Saving Land the American Way

By Richard Brewer, Professor Emeritus and President, Friends of the University Libraries

[The Friends' annual program includes at least one guest lecture each year. The following article is excerpted from a presentation on April 3, 2001, by Richard Brewer who has been influential in the development of the Southwest Michigan Land Conservancy, and other land trusts.]

Each town should have a park, or rather a primitive forest, of five hundred or a thousand acres, for instruction and recreation.

—H. D. Thoreau, 1859

The Southwest Michigan Land Conservancy (SWMLC) is a local land trust. The phrase "land trust" became widely used in the 20th century, and is defined as a private, non-profit organization whose mission is owning and taking care of natural lands and open space. As of October 2001, the Southwest Michigan trust is ten years old, has a membership of about 1,000, and a full-time staff of six. SWMLC has focused on nine counties and currently protects some 2,500 acres of land that will remain forever undeveloped. For more information about the Southwest Michigan Land Conservancy, go to www.swmlc.org on your Internet browser, or call (616) 324-1600.

Land conservation is an American invention that developed in the 19th century when concerned citizens began to react to the rapid destruction of the natural landscape. What we now recognize as one of the first land trusts, the Trustees of Reservations, was founded in Boston in 1891. The idea came from Charles Eliot, son of Harvard College president Charles W. Eliot. Eliot proposed that, just as art lovers had banded together to save great art in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, people who loved the land should form an organization to save the remaining great pieces of land.

A year later, in San Francisco, another land-saving group, the Sierra Club, was founded. In retrospect, these two organizations are prototypes of the two models of private land conservation. The Sierra Club was the first land advocacy organization. Rather than independently purchasing property, the Sierra Club protects land by persuading the government to buy land for parks and preserves, to set aside land already held, and to achieve appropriate use of privately owned land by such means as wetland regulation.

Land trusts, by contrast, protect land by owning it. They buy it or receive it as gifts. In the last three decades, they have also used a related approach, the conservation easement, by which some of the rights of ownership are permanently transferred to the trust.

For many decades, governments did a generally adequate job of protecting land in the form of preserves, parks, wildlife refuges, and designating state and national forests. Land advocacy organizations accomplished much good, and the land trust model seemed of minor importance. However, in the last three decades of the 20th century, in the 1970s and, more obviously in the 1980s, individuals and organizations opposing government land protection—even government ownership of land—began to gain prominence.

As it became evident that our government was faltering in the task of saving land, new land trusts began to be formed, with the trend accelerating into the 1990s. From fewer than 50 local land trusts in 1960, there have grown to be about 1300 today, with new ones forming weekly. Together, land trusts have protected close to 5 million acres.

The land trust approach is acceptable to people across a wide range of political persuasions. Because a trust doesn't depend on government ownership or regulation, some see it as a more American way of conserving land. On the other hand, the idea that parks and open space are a legitimate way to spend public money has always made sense to the majority of the American people. As a result, the land trust approach to saving land is powerful, but should not be considered more "American" than environmental advocacy.

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The Business of Friends

By David McKee and Donna Ring

In 1958-59, when Waldo Library was built and opened on the West Campus, a separate Business Library was established in the old library building, North Hall, on the East Campus. This branch library flourished for many years serving thousands of faculty, students, and community users. Then, in the early 1990s, a new building, Schneider Hall, was designed and built for the Haworth College of Business on the West Campus. The Business Library, both collections and staff, was integrated into the Waldo Library renovation and reorganization that occurred during the same years. Because of a strong business commitment to the University and community at large, two Central Reference Librarians continued to specialize in business related reference service. In addition, both are active members of the Friends of the University Libraries. David McKee has served as Treasurer and is current Vice President. Donna Ring is Treasurer for 2001-2002, and is responsible for review of gift books and the determination of which are added to the library collection and which become contributions to the Friends’ book sales.

