

## Conservation Easements: Government (or NGO) Control of Land

Private property was a very important issue to the Founders because private property has always been seen as essential to freedom. In fact, in drafting the Declaration of Independence the Founders debated saying “that among these are Life, Liberty and Property.” And they included in the Bill of Rights that “[no person shall] be deprived of life, liberty or property, without due process of law; nor shall private property be taken for public use, without just compensation.” (Fifth Amendment)

It is a goal of globalists, communists and tyrants to get as much property into government hands as possible, through confiscation or any other means, because they also know that power and freedom that comes with land ownership. In fact, the globalists have a goal of getting 30% of all land under Government control by 2030. The stated purpose of this is to address “[t]he dual crises of climate change and mass wildlife extinctions threaten to forever change our world.” They want to ensure that the earth is properly managed, as only Governments and government adjacent “Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs)” can do.

We have all heard Klaus Schwab of the World Economic Forum saying, “You shall own nothing and be happy.”

State and Federal ownership of land are generally viewed favorably by people. Federal, State and Local governments have public parks that provide recreational amenities to the public. State land is available to all State residents for hunting and fishing. National Parks preserve important historical sites and significant natural features such as the Grand Canyon and Old Faithful. And we can say that a *limited number* of these kinds of sites being available to all residents is consistent with the “general welfare” clause in the preamble of the US Constitution. Like so many things, the phrase “limited” is the key.

The Venango County Comprehensive Plan contains a goal of protecting private land (in volume 1, on page 25. Emphasis added):

### *Goal 3 - Balance Amount of Private and Public Land*

#### *ACTION ITEMS:*

- 1. Encourage no net loss of private land to public (state & federal) ownership.*
- 2. Establish standards for balancing the amount and development of private and public lands.*

But there has been a proliferation of “*conservation easements*” across the country, including here in Venango County, that tie up large tracts of land to “preserve” them. There are many problems with this trend.

***First, this takes land out of private hands.*** This is *inconsistent* with private property being essential to freedom. We remember that in the unsuccessful US Fish & Wildlife Service attempt to gain control of the *entire* French Creek Watershed a couple of years ago, that our consistent local refrain was that “we’ve been doing a good job managing this property in private hands so far, and we can continue to manage it in environmentally sound ways in private hands in the future.”

***Second, it takes land out of the tax base.*** When land is acquired by a government or is bought by non-profits (NGOs), the two-percent transfer tax is not paid, decreasing both State and local revenues. Then the property is not subject to local real estate and school taxes, a permanent on-going loss of

revenue. Finally, there is no chance for even a part of the eased property to be responsibly developed; once again eliminating the opportunity for the tax revenue of higher-valued developed land.

***Finally, much of the land going into “conservation easements” is paid for with tax payer funding!***

The PA Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR) issues grants for Land Acquisition and Conservation, through purchase of either land or easements. These grants are available to local governments, higher education institutions and non-profit Land Trusts.

*Note: land owners can **give** land or an easement to a non-profit, or can **sell** either the land or an easement on the land to a non-profit that has raised the funds privately or through a government grant.*

So how does that effect us today? What role do we have to play?

First, we respect private property and the right of a property owner to do what he or she wants with his property, whether that means holding it undeveloped, developing it, selling it, or putting it in a conservation easement. But we can also educate others on the importance of private property to freedom.

And second, we should encourage our local officials to approve only what land acquisition is minimally necessary for legitimate public uses, such as parks and public facilities (eg - fire stations, jails, office space).

And finally, we should encourage our local officials to oppose private land going into public hands or conservation easements, or at the very least, not support it. Local officials should write letters of opposition to this loss of private land, or at least not write letters of encouragement.

Remember, the owners of private property are free to do what they want with their property. Local governments have no direct say in that. But we do want to encourage local officials to use their “bully pulpits” to encourage land to stay in private hands whenever possible (without interfering with the right of landowners to use or dispose of their land as they see fit).

### **Case in Point**

There is a conservation easement currently in process of a large property mostly in French Creek Township (and partially in both Sugarcreek Borough and Mercer County).

If you live in one of these Townships you could call your Supervisors to encourage them to write letters opposing this and other conservation easements. Make them aware that this is not an insignificant issue. The health of our County and its municipalities is at stake. The next French Creek Township meeting is May 14.

If you live anywhere else, you can bring this up with your Supervisors anytime your talk to them. We encourage everyone to stay current with local issues and politely discuss them with local officials. Be the citizen who keeps informed, keeps in touch, and is always ready to help where needed.