MASSACHUSETTS LAND TRUST COALITION

Conservation Partners Meeting Notes

Friday, September 25, 2026
10:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.
Hybrid Meeting

In person at Blackstone Heritage Corridor Visitor Center, 3 Paul Clancy Way, Worcester MA and via Zoom.
Attendees: Virtual attendees on record. (94 registered; at least 30 attended)

Staff Attendees:

- Katy Coburn, ED
- Barbara Chrenko, Programs Manager
- Lauren Berk, Development & Operations Coordinator

Handouts: on website: https://massland.org/events/september-2026-conservation-partners-meeting

- Agenda
- LTA Federal Policy Updates
- LTA Updates
- MLTC Staff Report
- June 2026 CP meeting notes (unaccepted)
- Collateral referenced at meeting: MA/SJC/NEFF v Hawley decision May 15, 2024

Agenda for today's meeting on Sept. 25, 2026

- Welcome, Chair Report & Review of minutes of June meeting
- Staff Report- Katy Coburn, MLTC Executive Director
- LTA Report – Reggie Hall, New England Program Manager
- State Agency Report – Lisa Primiano, Director, Division of Conservation Services, EEA; Katharine Otto, MDAR Farmland Action Plan Coordinator; and other agency staff
- Featured Topic: Project to Update EEA's Protected and Recreational Open Space Data Layer: Background, Why, Your Participation
- MLTC Priorities Update- Heather Clish (The Trustees)
- Committee & Working Group 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 present in person introduced themselves first followed by the ones present over zoom, as Kathy called their names.*
   b) *Review of June meeting minutes: Moved by Colin Novick, seconded by Emily Myron. Approved by all, unanimously.*
   c) *Next meeting: Friday, December 11, 10 a.m. - noon over Zoom*

2) **MLTC Staff Report** -- **Katy Coburn, MLTC Executive Director** gave the following update
   All slides will be posted on the website, including links.

a. Upcoming Events & Announcements

- **Land Trust / State Agency Retreat**
  The retreat will be held at Saima Park in Fitchburg beginning at 9:00 a.m. and will focus on government and conservation issues, with an opportunity for land trust and state agency representatives to connect informally. A gathering at a local brewery is also being planned following the retreat, with details still to be

finalized. Katy noted that there is strong interest from state agency representatives and encouraged more land trust participants to attend.

- **2028 Massachusetts Land Conservation Conference**
  Date: Friday, March 19, 2027
  Location: UMass Amherst
  The deadline for submitting proposals is Sunday October 4. Katy thanked the conference planning committee for its work and explained that the format is being adjusted in response to feedback from participants. There will not be a keynote speaker this year. Instead, the conference will emphasize networking, collaboration, and opportunities for participants to connect with one another. The auditorium will use tables rather than traditional theater-style seating to create a more interactive environment.

3) **LTA Report – Reggie Hall, New England Program Manager**
All slides are posted on the website: https://massland.org/events/september-2026-conservation-partners-meeting

Reggie Hall, the Land Trust Alliance's new New England Program Manager, introduced himself and provided a brief overview of his background. He recently joined the Alliance after working as a conservation and impact finance consultant and previously working with conservation organizations in Rhode Island. He also serves as a board member and acquisition committee chair for a local land trust in New Hampshire.

Reggie reported on the recent Land Trust Alliance Rally in Denver, which included approximately 80 participants from Massachusetts. He described the event as highly successful, with strong participation and significant opportunities for learning, networking, and collaboration.

A major announcement at Rally was the launch of the Land Trust Alliance's new 10-year strategic plan. Reggie explained that the plan was developed with extensive input from the land trust community, including more than 2,000 comments. The plan is organized around four broad areas: people, systems, presence, and resilience. The "people" component focuses on professional development and leadership throughout land trust organizations, not only at the executive director level. "Systems" focuses on strengthening shared infrastructure, including policy, funding, and partnerships. "Presence" is intended to amplify the collective impact of land trusts and strengthen how the conservation community tells its story. Finally, "resilience" focuses on strengthening the Alliance so that it can continue to support the field as demands on land trusts grow.

