Sycamore Land Trust guiding effort to assemble land for Beanblossom Creek conservation area

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Sycamore Land Trust is working on an ambitious land conservation project in northern Monroe County that could create a huge swath of land that is both protected for future generations and open for public use.

The project is part of the states Bicentennial Nature Trust, which has a total of $30 million available for land purchases before Indiana's bicentennial celebration in 2016. The Monroe County project, known as the Beanblossom Creek Bicentennial Conservation Area, includes land from the east side of the county near Lake Lemon to the edge of Owen County near Gosport. The project area covers roughly 20,000 acres.

Sycamore Land Trust doesn't own all of the land in the conservation area and is unlikely to ever do so. Land trust officials are hoping to use $1 million designated for land purchases within the conservation area to help acquire undeveloped acres with wildlife habitat that needs protection and also land that could encourage tourism and add to recreational opportunities in the area. The total number of acres Sycamore Land Trust now protects within the conservation area is 750.

The land trust has already purchased two tracts, both of 31 acres, within the conservation area and is trying to locate and close on other tracts. Much of the conservation area is wetland or wooded and is in a flood plain.

One of those properties, now known as the Oxbow Preserve, is at the junction of Business Ind. 37 and Ind. 37 north of Bloomington along Beanblossom Creek. It was the first property within the conservation area to be purchased using part of the $1 million set aside by the state fund. As in all of the purchases, half of the money comes from the Bicentennial Nature Trust and the other half must come through donations or other funds. For Oxbow Preserve, land owner Skip Van Cel sold the land at less than half its appraised value, and the Community Foundation of Bloomington and Monroe County, as well as Sycamore Land Trust members, contributed funds.

They want to see community support, said Katrina Folsom, communications director for Sycamore Land Trust, speaking about the Bicentennial Nature Trust officials. Folsom added that the Oxbow Preserve is located at the "gateway to Bloomington," which is another benefit because that will allow people to see property protected by Sycamore Land Trust with help from the Community Foundation of Bloomington and Monroe County.

"He wanted to make sure it remained undeveloped," Folsom said of Van Cel, who approached the land trust about acquiring the property. "It will help gain attention for Sycamore Land Trust because of its location. I think that was a motivating factor for him." One of the features in the Oxbow Preserve will be a trail named for Van Cel's beloved rescue dogs: Bear and Bailey.

The other 31-acre acquisition is now called the Fix-Stoelting Preserve and is located near Gosport and another Sycamore Land Trust property, the Powell Preserve. The land at the corner of Mount Tabor and Bottom roads was acquired after Sycamore Land Trust sent mailings to area land owners asking if they were interested or knew anyone interested in selling land. Owner Julie Stoelting saw the mailing and approached the land trust about the property that she had received a couple of years ago from her father. Again, Julie and Kent Stoelting offered the property as a "bargain sale" donation, at half its appraised value, and that was matched with funds from the Bicentennial Nature Trust.

How it works

The Beanblossom Creek Bicentennial Conservation Area is one of five conservation areas that have been set up by the Bicentennial Nature Trust, which was created to preserve and protect important conservation and recreation areas in the state. Matching donations of land or money are used to acquire property that will be preserved and in some way open to the public. Each of the conservation areas was given $1 million by the state nature trust to be used for purchasing property. The money cannot be used for other expenses associated with the land purchases and must be used in a 1-to-1 match with other funds in acquiring property.

These are areas that we are trying to provide focus on, said Nick Heinzelman, executive director of the Indiana Department of Natural Resources Division of Land Acquisition, which is running the nature trust program for the Indiana Bicentennial Commission. "We've looked all over the state, and there are a few areas in the state that have several factors that we use when defining a conservation area."

Those criteria include a large geographic area with wildlife habitat that is important to protect, a location that has a patchwork of public and private conservation areas and locales where purchasing more acreage would help encourage tourism, protect habitat and the plants and animals already living there and help bring together nontraditional partners.

"It's one of those areas that just pops out on the map as important to protect," he said. Many of the acres have rare or endangered species living there and also connect other local, state and federal lands that are already protected.

In the case of Sycamore Land Trust, it has already worked with the Community Foundation of Bloomington and Monroe County, which is an entity that usually is not involved in land purchases. The land that is acquired must be put into the public trust, meaning that it will be open to the public in some way, Heinzelman said.

All of the conservation areas are trying to focus on "landscape-scale areas" that will offer larger tracts of land preserved for future generations. "Hopefully, the $1 million from the Bicentennial Nature Trust is just the seed money," Heinzelman said.

In all five of the conservation areas, they have beginning and end points that are in public hands already. "The cool thing about this is it ties together Sycamore Land Trust property, city property, state property and even federal property, with the Restle Unit," Sycamore's Folsom said, referring to land adjacent to the SLT-owned Beanblossom Bottoms that is part of the Muscatatuck National Wildlife Refuge.

Some of the acres that are getting a closer look are ones adjacent to Sycamore's land, Folsom said. Those areas would be easier to make accessible to the public because there are already nearby parking lots and trails that could be extended. "Access to the public is one of the criteria of the Bicentennial Nature Trust. And we generally like to do that anyway."

Other areas of interest

Not all of the land that has used funds from the Bicentennial Nature Trust is within conservation areas or was purchased after the conservation areas were defined.

