



Westchester Land Trust



FALL 2026 NEWSLETTER

WHERE HOPE TAKES ROOT

Protecting land and caring for it, forever



FROM OUR PRESIDENT

I am often reminded of the proverb, “A society grows great when old men plant trees whose shade they shall never sit beneath.”

A few years ago, our staff circled up after a hike through our beloved Westchester Wilderness Walk / Zofnass Family Preserve in Pound Ridge. We had big plans to make improvements to the trails and signs there, and we were sharing sample maps and signage with the preserve’s founding family. Paul Zofnass, his wife Renee Ring, and their extended family spearheaded the protection of the land and have helped steward the preserve’s cherished acres for many decades.

Our small group was huddled together when Paul arrived in from his morning hike accompanied by his caretaker and hiking companion Marietta, who was his new walking partner due to the progression of Paul’s Alzheimer’s disease.

We welcomed the two and asked them how their hike was. Paul’s eyes twinkled and his smile stretched cheek to cheek. “Wonderful,” he said. “I am so grateful to whoever made those trails!” In that moment, Paul was praising his own legacy—hundreds of acres protected, miles of meandering trails, and a respite of peaceful nature—even though he no longer recognized that it was his life’s work he was celebrating.

Paul’s sense of awe reminds me that our work has a lasting effect that will be here through all the chapters of our lives, and for generations after us.

This autumn, we proudly share these stories of impact and beauty with you and thank you for being deeply rooted in our work. As you read these stories, please remember: we welcome you to plant the trees, protect the trails, give generously, and help us leave this region’s land and waterways better than we found them.

You never know, one day someone could sit beneath the shade of a tree you’ve planted, take a sip of pure drinking water that you’ve helped us safeguard, or stroll the trails you’ve helped us create, and express tremendous gratitude to you for leaving behind so much beauty. And that someone could be you.

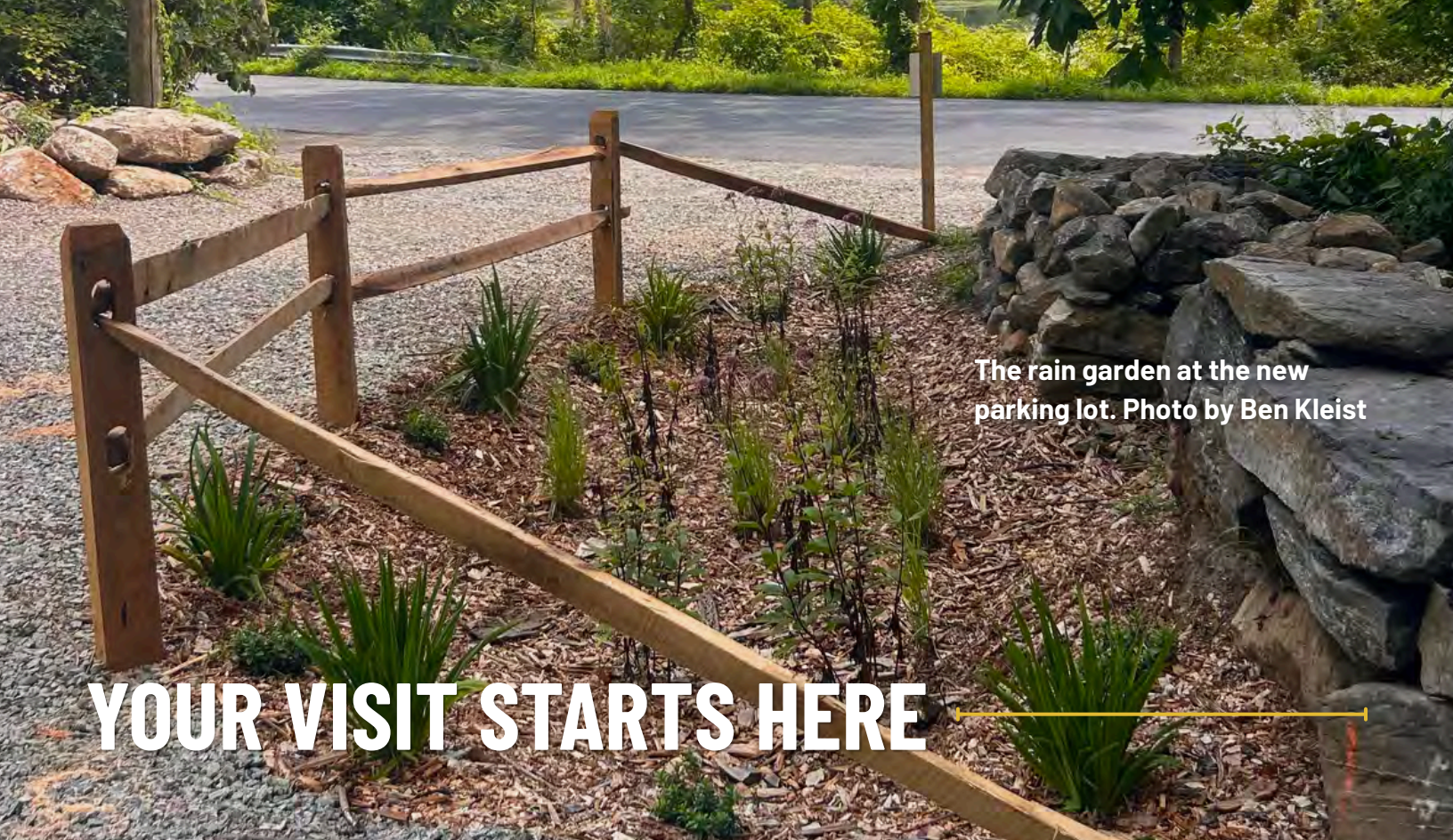
Thank you for your support and involvement.