Reggie also highlighted several upcoming training opportunities. A strategic planning course for small organizations will be offered over three Thursdays in October, with Jen Plowden serving as the lead instructor and additional guest speakers participating. A stewardship volunteer webinar is planned for November in partnership with MLTC. He also encouraged participants to take advantage of the Alliance's broader webinar offerings and practical resources, including guidance on trespass and encroachments and other stewardship issues.

The Alliance is also tracking several federal funding opportunities. Reggie highlighted the NRCS Agricultural Conservation Easement Program, with applications due December 18, and the U.S. Forest Service Community Forest and Open Space Conservation Program, which offers grants of up to $600,000 and has an October 13 application deadline. He noted that federal policy and funding information is updated regularly on the Alliance website.

Reggie encouraged participants to consider the Alliance's in-person training opportunities, particularly those held at the National Conservation Training Center in Shepherdstown, West Virginia. He described the facility as an exceptional training environment for conservation professionals.

He also noted that the Alliance job board currently includes several openings in Massachusetts.

Federal Policy Updates:
https://massland.org/sites/default/files/documents/lta_federal_policy_update_sept_2026.pdf
Mariah Fogg also shared additional resources at:
Addressing Trespass and Encroachments: Prevention, Monitoring and Resolution - Land Trust Alliance

4) State Agency Updates – Lisa Primiano, Director of Conservation Services; Katharine Otto, MDAR Farmland Action Plan Coordinator; Kurt Gaertner, Assistant Secretary EEA, Melissa Cryan Grant Program Manager, DCS; and other agency staff

a. CR Reviews

Lisa acknowledged that there has been concern among land trusts about delays and provided background on the staffing issues contributing to the backlog. EEA has lost two attorneys who had been involved in reviewing conservation restrictions, and Mike Gendron, who has been assisting Sheri Widdiss with CR reviews, is also leaving the agency. His final day is expected to be Wednesday October 7. Staff expressed appreciation for Mike's work and noted that he has been an important resource for land trusts and the CR review process. In response to the staffing loss, EEA has worked with its auxiliary reviewers, all three of whom have agreed to increase their hours devoted to CR reviews. Lisa emphasized that they did not want to alarm land trusts but wanted to be transparent about the circumstances and the likely short-term impact on review times.

Kurt added that EEA is also working to fill the vacant full-time position as a high priority, but that the current Commonwealth budget environment and near-hiring-freeze conditions have made the process more complicated. The Secretary's office is aware of the vacancy, and EEA is working through the necessary approvals to post and fill the position. The position is particularly important because the role extends beyond CR reviews to include Article 97 issues and reviews under the Open Space Act.

Sheri explained that the loss of attorneys has resulted in some CRs being reassigned to different reviewers. As a result, land trusts may receive additional comments on CRs that have already gone through an initial review. She acknowledged that this can be frustrating when applicants believe a document has already been reviewed, but emphasized that staff are working to move these documents through the system as efficiently as possible. Land trusts with urgent deadlines were encouraged to contact her directly. Sheri emphasized that she is willing to work with applicants to expedite reviews when necessary and that direct communication by phone can sometimes be more effective than extended email exchanges.

In response to a question about what applicants can do to make the review process more efficient, Lisa noted that the most important step was to follow the model CR as closely as possible; departures from the model can add substantially to review time. She encouraged applicants to read the entire CR carefully before submitting it. Inconsistencies within a document can result in the CR being returned for corrections, which stops the review process and adds additional time. Finally, attention should also be given to legal land descriptions. These descriptions are detailed and must correspond precisely with surveys and plans. Lisa recommended that applicants have another person independently review the descriptions and verify that all information is consistent.

