

Park Support Groups of Baltimore City: **The Woodberry Land Trust**

Woodberry is one of the quieter neighborhoods in Baltimore City. With Druid Hill Park to the south, Cylburn Arboretum to the north, and the Jones Falls Expressway to the east, the former mill-town is largely buffered from the rest of the city. But the thing that really gives Woodberry its distinct atmosphere is its 100 acres of forest, which represents one of the last large, undeveloped stretches of public land in Baltimore. The forest has been enjoyed by residents for generations, but development is now poised to remove a large chunk of this “urban wilderness.”

Many small projects had been proposed for Woodberry Woods, but the biggest and most contentious was introduced by Loyola College in 1998. Called the “Field of Dreams,” the ambitious plan called for the purchase of 71 acres of the forest for a sports complex with a 6,000 seat stadium, athletic fields, and parking. Residents committed to preserving the woods formed the Urban Forest Initiative (UFI) and fought the project for years, attending meetings, writing letters, and garnering endorsements and signatures for a petition against the stadium. However, community members realized that keeping the woods safe from one development scheme was not a long-term solution. To this end, the Woodberry Land Trust (WLT) was formed in 2000 to work towards securing conservation easements for the entire forest.

WLT is a small organization, with just ten official members and a four-person board. The group’s self-proclaimed vision is to “ensure permanent

conservation, restoration, and management” of the Woodberry forest. Educating the public about the woods is also one of the land trust’s foremost aims. Unlike most greening groups in the city, WLT is interested solely in the natural environment. The average urban park, with its mix of natural and man-made features, is not within the scope of their focus.

A few years back, WLT’s greatest ambition was to safeguard all of the woods in a permanent trust. This became impossible, however, when the sale of 50 acres of public land to Loyola was passed by the city’s Board of Estimates in 2003. Instead of giving up, the land trust has shifted its focus to protecting the rest of the forest while acting as a watchdog group to make sure that the college is conscientious in its construction efforts. Improving the health of the forest’s ecosystem has also emerged as a major goal, which involves reforestation some areas, removing invasive vines and trash and stabilizing eroded streambeds.

One of the basic actions that WLT has taken to protect the woods has involved getting as much of the land as possible under the purview of one city agency. To this end, the organization has helped negotiate the transfer of a number of land parcels from the Departments of Planning and Housing to the Department of Recreation & Parks. While this was an important first step, the real work started when the land trust began implementing the Woodberry Woods Watershed Assessment.

Focusing on some of the highest-quality woods in the northwest part of the forest, the watershed assessment was made possible in 2004 when WLT received a \$35,000 Chesapeake Bay Small Watershed Grant. The purpose of the assessment is to develop a “Restoration and Management Plan” both for the forest and for the watershed as a whole. The findings of the study could compellingly demonstrate the need to protect the forest as part of a larger effort to keep pollutants and trash from reaching the Chesapeake Bay. The study is being carried out by a

professional environmental assessment group.

In order to fully fund the assessment, WLT needed a matching grant of \$15,000. The land trust went to Recreation & Parks for this money and, in 2005, a partnership agreement was signed that provided for the matching funds. The members of WLT are excited about working with Recreation & Parks in the future, and hope to create a relationship based firmly cooperation and shared responsibility.

WHAT: The Woodberry Land Trust

WHERE: Woodberry Woods in the Woodberry community of north-central Baltimore City

WHEN: Since 2000

WHY: To “ensure permanent conservation, restoration, and management” of the Woodberry forest and to educate the public about the woods

Based on interviews with Jan Danforth and Tracey Brown and on information compiled during the summer of 2006.