In beauty may you always be,

Kara Whelan, *President*

PICTURED LEFT:

Kara Whelan introduces Paul Zofnass in 2016 at Westchester Wilderness Walk / Zofnass Family Preserve in Pound Ridge. Photo by Nonie Whelan



The rain garden at the new parking lot. Photo by Ben Kleist

YOUR VISIT STARTS HERE

Before you step onto the trail, your visit has already begun. A redesigned entrance at Westchester Wilderness Walk / Zofnass Family Preserve is making it safer and easier to arrive—part of WLT’s work to welcome more people into one of Pound Ridge’s most remarkable natural places.

This summer, after years of planning, WLT completed a redesigned gravel parking area at the preserve’s Upper Shad Road entrance. The updated lot offers visitors a safer, clearer place to park and begin their visit.

The compact design allowed healthy trees and other natural features to remain in place. A rain garden collects water from the parking area and allows it to soak slowly into the ground, while surrounding native plants help manage stormwater and create habitat.

“It was easy to see where to pull in and park,” said a recent preserve visitor. “We could begin our walk feeling relaxed and ready to enjoy the land.”

The improved entrance reflects a larger culture of care at WLT. We want you to enjoy your visit from the moment you arrive. That means caring not only for trails and habitat, but also reducing barriers, improving wayfinding, and creating experiences that feel welcoming to people with different levels of outdoor experience and abilities.

WLT’s stewardship team will continue restoring the entrance with native plants and shrubs. Future interpretive signage will help visitors explore the preserve’s history and meet the people whose persistence helped protect it.

Now, we invite you to experience it for yourself. Visit the Upper Shad Road entrance, set out on the trail, and tell us what you think. How people use our preserves—and the feedback they share—help us make these special places more welcoming for years to come.

This project was made possible with support from the Land Trust Alliance and longtime preserve champions Paul Zofnass and Renee Ring.

PROTECTING WATER AT THE SOURCE

For Bedford residents, clean drinking water begins long before it reaches the tap. It starts with the forests, wetlands, and protected land surrounding local water sources—including Guard Hill Preserve.