The current CR review timeline: there are 221 CRs in the system currently. Of those, 71, or approximately 32%, were with EEA reviewers or legal staff. The remaining 150 are with applicants, generally awaiting signatures, responses, or additional information. Lisa reported that 21 CRs had been signed by the Secretary during the previous three weeks, demonstrating that documents are continuing to move through the system despite the staffing challenges. The use of auxiliary reviewers is also being expanded to help increase capacity and the website is being updated.

EEA is working on a more deliberate prioritization process. This is particularly important when a land trust has multiple CRs in the system and not all have the same level of urgency. Land trusts were encouraged to communicate clearly with Sheri about which CRs have critical deadlines so that the review team can take those deadlines into account. When asked about the likely timeline for a CR submitted under current conditions, Lisa estimated that applicants should anticipate approximately 3 to 4 months before receiving an initial review. Fewer than 20 CRs were reportedly waiting for their initial review at that point. For a straightforward CR that follows the model and contains accurate information, the initial review can often move through legal relatively quickly after that. CRs involving substantive issues or multiple rounds of comments will take longer.

b. **CR Model Working Group**

Sheri provided an update on the CR Model Working Group. The group has met 8 times and is scheduled to meet again on Friday October 16. Considerable work has been completed on the permitted actions and uses section of the model, although significant portions of the model still need to be addressed. Scheduling has been somewhat difficult because of Rally and other summer commitments, but the goal of the next meeting is to establish a schedule and agenda for the group's remaining work. Sheri also emphasized the value of having CR reviewers participate in the working group discussions. Hearing directly from land trusts about how they interpret and use the model language has provided valuable context for reviewers and should ultimately improve the quality and consistency of CR reviews.

c. CR Tracking System

Sheri reported that the EEA has been using the system internally since approximately October of last year, and a small number of external users have begun testing it. The new system is intended to make the exchange of documents and information between applicants and EEA more efficient. Applicants will be able to submit documents, receive and return documents, and manage information associated with their CRs through the system. The goal is to create a more streamlined process for managing the many parties and documents involved in a conservation restriction. EEA is hoping to launch the system more broadly in October. One of the challenges has been migrating historical information into the new platform. The existing information was stored across multiple formats like spreadsheets and databases and cleaning and reconciling that information has taken considerable time.

Applicants will be able to access CRs to which they are assigned. Going forward, CRs will be linked to the appropriate applicants within the system. EEA does not currently have the capacity to go back and manually link every historical CR, although older CRs may be connected when they are subsequently amended or otherwise brought back into the system.

Kat Garofoli gave a shout out to DCS on CRTS saying she found it very easy to use.

d. Environmental Bond Bill and Nature for All

Kurt provided brief updates on two policy matters. The Massachusetts environmental bond bill, or MassReady Act, remains pending. The Secretary's office continues to communicate with legislators, and the expectation is that the legislation will move forward sometime in the fall, although the exact timing remains uncertain.

Kurt also noted that the Governor has endorsed the Nature for All ballot question. Participants discussed the continued effort to build endorsements and support for the initiative, with additional information and materials expected to be shared.

e. Massachusetts Integrated Land Use Strategy

Kurt provided an update on the Massachusetts Integrated Land Use Strategy, or MILUS. The initiative is intended to establish a coordinated framework for future land use across the Commonwealth and to align objectives related to housing, economic development, conservation, energy, and other statewide priorities.

The strategy is intended to help advance the Commonwealth's conservation goals, including the 40 by 50 objective. Kurt reported that criteria and indicators have now been translated into an initial suitability map using an algorithm. The initial draft is currently undergoing internal review. A more detailed discussion of MILUS is planned for the October 7 retreat. Kurt also expressed interest in continuing conversations with members of the land trust community about the strategy and its implications for conservation planning.

f. Dept. of Agricultural Resources Updates

Katharine Otto reported that a major focus of their work has been building municipal capacity to participate in agricultural preservation programs. Several of the resources developed for municipalities will also be useful to land trusts. A new resource addressing municipal responsibilities during the Agricultural Preservation Restriction process and subsequent stewardship has been released and was included in the August and September MLTC newsletters. Another resource focused on planning for farmland in Massachusetts was recently released, accompanied by a webinar. Participants were encouraged to review both resources. The Department is also working on revisions to its labor housing policy. Following a recent public comment period, the revised policy is expected to go before the Agricultural Board for review on Monday September 28, with the goal of finalizing the policy by the end of the year.

