

Land trust enriches life, preserves unique areas
By Daily Journal

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From the road, the land looks like a typical woodlot surrounded by fields showing crops just emerging from the ground.

From the air, it's a nearly perfect dark green square of trees.

But from the ground, Crystal Springs Woods is an unparalleled combination of features. The 41 acres near Interstate 65 in northeastern Franklin Township are unique. First, the trees are thick and mature. Some of the land has never been plowed under.

Most important, the site contains the county's last buttonbush swamp, a vestige of the ecosystem that once covered large swaths of Johnson County.

The landowners long have been committed to saving the land; but with the help of the Central Indiana Land Trust, its preservation has been guaranteed.

Other areas of the county also have been preserved. A large area along White River that is a heron rookery has been protected, and an effort is under way to create a nature preserve in Hensley Township that would be open to the public.

The trust preserves areas by reaching agreements with landowners who want to keep the land from being turned into tracts of houses or industrial sites.

Here's how it works:

A landowner who has a natural habitat for plants or animals donates the development rights to the land.

The property owner still owns and maintains the land.

A conservation agreement prevents future owners of the land from developing it into homes or businesses or clearing trees.

The assessed value of the land decreases, lowering property tax bills.

Property owners who sign conservation agreements can deduct the land value from their federal income taxes.

The agreement gives the landowner a financial incentive to preserve the land along with the environmental one. Often farmers are forced to sell land in order to have money to live on during retirement. The practice often is called “final harvest.”

But by working with the land trust, they can save the land and not have to make a significant financial sacrifice in the process.

Farmland that Jan Baldwin’s parents own has been preserved through an agreement with the trust.

“The last thing they wanted to see was tract housing,” she said. “The land is beautiful, and it will be a legacy for generations to come, a legacy that will make the community a better place. We’re trying to encourage more people to preserve their land, to leave something behind.”

The pressure to sell or develop land can be considerable, but the Central Indiana Land Trust is working to make sure these special areas are around for future generations to benefit from.

Photo Caption: From the road, the land looks like a typical woodlot surrounded by fields showing crops just emerging from the ground. From the air, it’s a nearly perfect dark green square of trees.