

Pheasants Forever helps buy Anoka County parcel for DNR

Nonprofit group Pheasants Forever helped purchase Anoka County property for the DNR.

By Shannon Prather Star Tribune | AUGUST 17, 2016 — 12:48AM



AARON LAVINSKY

John Newpower, president of the Anoka chapter of Pheasants Forever, scoped out the newly purchased land.

It's more than 200 acres of forest, prairie and wetlands in Anoka County, flush with songbirds and deer, and sandwiched between progress and preservation.

Longtime owners Tim and Paula Lang had eyed it for residential development. But that plan snagged, so the nonprofit Pheasants Forever swooped in last month and used state Legacy Fund dollars to buy the property and give it to the state Department of Natural Resources.

Nonprofits are critical partners — middlemen, if you will — in the state's conservation and land acquisition efforts, especially since voters passed the Clean Water, Land and Legacy Amendment in 2008 creating a pot of money for such work.

Nonprofits scout out leads on property that may come up for sale, work local connections, evaluate a property's worth and then negotiate purchase agreements with landowners often happier to work across the table with philanthropy groups than government officials.

Helping seal the deal

EMAIL

Paula Lang said negotiating with Pheasants Forever was “definitely” more appealing than doing a deal with the state. “They were really good about working with us and making it seem worth our while,” she said.

PRINT



AARON LAVINSKY

The Anoka County property is unusual in that it was never developed or even farmed.

The price to buy and develop the property was about \$900,000, with state Legacy dollars providing \$845,000 and the Anoka County chapter of Pheasants Forever covering much of the rest. Tim Lang said they sold the property for a loss with the understanding that it was going to a good cause. It will join the adjacent 24,000-acre Carlos Avery Wildlife Management Area (WMA) and be open to hikers, bird watchers and hunters.

“We love the idea they were able to buy it. ... We enjoy hunting,” Paula Lang said.

“It wasn’t an easy task. There was a lot of work put into making sure they bought it. We wanted them to have it. It’s a beautiful piece of land.”

The couple sold the land, located in Columbus, for less than the appraised value, said Eran Sandquist, Minnesota coordinator of Pheasants Forever. The group advocates for wildlife conservation through habitat improvements, public awareness, education and land management programs.

“The Langs could have easily jumped ship at several different points. They were committed,” Sandquist said.

The deal won’t cost Anoka County any tax dollars. When the DNR takes ownership of the parcel, it will make an annual payment in lieu of taxes to the county that is three-fourths of 1 percent of the value of the land. That is often more than the property taxes that would be paid on the same parcel, Sandquist said.

Kim Hennings, the DNR’s wildlife land acquisition coordinator, said that private partners such as Pheasants Forever, the Trust for Public Land and the Nature Conservancy have purchased nearly 13,000 acres for wildlife management areas with state Legacy funds and donated them to the DNR.

“They often are able to work faster and closely with private sellers,” he said.

“These partners are a major contributor to our WMA acquisition efforts across the state.”

‘There are pheasants here’

Pheasants Forever’s land program precedes the state’s Legacy program. Using donations and tapping into state and federal conservation funds, Pheasants Forever in Minnesota has purchased and turned over nearly 50,000 acres to state and federal wildlife management areas since 2002.

And when a prime piece of available land is close to the Twin Cities — the Lang parcel is just 30 minutes from downtown Minneapolis and not far from booming Blaine — there’s an even greater sense of urgency to preserve it.

“What private land today could be a Wal-Mart parking lot tomorrow,” said John Newpower, president of the Anoka chapter of Pheasants Forever.

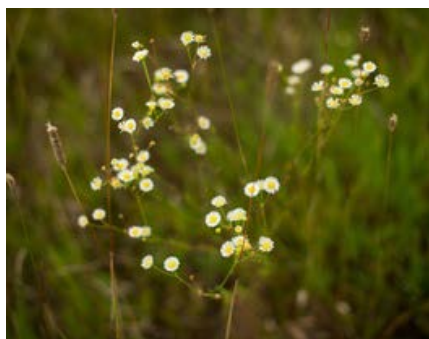
The Langs' property was unusual in that it was never developed or even farmed. It contains no buildings or roads.

The quality of the native plants and species on the land is rated "outstanding," according to a county biological survey. Carlos Avery Supervisor Jim LaBarre said he was pleased Pheasants Forever acquired the land because it "can get through the process a little quicker than we can. It's a benefit to have them to negotiate with the landowners."

Pheasants Forever holds out for the best pieces of property, often rejecting offers from willing sellers. It purchased the Lang parcel because it connects to Carlos Avery and provides more access to it.

"These properties are very strategic and focused. We try to protect the best of the best," Sandquist said.

One day earlier this month, Newpower and his chocolate lab, Kiya, highstepped through a meadow buzzing with life on the property. There were splashes of wildflowers mixed with tall grasses.



AARON LAVINSKY

\$900K purchase price for the Anoka County tract \$55K Pheasants Forever's approx. share of cost 50K acreage PF has donated to the state

"Pheasants love grasslands," Newpower said, because that's where they build nests. But pheasants also need wetlands to winter, and farm fields for grains. The new property hits all those targets.

"I know there are pheasants here," he said.