

F O O T H I L L S

# Western Sky Land Trust open for business

By John Barlow  
EDITOR

Landowners searching for a means to protect their land now have a vehicle to facilitate the conservation of sensitive lands.

The Western Sky Land Trust made a presentation to the MD of Foothills last Thursday giving the municipality an update on the progress of the fledgling organization which was officially launched last fall.

"We want to get back to the councils and show the results of the investment they made and show them we are open for business," said executive director Tracy Tarves. "This is an opportunity for us to share some information with councils and councillors who may not know we exist."

Western Sky Land Trust board member Michele Veldhoen, a former Foothills MD councillor, said the organization is a grassroots program in every sense of the term.

"This organization is not a reaction," she explained. "It is a very proactive organization that has taken time to build at the request of landowners."

More than two years ago a handful of landowners approached the Calgary Parks Foundation about accepting a land donation and the potential of putting their land in trust.

To address the proposition, Calgary Parks Foundation, which is not affiliated with the City of Calgary, established a steering committee to see if a land trust would be supported.

Three municipalities, including the MD of Foothills, MD of Rocky View and the City of Calgary, committed funding and staff to the steering committee which took almost two years to investigate the potential of developing a land trust organization. Finally, last summer a board of directors was appointed and Western Sky Land Trust was made official last fall. The board includes local landowners and representatives of like-minded organizations.

Western Sky Land Trust is guided by a vision to conserve open or natural areas within the MD of Foothills, MD of Rocky View and the City of Calgary with an emphasis on protecting land that meets one of the five principles including agricultural,

natural, heritage, scenic and recreational.

Veldhoen said the focus for the land trust is watersheds.

"Overall, our theme is watersheds and that is an important part of the Western Sky mandate," said Veldhoen. "It reflects the general feeling in the province that these (watershed) areas are important."

MD Councillor Ralph Nelson said establishing an organization that will help protect sensitive land is something that is needed to counterbalance the rapid urban and country residential growth in the rural municipalities.

"This is a great thing," said Nelson during their meeting with Western Sky Land Trust last week. We need to do all we can to support this because this is what we need. This is not a threat, this is an opportunity for us and an opportunity for people in the MD who have not had a conduit to do it."

The biggest question that has faced Western Sky Land Trust during its short existence is how does it work?

Western Sky Land Trust offers landowners three options. The first is for landowners to donate

land to the trust to protect in perpetuity. Option two is for the land trust to hold conservation easements without actually owning land and the third option is to raise funds to purchase land.

Veldhoen said the land trust would focus on voluntary land donations for the time being.

"Every case is unique and if someone wants to sell their land we will look at that, but we want to facilitate voluntary land conservation as a grassroots form for people who want to conserve their land."

In addition, there is a comprehensive evaluation process that must be done before Western Sky agrees to take on a project to ensure they have the resources to maintain each parcel long-term.

"It is driven by the landowner, they have to first decide what they want done with the land," explained Veldhoen. "We have to take care of it and that is part of the evaluation process. Can we do what the landowner wants?"

Western Sky Land Trust the board has developed partnerships with like-minded organizations such as Ducks Unlimited to help maintain parcels added to the land trust's stable. The

land trust will also be soliciting support from community volunteers, corporations and service clubs to help with various programs.

To date, Western Sky Land Trust has not completed any agreements for donation of land and due to confidentiality agreements the board would not reveal if any were pending.

Western Sky Land Trust will provide a long-range approach to land conservation and provides a mechanism for communities and landowners to actively conserve open space, but it will not actively lobby against further development.

"We have the same goals as the MD," explained Veldhoen. "We want to accommodate growth, but at the same time protect some of those areas that brings that growth."

Over the next few months representatives from the land trust will meet with local councils including Turner Valley (Feb. 6), Okotoks (Feb. 27), High River (March 13), Black Diamond (April 5) and Longview (April 24).

For more information on Western Sky Land Trust call 974-0756 or visit the website at [www.westernskylandtrust.ca](http://www.westernskylandtrust.ca)

