

Remarks-
Mary Pope Hutson, Vice Chair, Land Trust Alliance for
Johnson Education Center
Patron's Dinner
April 8, 2006

What an honor it is to be with all of you tonight for this glorious occasion to celebrate the beginning of a new era in land conservation and stewardship in this region of America. I was touched when Linda Mead and Wade Martin called and asked me to come and be part of this special evening with you, and to share a few comments on the national significance of what you have created here in Princeton and what it means to the land and the challenges we face today.

I must admit to you that I am completely overwhelmed with this center since I was last here a year and a half ago. I remember it well. We arrived one evening and carefully examined the interior of the building that evoked to me at the time, one of great promise. As a former preservationist-the structure had good bones as they say and I remember thinking what a great vision – but would it become a reality. Of course-with all great visions there must be the key ingredients to make it happen, a leader working with key partners to promote a compelling sense of urgency to create a legacy –and then make it happen.

Tonight is a pivotal point in the history of land preservation in this state as we all celebrate the opening commencement of the Johnson Education Center.

During the last several months I have considered the many pillars of the brand that this center represents to the township, state, region, and particularly its national context. To me four central themes emerged: significance of place, mission, partnerships and permanence.

You are the reason we are here tonight to celebrate a shared commitment to building a legacy that this education center will create through innovative training programs not only for conservation professionals, but also professionals in the field such as appraisers and tax attorneys, public officials, landowners and the next generation of conservationists. I need not recount the numerous partners who made this a reality, but it is important from a national scale to mention to you that no other conservation education center has garnered more partnerships than this particular landmark.

The significance of place and context of this farm's beginnings truly give us an insight into the agricultural landscape that once flourished in this region. The rural heritage was recounted...

Aldo Leopold was a student here at the Lawrenceville School in the early part of the last century at the time when this barn was built...Significance of place and the protection thereof requires a leader with a commitment to mission.

The central driving force for the conservation of the land in this region is an institution to which you have entrusted this landmark, D&R Greenway Land Trust. It is with great admiration that I affirm to each of you that D&R Greenway Land Trust is a leader among land trusts across the nation. As in this case and many others, D&R Greenway has consistently come to the fore with visionary ideas and strong results.

Your executive director, Linda Mead was awarded the 2001 Conservation Partnership Award from the Conservation Fund in Washington, DC – one of the most prestigious national awards in land conservation, given annually to recognize an individual who embodies the spirit of partnership and who achieves exemplary results through cooperation of the business and environmental communities. Her leadership and that of you Board truly stand out as a beacon of excellence for others to emulate.

The Johnson Education Center is one of a kind in New Jersey and unique in the nation. It takes its place at the top with only two other facilities – one public and one private – that have similar purposes. These are the Doyle Conservation Center in Massachusetts and the Shepherdstown facility in West Virginia.

Progress in land conservation is also notable here in New Jersey that is the state of “firsts” when it comes to land use. You have demonstrated the ability to provide the model for others to follow. Examples include statistics that:

- New Jersey was the first state to dedicate public land acquisition funds for open space in 1961. D&R Greenway was the first land trust in New Jersey to preserve land using NJ Green Acres funds dedicated to nonprofits in 1991.
- New Jersey is now predicted to become the first “built out” state in our nation – with lands that are now open becoming either developed OR preserved within his generation. The Johnson Education Center can have an immense impact on the result. Land Trust Alliance (LTA) will be looking to you to create models that others across the country can follow as they face the same challenges.

As you know, the strength of land trusts is their ability to come to the table as representatives of the land, working across political, geographic and social boundaries to bring all parties together to achieve a common goal. D&R Greenway has proven to be expert at using all of the tools available to create a win-win result. They have much to offer to those that come to the Johnson Education Center to work together on a regional vision.

