



MASSACHUSETTS
LAND TRUST
COALITION

Conservation Partners Meeting Notes

Friday, March 7, 2025

Virtual

Attendees: Virtual attendees on record. (~160 registered; 125+ attended)

Staff Attendees:

- Robb Johnson, Executive Director
- Barbara Chrenko, Programs Manager
- Lauren Berk, Development and Operations Coordinator

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

- Agenda for today's meeting (emailed in advance to all registrants, and on website).
- Minutes of meeting held on December 13, 2024 (on website)
- Quarterly Massachusetts Land Trust Coalition (MLTC) and Land Trust Alliance Public Policy Updates (emailed in advance to registrants and on website)

1) **Robb Johnson** convened the CP meeting.

- a) *Meeting Introductions and logistics.* Participants introduced themselves as Robb called their names. He offered anyone he missed to introduce themselves after he finished. .
- b) *Next meeting: Friday, June 20, 2025, 10am, Hybrid format-* Brewster's Woods in Concord and via Zoom. It will include MLTC's annual meeting with board elections

2) **MLTC Staff Report -- Robb Johnson, MLTC Executive Director** gave the following update

All slides will be posted on the website by early next week, including links.

- The MLTC Annual Conference is coming up March 21st. It is selling out fast, carrying a great set of workshops. Congress Jim McGovern will be keynote speaker and it is very timely to have a congressman join us during the current times so he can share what's going on in Congress and what we might all be able to take action on. Robb gave a shout out to the conference sponsors and shared that the pre-conference seminars are open to all, with over 100 participants at the first one that was held already. People can register from our events page on the MLTC website. Recordings of these seminars will be posted in our online video library.
- Robb also shared that we have a series of upcoming seminars and networking calls, also posted to the Events website that folks can check out.
- A 4-part course to provide training on fostering land trust engagement in urban communities starts in June, and was designed in collaboration with Vidya Tikku at the Trustees, which is co-sponsoring the series. Organizations that do not have big cities in their service areas but have town centers and more developed portions of their service area can also benefit from this series. They'll learn about what kind of work can be done in their service area, why they might engage more in those parts of the service area, and what kinds of work other land trusts are doing. We will be highlighting some different models from around the state. We will talk through process issues for organizations wishing to embark in this new direction- what do you need to know about, partnership models, how do you need to prepare from just staffing and funding that kind of work, etc. The course will be offered on Tuesdays, 3:00 – 4:30 pm, on June 3, 10, 17 & 24 and include speakers from BNRC, Wildlands Trust, Groundwork Lawrence, Greater Worcester Land Trust, Mass Audubon, the Trustees and more. Participation costs are \$20 per member organization for the whole series; \$35 non-members. Registration is coming soon.

- The 2025 field trips are coming up soon, thanks to volunteers who are hosting. The trips will be offered Fridays and Saturdays from May to September and are open to non-conference attendees as well. Registration opens March 21.
- The Land Protection Tools and Techniques 10-week course will be offered on Thursday afternoons, beginning September 2025. It is co-sponsored by MLTC, UMass MassWoods, Mass Audubon and Wildlands Trust and co- led by Christa Collins and Rob Warren, with guest faculty from around the state. It Includes a November weekend retreat in Plymouth, with field experience. It carries a \$500 course fee, with scholarships available. The original course was piloted last year by MLTC, Mass Audubon, UMass Extension and Wildlands Trust.
- On the MLTC website under Updates, one can find a page with updates and resources related to Uncertainty created by federal funding changes and executive orders. Please forward any additional information you have also collected that you think can help others, so MLTC can add it to [this webpage](#).

3) LTA Report- Jen Plowden, New England Program Manager

All slides will be posted on the website, including links.