More than two decades ago, 76 acres near Bedford Village were protected from development and donated to Westchester Land Trust. The reason was clear: to preserve the property's forests, wetlands, wildlife habitat, and trails for the future.

Today, that act of foresight is serving the Bedford community in another important way.

Beneath Guard Hill Preserve lies an aquifer that supplies drinking water in Bedford. This year, WLT and the Town of Bedford completed an agreement allowing the Town to develop new public wells, underground water lines, and related infrastructure on a carefully defined portion of the preserve.

The project will help strengthen Bedford's public drinking-water system while Guard Hill remains permanently protected and open to visitors.

An aerial photograph showing a vast expanse of green forest and wetlands. The terrain is hilly, with dense tree cover in some areas and more open, grassy or shrubby areas in others. The colors range from deep greens to lighter, yellowish-green, suggesting a mix of vegetation types.

Aerial view of Guard Hill Preserve's forests and wetlands.
Photo by Ben Kleist

WHAT PROTECTED LAND MAKES POSSIBLE

What happens on the surface affects the water below it. Forests and wetlands absorb rainfall, slow runoff, and capture pollutants from developed areas before they reach the surrounding water resources. At Guard Hill, protecting the land helps safeguard the water Bedford residents depend on.

The preserve's streams and wetlands are also part of the larger Croton watershed, which helps supply drinking water across Westchester County and New York City. Protecting these interconnected landscapes benefits wildlife while safeguarding a resource millions of people use every day.

“Permanent protection doesn’t mean a landscape never changes,” said Janelle Robbins, WLT’s Vice President of Conservation. “It means making thoughtful decisions, being a good neighbor, and ensuring the conservation values we promised to protect are still here for the generations that follow.”

COME SEE THE CONNECTION FOR YOURSELF

Guard Hill Preserve sits just beyond Bedford Village, offering acres of forests and wetlands with trails to explore. As the drinking-water project moves forward, visitors may notice construction activity and changes along portions of the trails. The agreement includes safeguards to minimize environmental and visual impacts, and the Town is responsible for restoring affected areas and maintaining the water system over the long term.

Once construction is complete, trails and vegetation will soften its traces. Most visitors may never see the wells and underground lines, but Bedford residents will continue benefiting from the water system they support.

When you visit Guard Hill, you’re walking through more than a peaceful preserve. You’re experiencing a protected landscape that provides wildlife habitat, stores and filters water, and helps meet an essential community need.

That’s why protecting land matters—not only for what we can enjoy today, but for everything healthy land makes possible into the future.

LET YOUR LEGACY TAKE ROOT

A planned gift to Westchester Land Trust can help protect the forests, farms, trails, and waterways our communities depend on for generations.

Start the conversation today. Call Kara Whelan at 914-234-6992 ext. 12 or email kara@westchesterlandtrust.org.

PLAN YOUR VISIT

DID YOU KNOW: Parking for this preserve is available behind the Bedford Village Fire Department. Walk the Sam Pryor Trail through Guard Hill’s forests and wetlands, just beyond Bedford Village.

Check current trail conditions and plan your visit before heading out.

Learn more at:
westchesterlandtrust.org/preserves/guard-hill-preserve

Guard Hill Preserve from above.
Photo by Ben Kleist



GETTING LODESTONE READY FOR YOU

When Lodestone Preserve welcomes its first visitors, we want the experience to feel simple: find the trail, step into the woods, and start exploring. Preparing more than 200 acres for that moment is anything but simple.

Since WLT protected Lodestone last year—our largest land-protection acquisition to date—the stewardship team has been getting to know the property with its future visitors in mind.

Where should the trails go? Which trees could pose a safety risk? How can people explore without disturbing important wildlife habitat? What permits, signs, and other infrastructure will visitors need?

Answering those questions now will help make your future visit safer, easier, and more enjoyable while protecting the forests, wetlands, rocky outcrops, and wildlife that make Lodestone so extraordinary.

Fortunately, the landscape already offers part of the answer. Historic mining roads wind through the property, creating opportunities for wide, stable trails without cutting entirely new routes through the forest.

