

New leadership at the Conservancy

Sally Walker announces ambitious plan for habitat acquisition

BY HOWARD W. APPELL
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Sally Walker started her new job as director of the Genesee Valley Conservancy on Jan. 1.

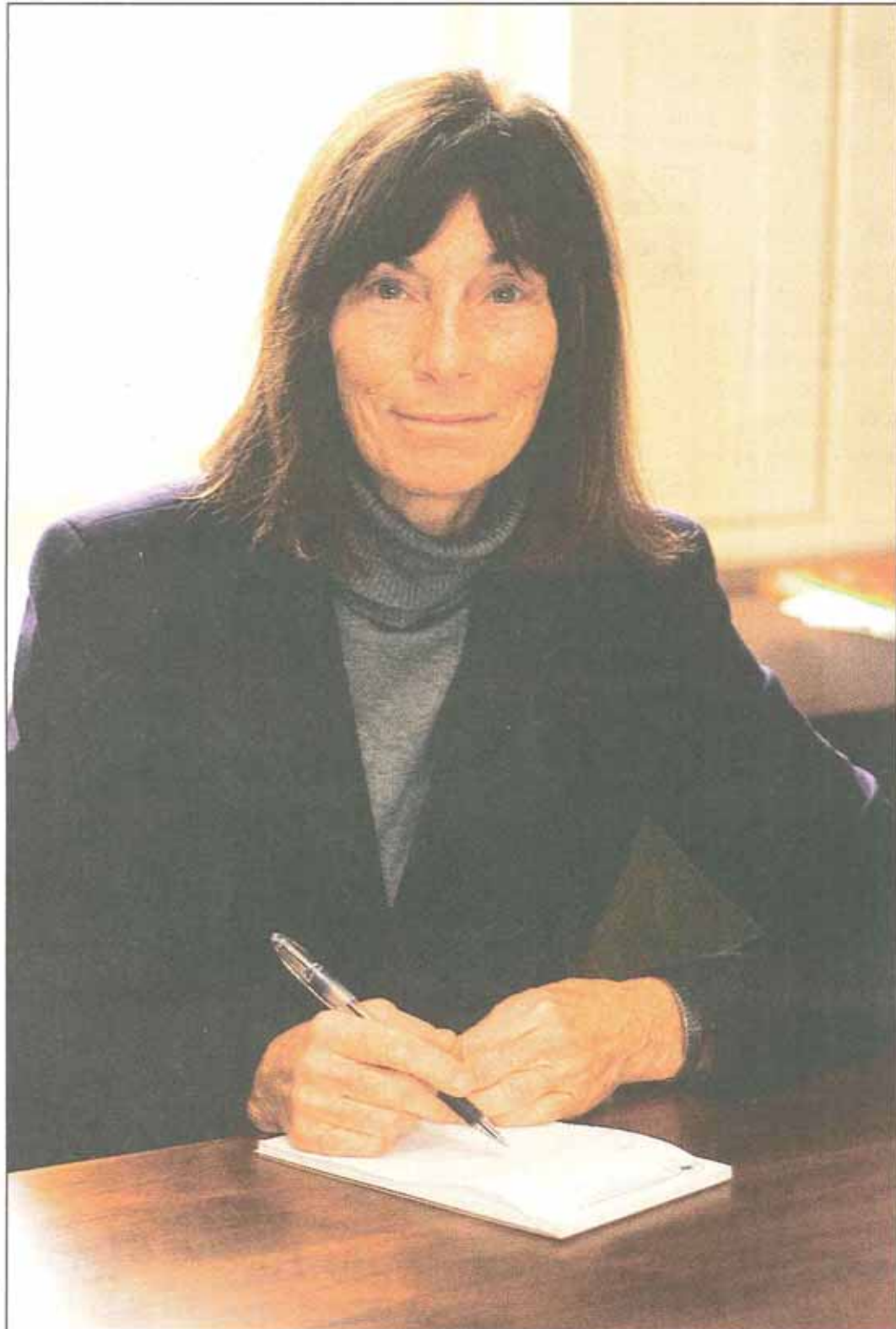
Her previous position was director of Pacolet Area Conservancy in North Carolina. Its service area is in the foothills below Asheville, with headquarters in Tryon, N.C.

In contrast with the Genesee Valley Conservancy, serving all the Genesee River watershed south of Monroe County, Pacolet has a smaller service area, with smaller farms, more forest and less water. However, there are similarities in that the region is defined by a river, the Pacolet, and is 'horse country.'

The Pacolet Area Conservancy is a member of 'Blue Ridge Forever,' one of a collective of ten protectors of 50,000 acres in western North Carolina.

Walker grew up outside Philadelphia. Previous to her conservancy directorship, Walker was in the field of corporate and private advertising and marketing, then ran the non-profit Horsemen's Benevolent Protective Association in Warrenton, Virginia, whose membership was racehorse owners and trainers throughout the northeast.

With her daughter attending law school in Winton-Salem, Walker became an empty nester looking for a new challenge.



BENJAMIN GAJEWSKI/For the County News

Sally Walker is the new Executive Director of the Genesee Valley Conservancy.