- Advancing Conservation Excellence- Organizational assessment and implementation grant opportunity coming up. The information session will be held April 9. The application period runs from April 14 – May 16, 2025. The grant will allow for tailored organizational assessment, followed by a \$10,000 Implementation Grant. Grantees get to participate in quarterly coaching calls with peer organizations that will be participating in the program. The 4 types of assessments being offered include:
 - Organizational capacity assessments
 - Terraforma eligibility assessments
 - Requirements manual assessments
 - Land Trust Standards and Practices assessments

Registration: <https://us02web.zoom.us/meeting/register/tZUzdOyhriljHNCDFGTGXwiwLcat6kji2BiQS#/registration>

- An Acquisition and Stewardship peer group is starting in May and will run for 18 months. There will be an Advanced Practitioner Group- if you have 8+ years of experience and one of your professional development goals for this year is to share your expertise and establish yourself as a leader, this may be of interest. Free for members. Apply [here](#).
- The [Urban Conservation peer network](#) application is also up. The Network provides a forum in which land trust staff and board members can discuss challenges unique to their urban service areas.
- The [New Executive Directors peer network application](#) for leaders in their position for 3 yrs or less, is also open through June. The course will prepare you for risk management, fundraising, financial management, organizational sustainability, partnership building, DBIE, Board management as well as real estate knowledge and stewardship.
- LTA has a new practical pointer- [What to do after a catastrophic event](#).
- LTA also has a new resource for Best Practices when engaging appraisers: <https://landtrustalliance.org/resources/learn/explore/best-practices-when-engaging-appraisers>
- A new Webinar, Best Practices for Working with Appraisers, will be held on April 8th. The event will be co-hosted by the Land Trust Alliance, Connecticut Land Conservation Council, and MLTC. Registration: https://us02web.zoom.us/meeting/register/wXtT_TeeThGWh1cYcgckAQ#/registration
- The LTA Job Board has been updated with several new openings, you can check it out at: <https://landtrustalliance.org/job-board>
- The 2025 LTA Webinar passes are available for sale now which carry benefits for the entire organization that signs up; details on the LTA website.
- There are a series of additional Webinars being offered by LTA that address the need to plan for the new federal changes. These include:
 - New Federal Landscape Webinar, led by Lori Faeth and Elizabeth Ward: the first webinar of this series was held on March 4th, recordings available at <https://landtrustalliance.org/resources/new-federal-landscape/upcoming-events>

- March 11: Financial Scenario Planning in Uncertain Times:
<https://landtrustalliance.org/resources/learn/explore/financial-scenario-planning-in-uncertain-times>
- March 13: Fundraising in the New Federal Landscape:
<https://landtrustalliance.org/resources/learn/explore/fundraising-in-the-new-federal-landscape>
- March 19: Compassionate Leadership on times of Financial Crisis:
<https://landtrustalliance.org/resources/learn/explore/compassionate-leadership-in-times-of-financial-crisis>

- Jen encouraged all to join her for the Advocacy Days in Washington DC, May 5-8. This year, participation is more important than ever. Travel stipends are available with a focus on key districts and first-time participants.

4) **Featured Topic: Federal Policy Update – Lori Faeth, Senior Director of Government Relations for the Land Trust Alliance.**

Robb welcomed Lori, thanking her for joining the meeting.

Lori gave a presentation on the new federal landscape and potential impacts to the land trust community. She responded to questions from our members. She referenced [LTA's printed policy summary](#), which was shared with participants in advance.

Steve Small commented that participants need to be aware of October 2024 IRS regulations on “Listed Transactions”, which are related to Congress’ efforts to shut down syndicated transactions (which was the subject of the Easement Integrity Act passed into law some two years ago.) There were not believed to be too many syndicated transactions in Massachusetts, but now the IRS has introduced another set of regulations that are more complicated – and folks in Massachusetts need to be aware. Just because you’re not involved in a syndicated transaction doesn't mean you get a pass. Also, the regulations *are effective retroactively to 2018*. Those who are following it closely still have several questions on what these regulations do and what are the implications for land trusts. Attendees raised about 20 questions and answered 4 of them. There really isn't a central source of information for some of the questions raised – all related to conservation restrictions where a charitable deduction is claimed by the grantor. The new rules require land trusts to decide whether they need to file a certain form with the IRS to avoid legal peril, but the rules are complex. Land Trusts are advised to consult with knowledgeable counsel. LTA has been on point for explaining these new regulations to the Land trust community, but we really need everybody to be aware of it. LTA has information on their website. Anne G. asked if this applies to donations to the State – like donations to DFG – or just land trusts? Someone in the group chimed in to say that it does apply to gifts to the State as well. There is a LTA webinar coming up on this topic that may address some remaining questions. They also have published [FAQs](#) and related resources in the LTA Resource Center.

