



Willistown Conservation Trust (WCT) members and Willistown Township (WTP) representatives gather to celebrate the 15th anniversary of the protection of Kirkwood Preserve and the power of community conservation partnerships. Pictured from left to right in the front row: Erik Hetzel, WCT Director of Land Protection & Public Grants; Britt & Janice Murdoch, WCT Conservation Partners; Bonnie Van Alen, WCT Co-Founder, President, and Executive Director; David Rawson, WTP Former Supervisor; Denise VanValkenburgh, WTP Parks & Recreation Board; Barbara Vincent, WCT Trail Committee; Jeff Vincent, WTP Open Space Review Board. Second row: Alice Hausmann, WCT Co-Founder and Vice Chair; Peter Hausmann; Clarke Blynn, WCT Trustee; Jim Van Alen, WCT Trustee; Mary Hundt, WTP Director of Parks & Recreation; Bob Lange, WTP Supervisor; Bill Shoemaker, WTP Supervisor Chair; Ted Leisenring, Open Space Review Board Chair; Bill Unrath, WTP Parks & Recreation Board; Brook Gardner, WTP Open Space Review Board; Ken Lehr, WTP Parks & Recreation Board Chair. Photo courtesy of WCT.

Kirkwood Preserve October 2020

Celebrating Willistown's Conservation Partners

We're not done yet!

Willistown Township representatives attended an event hosted by the Willistown Conservation Trust celebrating the 15th anniversary of their private/public partnership that resulted in the purchase and protection of Kirkwood Preserve. The 83-acre preserve is located at 855 Grubbs Mill Road in Willistown and boasts rolling hills and grassland, mature woodland, wetlands, a half-mile stretch of Crum Creek, and trails for pedestrians and equestrians.

The community conservation effort was commemorated with a new sign at the entrance to the preserve acknowledging the joint acquisition funding from Willistown Township's Open Space Fund, Chester County, the PA Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, and private donors. The Township and Chester County hold a Declaration of Covenants, Conditions, and Restrictions on the land that ensures the property will be open space for passive recreation, environmental education, wildlife and natural resource protection, and agricultural purposes forever. Willistown Conservation Trust owns, manages, and maintains the property, and Natural Lands monitors the property at no cost to the Township.

The partnership began in 1999 when Supervisor Bob Lange asked the Trust to partner with the Township on an open space referendum. The Trust ran the open space campaign which included letters from "Farmer Bob" to Willistown's residents. He encouraged them to vote yes for the 1/8 of 1% tax increase to purchase and preserve natural resources, farmland, and recreation areas. In one letter, Bob shared,

I think we all agree that Willistown Township is a beautiful place in which to live. In fact, one relatively new resident recently described it as "an oasis in the rapidly developing western suburbs of Philadelphia." As a lifelong resident and full-time farmer, I've watched with dismay the building frenzy occurring all around us. One of the main reasons I ran for supervisor... was to try to make a difference in protecting the future of our Township.

The residents of Willistown sent a clear message that they agreed by voting 80% in favor of the open space referendum. To date, over 400 acres of publicly accessible lands in Willistown Township have been protected including 235 owned by the Township and 169 owned by preservation partners. You can find the details in the Open Space Fund Project Summary Report at willistown.pa.us.

Mary Hundt worked on the Open Space Referendum as an employee of the Willistown Conservation Trust in 1999. Currently, as the Township's Director of Parks and Recreation, she is assessing the parks and recreation and open space results of the 2020 Township Comprehensive Plan Update Survey. She has found that Willistowners highly value the benefits of open space to this day:

The Open Space Referendum of 1999 asking residents if they would agree to an additional tax to protect natural, scenic, and recreational resources passed with 80% of the



Right photo: Representatives from Willistown Conservation Trust and Willistown Township who collaborated in the protection of Kirkwood preserve include: Alice Hausmann, Vice Chair WCT Board of Trustees; Mary Hundt, former Director of Community Resource Protection & Public Funding for WCT and current Township Director of Parks & Recreation; Bonnie Van Alen, President and Executive Director of WCT; Bob Lange, Township Supervisor; Bill Shoemaker, Chair Willistown Supervisors; and David Rawson, former Willistown Supervisor. Photo courtesy of WCT

vote, and the 2020 Comprehensive Plan Survey reveals that Willistown's strong preservation mindset still stands today. A total of 97% of Willistowners find the protection of open space, the environment, and scenic landscapes as important efforts, with 80% defining them as "very important." The preservation of trails, passive recreation parkland, and historic buildings are "important" to 94% of Willistowners. These statistics reinforce the overarching sentiment and desire of this community to continue to protect such special places as Kirkwood Preserve.

You can find out more about open space benefits in the Chester County Planning Commission's Return on Environment report at chescoplanning.org.

Bill Shoemaker, Chairman of the Willistown Board of Supervisors, pointed to the importance of collaborations in the open space protection effort. He noted that, in Willistown, it started with the Township, the Willistown Conservation Trust, and the residents through the successful open space referendum. From there, leveraging the Township's Open Space Fund contribution through partnerships with the Willistown Conservation Trust, Natural Lands, Chester County, and the state has accomplished far more than any individual organization on its their own.

Bill has served on the Township Planning Commission for nearly 30 years working with planners and elected officials to preserve and protect Willistown's open space and natural resources through the Township's land development and environmental protection ordinances. He shared his thoughts on the driving force behind this conservation ethic:

The benefits of open space start with the quality of life of our residents. Even as early as the 19th Century, greenspace was considered a critical aspect of livability, inspiring such

public lands as Central Park in New York and Fairmount Park in Philadelphia. There is so much to be said about what it does for our Township. Protected lands control and filter our stormwater runoff, recharge our water tables, clean our air, decrease demand for public services, and increase our property values. The greatest contribution to our people, however, is their ability to enjoy it. Whether you're a birder, runner, walker, photographer, painter, or plant enthusiast, the sense of wellbeing one experiences in open space is well known to you.

Bonnie Van Alen, Co-Founder and Executive Director of the Willistown Conservation Trust, moved to Willistown in the late 1960s. A decade later, she could see that sprawl development would overtake the community unless someone took action. Hearing that the Brandywine Conservancy was using conservation easements as a tool for land protection, she reached out to them. Shortly thereafter, in 1979, her preservation work began in earnest as a satellite program the Brandywine Conservancy. In 1996, she co-founded the Willistown Conservation Trust with Alice Hausmann, Willistown resident and Vice-Chair of their Board of Trustees. Much of the pastoral character of Willistown is thanks to their conservation collaboration with hundreds of landowners over the years, whom Bonnie refers to as "the heroes of the countryside." When asked what she'd like to share after devoting four decades of her life to conservation in Willistown, she replied,

Open space is for everyone. The more publicly accessible places we have for individuals, families, friends, and neighbors to enjoy, the more connected we become to each other and nature. This experience enriches our lives, and the protected land offers this same opportunity to the generations to come.