“When Lodestone opens, we want visitors to feel welcomed into the landscape,” said Janelle Robbins, Vice President of Conservation. “Every trail and access choice has to work for people while protecting the habitat that makes this place special.”



**Former mining roads will serve as trails
at Lodestone Preserve in Southeast.
Photo by Ben Kleist**

Wildlife research is helping guide those decisions. Lodestone provides habitat for bats and other species, and a two-year, \$123,500 grant from the Sarah K. de Coizart Article TENTH Perpetual Charitable Trust is supporting bat surveys, habitat restoration, and long-term wildlife planning.

The research will help WLT understand how wildlife uses the property and how public access and habitat protection can work together.

We're working toward welcoming visitors to Lodestone next year, and we're taking the time to get it right. There are still trails to prepare, safety concerns and habitat needs to address, and details to work through before the preserve is ready.

When the trails open, you may see a simple path into the woods. Behind it will be years of planning and care devoted to creating a preserve you can explore for generations to come.



HELP GET LODESTONE PRESERVE READY

There's still plenty to do before Lodestone can welcome its first visitors, and you can be part of it.

Contact Jake Sacket at jakob@westchesterlandtrust.org to be added to our Lodestone volunteer crew.

PLANTING FOR THE FORESTS OF THE FUTURE

The forest visitors will experience at Lodestone decades from now may be growing under different conditions than the forest there today.

As temperatures rise and growing conditions shift, some native plants common in our region may struggle, while species native to areas farther south may become better suited to local conditions.

When choosing what to plant, WLT considers soil, sunlight, water, wildlife habitat—and which native species are most likely to thrive in the future.

"We're still planting native species, but we're thinking carefully about which natives are most likely to succeed under the conditions we're going to have, not just the conditions we have today," said Brendan Blanch, WLT's Conservation Technician. "Stewardship means making decisions now with future forests in mind."

Those choices will help create a more resilient forest for future visitors and wildlife.

OPENING DOORS TO CONSERVATION

A first opportunity can shape a career. With support from our community, WLT's Conservation Apprenticeship Program gives emerging conservationists paid, hands-on experience—and helps them find their place in the field.

Conservation careers often begin with something small: a poster, a volunteer project, or the first chance to learn from someone already doing the work.

WLT apprentices gain experience across land protection, stewardship, and community engagement. They develop practical skills, build confidence, and explore different career paths. Some alumni have continued into conservation careers—and some have even returned to WLT as staff.

This summer, Christina Hernandez and Elsa Baudry-Confalone built on experiences that began years before either of them imagined working in conservation.



WATCH THEIR WORK

Christina and Elsa created a tutorial showing how to identify monarch butterfly eggs and caterpillars.



Scan to watch their Reel and follow us on Instagram!



Elsa and Christina give away grow bags at a farmers market in Mount Vernon.

Photo by Jake Sacket



Photo courtesy of Christina Hernandez

CHRISTINA HERNANDEZ

ONE SMALL DECISION

My path began when I stopped to read a poster for Groundwork Hudson Valley's Green Team.

That decision led to three years of restoring green spaces across Yonkers—including building bog bridges at WLT's Otter Creek Preserve. Returning to WLT as an apprentice helped me expand my skills, confidence, and ability to lead.

Now, I plan to pursue a career in urban forestry and bring what I've learned home to Yonkers—one neighborhood at a time.

ELSA BAUDRY-CONFALONE

A DIFFERENT KIND OF SATURDAY

My path began when my mom sent me across the street with a shovel and loppers for a cleanup at Glenwood Lake Park.

Working with WLT staff and my neighbors showed me what a community can accomplish by caring for a place together. Years later, I returned as an apprentice while studying natural resources management.

This summer, I discovered how much I love teaching and helping families experience the natural world.



Photo courtesy of Elsa Baudry-Confalone

Visit bit.ly/WLTapprentices to read more from Elsa and Christina, plus stay tuned for 2027 apprenticeship opportunities!

