

# Urban Land Protection Case Study

## MANCHESTER, CONNECTICUT

Prepared by *Manchester Land Trust*, July 2010

### The Manchester Land Conservation Trust

Founded in 1972, the Manchester Land Conservation Trust (MLCT) accepts donations of land to be preserved for open space “for enjoyment by the public and for protection of animal and plant life.” The Trust owns 28 parcels, 336 acres, in Manchester, East Hartford, Vernon, Bolton, and Andover, Connecticut. Land trust properties are open to the public for passive recreation. MLCT keeps its properties in their natural state, and does not build roads or install lighting. The MLCT has no paid staff; directors, stewards, and trail workers are volunteers. With limited funds, the Trust depends on donations and grants to acquire property. Membership is open to all, beginning at \$10 annually per family.

MLCT land protection successes include the 130-acre Risley Park in Vernon and Bolton; the Mary Jane Williams Park in East Hartford; and Salter’s Pond in Manchester. Other properties: [www.manchesterlandtrust.org](http://www.manchesterlandtrust.org).

A major success, but not without some controversy, was the acquisition of part of the former Cheney railroad, a spur between the Cheney silk mills and the main line in the North End.

### South Manchester Railroad

The old *South Manchester Railroad* (SMRR) was built in 1869 by the Cheney family, and it linked the mills to the Hartford, Providence, and Fishkill Railroads. At 2.25 miles, the SMRR was the shortest freight-and-passenger railroad in the United States, but the longest private railroad. According to an article in *The Hartford Courant* on September 30, 1923, it was the “Only Line in Country Owned Entirely by One Family.” The last passenger trip was in 1933, but freight trains still used these rails into the 1980s.

As with many railroads in the U.S., this one fell into disuse and disrepair. When **Consolidated Rail Corporation** was selling the property, Alphonse Reale, an enterprising resident, whose house and yard abutted the railroad, encouraged the town not to purchase it, citing various reasons, including that the neighbors wouldn’t like it. But on February 7, 1989 for



The rail-bed was used for freight into the 1980s.

\$200,000, he and a partner purchased the property themselves, including the land from the North End of town all the way to Center Street. The partner ran into financial troubles in the 1990s and sold out to Mr. Reale, who then tried to sell the property to the Town for a great deal more than he paid for it. Meanwhile, a 3/4-acre portion fronting Hilliard Street was sold to an abutting business, and a large segment in the center was sold to a shopping-center developer. Mr. Reale tried to sell portions to other neighbors, but they didn’t buy — they had the use of the land anyway, and some neighbors used the narrow corridor as a dump. Some folks did use the corridor as a short cut, but due to trash and undergrowth, the rail-bed was nearly impassable.

The neighbors were furious at the idea of Mr. Reale’s selling to the town, and petitioned for a referendum barring the Town from purchasing it, even though there were Federal and State funds available for such a purchase. Voters approved the ban, and things settled down for a while.

Upon Mr. Reale’s death, a one-mile segment of the railroad was offered by his heirs to MLCT for \$55,000 — a bargain — and MLCT got grants to make the purchase in 2005. Again some of the neighbors were furious. They tried to get the purchase reversed, tried to buy the land themselves, petitioned the Town, wrote letters, and appeared continually at

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MLCT leads 3-4 walks along the rail trail each year.

there is still one vocal neighbor who posts signs on his back fence protesting the trail and who complains to trail workers that they're making too much noise. But the volunteers continue to maintain the path, with occasional help from the United Way Day of Caring and other volunteers.