Two new webpages at MDAR with the new resources and additional links:

- Planning for Farmland in https://www.mass.gov/info-details/ag-resources-for-municipalities#planning-for-farmland-in-massachusetts
- Municipal role in APR process - https://www.mass.gov/info-details/agricultural-preservation-restriction-apr-program-resources-for-municipalities

g. Funding Opportunities

Melissa Cryan shared that the FY27 Land and Water Conservation Fund grant information is expected to be released shortly. The program primarily provides grants to municipalities, although land trusts can participate by working with municipal partners. The grants are approximately $100,000 with a 50 percent reimbursement rate. She explained that the federal funding supporting the program comes from offshore oil and gas lease revenue rather than the annual federal budget, so the program is not subject to the same annual appropriations uncertainty.

There was also a brief update on Conservation Partnership Grant applications. At the time of the meeting, there was no definitive information available regarding the status of those applications.

Katy from MLTC provided the update on the Land Conservation Assistance grants. As previously announced, MLTC is taking over administration of the LCA grants for FY27. MLTC is currently seeking a part-time contractor

with strong grant administration and project management experience and a background in conservation. The RFP deadline is Sunday October 4, 2026.

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

MLTC is working to launch the FY27 program as soon as possible, but it will be later than last year due to the transition in administration from a government to nonprofit program. Staff emphasized that they are working aggressively to complete the remaining steps. Approx. $200,000 is expected to be available for FY27 grants, with additional funding available for projects that carry over into FY28. The program provides funding for land protection projects undertaken by land trusts as well as municipal open space planning.

One of the primary goals of moving administration to MLTC is to significantly shorten the time between application, award, and contracting. Darya Mattes of EEA explained that the previous process often took too long and was not well suited to a rolling grant program. MLTC hopes that, with a dedicated contractor focused specifically on the program, successful applicants will be able to move from approval to contract in approximately one month and receive their funds more quickly.

Darya also reported that last year, the program was able to award 32 organizations with grants. Awards supported a mix of municipal land protection projects, land trust conservation projects, and municipal open space and recreation plans. Staff noted that the program's transition to a two-year grant model means that FY27 funding will support both projects that began in FY26 and new FY27 projects.

A participant asked whether grant funding would still be reimbursed if an acquisition ultimately falls through. It was clarified that reimbursement is tied to completing the work for which the grant was awarded. For example, if a survey is funded and completed but the acquisition does not close, the completed survey would still be eligible for reimbursement.

5) Featured Topic: Project to Update EEA's Protected and Recreational Open Space Data Layer: Background, Why, Your Participation

This project is important because there is currently a significant amount of land protected by land trusts that is not accurately reflected in the state's open space data. Improving the data will provide a more complete picture of protected land and will support conservation planning, open space planning, and the state's broader conservation goals, including 30 by 30 and 40 by 50.

MLTC has been working with a small group of land trusts to test the parcel review process. Participating organizations have provided useful feedback on the documentation, parcel review tool, and overall logistics. The current focus is on refining the process before it is rolled out statewide.

MLTC is working with the Center for Global Solutions at the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy to improve the parcel review tool and make it as user-friendly as possible. Another round of pilot testing may therefore occur before the statewide rollout.

6) MLTC Priorities Update- Heather Clish, Policy Director, The Trustees

What you can do, check out: https://www.natureforma.org/take-action

The group received an update on Question 6, the Nature for Massachusetts ballot initiative, which would dedicate a portion of existing sporting goods sales tax revenue to a new Nature for All Fund. The fund is expected to generate approximately $100 million annually for forests, farms, clean water, parks, trails, and urban green spaces.

