

Natural area near Ellis Park transferred to land trust

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Originally published 11:50 p.m., July 7, 2012

Updated 11:51 p.m., July 7, 2012

EVANSVILLE — Ownership of the Eagle Slough Natural Area near Ellis Park has been transferred to Sycamore Land Trust, a regional nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving Southern Indiana's natural and agricultural heritage.

Supporters of the project say the deal will allow local volunteers to maintain management of the property.

"It works out great," said Greg Meyer, a member of the Eagle Slough Steering Committee.

He said the steering committee hopes to expand its environmental education initiative working with several grade schools that fall within a two to three mile radius of the site a few miles from Downtown Evansville.

The slough is north of Ellis Park on Waterworks Road, east of U.S. 41 and south of Interstate 164. It is the trust's first Vanderburgh County property, said Christian Freitag, its executive director. The 22-year-old Bloomington, Ind.-based land trust conserves nearly 8,000 acres in 26 Southern Indiana counties. Its goal is to protect 20,000 acres by 2020. Its advisory board includes Evansville native and retired Indiana Supreme Court chief justice Randall Shepard and Evansville Otters' owner Bill Bussing.

Land trusts are independent, nonprofits which acquire land through purchases, donations or acceptance of conservation easements and protect it by limiting the type and scope of development.

A partnership of local organizations and volunteers have developed and cared for Eagle Slough since the land was first acquired in November 2007, transforming it from a swampy illegal dumping ground to an accessible 127-acre preserve of wetlands, lakes and bottomland hardwoods that includes some of the largest bald cypress trees in the state.

Meyer said the ownership transfer came after a lengthy process exploring permanent ownership options for the property, which had been owned by the Vanderburgh County Soil & Water Conservation District.

"We even considered creating a new nonprofit just for Eagle Slough," he said. "We wanted to conserve this land but because of political and charitable constraints we never really got to that point."

Freitag said Sycamore Land Trust hopes to continue its partnership with the Eagle Slough Steering Committee to help maintain the site.

"I do think that Sycamore Land Trust is the proper permanent home for it but we wouldn't be involved at all if it wasn't for the volunteers who worked on it," he said.

He said Indiana is near the bottom of the state rankings when it comes to protecting land for public enjoyment and Eagle Slough is a prime example of land worth saving.

"It's a really neat piece of ground. The quality of the land is excellent," Freitag said.

Area bird-watchers have documented about 150 different bird species at Eagle Slough, which is located in the Mississippi River flyway for migratory birds.

"We can never have enough wetlands in Indiana. The state has lost such a tremendous percentage of its wetlands, which is some of the most important habitats we have," Freitag said.

The site includes a nature trail built on an abandoned raised railroad track bed, interpretive signs, an outdoor classroom and a series of observation decks overlooking the open water lakes on the property.

The Eagle Slough project was a joint effort of the Vanderburgh County Soil & Water Conservation District, the former Four Rivers Resource Conservation & Development Council, The Nature Conservancy and Wesselman Woods Nature Society. The organizations maintained the project from their own budgets using mostly volunteer labor. Materials and paid labor have been funded mostly through grants and donations. Among its corporate supporters have been Toyota Motor Manufacturing Indiana and the Alcoa Foundation.

"It's just a great combination of everybody pooling their talents and using them," Meyer said.