

Protecting the Wissahickon Watershed: The Role of Conservation Easements

The Chestnut Hill Conservancy's Easement Program plays a crucial role in preserving the natural and cultural landscape of Northwest Philadelphia, particularly within the Wissahickon watershed.

Established in 1990, the program leverages conservation easements—a powerful tool that allows private landowners to protect their properties while ensuring that critical natural resources are safeguarded for future generations.

Wissahickon Valley Park, a cherished urban green space spanning over 2,042 acres, offers a diverse range of recreational, educational, historical, and ecological benefits to its approximately 1.1 million annual visitors, according to the Philadelphia Parks & Recreation Department. However, the park faces significant stormwater runoff and wastewater challenges, which threaten its ecological integrity. The role of privately owned land adjacent to the park is vital in maintaining water quality and preserving the watershed's health.

Conservation easements are voluntary legal agreements restricting certain types of development and land use on private property to protect conservation values. These agreements ensure that the natural and historic character of the land is preserved while the property remains under private ownership. The Chestnut Hill Conservancy, in partnership with the Friends of the Wissahickon (FOW), currently holds 52 conservation and preservation easements, protecting over 105 acres of land within the Wissahickon Watershed in both Philadelphia and Montgomery Counties.

The importance of conserving privately owned land within the watershed cannot be overstated. The buffer provided by these lands plays a critical role in reducing the impact of stormwater runoff on the Wissahickon Valley Park, which is essential for protecting the drinking water of 350,000 Philadelphians. As identified in the FOW's "Protect Our Watershed" study, more than 400 acres in Chestnut Hill have been designated as priority parcels for protection. Preserving these lands through easements is vital to restoring the watershed and ensuring its sustainability.

The Chestnut Hill Conservancy is at the forefront of urban land conservation, being the first urban-focused land trust in the nation to earn accreditation. This accreditation reflects the Conservancy's commitment to integrating land conservation with the preservation of historic architecture, archival resources, and sustainable practices. The program's pioneering efforts continue to protect open spaces and historic properties, helping to maintain the unique character of Chestnut Hill.

As development pressures increase and the population continues to grow, conservation easements are more critical than ever. Public protection of open spaces can be slow and sometimes insufficient, making private protection tools like easements indispensable. These agreements provide lasting, inextinguishable protections that benefit both the environment and the community.

Easements are truly the community's conservation tool, offering landowners a way to protect the places they love. To learn more about easements' impact on protecting our natural and cultural resources or to explore the possibility of placing an easement on your own property, visit the Chestnut Hill Conservancy's website.