The campaign is in a high-activity phase, with 117 endorsing organizations and several prominent individual endorsements. A recent UMass Amherst poll showed approximately 67% support, though continued voter education and outreach were emphasized. Members were encouraged to endorse the initiative, share information with their networks, use the campaign's digital toolkit, and participate in voter contact, phone banking, and text banking. The campaign is also raising funds for a final media push. Heather clarified that Question 6 redirects existing revenue to the fund rather than creating a new tax; the approximately $100 million currently goes to the state General Fund and represents about 0.16% of the state budget. The funding would be phased in over two years.

A participant asked if there is a good response to the question folks have about where this money is being diverted from (since it is an existing revenue source). Heather noted that this represents approximately 0.16% of the state's roughly $63.4 billion budget. The measure would be phased in, with 50% of the funding in the first year and the remaining 50% in the second year. It would quadruple the current budget for our work.

7) Committee and Working Group Updates

a. Early Career Conservation Network (ECCN) – Mariah Fogg, LTA

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

Earlier in September, the group hosted a mindful birding event in the Berkshires, which had a strong turnout and provided participants with an opportunity to connect informally during a busy time of year.

ECCN is also supporting a question-and-answer panel on conservation careers across sectors at the upcoming Land Trust and State Agency Retreat. The panel was developed in response to a survey of the ECCN community and will include David McGowan, Nick Patel, Olivia Barksdale, and Emily Myron.

Following the retreat, ECCN and MLTC are planning an informal networking event for retreat attendees. The current mentorship cohort is also being wrapped up, with a summary of the program and highlights to be shared at the retreat. Recruitment is underway for the 2026–2027 cohort. Nearly 40 applications were received, approximately three times the number received the previous year. ECCN is assessing its capacity and the availability of mentors while looking for ways to support as many applicants as possible. Additional mentors are still welcome, and members interested in participating were encouraged to contact Barbara.

b. Legal Advisory Committee- Mark Robinson, The Compact and MLTC Conservation Advisory Council, Buzz Constable, MLTC CAC

Mark Robinson, ED of the Compact of Cape Cod Conservation Trusts and a member of the MLTC Advisory Council, provided an overview of the work of the MLTC Legal Advisory Committee. He emphasized the importance of land conservation professionals understanding major court decisions that affect their work. The committee intends to highlight significant cases more regularly and is considering a workshop at the March conference.

Mark focused on *New England Forestry Foundation v. Hawley*, a landmark Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court decision concerning property tax exemption for land trust properties. The case arose after local assessors had

denied tax exemptions and the Massachusetts Department of Revenue had issued inconsistent rulings regarding conservation properties. The Supreme Court ultimately ruled unanimously that land trust properties can qualify for tax-exempt status. Mark emphasized that the decision contains broader language supporting the public benefit of private nonprofit land conservation. In particular, the court repeatedly recognized that private land conservation can lessen the burden on the government in carrying out environmental protection responsibilities.

Members were encouraged to read the decision and consider whether language concerning lessening the burden of government should be reflected in organizational purposes or governing documents. Mark also encouraged land trusts to establish relationships with local assessors proactively, including inviting assessors to learn about the organization's work and visit conserved properties.

A discussion followed regarding public access and tax exemption. Mark explained that public access is one factor in determining public benefit, but it is not the only factor. A conservation property does not necessarily lose its tax-exempt status simply because public access is limited, provided there is a legitimate conservation rationale for those restrictions. Examples could include protecting sensitive habitat, rare species, or public safety.

The group also discussed the relationship between tax exemption and payments in lieu of taxes (PILOT). It was noted that municipalities are under significant financial pressure and may seek PILOT contributions from nonprofit landowners. While the court decision supports the legal basis for tax exemption, municipalities may still request voluntary PILOT payments.

