

Napa Valley *Register*

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Land Trust of Napa County readies for the next 50 years.



Melanie Parker stood in a place steeped in the Land Trust of Napa County's 50-year history — the slopes of Mount George above the city of Napa — and talked about the future.

The Land Trust's chief executive was in the Foote Botanical Preserve. This is where it all started for the nonprofit group. Here was the small seed of protected open space that spread to every corner of the county.

A half-century after its formation, the Land Trust has preserved 96,000 acres (150 square miles). That's more than three times the area of San Francisco.

On its 50th birthday, Parker says the Land Trust is ready to keep preserving land, though with more in mind than boosting that 96,000-acre total as high as possible.

"Will the Land Trust continue to do acquisitions? Yes. But it will be strategic," she said as she stood amid the volcanic rocks and rare plants of the Foote preserve.

Quality over quantity, Parker said.

Fifty years have seen the Land Trust preserve diverse landscapes, from a Mount Veeder redwood forest to a Carneros vineyard to brush-covered hills around Lake Berryessa.

The Land Trust might own the property, such as with Mead Ranch on Atlas Peak. Or it might hold a conservation easement that strips development rights while leaving the land privately owned, as with some Napa Valley vineyards and Lake Berryessa ranches. Or it might give the land to California or another agency.

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All of this started with a shoestring operation. Back in 1976, citizens representing various businesses and professions did all of the Land Trust's work.

"We are all volunteers," Land Trust founder F.S. "Si" Foote said in a news release from the time. "No one is paid."

Over the years, the Land Trust has grown along with its land preserving ambitions. Its 2024 tax filings show \$39.7 million in revenues from donations and grants, and a payroll topping \$1 million for its six highest-paid employees.

What does the Land Trust do for an encore, and under new leadership at that, with Parker becoming CEO in January?

What's next

Parker pondered that question on that recent morning in the Foote preserve. She ticked off three priorities.

One involves creating links. Parker said she wants the Land Trust to continue preserving wildlife corridors — these allow creatures to travel between habitats. She also wants to connect trails, such as from the valley to ridges.

"It's about connections," Parker said.

Another priority is stewardship and tending the land. That includes bringing degraded habitat back to life. That includes such steps as prescribed burns, she said.

"Conservation has evolved," Parker said. "We've learned protecting land is not just locking it up and looking the other way."

The third is public engagement. That means getting people out on the land.

"Unplug from technology and tune into nature," Parker said.

Many of the Land Trust-preserved lands are off limits to the public. A vineyard with a conservation easement is still owned by a farmer. Some Land Trust-owned properties are accessible only for guided hikes.

In other words, the Land Trust is a land preservation specialist, not a parks district.

But Napa County has a parks district — the Napa County Regional Park and Open Space District. It runs such nature parks as Moore Creek Park and the state-owned Bothe-Napa Valley park.

Parker sees the two groups continuing to merge their specialties.

"I think our partnership with the Open Space District over the next 50 years is going to really change how the public will be able to access nature in Napa County," Parker said. "They're not the only ones, but they are the main partner."

Why a land trust?

The Land Trust of Napa County isn't the first land trust in the United States. That honor apparently goes to the Trustees of Public Reservations, founded by Charles Eliot in 1891 in Massachusetts.

Boston was industrializing. Eliot wrote in a circular that "the existing means of securing and preserving public reservations are not sufficiently effective."

He predicted nature lovers would donate to a land trust "precisely as the lovers of art have so liberally endowed the art museums."

The Trustees of Public Reservations still exists and has plenty of company. There are at least 1,200 land trusts in the nation, given the nationwide Land Trust Alliance represents that many members, with more than 100 in California.

But Napa County has the agricultural preserve covering the rural Napa Valley floor. It has voter-passed Measure P that says agricultural and open space can't be rezoned without a ballot measure.

In addition, county voters in 2006 formed the Open Space District to run nature parks. Plus, the state and federal governments own local open space lands.

Isn't all of this governmental action enough to protect Napa County's open spaces?

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Kara Heckert of the nationwide Land Trust Alliance said there are reasons to have local land trusts, as opposed to leaving land preservation up to the government.

"It's really just an entirely different makeup," she said.

A land trust has a unique relationship with a community that a government agency can't have. It can be nimbler than many government agencies, she said.

She pointed to the type of people who often sit on land trust boards of directors. They can range from landowners to experts in various fields.

The Napa Land Trust's 12-member board includes vintner Robin Baggett, wine industry consultant Mike Fisher, retired real estate attorney Les Hausrath, artist and conservation advocate Chris Miller, and finance expert Nick Orum.

Heckert and Parker both said that a land trust can secure conservation easements that protect land from development while leaving it in private ownership.

"That is the core tool of the Land Trust," Parker said.

