



Jane Iredale thanks all involved at the May 19 dedication ceremony. Photo courtesy of Berkshire Community Land Trust.

LIFE IN THE BERKSHIRES

A River Runs Through It: Berkshire Community Land Trust celebrates the first site designated for the nonprofit's Farmsteads for Farmers campaign

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**BY HANNAH VAN SICKLE
FOR [THE BERKSHIRE EDGE](#)
POSTED ON JULY 23, 2023**

Great Barrington — In a region rife with rolling hills and fertile farmland, acquiring acreage that’s arable and affordable remains out of reach for many of the growers and livestock farmers fueling the local—and highly sought after—food economy. In July 2021, when Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources

Commissioner John Lebeux made his annual pilgrimage to the Berkshires, his tour focused on farms where farmers lease the land they work. Since that time, [Farmsteads for Farmers](#) (a program of [Berkshire Community Land Trust \(BCLT\)](#) and its sister organization, the Community Land Trust in the Southern Berkshires) is fundraising to acquire its inaugural site—a 79-acre parcel of flat land on North Plain Road—via a community-based effort that is poised to change the local landscape by securing long-term access to land for local farmers.

“[River Run Farm](#) project is so exciting to me, in part, because it is serving to educate the Southern Berkshire community about how it can address at least one land insecurity problem—that of our farmers—through coming together one farmstead at a time,” said [Susan Witt](#) who, since 1980 (the same year she co-founded the Schumacher Center for a New Economics with Robert Swann), has been responsible for many of the innovative financing and contracting methods used to create affordable access to local land.

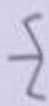
Since 2015, when Berkshire Community Land Trust was incorporated, Witt has been working with philanthropists like Jane Iredale (founder of Jane Iredale Cosmetics) to purchase agricultural sites complete with housing—with the latter sold at an affordable price to a farmer while the former is leased to the same farmer on a 99-year basis.

“It seemed to me when this opportunity first came my way, that it embraced all the things I hold dear,” Iredale wrote in remarks prepared for the May 19 community gathering at River Run Farm, citing, “a love of the land, an opportunity to maintain its beauty and productivity for generations to come [not to mention] an opportunity to do something positive towards the pressing workforce housing challenge.”

In no small bout of coincidence, it was Anna Houston—of Off the Shelf Farm in New Marlborough—who first reached out to Iredale (whose been an all-day egg sandwich customer at the Great Barrington Farmers Market for many years) with the idea of securing the site where she and partner Rob Perazzo are currently farming, on flat land boasting well-draining soil that’s suited for poultry.



Man's management of the land must be primarily orientated towards three goals - health, beauty, and permanence.



The fourth goal - the only one accepted by the experts - productivity, will then be attained almost as a by-product.

— E.F. Schumacher,
@SmallIsBeautiful



Anna Houston grateful for security at River Run. Photo courtesy of Berkshire Community Land Trust.

“We will soon sign the official 99-year lease and have been able to use the land this season,” Houston told *The Edge*, calling the ability to consolidate their poultry operation to one property—now that she and Perazzo have been designated River Run’s new long-term lessees—nothing short of incredible.

“It’s allowed us to seamlessly expand our meat-bird operation from 900 [per] season to 3200 [per] season and has given us access to basic but crucial resources such as water and power in the field,” Houston explained, citing an epic boost in overall efficiency on the heels of having everything in one place (with a few sheds to store equipment) as opposed to driving among multiple parcels of leased land each day, as has been their practice since 2018. Still, the farmers’ acquisition of a single parcel comes at a cost.

“We’ve spent five years fertilizing the pastures up here and will continue to have the sheep graze this lush grass we’ve worked so hard to create,” Houston explained, acknowledging the epic task ahead: restoring the pastures in Great Barrington via rotational grazing, which not only mimics the hens’ natural movement, but also uses the animals’ natural instincts to the mutual benefit of the land and its stewards. It is this type of investment in land, via sweat equity as opposed to dollars, that is all too familiar for farmer Molly Comstock. In 2021, when Colfax Farm lost its handshake lease in Alford, it caused the widespread uncertainty surrounding land access facing many local farmers to snap into sharp focus.

