

Stonington's Land Trust can prove to be resource for all

The creation of the new Stonington Land Trust , which announced its formation last month and kicked off its efforts with a meeting Thursday night, is a logical step in a community where residents are passionate about the need to preserve open space, yet the town can't afford to pump millions into the effort.

And Jim Smith, who heads the group as its president with a 10member private board, is right to try to pattern the trust 's ventures after the Westerly Land Trust , which continues to grow on the east side of the Pawcatuck River.

Now, we hope the Stonington trust will also strike the delicate balance that the Westerly Land Trust has seemingly found, between preserving land , leaving room for managed growth, and working with the town and its residents so as not to hurt the community's tax base in the process.

The move to develop a Stonington Land Trust came after the town's Conservation Commission and Open Space Bonding Committee couldn't get clearance from the town's Board of Finance to pursue a bond that would have set aside between \$2 million and \$4 million to acquire land and preserve it as open space.

Given that, Smith was right earlier this week to note that openspace preservation can be carried out better in the private sector. And while the group may look for the town to "help with" some funding, the bulk of the financing should grow through the private, nonprofit trust , which can offer capital gains tax breaks and other incentives for those who donate properties and securities as well. The Westerly Land Trust , headed by Harvey Perry II, has become a significant player on the Westerly landscape by acquiring large-scale properties such as the Grills Preserve in Bradford

and the Avondale Preserve, which helped put the organization on the map.

Are there pitfalls? Of course – and not just financial ones. Some of the Westerly Land Trust 's recent acquisitions, for example, have included downtown properties such as the former Shell station and Renskip properties on Main Street, and the United Theatre on Canal Street. Each of those sites was acquired with support from the Royce Foundation, and some residents have quietly wondered whether they give Wall Street and Watch Hill financier Charles Royce control over those sites.

But Perry has said that's not the case. He's emphasized that Royce has merely partnered with the Land Trust in those ventures, and the Land Trust has cooperated with the town and residents in those dealings. While it could shield properties as a nonprofit, the Westerly Land Trust has been paying property taxes to the town for its key downtown holdings. And it's been open to significant public input regarding potential uses for the United and the bank building.

The Stonington Land Trust , of course, is only in its infancy. But it's clear that Smith cares about the community, that he's willing to take a lead role in this effort, and that he and the other trust organizers are committed to this effort. That commitment is a good starting point; now, they should follow the model cast by Perry and the Westerly Land Trust , which has become a true community resource fits own.

We wish Smith and his colleagues well. Forming a land trust – and building the community's trust – is a giant step toward preserving Stonington's open space and character. Let's hope it proves a winning step for all.