

EQUITY TRUST NEWS

December 2020

Land is central to racial justice and resilience

Amidst the overlapping crises we are facing as a society, Equity Trust continues our work, adapting and working remotely, while responding to new challenges and opportunities. Our projects often take time to develop, and our work requires that we take the long view. In the face of distressing circumstances—a pandemic triggering economic disaster on Main Street alongside the continued need to stand up for the sanctity of Black life—we are encouraged to see growing interest in land-based work for racial justice and building resilient communities, with multiple groups seeking guidance around such initiatives.

We are encountering inspiring efforts to apply equitable and democratic forms of ownership to advance goals of racial justice and reparations. We have heard from organizers interested in forming community land trusts (CLTs) to protect affordable housing as well as urban communities' access to open space; from people exploring reparations land gifts; and from groups that want to establish collective land ownership for housing, growing food, and building community space for education, healing, and sanctuary, the fellowship we are all missing right now. There are local initiatives focused on the specific needs and goals of



Earthseed Land Collective in North Carolina is one of many groups that have reached out to Equity Trust in recent years. In their case, we provided initial consultation and shared resources around ownership structures and affordable housing. Their work to "reimagine our relationship to ourselves, each other, and the land in pursuit and practice of collective liberation" is linked to the wider work of Black Land and Power (BLP), a project of the National Black Food and Justice Alliance to build a land-based movement for Black liberation. BLP's Reparations Summer campaign benefits Earthseed along with other Black land stewards. (credit: Earthseed Land Collective)

a particular community, and ambitious regional initiatives guided collaboratively by coalitions of organizations. Although many of these efforts--and our connections with them--are still emerging, we are thrilled to see the excitement about the possibilities.

Since Equity Trust's founding, we have advocated for community control of land and resources. We continue to support Black-led efforts to develop spaces for self-determination, arts and culture, and farming. We play an important role as an information hub when we respond to inquiries, directing people to other resources, as well as sharing examples and experiences that can inform new efforts. As we have seen in the past, we expect that some of these efforts may create models for others seeking tools to advance justice, fair housing, equitable food access, and ecological resilience.

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From the late 1990's into the early 2000's, Equity Trust supported the Sapelo Island Cultural and Revitalization Society to construct this community center and also to develop strategies to acquire land on Sapelo Island, Georgia to preserve their Gullah/Geechee community and culture. (photo credit: NRCS)

Building lasting land-sharing agreements

Equity Trust advocates removing farmland from the speculative market so that farmers can have the affordable access and secure tenure that they need to provide food for their communities and steward the land for the next generation. When land trusts or other organizations embrace the idea of making land they own available to working farmers, that is a cause for celebration. It is also often the kickoff for some of our most important work.



Planting underway at Pioneer Valley Workers Center farm, MA (photo credit: Erin Long Photography)

Once a land-owning organization commits to protecting a working farm, it needs tools and guidance to do so effectively. Providing this support is one of the less visible elements of Equity Trust's work; it is also one of the most critical for advancing our mission, requiring careful collaborative work and significant time. This year we have been engaged with two important efforts to create long-term leases to balance the needs of current and future farmers, the land stewarding organization, and the wider community.

The first of these builds on work we began in 2019 in support of the **Pioneer Valley Workers Center** (PVWC) as a group of its worker-members launched a worker-run cooperative farm, **Riquezas Del Campo**. PVWC was offered access to a ten-acre field in Western Massachusetts, part owned by Kestrel Land Trust and part by the City of Northampton, and we are now working with them to draft a long-term agreement that will ensure secure tenure for the farmers as they develop their business.

This project is part of an important multi-racial food justice movement, planting the seeds of an economy where farm workers can become farm owners and grow

food to feed their communities and meet their own basic needs. Secure land tenure is key to creating pathways to build equity for farmers who have been historically excluded from ownership opportunities, especially farmers who are Black/Indigenous/People of Color.

Technically, the process of drafting a lease involves a series of in-depth discussions with the parties about the desired terms. With the farm's shared ownership, this project is particularly complex, involving a lease between PVWC and Kestrel as well as a license to use the City land, which cannot be leased. There will also be a sublease from PVWC to Riquezas, and other agreements to share space with other farmers until Riquezas grows into full use of the field.

Meanwhile, in Eastern Massachusetts, we've been helping **Greenbelt, Essex County's Land Trust**, to draft a ground lease for a 60-acre farm it acquired in 2019. The lease will give a farmer lessee long-term tenure at an affordable price and the right to develop and own farm infrastructure on the property, which is currently bare land. Working in an area of very high land prices, Greenbelt has been expanding its farm protection work, and this lease represents the newest addition to its toolkit.

Over the course of the year, we have worked closely with a committee of staff, board members, and others to draft the lease while Greenbelt simultaneously issued a request for proposals and reviewed farmer applications. The lease terms will be finalized in dialogue with the selected farmer late this fall, in time for the start of the 2021 growing season.



Riquezas Del Campo farmers give Congressman Jim McGovern a tour, MA (photo credit: Pioneer Valley Workers Center)

Borrowers offer healing and hope

Equity Trust Fund

In a year that has tested everyone's heart and soul in so many ways, the Equity Trust Fund has been fortunate to partner with people and organizations striving to rejuvenate and strengthen their communities from coast to coast.