"I had friends who grew up here [Geneseo area] who told me I would like it," she noted. "I was open to a new phase in my career, although I didn't know I'd come this far away."

For her interview, which took place in late October, the entire Conservancy board of directors turned out. After meetings, meals and presentations, Walker's visit culminated with a morning horseback ride cross county over Conservancy lands in which she got to see first hand the open space, trees, water and terrain which the Conservancy protects. Walker also was taken on an auto trip to view the Conservancy farmland acreage.

"I was impressed by the quality of the conservation here, and the commitment from the community," she said. "This Conservancy is in very good shape. We don't have to fix anything. We can move right forward."

The next stage: Wildlife and water

An individual conservation easement will have a main purpose and secondary purposes. The main purpose can be as variable as agricultural, scenic, habitat and even historic - tailored to the owner's wishes and the natural characteristics of the land. To date, a large part of the Genesee Valley Conservancy acquisitions have the main purpose of preserving the existing agricultural activity -- either horse raising or dairy farming.

However, with the new administration there may come a shift in land acquisition priority.

During Walker's seven year tenure with the Pacolet Area Conservancy, the number of protected acres grew from 3,000 to 8,000. Included were about 1,000 acres of horse farms, but

the bulk of new conservancy acreage acquired under Walker's watch was protection habitat for flora and fauna.

In the Genesee country Walker will be moving forward with a similar broadening of conservation concept, creating increased awareness and interest in easements for wildlife habitat and land-water interfaces.

"It was explained to me that the Conservancy has accomplished much in hunt country and for farms, and the next stage will be natural resource habitat protection," Walker confirmed.

While farms and open horse country are certainly wildlife habitat, the new campaign will be one of seeking easements from people who simply own and love their land.

People may not have given serious consideration to a conservancy

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donation out of concerns over restrictions that might limit their later enjoyment of the property. However, anyone who deeds an easement to the Genesee Valley Conservancy can custom tailor the agreement to meet their circumstances and desires.

"People may not realize you can put a conservation easement on a property and still reserve a building site for your children, a spot for a new barn, or other future development. You can design your own easement and it will be our job as a conservancy to validate that

it has conservation value," Walker said, clarifying, "And it's another misconception that you 'leave' the land to the Conservancy. You will still own it, have all the rights of ownership to will the land to an heir -- but with the perpetual protection of the Conservancy."

Yet another misconception relating to conservation easements is that the public has unbridled rights to enter upon an easement. That is definitely not the case. The property owner may post the land against trespassers as he or she did before donating the easement.

"We can determine how to protect a person's land in a realistic way that will benefit the landowner," Walker said, "It's a wonderful tool for keeping the rural charac-

ter of this area. It's like making a will for your land."

Still another incentive a person might consider is the perpetual property tax credit New York State offers landowners making easement donations -- reducing school, town and county taxes.

Water-based initiatives are likewise high on Walker's agenda, broadening the Conservancy's mission to give new emphasis to "protecting the land around the water."

Walker's new administration will be reaching out to other enabling groups to promote projects of mutual interest. One such affiliate is the Genesee River Wilds Project, itself a coalition of groups and individuals working to develop an envi-

ronmentally sustainable system of nature parks concentrated along the Genesee River.

Walker is inheriting a conservancy with oversight of about 13,600 protected acres. Her ambitious goal is to have 20,000 protected acres overseen by the Conservancy by the end of 2013.

"You don't want to make it all about numbers, but numbers are a reflection of how successful the campaign has been," she said.

Conservation is a friendlier conversation

A person who loves his land will hope to leave it better than he found it. One of the betterments might be the protection of a conservancy easement.

The notion of several neighbors getting together and granting easements forming a contiguous stretch of property is very appealing. Such easements will often have habitat preservation as their main purpose.

Walker advises that the Conservancy would be delighted to work with any person who has this sort of idea, aiming towards hosting an event for the neighborhood and presenting the concept.

"We want to be good stewards of the land, and we know that people really want to be good stewards of the land, but that they may

not always know how to do it. We're here to help," she said. "I hope I can simply make conservation a friendlier conversation. People are welcome to come here and talk about it without feeling obligated.

But the Genesee Valley Conservancy certainly is not just about acquiring more easements. Many walks, talks and other educational events for the general public will be scheduled in the coming year, Walker promises.

Indeed, public participation in the Conservancy will be a two-way street. Director Walker is very open to insights persons wish to share.

"We want to get a new energy into the community," she said. "I would like to hear from anyone who wants to stop by and talk about their vision for the land."

Conservancy Director Sally Walker may be contacted at 243 2190 or sally@geneseevalleyconservancy.org.

Take a look

"There is a big opportunity here to do a lot more conservation, which is really exciting," Walker said.

She concluded our interview with a personal request to everyone reading this story:

"I would just like people to go outside — perhaps on one of the preserves here — go out into nature, even now

in the winter, and look closely," Walker said.

"Stand there for five minutes and look closely at what's around you."

"Look at some land; some water. If you open your perceptions, it is amazing what will go through your mind and your heart."

Beginning in February, Sally Walker will be writing a regularly appearing column in The Livingston County News, addressing subjects of land stewardship and conservation.