A local example came in December 2024. Andy and Betty Beckstoffer donated an easement to the Napa Land Trust covering 51 acres of farmland on the Napa Valley floor in the Rutherford district.

That marked the 12th easement the Beckstoffers have given. Andy Beckstoffer made a statement in a Land Trust news release.

"Protecting Napa Valley's agricultural lands has always been a core principle for our family and business," he said. "Partnering with the Land Trust of Napa County allows us to ensure that these lands will remain dedicated to agriculture and conservation forever."

There are some big land trusts in the state. The California Rangeland Trust claims to be the biggest and has protected 416,000 acres (650 square miles).

Other land trusts have protected a few hundred acres. The Land Trust of Napa County fits somewhere in between.

"Definitely one of the most successful ones," Heckert said. "I would say mid-to-upper tier, one of the larger."

And apparently one with a reputation.

Parker talked of fishing with her father and hiking as a kid. She studied conservation in college. She played a role in the Montana Legacy Project to preserve land. She served eight years as deputy director for Sonoma County Regional Parks.

When the chance to lead the Napa Land Trust came up last year, she wanted the job.

"I've known about the Land Trust of Napa County for decades. It's a gold star in the land trust world. It's known across the country," Parker said.

The start

Si Foote helped plant the seed that grew into today's Napa Land Trust.

He was a businessperson who co-founded TAB products, which patented a vertical filing cabinet found in medical offices. Yet, he said, "the free market system, for all its wonders, doesn't do anything to protect land."

Foote wanted to protect land. In 1976, Foote started the Napa Land Trust with Harry Tranmer, Harold Kelly, Vic Fershko and others.

"Our task will be to search out unique sections of undeveloped land and seek the donations of that land for permanent preservation," he said that year.

In 1977, Foote and his wife June made the first donation. They gave the Land Trust 200 acres on the slopes of Mount George. Today, the Foote preserve is 767 acres.

"For several years now, we have wanted to preserve this land," Foote said in 1977. "The existence of the Napa County Land Trust now makes it possible to keep this area in its natural state in perpetuity."

And what a property. The land the Footes donated has more than spectacular views of the southern Napa Valley and city of Napa.

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"Whoever heard of a chaparral where the rare plant species outnumber the common?" California Native Plant Society botanist James Roof said that year.

Foote brought his business acumen to the Land Trust venture. According to his obituary, he insisted that the organization use a return address stamp instead of printed envelopes to save money.

Foote served on Land Trust board of directors until he moved to Oregon in 1995. He died at age 91 in 2008.

"It is not too much to say that without Foote and his wife June, there would not have been a land trust in Napa County as we know it today," his obituary stated.

Over time, the Land Trust grew and moved on from its all-volunteer, shoestring approach. John Hoffnagle became its executive director and first full-time employee in 1988.

Hoffnagle left the Land Trust in 2012 and Doug Parker — who is not related to Melanie Parker — served as the organization's CEO until last year. Now Melanie Parker has taken over the leadership role.

The political sphere

Foote wanted to avoid being perceived as an ardent environmentalist during a 1990 interview with the Napa Valley Register.

"We aren't tree-huggers," Foote said.

"I am," said his wife June, who was nearby.

Foote added that personally she is a tree-hugger, but not as a member of the Land Trust.

Napa County has had its growth battles, whether over vineyard development in the watersheds or proposed wineries. The Land Trust for the most part has stuck by Foote's approach and stayed out of them.

Perhaps the closest it came to taking a controversial stand was with Le Colline. Le Colline was a proposed vineyard in the mountains near Angwin that generated both opposition and support in the community.

The Land Trust had an interest because the Le Colline site borders its 177-acre Linda Falls preserve. It didn't oppose the project, but favored shrinking the size of the proposed vineyard to avoid possible harm to the preserve.

"The preserve has been a favorite hiking destination for many Napa County residents and visitors," the Land Trust wrote in a 2019 letter commenting on the project's draft environmental report.

But when Le Colline came to the Board of Supervisors in 2023 — the board turned it down — the Land Trust kept a low profile. It didn't have representatives address the board.

Melanie Parker said the Land Trust isn't an advocacy group in the political realm.

"We work with people because they love land. We don't care how they vote," she said.

But the Land Trust is approaching politics in a different way. It is working to qualify a half-cent fire prevention/open space sales tax measure for the November ballot. If it passes, the Board of Supervisors would oversee half of the tax money for fire prevention and the Open Space District would oversee half for open space.

The Land Trust is preparing for the next 50 years. Its mission can be traced back to these words from Foote in 1976:

"We believe there are people in Napa County, in both our cities and unincorporated areas, who would like to see a portion of their land permanently preserved because it possesses some unique recreational, scenic or environmental value."



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