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Federal law boosts benefit for conservation agreements

Generous landowners who donate voluntary conservation agreements, also known as conservation easements, to their local land conservancy or land trust to permanently preserve their land are inspired by many things: they love the region where their property is located, they feel connected to their land, and they wish to leave a legacy for future generations. This inspiration is at the heart of the work of LandChoices, a Milford-based national land conservation organization, to help permanently protect valuable natural resources and balance conservation with development.

But for almost all donors, donating a conservation easement is a major financial decision, and the federal income tax deduction that comes with a donation helps make conservation easements possible for landowners in the community.

Congress recently passed a new law that enhances the tax benefits of protecting private land for many landowners. The legislation improves the tax incentive for conservation easements by allowing conservation easement donors in 2006 and 2007 to: deduct up to 50 percent of their adjusted gross income in any year (up from 30 percent); deduct up to 100 percent of their adjusted gross income if the majority of that income came from farming, ranching or forestry; and continue to take deductions for as long as 15 years (up from 5 years) after the initial deduction.

Congress also passed tighter appraisal standards for such gifts, and stronger penalties for appraisers who violate the standards.

The Land Trust Alliance (LTA) led the effort to get Congress to approve this new law. LTA is a national organization that sets national standards for conservation organizations like LandChoices, provides training and networking opportunities, and represents the land trust community in Washington, DC. LandChoices' founder and president Kirt Manecke is a member of LTA.

"Each day we are touched by the generous and inspired landowners who contact us. The new law will make it easier for landowners in communities across America to build on their love of the land and permanently protect the unique lands that make our country special," said Manecke.

A conservation easement is a voluntary legal agreement between a landowner and a land trust or government agency that permanently limits uses of the land in order to protect its conservation values. The landowner continues to own the land and the easement does "run with the land" and is binding to future landowners, but the land can be posted against trespassing, and sold or given to heirs just as any other private property. Land protected with a conservation easement does not require the landowner to allow public access on his or her property.

LandChoices recently received its 501c3 designation from the Internal Revenue Service and is working to reach landowners and provide them with choices that preserve land. "This is a nice boost for our fundraising program. As a 501c3 organization, contributions to LandChoices are now tax-deductible and we are eligible to receive foundation funding, tax-deductible bequests, and transfers of gifts such as stock," said Manecke.

With the new designation LandChoices has launched a new online monthly donor program. "Our new online monthly donor program provides a very easy, safe, secure and affordable way for members to contribute a tax-deductible \$10, \$20 or \$30 per month, rather than trying to invest one lump sum at the end of the year during the holidays when funds might be tight," said Manecke.

LandChoices is also offering local businesses sponsorship opportunities to build goodwill and increase visibility and sales. Sponsorship opportunities are listed on the group's web site. To learn more about these new tax incentives, visit www.landchoices.org and click on the "Conserve Your Land" link, or visit www.lta.org .

