

# Permanent Shoreland Protection Tools

Article written by the [Northwoods Land Trust](#), in collaboration with [Vilas County Lakes & Rivers Association](#)

A priority of the Northwoods Land Trust (NWLT) is to assist landowners in conserving sizable properties to protect our world-class water resources. Permanent land conservation is one of the most effective ways to safeguard our lakes and rivers.

The Vilas County Lakes & Rivers Association (VCLRA) is partnering with NWLT to advance a Shoreland Protection Legacy Initiative to reach more landowners on Vilas County's 1300 lakes and 70 rivers. Both organizations are promoting permanent land protection tools as a means to ensure our waters stay healthy, productive and clean.

Natural forested areas and undeveloped shorelines play a big part in maintaining water quality and wildlife/fish habitat long-term. Moreover, protecting more land today will reduce the need to restore degraded water resources tomorrow.

Private landowners hold the key to preserving remaining natural shoreland areas. Community-based conservation with a nonprofit land trust like NWLT is local, voluntary, and (importantly) permanent. Landowners that protect the land they love also provide greater public benefits in the form of clean water and air, wildlife habitat and scenic beauty.

NWLT has several conservation tools available to private landowners. A common approach involves a land protection agreement, known as a conservation easement. A conservation easement is a binding agreement between a landowner and the land trust to permanently protect a property's natural characteristics. The easement is the legal document that is



forever tied to the property's deed, so future owners are obligated to the terms. The land remains private, and it can only be managed and developed to the extent specified in the easement – for example, a defined footprint for existing or future structures is common.

Unlike deed restrictions and covenants, a conservation easement

comes with a stewardship commitment from the land trust. Land trusts annually monitor lands protected by a conservation easement to ensure the terms are honored in perpetuity. Conservation easements are also considered qualified charitable contributions by the IRS, and so there are tax benefits available.

Another approach landowners can consider is transferring ownership of land to a land trust, or to another entity, such as a nonprofit lake association – if it's a part of the mission. The natural portion of a property can be separated from a house lot area and gifted for the land trust or other entity to own and manage.

NWLT has worked collaboratively with property owners and lake associations in the past to protect land. For example, a family can donate property to the lake association, and NWLT can then place a conservation easement on the donated land to ensure that it remains undeveloped. Some people prefer to donate land – and in certain cases, their homes – through their wills to leave a lasting legacy after they are gone. Read the [January 2023 VCLRA newsletter](#) article entitled “Associations Can Help Protect Land to Benefit” on the [vclra.org](#) website for more examples

of lake associations participating in permanent conservation projects.

All properties considered for permanent conservation go through a review process to ensure that they meet NWLT's criteria. In most cases, 500 feet or more of undeveloped shoreline is required, unless a property

is adjacent to other conservation land or has outstanding ecological features. Inland properties (generally 40 acres or more) are also of interest to NWLT as they protect the health of the overall watershed and help lessen the impacts brought on by climate change.

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The Northwoods Land Trust is based in Eagle River. Since 2001, NWLT has assisted over 120 families in permanently protecting over 80 miles of lake and river shoreline and 15,000 acres of land in its seven-county service area in northern Wisconsin. Visit [www.northwoodslandtrust.org](http://www.northwoodslandtrust.org) or call (715) 479-2490 to learn more.

The Vilas County Lakes & Rivers Association was formed nearly 30 years ago with the mission to sustainably preserve, protect and enhance our lakes and rivers for the benefit of all. To learn more about the Shoreland Protection Legacy Initiative and to receive a landowner's guide to conservation, visit <https://vclra.org/legacy/>.