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## PARKS FOR TOMORROW

By Marilyn Mendell

Spring has sprung, and it's time to get out to all the parks, trails and other special places that our region has to offer. But before you picnic along the Patuxent River, or enjoy the view from Georgetown on the Potomac, pause to think about how these lands have been preserved for public enjoyment.

The Trust for Public Land (TPL) is one of the organizations working to create parks and preserve land for public use. Our region is fortunate because so many before us had the foresight to build a legacy of conservation that we all enjoy today. Carrying on that tradition, TPL's mission is unique in that it conserves land for people, wherever they may be. TPL's fingerprints are just as likely to be on a park in a dense urban neighborhood as a postcard-like scenic vista.

Over the last quarter-century, with tremendous backing from supporters all over the metropolitan area—and into West Virginia and Kentucky—TPL's Chesapeake and Central Appalachians Field Office has protected more than 100,000 acres of parks, trails, forests, streams and other natural areas in our region.

In Baltimore, the Gwynns Falls runs from Historic Franklintown, a historic milling village, through the vibrant Sharp-Leadenhall and Federal Hill neighborhoods—among others—before it eventually reaches the Inner Harbor and empties into the Middle Branch of the Patuxent River. Over a 14-year period, TPL joined with numerous partners to create the Gwynns Falls Trail, an urban greenway that follows the Falls as it snakes in and out of more than 30 different neighborhoods, connecting over 2,000 acres of publicly owned land within the Gwynns Falls stream valley.

Officially opened in 2005, the Trail is an excellent amenity for walkers, runners and bikers. It also guides users to picnic areas, neighborhood parks and ballfields, historic landmarks and fishing holes. At 14 miles, it's one of the longest urban greenways in the U.S. The Trail can be accessed via its northern trailhead at Leakin Park-Winans Meadow at 4500 North Franklintown Road, or at its southern tip at the Baltimore Visitor Center in the city's Inner Harbor.

A lot goes on behind the scenes to create a new park or trail, and the process can (at times) take years. The Trust for Public Land works to coordinate funding sources, managing agencies and willing sellers before a property can be acquired and conserved for the public. Each individual task represents one step in TPL's mission to create places we can all enjoy.

Closer to home than Baltimore is the Patuxent River Scenic Trail, a greenway planned to extend 60 miles along the Patuxent River in Prince George's County, only 12 miles from the District. Last summer, TPL helped

link in the trail system, providing a southern trailhead for walkers, bikers, bird watchers, and other outdoor enthusiasts.

The property, once under contract for development and feared lost forever, sits at the end of a single-lane gravel road, and is a mix of woodlands, fields and riverbanks. It's almost unbelievable how close it is to D.C.'s metropolitan core, as visitors to the property hear only birds and the rustling of leaves as a breeze blows through the trees.

It comes alive, however, on Saturday mornings, when the Prince George's County Radio Control Model Airplane Club, with more than 200 local members, holds its weekly meetings. Post-preservation, the club will continue to hold its gatherings at the property, lending it a decidedly human feel that is unique to TPL-protected lands.

The property sits at the end of Swanson Road, east of U.S. Route 301, and is currently open to the public on weekends when the Model Airplane Club is at the site. Special use permits

are available for other times from the Patuxent River Park office at (301) 627-6074. An overnight campsite and hiker-biker trailhead is in the works, as well.

The Patuxent acquisition is significant because TPL partnered with Prince George's County to help bring to life the county's

larger vision—one that will be played out over years to come, connecting people to the land and the natural world in which we live.

These snapshots are just that, highlights of a conservation blueprint that reaches far beyond our metropolitan region. The Trust for Public Land's vision extends across the U.S., protecting historic sites, scenic landscapes, waterways and the places that matter most to people. In the Chesapeake region, TPL has created 32 new parks and acquired additions to 22 existing parks. They've protected more than 56,000 acres of forestland in Virginia, West Virginia and Kentucky, and they've created 21 new public access sites on the Patuxent and Potomac rivers, and other major Chesapeake Bay tributaries.

So, next time you spend your day outdoors, do stop to reflect on the efforts that have gone into the conservation of this region's special places. Stop to reflect on the impact of natural space—on our families and on ourselves—and now we hope you have a better idea of all that is involved in conserving land for people. Now, get out and play!

The Trust for Public Land (TPL) is a national, nonprofit, land conservation organization that conserves land for people to enjoy as parks, community gardens, historic sites, rural lands, and other natural places, ensuring livable communities for generations to come. Contact the Chesapeake and Central Appalachians Field