6. **State Agency Updates – Kurt Gaertner, Assistant Secretary for Environmental Policy, Bob Wilber, Director of Conservation Services** and agency staff- Melissa Cryan, Katherine Otto and Michael Gendron

- EEA and agency news
- Progress report on CR review process and 2024 Conservation Land Tax Credit projects
- Grant program news
- APR and Farmland Action Plan updates

Kurt Gaertner shared that the Commonwealth is in the process of drafting an Environmental Bond Bill to be filed later this spring, as is done every five years or so. Undersecretary Stephanie Cooper has been holding meetings, trying to make sure that the interests of the conservation community are included in the authorizations we are seeking and policy aspects of the bill that we will be filing. We are looking to make sure we have the resources that we need.

The budget season for the next fiscal year is underway. EEA expects either a level or a modest increase in some of our conservation line items, which is relatively good news given our times. We have been fortunate to have the one-time federal funding from ARPA- all of which has been either expended or committed now. As a result, they are returning to their operations budget for funding, which will be limited compared to the last few years. There are no additional funds left. So that means EEA needs to reconsider funding levels for the variety of programs that have

been put forward. In the last few years with the federal money received, they started several new programs that include a forest reserve program, a cool corridors tree planting program and others, and they're in the process of working through what they can afford to do moving forward.

At the state level, something called a holistic land use plan has been gaining momentum. It also involves site suitability analysis which could also factor into the process for developing and issuing regulations by the Department of Energy Resources and the Department of Public Utilities related to siting of energy infrastructure under the 2024 Grid Equity law. Of course from the perspective of the conservation and environmental community, we want energy facility siting to be done in a way that avoids unnecessarily impacting important natural resources.

Mike Gendron spoke about the pending Open Space Act regulations, which were open for public comments until January 22nd. They received 185 comments from individuals, turning into about 450 pages of comments. There is a lot of really good information that was passed along but it was flagged several times that more time was needed to understand and comment on the regulations. With that in mind, they have reopened the comment period and will hold a third virtual public hearing on [Wednesday, March 26th at 4pm](#) so that it's not in the middle of the day. Mike said they are particularly interested in additional input on methods for natural resource evaluation, including a tool now available on their website. Any feedback there would be helpful. Kurt and Mike presented about the Open Space Act at the MACC conference held last weekend.

Katharine Otto presented updates for the Farmland Protection efforts, announcing the release of the [Farmland Partnership Program grant opportunity](#). This grant program will help implement the Massachusetts Farmland Action Plan (MFAP) at the local, regional or statewide level. The goal of the program is to build networks of partners who will work together collaboratively and in coordination to protect farmland, enhance farm viability, and ensure access to farmland. To get direct newsletter updates on the Farmland Action Plan as well as the new Farmland Partnership Program, sign up for newsletters [here](#), or email Katharine.s.otto@mass.gov

Barbara shared a [MLTC resource defining terms](#) and acronyms in case helpful.

Bob presented an update on conservation restriction review. EEA has 261 applications in their system. Of those, only 37 have not yet started and only 4 of those have been waiting for review for more than 6 months. Overall, 38 are back to parties for local approval, 89 are back to parties for edits, 44 are under active DCS review and 46 are currently with the legal department. 7 were signed this past Tuesday by Secretary Tepper. For the end of FY25, they have 36 applications that are end-of-fiscal-year sensitive and are getting prioritized to close by June 30th. In 2022, the average processing time from submission to recording was 249 days, which was unacceptable. In 2024, that was down to 174 days. That's still not where we want to be but it is an improvement.

The EEA IT team is putting together an updated tracking system to further improve efficiency and importantly for this group, it will have a utility for applicants to check the status of the applications themselves. Bob credited Cynthia Henshaw for requesting this.

Bob reported for Hillary Dimino (from the statewide tree-planting program) who was not able to join today has been working with the Nature Conservancy and a private consultant - targeting cold water fisheries and enhancing flood storage and environmental communities for cooling hot spots/heat islands from climate change. The grant program will allow for the creation of micro forests for greater cooling services and removal of heat absorbing materials like asphalt.

The Resilient Lands Conservation Coalition working groups are up and running, including a forests and landscapes workgroup and a farms and food workgroup. Participants include DCR, TNC, Groundwork Lawrence and EEA's environmental justice team.