YOUR SUPPORT OPENS THE DOOR

Your gift helps emerging conservationists gain paid experience, learn from professionals, and begin building careers that benefit our land and communities.

Help launch a conservation career at westchesterlandtrust.org/donate.

GIVING BACK

Ted out on the trails.
Photo by Jes Parker

After more than 25 years of exploring Westchester Wilderness Walk / Zofnass Family Preserve, Pound Ridge resident Ted Dowey is finding new ways to care for a place that has given him so much.

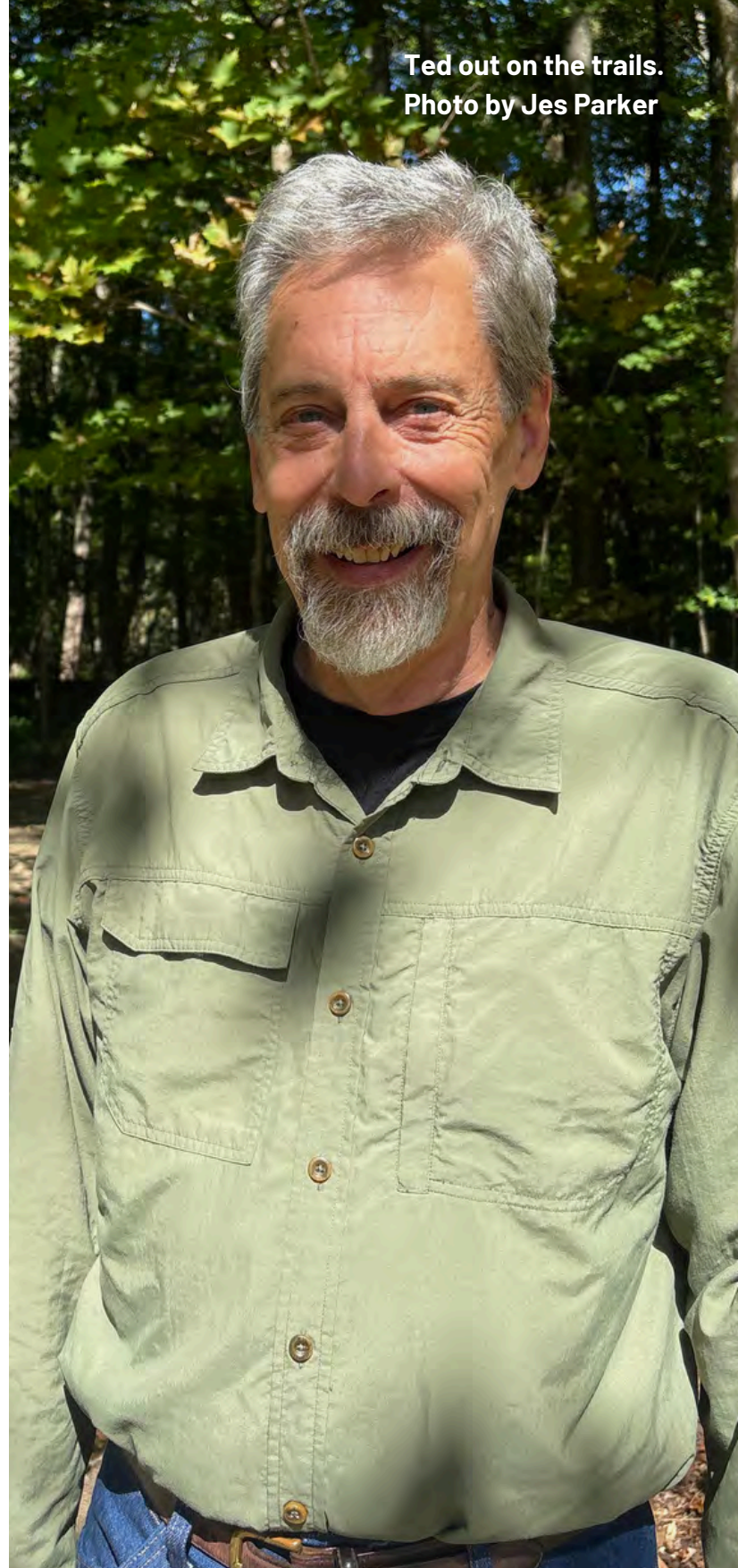
Ted lives just around the corner from the preserve. For decades, its trails have offered him a place to hike, run, and step away from everyday life. He remembers occasionally encountering Paul Zofnass as Paul worked persistently to protect the land.

