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APRIL 2022

THE DARIEN LAND TRUST: SAVING SPACE IN DARIEN



Greening Our
Summer Events
Pollinator-Friendly
Spring Cleanup
Linda Stephens
on Living Your
Best Life

Photo by Laney Lloyd

Photographed at Mather Meadows

Pictured (from left): DLT leaders past and present—Chris Filmer, Terrie Wood, John O'Brien, Beth Harmon, Den Frelinghuysen and Flip Huffard



Best Version Media

THE DARIEN LAND TRUST: Saving Space in Darien

BY PAMELA DEY VOSSLER | PHOTOS BY LANEY LLOYD

The pace of life in Darien is full-throttle. We work. We play. We volunteer. We raise our kids. We go. We go. We go. It's all good, mostly.

But no one can truly thrive in a life endlessly jammed. We need time to catch our breath and space to recharge. That's where we find the perspective, gratitude and the quality of life that makes us whole. That space can be found, in large part, in the world around us—the meadows, the marshlands, the woodlands and water ...but not without effort, not without intention, especially in an area as fully built upon as Darien.

The people of the Darien Land Trust (DLT)—the members, volunteers, trustees and donors—work hard to safeguard our remaining open tracts, as they take their turn at a wheel bequeathed to them by the visionary Darienites who started this worthy effort 65 years ago.

They are the reason why, on the drive to Weed Beach down Nearwater Lane, we can look to our right across an expanse of open marsh and grasslands to the water beyond—and feel a surge of restoring calm. Thanks to the preservation efforts of the DLT, it is not the multi-family housing unit that was once slated for the spot.

“Modern industrialism has grown at the cost of so much of nature,” said Chris Filmer, one of DLT’s 23 trustees who joined the DLT board in 1996, served two terms as vice president and one as president. “Aristotle said, ‘In all things of nature there is always something of the marvelous.’ Perhaps we will help some of it along,” he added.

“Of course there’s a right place and need for development,” said DLT Trustee and longtime Darien resident Den Frelinghuysen who co-chairs the group’s stewardship committee, “but in a world where zoning regulations seem dated, and are increasingly affected by forces beyond our community such as pandemic-driven shifts in demographics and legislative agendas, preserving open space makes more sense than ever,” he added.

Thanks to land donations and capital campaigns large and small supported by hundreds of families in town to purchase properties often discounted by generous sellers, the DLT currently protects 18 acres of meadows, 148 acres of woodlands, 35 acres of coastal wetlands and an assortment of other gems. In all, it’s more than 220 acres of open space in Darien that will never be developed.

“Families sometimes choose to create a legacy gift to permanently preserve their property, an act of generosity made by a generation that will indelibly mark all who come next, as well as the larger community, in ways seen and unseen,” said DLT Executive Director Beth Harmon.

Permanently preserving the 16 acres of sweeping meadows on both sides of Stephen Mather and Brookside Roads was an effort championed by then DLT president Jay Shutts and made possible



DLT leaders past and present, from left: Den Frelinghuysen, Terrie Wood, John O'Brien, Beth Harmon, Chris Filmer and Flip Huffard



DLT Trustees Michael Sgroe, Flip Huffard, Kara Bohnsack, Chris Filmer and Bob Arrix working to maintain Brendan's Meadow, a DLT property on Nearwater Lane

by land donations from the McPherson Family, descendants of the Mathers, in combination with support from the state and financial donations from hundreds of Darien families. Filled with native plants, flowers and trees—the meadows are not only breathtaking but also provide habitat for the pollinating insects and birds so necessary to our survival.

The Land Trust is behind the 22 rejuvenating acres of Dunlap Woods as well, thanks to a gift from Dunlap & Associates in 1972. Abutting Selleck's Woods and accessed from Parkland Drive, Dunlap Woods is tucked in on the other side of the Exit 11 rest stop on I-95 North, balancing the bedlam and cement of this major thoroughfare with the kind of place egrets, heron, native shore birds and swans covet, and migratory birds count on as a place to stop and rest so they can operate as nature intends.



The Valley Forge property near Half Mile Road donated to the DLT by the Paxton Mendelssohn Estate in 2006

“Darien’s coastal location in the heart of the Atlantic Flyway means our properties provide important resting and refueling spots for the many species that migrate along the eastern seaboard each spring and fall,” explained Den.

