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This land is our land

Fund-raiser for Athens and Oconee River land trusts celebrates the land

By Julie Phillips

There's probably no time better than spring when we feel an immediate connection to the land. Spring fever stirs in our bodies (not just our sinuses) as the landscape, only weeks ago dismal and gray, suddenly bursts with green and blossoms of pinks, reds and yellows, dazzling us each day with its beauty.

It's an appropriate season for a fund-raiser that brings together two organizations working to preserve the land. On Saturday, Athens Land Trust and Oconee River Land Trust will hold Spirit of the Land - an event featuring an art auction, dinner and wine tasting and live music - not only to raise funds for the organizations, but to further stress the importance of land conservation, said Nancy Stangle, development director for Athens Land Trust.

"A lot of people take for granted how important land conservation is to the community," Stangle said. "So one of the things we want to do is show the importance of protecting our green space, wetlands, forests, working farmland ... they provide critical health and environmental benefits," she said, adding that's one aspect people often forget - that these natural areas help filter pollution, provide clean air, prevent flooding and sustain wildlife habitats, while protected farmland provides us food. "These resources, in the long term, are necessary for our survival," she said.

The fund-raiser brings together the two organizations, which have worked together before, said Steffney Thompson, executive director of Oconee River Land Trust, who started working at the organization seven years ago as its first staff member. Like Stangle, Thompson expresses a love for her work. "I can't imagine living somewhere where I wasn't able to see or ... take walks thru natural, undeveloped areas," she said. "It's essential to our physical health as well as our mental health."

Lori Olson, who also works with ORLT as outreach and development director, moved to Athens from Durham, N.C., in January and said she thinks there's hope for Athens. "With groups like OCRT and ALT and the (North Oconee River) Greenway and the Athens-Clarke County (government), there's a lot of exciting things happening, but there's also a lot that needs to be done (in land conservation)," Olson said.

Saturday's event is designed to keep people aware of the land throughout the evening; artworks featured in the live and silent auction focuses on natural themes, while the wine dinner and tasting are about the bounty of the land.

"We asked the artists (donating to the event) to provide work that shows their feelings about the land, and we've been really excited by what we've received," Stangle said.

More than 40 pieces of art were contributed to the silent auction with works in a variety of media including photographs, paintings and fiber works in silk and quilting by well known area artists, among them Margie Spalding, Margaret Agner, Celia Brooks, Renee Shoemaker, Jimmy Straehla, Mary Padgelek, Jim StipeMaas and Peter Loose.

Meanwhile, the live auction, conducted by Donald Keyes, mostly will feature rare and fine wines, said event coordinator Jared Bailey. An original painting by Philip Juras (pictured on Page D1) used to help illustrate the event, will be included in the live auction as well.

"Through the art work, we hope to bring attention to the beauty that surrounds us, and (the wine tasting) reflects the fruits of the land," Stangle said.

A separate five-course dinner prior to the auction will feature terroir-focused wines from Germany, France, Italy, Spain and Argentina. Guests will learn how the flavors derived from the earth affect the grapes producing the wines from different regions.

Many people may feel a sense of helplessness when it comes to land conservation, driving down stretches of road once lined with trees but now clear cut to make way for development. But, Stangle said, conservation really does start with each individual.

"In our society, it's so easy to lose our connection to the land and it is easy to feel helpless," she said. "But I think the more people who care for the land and provide good stewardship, the more it will reach our policy makers and (developers), when people choose to buy a home where the trees and land have been protected. ... It's a matter of communicating the importance to the community as a whole."

Stangle said part of that comes from having a natural space that's meaningful to us.

"Hopefully everyone has natural areas that they love, where they've been able to experience the wonder of the natural world. We try to remind people of those places," she said. "Land isn't something we can create - once it's gone, it takes (decades) to get it back. But it's such a good feeling to walk on land that I know is protected, and know that it will be here for my children to walk on, too."

Spirit of the Land

Tickets at Aurum Studios, Homeplace Gifts and the Last Resort Grill or call Athens Land Trust, (706) 613-0122, or Oconee River Land Trust, (706) 552-3138.

For more information about ALT or ORLT, respectively visit www.athenslandtrust.org or www.orlt.com.

Five-course wine dinner

When: 6-8 p.m. Saturday

Where: Lyndon House Arts Center, 293 Hoyt St.

Cost: \$95, limited advance sales only; includes auction preview at 5 p.m. and following event

Spirit of the Land

Wine tasting, art exhibit, live and silent auction of wines and artwork, with live music by the Robert Michler Trio

When: 7-10 p.m. Saturday

Where: Lyndon House Arts Center

Cost: \$25 advance, \$30 at door

Contributing artists include:

Philip Juras • Margie Spalding • Margaret Agner • Celia Brooks • Renee Shoemaker • Jimmy Straehla • Mary Padgelek • Jim StipeMaas • Peter Loose • Skipper StipeMaas • Suzanne Reeves • David Becker • David Dwinell • Mary Lou Neuhauser • Dorsett Trapnell • Stephen Humphreys • Cao-Lin • Connee Flynn • Teri Jarrett • Tracey Young • Shannon Williams • Lola Gazda • Flo Gross • Pam Taylor • David Lindsey • Suzanne Lindsey • Toni Carlucci • Carol Downs • Jim Norton • Eric Kissell • Amy Steele • Russell Gabriel • Jim Creech.

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