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Discovering Chestnut Hill: Protecting urban open space one acre at a time

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by Kevin Hughes

Chestnut Hill is one of the region's most beautiful and architecturally distinguished communities. Flanked by the spectacular Wissahickon Gorge and Cresheim Valley, it began as a rural farming and milling community in the early 1700s and became the site of one of the first planned suburban communities in the 19th century. With the help of an engaged community, Chestnut Hill has thus far been able to effectively preserve its beautiful landscapes – a feat not achieved in many major cities.

Aside from the enchanting aesthetics of green space in an urban environment, open space

plays an important role in the health of a city and its inhabitants. According to the Pennsylvania Land Trust Association, research shows that open space improves the physical and psychological health of its residents, increases home values and helps communities save money on ecosystem services like soil erosion and pollution management.

Not surprisingly, here in the City of Philadelphia, green space is at a premium. This is a reality that many major cities face – how to balance development and the protection of natural resources. The Chestnut Hill Conservancy realized the value of the community's open spaces long ago and has been working in partnership with Friends of the Wissahickon to preserve green space in the Wissahickon Watershed ever since. As the first urban accredited land trust in the nation, the Conservancy – which just this week celebrated protecting over 100 acres of open space – defends open space in a very different environment than other land trusts, using a variety of tools and strategies to encourage conservation.

Though other land trusts scattered across the United States may protect larger swaths of land, every acre conserved in an urban environment is equal to four rural acres of protected land; each acre is more economically and environmentally significant because it is at greater risk for immediate development. Further, with many of the open space parcels in Chestnut Hill adjacent to the Wissahickon Valley Park, their conservation and stormwater value is more significant than parcels in rural areas. As the conservancy's partner in the easement program, FOW is quick to point out, appropriately conserved and managed area adjacent to the Wissahickon Watershed can help avoid millions of dollars of stormwater remediation costs down the road.

Now that the Conservancy has preserved our 100th acre of open space, we are setting our sights on the next 100 acres. With development pressure in Chestnut Hill and the surrounding areas growing, the protection of open space area is more important than ever. This may seem like a heavy lift for just one organization, but thankfully, we do not have to do it alone. In our 52 years, we have established collaborative partnerships with like-minded organizations, garnered inspiring community support and engaged some of the fiercest open space advocates in the region. With your help, we can continue to protect the open space resources of our cherished community.

To learn more about how the Conservancy is protecting open space and natural resources and what you can do to protect the character of the place you love, go to CHConservancy.org/About (<http://chconservancy.org/about>) or contact me at kevin@chconservancy.org

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