Similarly, the Land Trust protects Olson Woods, the surprising oasis of nature accessed from Heather Lane or Echo Drive North in the Noroton part of town, a throwback to what was here before us, complete with woodlands and a pond fed by the Noroton River. And a good thing this is—not just for us but also for the alewives (aka blueback herring). These humble fish, lowest on the coastal food chain, prized by striped bass and birds of prey, can now access the fresh water they need to spawn and simply exist, thanks to a fish ladder built in the river by the Land Trust in collaboration with Save the Sound and the state.

Other DLT properties include Cherry Lawn—the trails behind the Darien Nature Center, Norton Woods—a 1974 acquisition supported by Charles Lindbergh, Waterbury Field—that nearly two-acre expanse on the corner of Hollow Tree Ridge Road where a right turn takes you on to Hanson Road, Tokeneke Preserve, wetlands along Five Mile River, as well as tidal salt marshes at Scott's Cove.

“Without the visionaries who founded the DLT 65 years ago, I think Darien would look, sound and feel a lot different than today,” said Den.

Although the majority of DLT properties are too fragile for pedestrian access, Dunlap Woods, Cherry Lawn and Olson Woods are open to the public, offering hiking trails, discovery and respite for all ages.

But all matter.

“Every single acre of preserved and protected open space in Darien is precious,” said Beth. “It is ecologically vital in offsetting the impact of development. These land-saving efforts are more important now than ever,” she added.

“In a time when overdevelopment threatens many communities, open space allows for permeable surfaces that absorb flooding and support wildlife,” said State Representative Terrie Wood who has been in Darien since 1975 and joined the DLT board in 1999 just as the project to acquire Mather Meadows was taking flight. She served on the board for nine years, four and a half years as

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president.

Today Darien is 97% developed. Gone are the pastoral fields crisscrossed by stone walls and dotted with natural ponds that stretched across much of Darien in the 1950s.

“The 1970s saw many changes to the town of Darien. The flight to suburbia was in full swing and green open spaces were disappearing under building construction machinery,” said Chris who moved to Darien in 1978.

“After I had lived in Darien for more than a decade, I started to understand how many of our previously open spaces had been turned into more and more houses and how that development was changing the look and feel of the town,” said Darien resident Flip Huffard, who joined the DLT board in 2006. He served as treasurer then president of DLT and continues his volunteerism with the group as a trustee and co-head of the Land Review Committee which identifies and acts on preserving additional land. He works on stewardship as well.

The DLT not only acquires properties for protection but also actively works to maintain them, often with the youth in town who volunteer to help clear out invasive species, seed pollinator- and environmentally-friendly native plants and keep waterways clean, to name just a few of their many tasks.

Still, there’s more to be done.

DLT properties, in combination with lands protected by the town, comprise about 10% of Darien’s acreage. Conversely, the State’s goal is to protect 673,210 acres or 21% of Connecticut’s land as open space by 2023. As of 2019, the state was 75.5% of the way there.

“Obviously, we are far from having a lot of open space permanently preserved (in Darien),” said Flip.

“We are fortunate to have the land we do,” said Den. “Still, when driving around town much of what appears open and natural is not necessarily protected, so it remains at risk to development. Now more than ever, that’s a wild card.



Nearwater Lane corridor



Olson Woods



Dunlap Woods



Mather Meadows

“Recent trends among developers enabled by flex zoning and external legislative initiatives, demonstrate that the future development of Darien may unfold much differently and in places one might not imagine today,” Den continued. “Without the rigorous and perpetual protection, our landscape can change rapidly; once lost, gone forever,” he added.

As Flip explained, there are three reasons why the work of the DLT matters. “First, it dramatically impacts the look and feel of the town, keeping a more natural, green feel to our neighborhoods. Second, it offers first-hand exposure to nature for all of our children, whether it is exploring one of DLT’s public access properties or simply living in a town with woods and meadows and all of the wild animals that live in these open spaces. Last, it obviously creates and preserves environments for wild animals to live in, whether they are ‘stay at home’ animals or migrants,” he said.

Plus, it just makes you feel better.

“Environmentally, economically, historically and socially, it makes sense to me that our community does all it can to persevere, protect and enrich what few open spaces are left,” said Den.

“Our motto is, ‘Land doesn’t protect itself - people do,’” said Beth. “That’s because the DLT relies nearly 100% on private donations. Simply taking care of what we have requires several hundred thousand dollars every year.”

“Every additional acre is a benefit, particularly to future generations,” said DLT’s current president John O’Brien. The DLT family of volunteers, members and donors who come together to save open space in Darien also know this, and live it. With a passion.

To get involved with the Darien Land Trust or learn more about their work and how you can contribute, visit darienlandtrust.org or follow on Instagram @ [darienlandtrust](https://www.instagram.com/darienlandtrust).