MISSION

D&R Greenway’s mission has been crystal clear from the very beginning and the Board of Trustees and donors of this exemplary organization should be commended for never wavering from its original intent. Part of its mission, which is emblematic of tonight’s celebration, is the underlying principle of inspiring a conservation ethic that promotes policies, educational programs and partnerships that result in a public commitment to land preservation.

You are now all part of the fabric of this building and integral partner in all that this organization will attempt to pursue to continue teaching the importance of land legacy in this region of America and nationally to other communities.

Your mission is part of a National mission that requires each of us to embrace now more than ever. Our challenges at the national level lie in the political and economic climate threatening the issue of permanence for land protection, not only with the tools we use, but in all of our decisions every time we attempt to protect a part of our heritage.

Not too put too fine a point on it, but we are truly at the crossroads of conservation in America and many would say a place of danger.

The Perfect Storm

Last January 27th, Congress issued a report proposing to eliminate deductions for donated conservation easements. Conservation groups were maligned in the Washington Post for their activities on the ground and governance practices were questioned. The Senate Finance Committee launched a full scale investigation into the practices of conservation groups and we were faced with public hearings in Congress at which we testified last June.

The LTA, working on behalf of all land trusts in America, responded quickly and decisively working diligently with our member land trusts to educate members of the Congress in every district in every state as to the importance of private land conservation. Thanks to many of you and particularly the support of D&R Greenway, our message was consistent and concise – Private land conservation is critical to the quality of life in America and that despite the Congressional and IRS inquiries we are advocating the Best Practices for land trust operations and stewardship of protected lands now and for those in the future.

As I speak to you tonight, reforms that we have worked on for over a year with Congress to advance are pending in the Tax Reconciliation Bill. They would advance Appraisal reform to cut out the real abuses and also advance additional tax incentives for all landowners – and parity for farmers and ranchers. Congress has realized how important these incentives are, and have coupled them with reasonable reforms to give landowners additional tools to protect land in America.

We may not succeed in their passage, as charitable reforms and additional tax incentives continue to be scrutinized. The schedule for the Tax conference committee to reconvene is after the Easter recess beginning April 24, 2006, so we will need to persevere to accomplish our goal. At the Land Trust Alliance our mission is to represent you, providing land trusts with the leadership, tools, and standards to increase the pace and quality of conservation in America.

This increased scrutiny is truly a call to action to our community of 1,500 land trusts that has never before had as a central goal to make sure that we educate members of Congress on the value of conservation, but now we must do so.

Development pressures are mounting. The recent statistics show that there are more malls in America than high schools, more prisoners than farmers and we are losing 270 acres every hour. Many have said that there is a Natural Deficit Disorder pervading America and the places we hold dear are threatening the permanence of protected land.

I must tell you that the 18,000+ easements in America may at some point be challenged by second-generation landowners as the properties change hands. Government investment in land protection programs has diminished significantly and, therefore, our private actions to preserve a sense of place have never before been more important.

We truly believe that the future and opportunities for land conservation remain hopeful with citizens like you who have committed to the establishment of the Johnson Education Center.

From this point forward, the D&R Greenway land Trust is going to need your continued support and dedication to position the organization to sustain itself for the future. By building a significant stewardship endowment and your commitment to continue to stay focused on the mission to preserve this land legacy. Now let me close with one of my favorite quotes by Archbishop Oscar Romero who was assassinated, "It help now and then to step back and take the long view. The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts – it is even beyond our vision. We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is complete...."

This is what we are about:

We plant the seed that one day will grow.

We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold promise for the future...

We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.

This enables us to do something and do it very well.

It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way,

An opportunity for God's grace to enter and do the rest."

You have planted the seed by the establishment of this education center and now the D&R Greenway needs your continued commitment to sustain a vital mission not only for New Jersey and the region, but as a landmark for America that will actively protect our natural heritage for future generations.

Thank you for the opportunity you have afforded me tonight to be part of your amazing Accomplishment and I hope our paths will cross again.

