other developments to places where it is most suited, and so engagement for a working group, there will be engagements through the Resilience Conservation Coalition.

- *Consulting Team:* To help with an outreach plan. The state agencies include housing and local communities, economic development, transportation and unintended future land use. EEA is in the lead on the production of these plans.
- **Environmental Bond Bill – Mass Ready Act** is expected to be filed by the Governor next week; Details are not yet public, but it will propose authorization of substantial funding across land conservation and infrastructure facilities, bridges, dam repairs, the drinking water and wastewater infrastructure. A number of policy sections are also proposed to enhance conservation tools and outcomes. Also expected in coming weeks is an announcement of a new state commission to look at payments in lieu of taxes (PILOT) from the State to municipalities -- to work on addressing the formula that may be providing some disincentives to conservation by not adequately compensating small communities that host a lot of the Commonwealth's conserved open space.

Bob Wilber presented that the CR review is going much better than it was several years ago.

- 95 Applicants are waiting for action from the EEA. Of them, 55 are nearing the end of their review. The average processing time in 2022 was 434 days. In 2024 it moved down to 223 days. In 2025, we are average 102 days. They are trying to get this down to 90 days. This does indeed show progress. The secretary signed 12 CRs last week, demonstrating the progress being made.
- This year, Mike Gendron has stepped up to take on all the end of fiscal year time sensitive CRs, and those are the grant related reimbursement CRs and the CLCC CRs. For 31 grants, all but 2 are at the point of full approval. For conservation tax credit, there are 14 in total.
- An update on the DCS team has been developing with the EEA Information and Technology Team that will allow applicants to determine the status of their application.
- In terms of the Resilient Lands Conservation Coalition, it's a public private conservation partnership, that has four working groups:
 1. Coastal, which is co-led by Mass CCM office and TNC, Massachusetts.
 2. Forest and Landscape Group, which is co-led by DCR and Mt. Grace Land Conservation Trust.
 3. Urban Group which is co-led by EEA and Groundwork Lawrence
 4. Agriculture Group which is co-led by MDAR and the Trustees

Upcoming Grant Opportunities:

- **The PARC Grant:** Applications are due on July 8th at 3pm
- **Conservation Partnership Grant:** Applications are due on July 11th at 3pm

Article 97 and the Open Space Act - Michael Gendron

- EEA hosted multiple public comment periods for the draft regulations based on a number of requests to extend that comment period. Based on a number of comments from the public, they added a third public hearing and again extended that period, which went into April. They got a lot of really good feedback. Special credit to MLTC, MACC and MSNCP and all the other organizations that have spent a lot of time and effort on reviewing and commenting on the draft regs. They are really trying to piece together this puzzle and make sure that they are paying special attention to all of these comments. They are meeting very regularly right now and trying to do the best job they can since it is their last chance to do so.
- When the final version will come out is undetermined. The final version goes through a review process with the higher ups and the staff is trying their best. Buzz asked if the Governor's office has a record on Article 97 that is impacting or slowing the outcome of the regulations, and if so, do the higher-ups have any position on it so if there is anything we can do on our end? Kurt responded that they've had no unusual interactions on Article 97, no sense that these regulations would be looked at unfavorably. EEA doesn't control the process, but Kurt expects a timely review. Robb asked when it may be moved up the chain, and Kurt estimated that they are aiming for June 30 but if not, sometime in July.

- Ron Hall provided updates on the APR program that closed very successfully with three projects preserving 946 acres at roughly an APR value of \$12.2 million. They are hoping to add an additional three projects that will bring that total to roughly 11 projects protecting 1,120 acres at a \$13.5 million APR value. He acknowledged that three of these projects were substantial as they related to APR split; dairy related projects and those projects wouldn't have been done without the assistance of the land trusts. These three projects were: 1. South Hadley that the Kestrel land trust helped with. 2. The Herrick farm in Essex County where the Essex County Green Belt Association helped. 3. Pine Island farm, which the Sheffield Land Trust and the Trustees of Reservations helped with. These three whole-farm projects protected roughly 786 acres at a rough APR value of \$9.5 million.
- The commissioner Ashley Randall has recently been elected as the president of the Northeast Association of State Departments of Agriculture, also known as NEASDA. This is a regional association brings together the commissioners and secretaries in the Northeast to work on shaping the national agricultural policies and to promote the collaboration of these partnerships on federal entities.