“We need River Run again, and again, and again,” said Comstock at the May 19 dedication ceremony, distilling the widespread efforts down to their essence. “It’s about all the farmers in our community, and whether or not they have secure land access, and it’s about all the farmers who are not farming here yet,” she said, underscoring the work being done by many for the sake of posterity.

“Though conservation land trusts working with state and federal programs have ‘protected’ significant acreage of farmland and kept it open—the easements exclude buildings and do not provide equity in improvements such as regenerative soil practices,” Witt told *The Edge*, pointing to the inherent danger of commodity crops of corn and soybeans grown on land leased to large corporations. “The old farmhouse, once owned by the dairy farmer, gets resold to second homeowners at prices not affordable to those living on a farm income,” she said, pointing to the

pivotal role played by Iredale who, as lead donor, holds title to the land and is overseeing improvements—both to the house and its environs, via removal of invasive species—until enough funds can be raised to place the land into community hands via reselling the parcel to BCLT.

“Aesthetics are not trivial,” said Iredale. “They are fundamental to our productivity and inspire us to give back. They nurture our souls,” she said of a process which, when it comes to those individuals tasked with shaping a resilient area food system in the face of climate change, is perhaps more important than ever. As someone who worked with [Bob Swann](#), one of the founders of the community land trust model in 1967 at New Communities in Albany, Ga., Witt has a unique perspective on the pressing issues at hand.



A hayride tour of the River Run site. Photo courtesy of Berkshire Community Land Trust.

“I have come to understand that there is not enough money in government coffers and foundation portfolios to address the critical need for affordable land access for housing, for farmsteads, for small-scale manufacturing, for locally owned retail shops—in short, for all the needs of a thriving, diverse, local village,” Witt said in a written statement, before delivering her salient conclusion. “Community land trusts will have to depend instead on a culture of land gifting.”

As such, BCLT remains on the cutting edge of educating the public about innovative solutions to keep local farmers in the business of farming—as evidenced by Indian Line Farm in South Egremont, which was placed into BCLT trusteeship in 1999 and has proven the success small-scale farmers are capable of achieving in the Berkshires with affordable access to land.

“Once you start putting energy into land, you become connected,” Elizabeth Keen told [Berkshire Food and Travel](#) several years ago, a sentiment with which Witt wholeheartedly agrees.

“It was more than a loss of land,” Witt says of Colfax Farm’s lease falling through; it was an ostensibly lone event that triggered “[the] loss of an irrigation system and soil preparation, cultivation, and enrichment that [Molly] could not take with her.” Going forward, the community land trust model stands to improve the local farming landscape for all—most importantly farmers who can remove land debt from their start-up costs; build equity in their improvements via long-term, inheritable lease agreements; and keep the site affordable for future farmers thanks to an easy resale formula.

“This community has shown us that they are here for us, and have supported us immensely,” Houston [told The Edge in 2021](#) with equal parts awe and gratitude. Meanwhile, the land at River Run is already responding to the work being done there, which—with any luck—stands to be a shining example for similar projects down the road.

“As we removed the barberry, buckthorn, multiflora rose, and honeysuckle, native wildflowers that had been smothered for years suddenly sprung up,” Iredale said in her remarks, detailing Solomon’s Seal, Bloodroot, Trillium, and violets (in a trio of different hues) flourishing in one patch alone down by the river.

“The happy chickens, sheep, and cows are putting back valuable nutrients while they eat to their hearts’ content [and] the land is coming alive,” said Iredale as if penning a poem. “We’ll never reach the level of harmony that indigenous Americans did, but we’re going to give it our best shot.”

NOTE: Want to learn more about securing permanent land access for small-scale farming and farmer housing? [Join](#) the local land access campaign and [donate](#) today. Show your support for Farmsteads for Farmers when out and about with a [campaign cap](#) available at the Great Barrington Farmers Market. Or get in the spirit by watching the Community Gathering at River Run Farm [here](#).