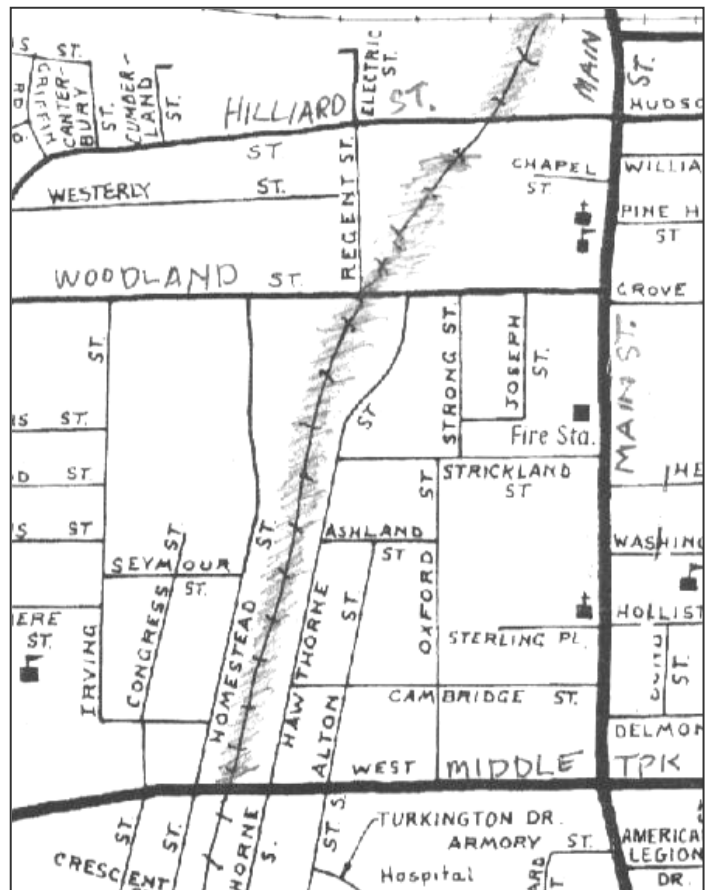
MLCT has been trying for several years to purchase the next segment of the trail, but the real estate company that owns it is located in California, and hasn't been responsive as yet. MLCT will press on in the hope that some day the historic South Manchester Railroad will again be a corridor between the north and south ends of Manchester.

town meetings asking the town to do something to prevent creation of a public path. The town responded by censuring MLCT and enacting a ban on any town help to MLCT for rail trail work or improvements. On other properties, MLCT and the town have worked as partners to maintain open space for public use.

Nevertheless, one of the grants required that a path be created, and MLCT members accomplished this within the deadline — volunteers hauled out trash, cut invasive trees and vines, built some steps, and smoothed out a walking path, which immediately became popular.

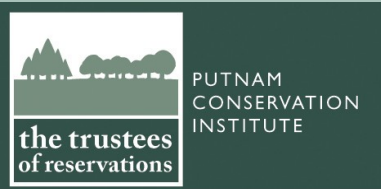
MLCT led hikes along the rail trail, although a major detour was required at Hilliard Street, where the small business had bought a 3/4-acre lot. This area was deeply eroded and overgrown. Fortunately, in 2008, MLCT purchased this critical property, using funds from grants, a bequest, and donations from members and friends. The seller cleared the overgrowth and graded the area. MLCT volunteers and Eagle Scout candidates created a small park with a kiosk, picnic table and parking area.

MLCT continues to lead 3 or 4 hikes a year along the rail trail. Most neighbors wave to us and thank us for the trail, and we know that they use the trail. However,



In 2005, MLCT purchased the shaded portion of the railroad of the SMRR. In 2008, the un-shaded Hilliard Street portion of the railway was purchased. MLCT continues to work on securing an easement over the remainder of the rail

This case study was produced following a visit in Dec. 2009 to the Southside Community Land Trust by the Urban Land Protection Council (ULPC). The ULPC was founded to develop and enhance the collaborative efforts of the urban land protection community and is partially funded by The Jessie B. Cox Charitable Lead Trust. The ULPC includes the Lowell Parks & Conservation Trust, the Greater Worcester Land Trust, the Waltham Land Trust, and Groundwork Lawrence.



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The Trustees of Reservations' Putnam Conservation Institute is an active participant with the ULPC as well, providing significant in-kind support. If you would like to be part of a growing statewide network of people who care about protecting and caring for land in Massachusetts' cites, sign on to [www.UrbanParkAdvocates.org](http://www.UrbanParkAdvocates.org).