

The official newsletter of Avalonia Land Conservancy

AVALONIA *trails*

SPRING
2026



MERGER WITH COLCHESTER & SALEM LAND TRUSTS EXPANDS AVALONIA & STRENGTHENS CONSERVATION EFFORTS ACROSS SOUTHEASTERN CONNECTICUT

BY GAIL KAHOVER

Avalonia has been securing land for conservation for 58 years throughout southeastern Connecticut. That mission will be more fully realized with the recently announced merger of two land trusts in Colchester and Salem into Avalonia.

The merger with the Colchester Land Trust and the Salem Land Trust brings the total number of acres managed by Avalonia to more than 7,300. Like Avalonia, both organizations are nationally accredited by The Land Trust Alliance.

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PRESIDENT’S MESSAGE

A WORD FROM DENNIS MAIN



Avalonia’s Board of Directors adopted the organization’s first formal Strategic Plan in November 2024. Since then, the Board has worked assiduously to implement the seven strategic priorities of the Strategic Plan. I can’t better state the case for the merger with the Colchester and Salem land trusts

than to recite the board’s Strategic Priority 5:

Strategic Priority 5: Provide mission-area regional leadership and collaboration.

Outcome(s):

- Align with SECOG (Southeastern Connecticut Council of Governments) plans

Implementation Actions:

5.1 Identify and assess potential collaboration and merger possibilities with other mission-area land trusts that are not currently accredited. Aim to complete 1-3 mergers/consolidations over the 5-year period.

5.2 Prioritize work in communities lacking conservation capacity and coordinate conservation, stewardship and education with local and tribal governments and community groups; consider collaborations with unaccredited land trusts; work with SECOG; collaborate with indigenous groups.

The fact that both land trusts are already accredited even surpasses this goal! The boards of all three land trusts approved resolutions supporting the merger with no dissenting votes. Additionally, leaders of each organization eloquently state the case for the merger in the other articles in this newsletter (see page 4).

I look forward to the special meeting of the Avalonia members on June 14 when a vote will be taken on the merger. If approved, the merger will take effect July 1, 2026. **To learn more, scan the QR code or visit Avalonia.org/merger**



Avalonia Trails is a biannual publication that communicates Avalonia’s work to acquire, protect, and maintain land of high conservation and habitat value; combat climate change for the benefit of people and wildlife; and ensure healthy, livable communities for now and generations to come.

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CONTINUED FROM COVER

Avalonia President Dennis Main noted the organization has been committed to “looking at every opportunity to collaborate and coordinate with other land trusts in our mission area” since attending a merger session at the 2014 Connecticut Land Conservation Council annual conference. “This merger is the initial culmination of those efforts,” he said. “This will clearly be a case of the whole being greater than the sum of the parts.”

In all, Avalonia will oversee management of 111 preserves in New London County, 58 of which include public-access trails. With the addition of the purchase of Camp Laurel in Lebanon (see page 5) and the upcoming closing on the Bond property in Montville/Salem, Avalonia’s conservation holdings will be more than 8,000 acres.

“The merger is a natural, with part of the Bond property lying in Salem and with Salem, Colchester and Lebanon being abutting towns within Avalonia’s mission area,” Main noted. “Having a core group of highly knowledgeable volunteers with decades of experience already in place will serve to make this a near-seamless transition.”

Officials from Salem and Colchester began talking about potential mergers years ago. Sarah Smith Levine, secretary of the Colchester Land Trust, wrote that the organization reached “the limits of what we can accomplish on our own.”

“The conservation projects ahead of us are larger, the legal and stewardship obligations more complex, and the demands greater than a volunteer board alone can manage long-term,” she wrote. “After two years of careful research, conversations with peer organizations, and guidance from the Connecticut Land Conservation Council, we found our answer: Avalonia Land Conservancy.” (See page 4).

Aaron Lefland, deputy director of the Connecticut Land Conservation Council, said mergers are a growing trend among land trusts in the state and the country where “land trusts recognize that they are often more effective together than they are alone.” The merger with Avalonia is the 12th land trust merger in Connecticut, Lefland said, and the sixth in the last three years. “As organizations seek to increase their capacity and ensure long-term financial sustainability, they are often finding that it makes sense to join forces, rather than go it alone,” Lefland said. “We look forward to seeing the expanded impact and amazing work this newly unified organization will undoubtedly achieve.”

