

## West Meade neighbors surrender development rights to save nature

*We few, we happy few, we band of brothers.*

A delighted phalanx of volunteers — men, women and children — in the greenwoods of West Meade fit these words from Shakespeare’s *Henry V*.

They are among nine households who signed legal documents Sunday that make them the first to give up development rights on part of their land for the [West Meade Conservancy](#).

Their signatures will preserve a strip of hillside, trees and creek for future generations. Dozens of other homeowners are lined up to follow.

“All I had to hear was ‘We’re going to try to preserve the hills,’ ” said Mary Kowalski, who lives on Rolling Fork Drive and is among the first wave.

“It was a no-brainer for me. I said, ‘Sign me up.’ ”

The voluntary urban/suburban conservation program meshes with [Nashville’s Open Space Plan](#) to increase the city’s green infrastructure by adding public

parklands and privately protecting at least 3,000 acres over the next 10 years.

“It’s an excellent example of the open space plan being implemented in a really creative way,” said Audra Ladd, with [The Land Trust for Tennessee](#).

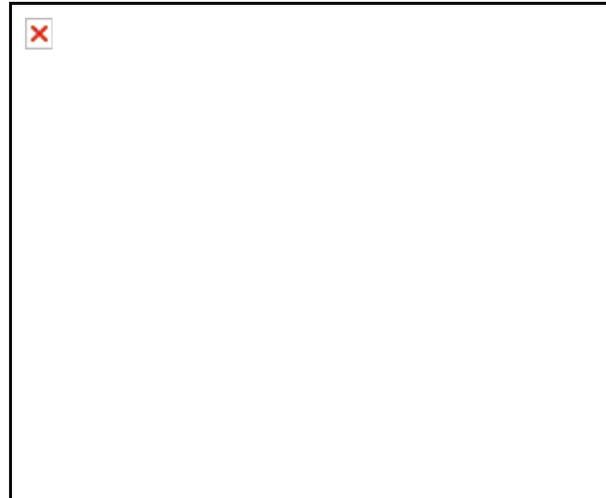
The Land Trust, which assisted with the city’s plan, will hold the West Meade easements that prohibit development on parts of the pilot families’ properties.

These residents will receive no tax breaks, unlike in most larger-scale projects.

Protecting lands and waterways publicly and privately has been an increasingly popular way to [improve](#) quality of life in this country. It can help clean the air and water for healthier lives and provide places to walk, bicycle and enjoy the outdoors.

Green space that can include historical elements, such as old rock walls, and waterfalls and scenic vistas preserves a community’s character, Ladd said.

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Wildlife habitat is kept intact, and green natural areas are key to filtering and absorbing stormwater to reduce flooding.

## Dwindling beauty

A series of tree-spackled ridges and hollows runs beside and behind many homes — often ranch-style — in the West Meade area, where lots can be one acre and greater.

Nancy Smith, one of nine property owners in the pilot group, looks from her Jocelyn Hollow backyard across a creek and up a steep hillside.

“It’s like living in the Warner Park,” she enthused. “But this beauty is dwindling even as we speak.”

A new street cuts up a hillside nearby where large houses sprawl across a ridge, breaking up the woods and view. Such development can concentrate water flow during rains, and some neighbors worry that ridge top development might further destabilize the terrain.

The sloped hillsides are prone to landslides, as seen when heavy rains and flooding hit Nashville last year.

The West Meade Conservancy, Nashville’s first of its kind, was modeled after [The Hillside Conservancy](#) in Cincinnati, which began in the 1960s after hills and ridges that surround much of the city were increasingly being scraped off for buildings.

The group wanted to maintain the attractiveness and appeal of the area, while still allowing growth, and also to reduce landslides that are an issue there, too.

“In most cases where you have development, it often exacerbates it,” said Eric Russo, executive director.