Kathy thanked Ron and everyone who presented from EEA.

7) **State Policy Updates- Robb Johnson, MLTC**

Updates on MLTC's administrative and legislative priorities are posted on the MLTC website. The Environmental Bond Bill is very critical to the work the MLTC is doing and MLTC will work closely with Coalition partners to influence the bill as it moves through the legislature Robb expressed disappointment that it appears expansion of the Conservation Land Tax Credit will not be included in the version of the bill the Governor is expected to file soon.

8) **Committee and Working Group Updates**

a) Early Career Conservation Network – Mariah Fogg (Land Trust Alliance)

- ECCN is meant to support those in their first 10 years in the land conservation profession in Massachusetts
 - Volunteer Organizing Committee that leads this effort by organizing events and offering a mentor program. We have a handful of wonderful upcoming events!
- i) Bog and Beach field trip coming up in Falmouth on June 27th. It will kick off with a picnic bunch at the 300 Comm 300 Committee's new headquarters and then head to the Coonamessett Greenway Heritage Trail to learn about a wetland restoration project and wrap up at Woodneck Beach for some beach activities and learning a little bit about erosion control efforts.
 - ii) Horticulture tour in Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge on July 11th. This tour will cover some of the cemetery's history and the management practices that balance the aesthetic value and ecologically minded stewardship practices on that property.
 - iii) The bird migration walk in Dartmouth is coming up on September 10th. It is going to be held at Smith Farm, a Dartmouth Natural Resources Reserve, and it hosts a variety of habitats. And afterwards, folks are going to get together for a bite to eat at a nearby village.
 - iv) There will be a virtual event coming up, which will focus on using GIS to identify and prioritize land protection efforts. That is going to take place on September 18th.
 - v) Mass Audubon's spadefoot toad conservation project that will take place in Barnstable in September and another to enjoy the fall foliage in the Berkshires.
 - vi) Applications for the ECCN 2025/2026 year-long mentorship program are open and will be through September 12th.

b. Amicus Committee – Buzz Constable (MLTC Board)

Buzz Constable reported that there are no current MLTC amicus activity, but he reported on two cases on which MLTC did not take a position. The first is Concord v. Rasmussen, which involves whether public rights exist in roads which have been abandoned via a certain statute but used for decades as trails, was argued to the Supreme Judicial Court on May 8, with no decision anticipated for several months. He also reported that

the Supreme Judicial Court has agreed to hear an appeal by the Emerald Necklace Conservancy and others, in a case about reconstructing White Stadium in Boston's Franklin Park. The prime conservation issue being whether road and access easements across Article 97 land are themselves subject to Article 97 protection.

c. **Agriculture – – Kathy Orlando (Sheffield Land Trust),**

- Free mediation services are available across the state to help farmers and families deal with conflict related to agricultural land. Bob O'Connor and Laura Johnson are both participants in the Metrowest program, which is offered through Metro West Mediation Services. Bob shared literature on the program.

d. **Other announcements/ questions**

The next Conservation Partners meeting will be held on Friday September 12th from 10:00am – 12:15pm. It will be a hybrid format, being held at Mass Wildlife Field HQ, Westborough, and via Zoom. Register at massland.org/events

Buzz moved to adjourn the board meeting; Rita seconded.

Kathy thanked all for their participation and closed the meeting.

Respectfully submitted,
Vidya Tikku, MLTC clerk