THE MERGER AT A GLANCE

Colchester Land Trust	Salem Land Trust	Avalonia Land Conservancy
379 acres conserved	1,354 acres conserved	5,621 acres conserved
4 preserves	10 preserves	97 preserves
1 preserve + public hiking trails, outdoor classroom	10 with public hiking trails	47 with public trails

AFTER THE MERGER

7,364 acres conserved*
111 preserves — 58 with public trails

*8,387 with addition of Camp Laurel (see page 5) and Bond property (pending)

Peter Gauthier, treasurer for Avalonia’s Board of Directors, said the merger will save \$25,000 annually due to efficiency gains, as well as free up time for Colchester and Salem to “invest in improving and preserving lands by eliminating organizational redundancies.” Additionally, the merger will add \$500,000-plus to Avalonia’s endowments and expand its land holdings, he added.

The merger stipulates the following conditions:

- The Colchester and Salem land trusts will each have two representatives serve three-year terms on the Avalonia Board of Directors
- The land trusts will maintain their local identities and community presence and become local “chapters.” They will continue to provide trail maintenance, with support from Avalonia
- The land trusts will continue to sponsor local events, such as the Annual Amphibian Walk in Salem and the Annual Salmon River 5.5-Mile Run in Colchester
- The enlarged Avalonia will continue funding of an existing scholarship program in Colchester
- The enlarged Avalonia will hire an executive director

The mergers must be approved by members in each of the three land trusts. Avalonia’s members’ meeting is scheduled for June 14th.

COLCHESTER LAND TRUST FINDS ANSWER WITH AVALONIA

BY SARAH SMITH LEVINE
COLCHESTER LAND TRUST SECRETARY

Colchester Land Trust (CLT) is a three-time accredited non-profit organization, formed in 2002 by a group of concerned citizens determined to preserve land from rapid development.

In 2004, CLT achieved federal nonprofit status, and received its first 4-acre donation of land in 2006. In 2007, 18 acres known as the “Gateway to the Airline Trail” became available, followed by a 62-acre conservation easement.

In 2009, CLT collaborated with the town of Colchester to increase the town-owned Ruby Cohen Woodlands, and then received two wooded parcels, 25 acres on Usher Swamp Road and 15 acres on Bulkeley Hill Road.

In 2013, CLT became one of 13 Connecticut land trusts and one of 301 in the nation to achieve accreditation, and has been re-accredited for the third time in 2026.

We preserved the 88-acre Tangletree Farm in 2015. In 2016, CLT launched a successful fund-raising campaign, repaying loans for Tangletree and 115 acres on Bulkeley Hill. Tangletree remains a working farm, and Bulkeley Hill Preserve is a public venue, with parking, trails, and an outdoor classroom.

Our mission has never been stronger. Our love for the land has never wavered. But like many small, all-volunteer organizations, we have reached the limits of what we can accomplish on our own. The conservation projects ahead of us are larger, the legal and stewardship obligations more complex, and the demands greater than a volunteer board alone can manage long-term.

After two years of careful research, conversations with peer organizations, and Connecticut Land Conservation Council guidance, we found our answer: Avalonia Land Conservancy.

In partnership, our combined agencies will benefit from sharing valuable knowledge and skills.

Together, we know our region.

Together, we share the deep belief that protecting natural resources is essential to healthy, livable communities.

And *together*, we are *stronger*.



The Bulkeley Hill Preserve's outdoor classroom, Colchester Land Trust

SALEM LAND TRUST, AVALONIA SHARE VALUES

BY LINDA SCHROEDER
SALEM LAND TRUST PRESIDENT

This year marks the 30th Anniversary of the Salem Land Trust (SLT), Inc.'s founding.

During these 30 years, SLT has acquired 18 fee properties, combined into 10 public access reserves with hiking trails. The land trust also acquired agricultural and forest easements on two Salem farms. Members also supported maintenance of The Nature Conservancy's 400-acre Walden Preserve and its miles of trails.

Much has changed in 30 years, but people's love of the outdoors is still very strong. However, we have seen a decrease in the time people have available to volunteer. Keeping a non-profit land trust running legally and properly requires a lot of office work: the responsibility for tracking donations, finances and investments, and all the legal paperwork for each new property acquisition, are just the highlights. Finding volunteers with the skills and time for these duties has been difficult.