## 'Great value'

Smith and her husband, Collins Smith, had moved out of Green Hills after a [developer](#) knocked down a duplex and put up two 3 .5-story houses next door, blocking sunlight from their home and yard.

“I said it’s time for us to get out,” she said. “I felt like something was being taken from me. It was out of my control.

“When I heard about the Conservancy, I thought these people are going to do something before it happens to them.”

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The protective easement behind her and her neighbors' homes includes a stretch of the Jocelyn Branch of Richland Creek that's on their property and will run up the hillside.

The restrictions will cover half of her 1.5-acre lot. The amount varies for each neighbor, depending on where the creek is on their land and how much land they wanted to put in an easement.

This is still private property — not open to the public — and the houses can be torn down and rebuilt. But the easement that restricts development remains on the other portion, even if the property is sold.

Questions as to whether the property values will be **improved** or hurt remain.

"We realize we are going to narrow the number of people that are going to want to buy this, but as more of the city encroaches on the outlying area," Smith said, "I think this is going to be something of great **value**."

## Neighbors unite

The land trust's hurdle was finding a way to apply conservation easements in a meaningful way. The nonprofit most often has worked on country properties that are hundreds or even thousands of acres.

"We wanted to make sure we weren't doing piecemeal conservation," Ladd said.

They determined that a string of landowners on several adjoining pieces of

land, along a ridge and creek, would be the place to start.

The West Meade Conservancy's mission in an area with about 800 acres of forest is "to preserve the woodlands and wildlife of West Meade as a vital link in Nashville's ecological corridor."

In spring, much of the area already appears green from the air, and the color hopscotches roadways to the lush Warner Parks, then the large-yarded Forest Hills and eventually Radnor Lake State Natural Area across town.

To the northwest lie Metro's Bells Bend and Beaman parks across the Cumberland River.

All share an abundance of owls, hawks, deer, foxes, salamanders, downy woodpeckers and a host of other animals, including coyotes that spread from the western U.S. Some species need the extensive woods to mate and survive.

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A social change has already begun among the people.

“It brought us together as a neighborhood,” Kowalski said. “We might never have talked to each other. Now we’re quite proud of what we’ve done together.”

## 'You need nature'

The West Meade Conservancy, a new example of land protection for Nashville, blossomed from a gathering in 2006 on a grassy circle in the middle of Jocelyn Hollow Road.

Biologist Noah Charney, then in his 20s, had asked neighbors to come discuss the possibilities for protecting the jagged hills and woods that he roamed growing up.

Today, more than 60 homeowners are registered with the conservancy. That means they have filled out nonbinding forms saying they’re interested in an easement. But it’s no overnight deal. Just where the next batch will be has not been determined.

Alys Venable, a former teacher, and many others continue to work to raise money with art, yard and bake sales; 5k run/walks; and publication of the book *Noah and the Arc*, about Charney and the woods.

The money goes for attorney fees, surveys and other needs to establish the voluntary easements. In the meantime, the group still gathers on the circle in good weather.

“In order to live sanely you need nature,”

Kowalski said. “We’re a part of it, not separate from it. Here is a chance to be allowed to protect the land.”

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The protective easement behind the West Meade neighbors’ homes includes a stretch of the Jocelyn Branch of Richland Creek. / John Partipilo / The Tennessean

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## Public invited

A celebration open to the public for the West Meade Conservancy will be 6:30-7:30 p.m. Dec. 12 at Westmeade Elementary School, 6641 Clearbrook Drive. Contact the West Meade Conservancy at 615-356-2423 or w [estmeade@gmail.com](mailto:estmeade@gmail.com) . Contact The Land Trust for Tennessee ( [www.landtrusttn.org](http://www.landtrusttn.org) ) at 615-244-5263 or [landowner@landtrusttn.org](mailto:landowner@landtrusttn.org) .

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## Related Links

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[Dec. 16, 2006: Tennessee Voices: Neighbors link up to keep the woods and hills of West Meade spectacular](#)

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