Melissa presented upcoming grants opportunities. For folks interested in applying for a landscape partnership grant-the deadline is Thursday, April 3rd. Some additional new grants are coming out in the next couple of weeks. You can

learn about them at the MLTC annual conference. Darya is also working hard, making changes to the open space and reparation planner's workbook, which is out of date. She is [presenting at the CPTC conference](#) next Saturday on OSRPs in general, as well as some of the proposed changes that she will be making. If your community is working on a plan, Darya Mattes is eager to come out and talk to your community in person or over zoom. The new land conservation assistance program is still accepting applications through April 11th, but those projects need to be wrapped up by June 30th. Melissa can be reached at melissa.cryan@mass.gov.

Alain asked a question about the state's recent report on the state's PILOT (payment in lieu of taxes) program and whether there's any action on the recommendations in that report. Kurt responded that the state auditor has made some recommendations that EEA is reviewing. The report makes several important recommendations relative to payment in lieu of taxes and particularly as it is applied to small rural communities with lots of conserved land.

Kurt added that the EEA is meeting with MLTC on 19th of March to continue making improvements to the CR review process. Kurt also fielded a question on the capital budget for land conservation programs, saying that he expected the FY26 budget to be in the 41-42M range whereas the ARPA funds had brought roughly 175M. So that's the drop to expect for the coming year.

Bob shared a personal update that he will be retiring from his current position this spring and his job will be posted soon. He encouraged participants to apply and share broadly with their networks. Bob continued that it's a great job and it has been one of the honors of his life to serve in this job. The Division of Conservation Services team is an amazing team of dedicated people. Kurt thanked Bob for his many years of work and his decades of service to conservation work. Several others joined in to congratulate and thank Bob for his truly remarkable contributions and partnerships.

5) State Policy Updates- Robb Johnson, MLTC

Updates on [MLTC's administrative and legislative priorities](#)

Robb directed everyone to the written update shared with everyone ahead of the meeting. He did want to flag that some of MLTC's policy priorities are about money. MLTC is trying to get more dedicated funding for conservation through the Nature for Massachusetts bill. They are also trying to get an increase in the conservation land tax credit. Yet, tough budget times are ahead, and it will be an interesting year, challenging but we will remain optimistic. Robb also shared that MLTC has officially joined the Green Budget Coalition that ELM convenes.

https://massland.org/sites/default/files/documents/nature_for_ma_exec_summary_feb_2025.pdf

<https://massland.org/sites/default/files/documents/fy26-green-budget-fact-sheets-1.pdf>

6) Committee and Working Group Updates

a) Early Career Conservation Network – Olivia Barksdale (Town of Acton)

There is a new event coming up on March 20th - an annual pre-conference gathering, to bring everyone together. Last fall, the group piloted 8 mentorships. A short survey will be sent out soon to collect more data. Overall, so far everything is going well. Each mentor-mentee pairing has met at least once so far. One feedback to keep in mind is to consider geographic distance between each pair, when matching applicants with mentors.

b) Amicus Committee – Buzz Constable (MLTC Board))

Buzz updated everyone on the dispute between the Town of Concord and abutters regarding public access to a trail on an abandoned road from Concord to Acton in Estabrook Woods. There is potential that a decision here could impact all abandoned roads. It's a complex matter of how roads were abandoned, but it might conceivably impact CRs and conservation lands if such roads are suddenly open to all – or conversely – are no longer accessible to the public at all. The group is following the case, which may or may not be argued in May and decided by the fall. If anyone is interested in learning more, they should reach out to Buzz.

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

The group is looking to maximize efforts to help implement the farmland action plan and make land trusts feel more comfortable doing farm conservation. They are looking for land trusts to apply more directly and faster but

continuing to educate all in the interim. The committee is meeting more regularly. Please reach out to Kathy if anyone is interested in joining. The group is also planning some workshops, including one at the upcoming MLTC conference. Kathy can be reached at kdoherly@farmland.org

7) Other announcements/ questions

- Robb asked Kurt how the energy siting changes may come down. Kurt responded that they will come down in the form for regulations. For more information, see: [Energy Infrastructure Siting and Permitting Reforms | Mass.gov](#) and <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/smart-programmatic-review>

Robb thanked all for their participation and closed the meeting.

Respectfully submitted,
Vidya Tikku, MLTC clerk