Larger land trusts have paid professional staff. Most of the land trusts in Connecticut are small, but a number are now merging to enable the sharing of professional staff, which for many land trusts has become a necessity.

About four years ago the board of SLT began to investigate the possibility of merging with another local land trust. This process led SLT to begin a serious discussion of a three-way merger: Salem Land Trust, Colchester Land Trust and the Avalonia Land Conservancy.

Avalonia has been protecting the lands of southeastern Connecticut for more than 50 years. Like the Salem and Colchester land trusts, Avalonia is accredited and shares our belief that protecting natural resources is essential for healthy, livable communities. They know our region. They share our values. Together we can be stronger.



AVALONIA READY TO CONSERVE BELOVED GIRL SCOUT CAMP IN LEBANON

We are one step closer to acquiring Camp Laurel in Lebanon, a treasured Girl Scout facility that provided summer fun for decades of campers.

Avalonia's board approved an agreement with the Trust for Public Land for the 350-acre property. The Trust is under contract with the Girl Scouts of the USA and has led fundraising efforts in partnership with Avalonia and other collaborators. A major contributor is from the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection through its Open Space and Watershed Land Acquisition Program, which has committed \$1.365 million to the project.

The opportunity to conserve the property is "phenomenal," said Avalonia President Dennis Main, adding that many active volunteers currently live in Lebanon. "Kudos to the

Trust for Public Land for taking the lead on the contract to allow this to transpire," he added. "The property is a significant opportunity to protect land in an area that has had limited access to conserved open space and passive recreation," Main added. The camp is located near the Air Line State Park Trail and is home to the headwaters of the Ten Mile River.

Camp Laurel has a six-mile trail, likely providing opportunities for equestrian activities, hiking, running, and cross-country skiing. Under the agreement, the Girl Scouts will keep 13 acres at the front of the property, including the troop house.



PHOTOS BY DENNIS MAIN

PRESERVING THE LEGACY OF CAMP LAUREL: WIN-WIN

BY AMY STORROW

Camp Laurel in Lebanon, Connecticut, has introduced thousands of Girl Scouts to hiking, boating, campfires and camaraderie.

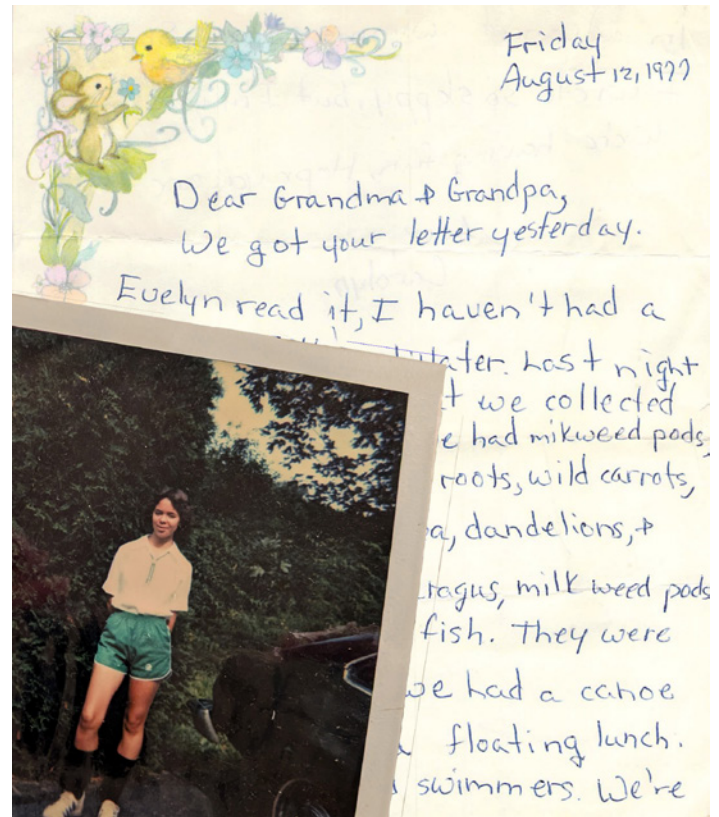
Carolyn Baker-Reck was one of those campers. The North Stonington resident spent the summers of her youth at Camp Laurel, starting as a camper in second grade and ending as an instructor when she was 19 in 1983.