Development and Services

David McKee is the veteran librarian of the old and new business collections with 30 years of service at WMU. Born in East Cleveland, OH, David earned his undergraduate degree in business administration at Bowling Green University, his M.S. in Library Science from Case Western Reserve University, and a M.B.A. at WMU while employed in the Business Library. David began his professional library career at the University in 1971, and is an Associate Professor and Business & Law Librarian in the University Libraries. He serves as the faculty library liaison for the departments of Marketing, Accountancy, and Finance & Commercial Law.

The WMU Business Library, under the direction of James Tydeman, was a key part of the School of Business that was formed in 1956 with Dr. Arnold Schneider as Dean. This was in preparation for the attainment of university status that occurred a year later in 1957. Prior to that time, a department of Business Studies had existed as one of five major areas of study at Western Michigan College. In 1958, the School and its library were located in North Hall, and before long six levels of “stacks” remaining from the original Library building on East Campus were occupied by the library. A third floor was added in North Hall to provide space to house the collection, offices, and study tables and chairs. The high arch of the original multi-storied reading room remained as the ceiling of the third floor Business Library. Jim Tydeman, the first business librarian, quickly developed a superior collection of academic materials that would support the research needs of the students and faculty of the business program. Because of the somewhat isolated location of the library, the collections and services were essentially self-contained although acquisitions and cataloging were handled at Waldo Library.

In 1970, the “schools” at WMU were designated as colleges, and in 1971, a second business librarian was added to the library faculty. By 1976, the College of Business, under the leadership of Dean Darrell Jones, provided undergraduate education to 3,600 students and graduate programs to over 500 students. The undergraduate program had been accredited by the AACSB in 1969, and the graduate accreditation came in 1981. Enrollment burgeoned even further with that key standard met, a third professional librarian was named, and commercial online databases made information readily accessible. Premier among them was Lexis-Nexis that, today, is open to all students, faculty, and staff from the Libraries’ WW site. This source offers a wide breadth of medical, legal, business, and general full-text information from journals, newspapers, and government sources of all kinds.

By the late 1980s, the College of Business served some 5,200 undergraduate majors and 900 graduate students. President Diether H. Haenicke saw an opportunity and quickly persuaded the State to provide funding for both a new business college on the West Campus and Waldo Library renovation. In the planning, the Business Library was merged with the Waldo Library collection. This occurred over the summer of 1991, and when Waldo Library re-opened in August of 1991, business had become a significant part of the collections and reference service located in Waldo. Today, the business collection of monographs and bound periodicals resides in the east wing of the second floor of Waldo Library while the large business reference collection is shelved with the general Central Reference collection on the first floor. Because of high demand, a major portion of the books found in the special Desk Collection are also related to business, e.g., the Million Dollar Directory, Value Line, key sources of statistics, the advertising “Red Book,” etc. Currently, the print and online databases support programs in Accountancy, Finance, Advertising, Food Marketing, International Business, Real Estate, Commercial Law, Business Communication, Computer Information Systems, and all aspects of Management.

In addition to the large print collection found in Waldo Library, business information of all kinds is now available through the WWW. Hoover’s publications are accessible, as is the current data from Moody’s (now published by Mergent, Inc.). Annual and 10-K reports, and other documents required by the Securities and Exchange Commission are

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As evident from the rapid development of land trusts, many find the land trust approach more personally fulfilling for several reasons. First and foremost, the work of land trusts is based on love of the land rather than anger at and fear of environmental degradation. All land trusts are place-based, connected to a local or regional piece of land. A successful project preserves land where we can hike, go birding, hug trees, or meditate.

Another reason for support is the fact that land trust organizations are taking direct action rather than depending on a town council, a department of environmental quality, or a state or national legislature to agree with them. Moreover, the accomplishments of a trust are permanent. The land is preserved, and the whim of the next batch of politicians or bureaucrats has no effect.

Despite the value and strength of land trusts, this brief commentary is not intended to reduce the number of advocates and increase the land trust memberships and donors. We need more of both! Especially at this time in our history, the need for environmental heroes has never been greater.