

The Workings of the Mountain Area Land Trust

by Penny Randell

Through the acquisition of conservation easements, Mountain Area Land Trust (MALT), has managed to preserve and protect 24,000 acres of mountain land thus far. Their mission statement: To save natural areas, wildlife habitat, streams and rivers, working ranches and historical lands, for the benefit of the community, and as a legacy for future generations, is a vow which stands firm today. Beginning in 1992, records reveal service to 4,290 square acres located in such counties as Jefferson, Clear Creek, Park, Gilpin, Teller, and the mountainous regions of Boulder. Tireless efforts have been rewarded through a handful of devotees that keep the spirit alive.

But, before serving accolades to MALT, an understanding of land easements and the process therein is relevant. In effort to protect the conservation values of a property, one can enter into a conservation easement: a voluntary and legal agreement between a land owner and a Land Trust that restricts the use of land in a way that is deemed worthy. Such easements can be donated or sold by the land owner. Still, beyond recognizing said restrictions, the landowner maintains ownership and use of the property. In simpler terms, an easement is a legal right to use another's land for a specific limited purpose, mainly protection.

Protected lands include wildlife and natural habitat, historic value, open space and scenic value, plus recreation and educational value. Priority data is determined when considering these areas. Mostly wildlife corridors are protected along with high alpine botany. During summer months local college students assist as they conduct research in such areas. MALT, with conservation motives, goes to work with solutions when issues or problems are reported.

MALT's first endeavor began in 1992 with Noble Meadow, located at the corner of Highway 103 and Evergreen Parkway. The threat of development drew the attention of concerned residents. Just four people initially headed up the team and labored to keep Elk Meadow as inviting and restricted as it is today. Readily seen as a wise move, protection of this land has continued until this day. Twenty-five years later in 2017, MALT celebrated its anniversary knowing the work they were doing had paid off and as a result much land, which could have been developed, remained in its natural state.

It was August 21, 2019 when MALT's most recent achievement was recognized. With more than 100 bicyclists, hikers, community members and staff on hand "the Sluice" opened at Floyd Hill Open Space. A grant of \$75,000 from the Gates Family Foundation secured the construction of trails as well as the opening of the first Front Range downhill bike only trail. Because of the generosity of MALT donors and the community, construction began on the first of several trails at Floyd Hill Open Space the following September. That same month saw the completion of a connector trail servicing the area. It was that October when a community survey was performed and an open house followed that would discuss the idea of future trail construction.

Linda Besler, MALT's communication director states, "It is our business to cultivate relationships with landowners. We also access the county government, as well as tax brokers. It is common for neighbors to refer neighbors to us and we end up with a community of donors." An example of

such is Pleasant Park Road in Conifer where a string of property owners successfully worked with MALT. Remembering that MALT services six counties, it's obvious they have plenty of prospects. Too, they are supported by various organizations such as the Evergreen Area Chamber of Commerce, the Rotary Club, and Elks Club to name a few.

Board member and secretary for MALT, Nikki Croce, is proud of this non-profit organization and volunteers much time for it. She said, "A great deal of our outreach is through word of mouth. It's common for neighbors to work together and a wonderful thing to see." Indeed, the annual fundraiser is an absolute hit and is a valuable resource for future endeavors. This year the event will take place on July 11th. Advertising will appear and tickets will go on sale. The evening includes a silent auction, entertainment, and a fine dinner. Conversations concerning development will be rich. Water, its value and use, are of great concern and will no doubt be at the center of discussion.

Land and water conservation specialist Dylan Sondermann is a full-time employee of MALT and is around to analyze scientific data. Jeanne Beaudry, executive director, excels in keeping the organization active and committed. Lynn Caligiuri the development director considers her role to be of great importance, calling it "a labor of love." In fact, that sentiment is in keeping throughout MALT. These folks, including the valuable board members, keep the process forever moving forward. We citizens of the mountain area are truly fortunate. After all, once educated, we realize that we are surrounded by these dedicated works of service. We are blessed; just look around.