The camp instilled a lifelong love of nature, as well as the skills to “develop through life,” she said.

When she heard that the camp might be sold, Baker-Reck said she was “saddened.”

“So, you know, corresponding to that [was] my overwhelming joy” over the preservation of the camp for all to enjoy, she added.

“I just think it’s marvelous that it’s being preserved... and that it will be accessible to the public,” she said. “In a day where we’re so connected to technology and on our phones and on our screens all day long, any opportunity that our children have to get outside in nature and to make friends and be social is a positive win-win for everybody.”



Carolyn Baker-Reck as a camp counselor at Camp Laurel in 1981 and a letter to her grandparents, written as a camper in 1977.

A WORD FROM CHRISTOPHER KEPPEL, DIRECTOR OF PHILANTHROPY

WE WELCOME NEW CONSERVATION PARTNERS!

The pending Avalonia merger with Salem and Colchester Land Trusts is setting the stage for an expansion of Avalonia’s acreage in New London County. It is also a unique opportunity to grow the community that supports and stewards all the land each organization has worked so hard to acquire and protect. The merger offers the chance to welcome new friends and allies to the mission that Avalonia has been fulfilling since 1968.

All of us at Avalonia are looking forward to welcoming members, volunteers and supporters from both Salem and Colchester as new Avalonia members and partners in conservation work. As we merge our efforts to more efficiently continue the work that aligns these three organizations, we see the opportunity for growing our membership rolls for individuals, families and businesses.

The development team at Avalonia is looking forward to working with members from both Salem and Colchester

and welcoming them into the Avalonia family. We are also excited to get out hiking on some new trails and discover the beautiful places that have been preserved in Salem and Colchester. We are also looking forward to inviting our new partners to hike and visit the many trailed preserves Avalonia currently owns and maintains.

We hope to learn what inspires the people of Salem and Colchester to support the open space movement while embracing their history and the commitment that enabled them to build these wonderful organizations.

As Avalonia approaches the milestone of its 60th anniversary in 2028, the merger promises to further embolden this multi-generational project and assure its strength and permanence. I’m personally excited to welcome our new partners in conservation and discover how we can work together to strengthen our efforts to acquire, protect and educate the public on open space in New London County.



RELATIONSHIPS, TRUST AND STEWARDSHIP WILL BE KEYS TO SUCCESSFUL NEW PARTNERSHIPS

STORY AND PHOTO BY TOBIAS GLAZA, DIRECTOR OF STEWARDSHIP

Avalonia's merger with Salem and Colchester land trusts, together with the forthcoming acquisition of the sprawling Camp Laurel in Lebanon, represents an exciting moment in our nearly six-decade history as a regional land trust.

Land trusts don't typically get smaller, but there is little doubt that the addition of over 2,000 acres of land will test our stewardship capacity and require some adjustments and creativity so that we might meet the hefty and very real challenges of what is essentially a perpetual obligation.

How is it that we expect to care for and manage these additional lands, avoiding redundancies and the pitfalls of rapid growth as we expand our geographic footprint? Assuredly, there will be a steep learning curve and a misstep here or there. The stewardship road map that will help to link these lands and our collective efforts together includes a number of different approaches. We will certainly continue to explore technologies, such as Landscape, GIS, and drone mapping, each bringing enhanced efficiencies. And not to be overlooked is the support and resource base of groups like the Connecticut Land Conservation Council and our national accrediting organization, the Land Trust

Alliance. Of course, our commitment to developing our professional staff, not the least of which is the hiring of a full-time land steward, will go a long way in shouldering the tasks ahead.

I suspect, however, that the real linchpin to the successful stewardship of these lands will be the reliance on something much more time-honored and personal. It will be the relationships and trust that we build with the people who know the lands best and who have demonstrated a passion for conservation. This is not something that just happens with the stroke of a pen. It takes time, intention, and nurturing. There will need to be ongoing conversations that encourage Avalonia's broader landscape view of conservation without the sacrifice of what is often an intensely local experience. A re-commitment to stewardship outreach and an affirmation of the value of our volunteers will be the critical pieces as we grow.



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at www.AVALONIA.org

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THANK YOU FOR BEING A VALUABLE MEMBER OF AVALONIA!

Over 58 years of preserving natural habitats in southeastern Connecticut by acquiring and protecting lands and by communicating the value of these irreplaceable resources.