Registration link for PILOT listening sessions:
https://forms.cloud.microsoft/pages/responsepage.aspx?id=Fh2GPrdIDkqYBowE2Bt7Km7SNrpTTVdNr1hbSiw4rf1UMjYwM0tLNE5WV0kyRU5WSVZSRzIxVlJLUi4u&utm_medium=email&utm_source=govdelivery&route=shorturl

https://massland.org/sites/default/files/documents/ma_sjc_neff_v_hawley_decision_15may2014_condensed.pdf

Recent Legal Decisions

Buzz Constable of the Lincoln Land Conservation Trust and the MLTC Conservation Advisory Council provided an update on 3 recent legal cases of particular interest to the conservation community.

The first was *Nahant v. Northeastern University*, involving the use of eminent domain to acquire land that had historically functioned as publicly accessible open space. The Supreme Judicial Court affirmed that protecting open space can constitute an appropriate public purpose for governmental acquisition through eminent domain. The decision provides important clarification for municipalities considering the protection of open space through eminent domain.

The second case concerned White Stadium and the Arnold Arboretum in Boston. The litigation involved Article 97 protections and the proposed redevelopment of White Stadium. The court concluded that the stadium parcel itself was not subject to Article 97 because it had been removed from the park system before Article 97 was enacted. MLTC, Kestrel Land Trust, and others had filed an amicus brief raising concerns about the use of surrounding Article 97 rights-of-way and park paths associated with the project. The court did not resolve that broader question, leaving an important issue regarding the application of Article 97 to future changes in use of adjacent parkland.

The third case, *Sunbin v. Petersham*, involved a zoning decision concerning a proposed solar installation and the potential impacts on forest resources and climate. The court returned the matter to the Petersham Zoning Board of Appeals for further consideration. While the decision did not establish the broader principle that conservation and climate impacts could independently determine local zoning decisions, it left the local board with an opportunity to impose conditions addressing some of the concerns.

The Legal Advisory Committee plans to provide more regular updates on significant cases through MLTC communications and at future meetings. Members also discussed creating a centralized resource on the MLTC website where important cases, including *New England Forestry Foundation v. Hawley*, could be posted with links and commentary.

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

The MLTC Agriculture Committee will meet by Zoom on Sept. 30 at 4:00 p.m. The committee is expected to meet quarterly on the fourth Wednesday at 4:00 p.m., although that schedule will be discussed at the upcoming meeting.

The committee will focus on policy issues and practical ways for members to support agricultural land protection. A subgroup is also developing guidance related to incorporating agricultural protections into conservation restrictions. Rather than simply providing model language, the guidance will address the circumstances in which agricultural provisions may be appropriate and the considerations land trusts should evaluate when developing conservation restrictions.

An update was provided on the Agricultural Preservation Restriction (APR) program. APR applications are accepted on a rolling basis and are reviewed periodically by the Agricultural Land Preservation Committee. Organizations with potential projects can reach out to their local land trust or the appropriate MDAR representative for assistance.

Members were also reminded of the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service Agricultural Land Easement (ALE) program. A deadline of Friday October 23 was announced for the current funding opportunity. Land trusts are eligible to apply for federal funds to purchase conservation restrictions on farmland. The application process can be demanding, and members were encouraged to contact American Farmland Trust for technical assistance with potential applications.

The Massachusetts Food System Forum was also highlighted. This year's forum will include a session specifically focused on land conservation and agriculture, with several MLTC members participating

Jamie Pottern shared that the MA Food System Forum will be held on November 19: 2026 MA Food System Forum - Massachusetts Food System Collaborative. This year's gathering will have a particularly strong focus on agricultural land and working lands. Members were encouraged to attend the gathering as an opportunity to connect with conservation practitioners and learn about a range of conservation topics.

ACEP-ALE program from USDA to help pay for farmland easements (CR/APR/Private APR): Agricultural Conservation Easement Program - Massachusetts | Natural Resources Conservation Service

Mary Griffin moved to close the meeting, Rob Warren seconded.
Kathy thanked all for their participation and closed the meeting.

Respectfully submitted,
Vidya Tikku, MLTC clerk