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Saving land, one parcel at a time

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By Nancy Crotti

Tags: [Amherst H. Wilder Foundation](#), [Bob McGillivray](#), [Boundary Waters](#), [Cedar Creek Conservation Area](#), [Columbus Lake Conservation Area](#), [Environmental and Natural Resources Trust Fund](#), [Frogtown](#), [Frogtown Farm and Park](#), [Frogtown Gardens](#), [Frogtown Neighborhood Association](#), [Gateway Park](#), [John VanDerLinde](#), [Lamprey Pass Wildlife Management area](#), [Legislative-Citizen Commission on Minnesota Resources](#), [MayKao Hang](#), [Nicollet Mall](#), [Parks and Recreation Department](#), [Rice Creek Chain of Lakes Park Reserve](#), [Seitu Jones](#), [Soyini Guyton](#), [Susan Schmidt](#), [Trust for Public Land](#)



Raising money for Frogtown Farm and Park is the Trust for Public Land’s main goal this year, according to the trust’s state office director, Susan Schmidt, left. With her is Bob McGillivray, a senior project manager who has been with the trust for 10 years. (Staff photo: Peter Bartz-Gallagher)

Seitu Jones and his wife, Soyini Guyton, were having an angry discussion over dinner with friends three years ago. The source of their ire: the possibility of losing the only sliding hill in their neighborhood, the Frogtown section of St. Paul.

The hill is part of the property at 919 Lafond Ave. that the Amherst H. Wilder Foundation had called home for nearly 100 years. Wilder built a new headquarters at University and Lexington avenues in 2007 and tore down the buildings on the 12-acre parcel — bounded roughly by Lafond and Minnehaha avenues and Victoria and Chatsworth streets — to make it more attractive to buyers. A housing developer was already eyeing the property.

“In addition to wanting to save the sliding hill, we all started thinking about other uses for that site,” Jones says.

Since the 1990s, Jones had been part of a nonprofit organization called Frogtown Gardens, which sponsors garden tours of St. Paul’s most culturally diverse neighborhood. The group approached “everybody” to help preserve the land, according to Jones. Finally, it hit pay dirt when Jones contacted the Trust for Public Land, a national land-preservation nonprofit that has had a presence in Minnesota for half of its 40-year history.

“We had no idea whether or not we could raise money for it. I’m talking about folks here in Frogtown. We just knew that we couldn’t have it sold to a developer that would put housing there,” Jones says. “That was the thing that really drove us, the fact that we have this 12-acre green amenity here in Frogtown in a neighborhood that doesn’t have that many amenities, in a neighborhood that has the least amount of parkland devoted to children than any other neighborhood in St. Paul.”

Jones had worked with the trust previously and thought this would be the perfect project for it. The Frogtown Neighborhood Association, which also serves as St. Paul Community Planning District 7, and the city Parks and Recreation Department joined in advocating for what will be known as Frogtown Farm and Park.

The trust had the land appraised at \$4.7 million. The Wilder Foundation, whose mission is to promote the social welfare of those living in the greater St. Paul area, decided to sell it to the trust for \$2.2 million.

The Wilder Foundation board agreed that dramatically reducing the asking price would enable the neighborhood, the city and the trust to turn the land into something the community could be proud of, said MayKao Hang, president and CEO of the foundation. There was more to it than that, however.

“Even when they signed that deal, none of us, the Trust for Public Land included, had any idea where that money was going to come from,” Jones says. “It’s taking a risk. It’s living in a world that I don’t live in at all. But the money started coming in.”

The city agreed to kick in \$1 million toward the purchase price if the trust can come up with the rest. The Legislative-Citizen Commission on Minnesota Resources has recommended that the Legislature release \$1.5 million of the state Environmental and Natural Resources Trust Fund this session to help purchase the land. The trust is also banking on contributions from Wilder and private donors to make up the balance of the \$3.45 million needed to make Frogtown Farm and Park a reality.

Frogtown Gardens will play a major role in developing the vision and plan for the new park, which the city will develop and maintain. Broad plans for the land include an urban demonstration farm, preservation of dozens of 50- and 100-year-old oak trees, a recreation area for children and saving the beloved sliding hill.

Raising money for Frogtown Farm and Park is the trust’s main goal this year, according to the trust’s state office director, Susan Schmidt. The trust plans to close the purchase with Wilder and convey the land to the city in December.

In Minnesota, the trust works to preserve land that is important to communities in the Twin Cities, along the Mississippi and St. Croix rivers and in the north woods, Schmidt said.

In December, the trust acquired 258 acres of private land along Rice Creek in Columbus, located in Anoka County. On Jan. 3, it sold Anoka County the parcel to preserve wild land for animal habitat, hunting, fishing and other recreation. The acreage creates a seamless natural area between the state-owned Lamprey Pass Wildlife Management area and the county’s Rice Creek Chain of Lakes Park Reserve. It will be known as the Columbus Lake

Conservation Area, according to John VanDerLinde, director of parks and recreation for Anoka County. In 2010, the trust helped the county acquire 550 acres to establish the Cedar Creek Conservation Area.

“That’s very typical of how the trust works,” VanDerLinde says. “They finance and secure the property and then they turn it over to local leaders of government.”

Local and state governments and citizen groups approach the trust about land it can help preserve, according to Bob McGillivray, a senior project manager who has been with the trust for 10 years. The trust is also working on the proposed Gateway Park that would connect Fifth Street and Nicollet Mall in downtown Minneapolis to the Mississippi River. The six blocks are a mixture of publicly and privately held land.

Schmidt has worked on water quality, solid waste, community infrastructure and agriculture projects for a variety of organizations over the past 30 years.

“That history of issues led me to the Trust for Public Land,” she says. “Protecting land and creating parks really is sort of a nexus of all those issues. That’s why I’ve stayed here for a long time, because of that interest and that always changing agenda.”

Schmidt spent lots of time in the outdoors as a child and a college student, in the Boundary Waters, in rivers and parks in Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa and Illinois. That’s what piqued her interest in preserving these amenities for her children and grandchildren.

Schmidt predicts it will take another five years to make Gateway Park a reality. As with Frogtown Farm and Park and the Columbus Lake Conservation Area, she accepts that these projects take time.

“Those three illustrate the role of the Trust for Public Land as a nonprofit partner that can sort of bring the public and nonprofit sector together ... to realize the vision for a neighborhood or for a city or for a county on a river,” Schmidt says. “We help lead and facilitate that partnership and we help make the big ideas real.”



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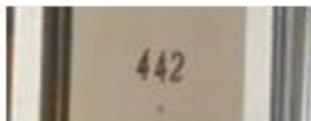
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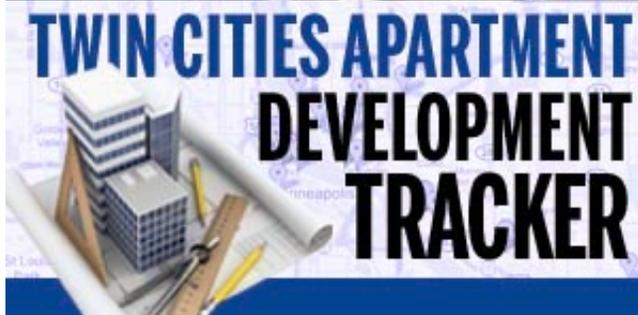


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