

Easement for lake bluff to land trust

By Ryan Whisner
Union regional editor

JEFFERSON — Continuing its efforts to protect and preserve land throughout the area, the Land Trust Network of Jefferson County has accepted a donation of a conservation easement on a 64-acre wildlife area in the Town of Koshkonong.

The property, located on the south side of Lake Koshkonong and referred to as Blackhawk Bluff, is owned by Linn and Ann Duesterbeck.

Significant portions of the land have been restored to native prairie and wetlands, which are home to many birds, wildlife and aquatic species.

"It is a wonderful gift to nature," said Martine Koeppel,

chairperson of the Land Trust Network of Jefferson County. "It's just a beautiful area."

By recently donating a conservation easement on their property, the Duesterbecks have protected their land in perpetuity.

Conservation easements, when completed, are attached to the title of the property and are forever enforced.

Members of the Land Trust Network of Jefferson County monitor the easements for compliance and the easement travels with the entire piece of land, even if the land is split up and sold as separate pieces.

"Property owners like the Duesterbecks, who wish to determine the fate of their land even after they no longer own it,

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may place a conservation easement on their property restricting it from future residential, commercial and industrial development," Koeppel explained.

The easement also restricts the destruction of the land itself. Activities such as mining, gravel and sand extraction, and sod farming, are not permitted.

Koeppel said landowners can be very specific with their conservation easement by including language that restricts logging in certain areas, ensures that their prairies are not disturbed, and even restricts the type of recreational activities allowed in the future.

In October, the land trust accepted another donation of an easement on a 137-acre farm in the Town of Sumner.

Koeppel said the property owners, who wished to remain anonymous, currently grow crops and raise livestock on their farm, and wanted this tradition to continue in the future.

"This farmland conservation easement was created to protect farming in the future for Jefferson County, but it also protects the native wildlife habitat that exists in the woodlands, prairies and wetlands that exist on the

farm," she said, adding three more projects are under way.

The history of the Land Trust Network of Jefferson County traces back to 1995 when a group of Jefferson County citizens, concerned for their environment, formed the Jefferson County Environmental Network.

Koeppel said that network was incorporated to help organize its members affect change in Jefferson County Zoning regulations that members believed were allowing too much development in the county.

The group was instrumental in the developmental process of the Jefferson County Agricultural Preservation and Land Use Plan or "2020 Plan".

"We realized when we were involved in the 2020 plan that zoning isn't forever," Koeppel said, noting that zoning designations can change with a vote of the Jefferson County Board of Supervisors.

Members of the Jefferson County Environmental Network determined that the only way to permanently protect the land was through conservation easements or buying the land outright.

To address that avenue of protection, members formed a 501c3 tax-exempt land conservation organization named the Land Trust Network of Jefferson County.

"We did it primarily to protect land and give the landowners an opportunity to get a tax deduction from it," Koeppel said.

By creating the land trust, landowners were given the option of protecting their land rather than selling it for residential, commercial, and industrial development.

She said landowners could now determine the fate of their land's future by placing a conservation easement on their land, which would allow them to continue to own their land, but it would be protected forever.

"We are a private, non-profit organization," Koeppel said. "We are not government-related."

In addition, she said the Land Trust Network of Jefferson County is open to any type of land preservation. Protected land can be in the city, in the town and also of any size.

"If you are a landowner and want to permanently protect your land, our land trust will help you do that," Koeppel said. "We will do any piece of land if the landowner wants to protect it."

By selling or donating a conservation easement, the easement is attached to the title of the land and the Land Trust Network of Jefferson County monitors the easement's compliance in perpetuity.

To date, land trust members have completed 15 land preservation projects in Jefferson County, resulting in the permanent protection of more than 1,400 acres of land.

The Land Trust Network of Jefferson County has worked with the state Department of Natural Resources' Stewardship Fund, the U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service, the Jeffer-

son County Parks Department, and private landowners in protecting Jefferson County's natural resources, and this mission will continue into the future, Koeppel said.

She herself put a conservation easement on her farm.

"I'm a CPA, so I saw what a great tax advantage there was for me," Koeppel said.

Federal tax deductions and the numbers of years the landowner could take a deduction for the donation of a conservation easement was increased for 2006 and 2007. It remains unknown at this time if these deduction amounts will be continued in 2008 and beyond.

The Land Trust Network has received three donated conservation easements in the past year. Those landowners have taken advantage of the substantial tax saving received from their donation.

Persons interested in permanent land protection may view the Land Trust Network of Jefferson County's website at www.landtrustnetwork.org. They also may contact the land trust by mail at LTN, P.O. Box 142, Watertown.

In addition to Koeppel, the Land Trust Network Board members include Susan Lidholm, J. Rod Clark, Mo Hansen and Alexander Brower.

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