The **Smith Hill Community Development Corporation** works to create and sustain affordable housing, stimulate economic development, and



Camden Avenue Garden, RI (photo credit: Smith Hill CDC)

promote a sense of community in a multiracial/ multiethnic neighborhood in Providence, Rhode Island. The CDC looks for opportunities to purchase blighted buildings and unused lots that devalue the community, rehabbing boarded up houses or building new ones and making them available as affordable ownership and rental homes for local residents. It also provides a variety of services, programs, and employment to the community at large and manages a community garden.

One of its latest projects is the conversion of a triple decker once used as the organization's offices into a drop-in community center and two floors of housing for "transitioning aging youth" (ages 16 to 24), to be operated by a partner social service agency. It will serve as a resource center and housing for young people who are leaving foster care or juvenile detention facilities, have run away from home or dropped out of school, or struggle with disabilities – all previously, or at risk of becoming, homeless.

Tryon Life Community (TLC) Farm is a small urban farm in Portland, Oregon operated by a worker collective called **Cedar Moon** that lives on the land. Almost fifteen years ago, Equity Trust helped them purchase and permanently preserve the farm when it was under threat of development, and to craft a land stewardship model that reflects a vision of "overlapping organizational rights and responsibilities for the land, in much the way an ecosystem overlaps niches" and allows for the "land-as-such" to participate in its own management. TLC Farm offers experiential education workshops and internships on agriculture and sustainability in non-pandemic times. Meanwhile, a second collective has emerged on the land

to create a space specifically for people of color and trans* folks to live and organize. Conflicts between members or collectives are managed in a process drawn from the traditional practices of villages indigenous to the region, and a council of elders is specifically entrusted with keeping the needs of the land foremost when making decisions. In addition, the farm hosts a monthly program bringing Indigenous girls and teens to connect with the land and their culture, and residents are working to make the farm a refuge for Black Lives Matter activists in need of respite.

Land is central to racial justice *(Cont'd from p. 1.)*

We are honored that so many groups exploring pathways to remove land from the speculative market and return it to the commons contact Equity Trust. We are also challenged to continue to examine our strategies and assumptions, reminded that in a society contaminated by racism and inequality, even tools and approaches designed to support positive change need to be continually reworked.

We believe that we need a transition away from existing destructive, racist systems and that the current crises present an opportunity to realign our collective priorities around secure food and shelter, and human and ecosystem health. This moment calls for us to re-emphasize our mission, "promoting equity in the world by changing the way people think about and hold property," to care for each other, the land, and future generations.

Historic barn gets a new roof

Farm Stewardship

Equity Trust plays a stewardship role in a number of farm properties. One of those is **Dimond Hill Farm**, in Concord, New Hampshire. Its farmland and historic buildings have sustained this working farm since the 1700s, and in 2006, they were permanently protected through a unique partnership. With assistance from the City of Concord and Trust for Public Land, conservation and historic easements, held by Five Rivers Conservation Trust and NH Preservation Alliance, respectively, were placed on the farmland, forest, and buildings, preserving the picturesque hilltop farm and continued public access to trails. Equity Trust took ownership of the protected farm subject to a life estate held by the current farmer, Jane Presby, whose family has operated the farm since 1827. Our role is to ensure that the farm will remain available and affordable for future farmers so that it will always produce food for the local community.



During the term of the life estate, the Equity Trust and our partners bear some responsibility for maintaining the historic infrastructure. When the barn's 60,000-square-foot roof needed repair, it was a major undertaking, essential for the preservation of this iconic building at the center of the farm complex that houses the popular farm store. Working with the farmer and the Preservation Alliance, we oversaw the installation of a new 50-year roof last winter, followed by renovated lightning protection for the house and barn completed over the summer. This historic infrastructure is now better protected than ever for continued farm and residential use!

Visible Impact in the Hudson Valley

Farm Affordability

Although Equity Trust's Hudson Valley Farm Affordability Program officially wrapped up in 2019, work completing some farm protection projects has continued into 2020. The year started with the protection of **Lewis Waite Farm**, a 444-acre grass-fed beef and pork operation in Washington County. As 2020 ends, we are close to completing protection of the 20-acre **Lansing Farm**, an eighth-generation farm in Albany County growing fruits and vegetables. The agricultural easements that we introduced to the Hudson Valley go beyond standard easements that prohibit subdivision and development, to also include "working farm" resale restrictions that require that when sold, the farm go to another farmer for its agricultural value. As reported previously, by proving farmer interest, and carrying out demonstration projects, our program has encouraged a number of regional land trusts to embrace this approach and helped win state funding for these restrictions.

The program's protected farms also now serve as a real world example of the impact that working farm protections can have. As the chart here shows, the purchase prices of farms protected with resale restrictions, determined by appraisal, range from 13-50 percent below their cost if protected by a standard easement. This is a big help for farmers seeking land, but it is just the beginning. Over time this difference will grow because these farms will be isolated from the speculative estate market that has contributed to the doubling of regional farmland prices in just two decades and is particularly extreme in the current economic and health crisis.