“When Paul put the preserve together, it was really a blessing,” he said. “As development increases, places like this will become more and more important.”

After retiring last spring, Ted began joining WLT’s volunteer work sessions at the preserve. Along the way, he learned more about the preserve’s trees, wildlife, and invasive plants.

Today, Ted serves as the Preserve Ambassador for this special place. As he walks the trails, he watches for fallen trees, damaged infrastructure, and other concerns, reporting them to WLT’s stewardship team.

Ted also donated a brush hog—a heavy-duty mower he had used to maintain wildlife habitat on his own property. The equipment filled an important need on WLT’s organizational wish list and will now help us care for more protected land.



COULD YOU HELP WITH OUR NEXT WISH?

WLT has a wish list of tools, equipment, and supplies that support our work. Like Ted, you may already have something that could make a meaningful difference.

To learn more, contact Carolina Cooney at carolina@westchesterlandtrust.org.



CONSERVATION ACROSS BOUNDARIES

This summer, emerging conservationists traded familiar ground for new preserves, new mentors, and new ways of caring for the land.

The summer exchange brought together apprentices and interns from Westchester Land Trust, Hudson Highlands Land Trust (HHLT), Pound Ridge Land Conservancy (PRLC), and Westchester County Department of Planning. Each stop introduced them to a different landscape, stewardship challenge, and team of conservation professionals.

At Lodestone Preserve, they planted trees for a future forest. At Pound Ridge Land Conservancy's Armstrong Preserve, they repaired fencing that protects young plants from deer. At Hudson Highlands Land Trust's Granite Mountain Preserve, they removed invasive plants and prepared the ground for native species.

"Nature doesn't follow property lines," said Nadia Azizi of Hudson Highlands Land Trust. "Wildlife corridors, clean water, and climate resilience all depend on connected landscapes."

The exchange gave participants broader experience while helping them build relationships with peers entering the same field.

"Sharing resources and coordinating efforts among organizations can allow us to accomplish more than we could individually," said Medha Pandey, Executive Director of Bedford Audubon. "The collaboration and camaraderie are uplifting and sustain the momentum."

For our community, these partnerships mean more expertise on the ground, stronger protection for the places we love, and a new generation prepared to care for them.

PROTECTION WITH A BACKUP

Collaboration between WLT and Pound Ridge Land Conservancy extends beyond shared workdays. WLT holds conservation easements on 17 PRLC properties, while PRLC provides the same added safeguard on one WLT property. Across the region, WLT also holds easements on properties owned by Bedford Audubon, Putnam County Land Trust, and North Salem Open Land Foundation.

That gives each property a second organization with the legal authority to help uphold its permanent protection if needed.

"This 'belt and suspenders' model of conservation adds another layer of protection," said Dave Prosser, PRLC's Director of Stewardship.

PICTURED ABOVE: Apprentices from several regional conservation organizations gather for a shared workday. Photo by Kim Fendrich

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BUILT TO LAST

We're pleased to report that WLT earned reaccreditation from the Land Trust Alliance, confirming that we meet rigorous standards for sound finances, responsible governance, and lasting stewardship.

Thank you to everyone who supported the process and continues to help us protect land forever.

Want to learn more? Contact Carissa
Gospodinoff, Vice President of Operations,
at carissa@westchesterlandtrust.org.



- Sound Finances
- Ethical Conduct
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- Lasting Stewardship



ON THE COVER: A great horned owl perched at The Center at Mariandale in Ossining. Photo by Karalyn Lamb