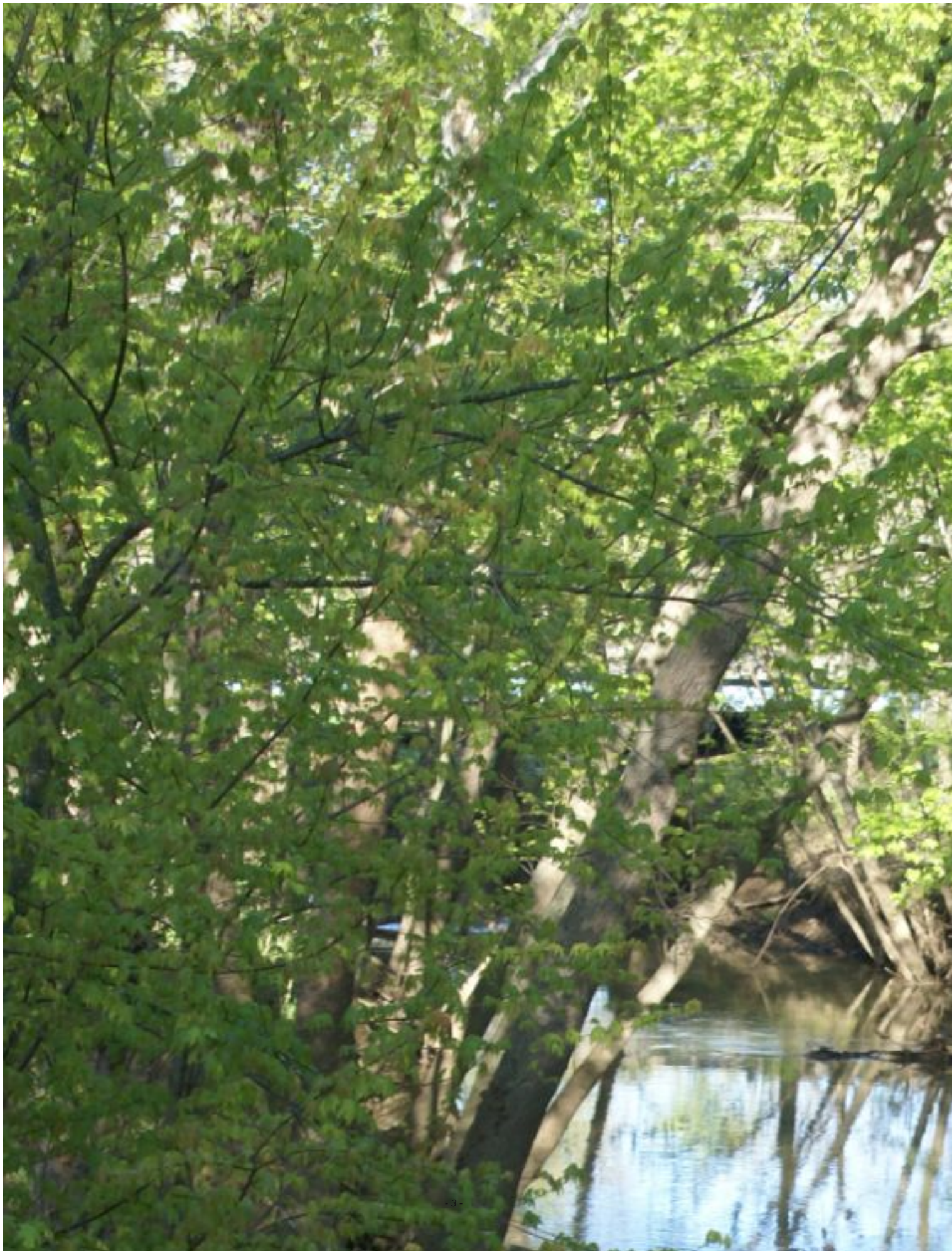
The Oliver tract of the Beanblossom Bottoms Nature Preserve was purchased in January using nature trust funds. It was a bargain sale donation by Bill and Kathleen Oliver and also was funded by grants from the Ropchan Foundation. The land is within the Beanblossom Creek Bicentennial Conservation Area, but the purchase was started before the conservation area was established in September 2014.

There were also 26 acres that include rare eastern hemlock trees added to the Trevlac Bluffs Nature Preserve in Brown County using money from the Bicentennial Nature Trust. Another 95 acres of forest habitat were added to Sycamore Land Trust in a location near Morgan-Monroe State Forest known as the Kent Preserve and Wood Preserve. A third area that was added was the Columbia Mine Preserve, with 1,043 acres in Gibson and Pike counties 18314499 a place where resident bobcats have been photographed. In total, 1,222 acres have been protected by the Sycamore Land Trust using $643,000 in Bicentennial Nature Trust funds.

"We are still pursuing some projects outside the conservation area while funds are available," Folsom said. "We need to have the projects started by the end of this year to have them completed by 2016."

Heinzelman noted that of the original $30 million in the state fund, only about $6 million remains uncommitted. "This has been a really popular program," he said.

Oxbow Preserve



Bean Blossom Bottoms trail

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Beanblossom Creek Bicentennial Conservation Area.jpg