

Carbon stored in Elizabeth Township forest will help pay for its preservation



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On paper, more than 150 wooded acres in Elizabeth Township had been cut into more than 150 housing lots, but on the ground, the forest was still forest.

The trees will stay standing because the Allegheny Land Trust bought the parcels near the community of Buena Vista last year from the developer, who decided to retire without carrying out the subdivision.

Part of the funding to preserve the property will come from the sale of credits that reflect the climate value of not chopping down the trees, which absorb and store carbon dioxide. It is the land trust's first foray into environmental markets.

Usually, [forest carbon credits](#) are certified and generated from huge tracts, thousands of acres at a time, far from population centers. But the Buena Vista Heights Conservation Area is generating a new kind of premium credit, developed by Seattle-based nonprofit City Forest Credits, that represent the special environmental value of trees in and near cities.

Along with storing carbon, [urban trees](#) help clean the air, cool buildings and — crucially for hillside communities — intercept rainwater that could otherwise contribute to flash flooding, erosion and landslides.

At the same time, urban and community forests nationwide are shrinking as cities expand.

“We’re losing these trees that are very beneficial to our health and our daily lives,” said City Forest Credits director Liz Johnston. “City budgets are really stressed. There’s a need to find a way to bring out other funding sources to help protect our existing trees and plant and care for new ones.”

Voluntary carbon credits are a popular tool to balance the carbon ledger as companies, communities and other organizations strive for net-zero greenhouse gas emissions across their operations but can’t actually cut their emissions to zero because of technological limitations. By

investing in trees, companies aim to offset emissions they can't eliminate, like from shipping or air travel.

One carbon credit represents one metric ton of carbon dioxide removed from the air by the forest. The Buena Vista Heights parcels will generate nearly 14,000 credits for sale.

The first 500 credits were bought by environmental tech company Cloverly, which develops web tools that make it easier for customers to offset emissions from shipping a package, booking a flight or using a ride-hailing service. It matches customers to offset projects as close as possible to their location.

The company bought the credits for \$30 apiece — about three times the price of a typical carbon offset.

Ms. Johnston said urban forest credits are “low volume but extremely valuable.” Part of what makes carbon verification and marketing possible on smaller, urban parcels is that “businesses are willing to spend more buying these premium credits because of all of the local benefits that come with each project.”

When Cloverly CEO Anthony Oni announced the purchase of the carbon credits late last year, he said price alone had long been the dominant variable in carbon markets.

“We'd like to change that. Our customers are not looking for the cheapest credits. They're looking for projects that have real meaning to them.”

Valuing those co-benefits was also key in enticing the Allegheny Land Trust to sign up.

“Stormwater sequestration and air quality improvements in our post-industrial county are just so critically important to address in our land protection work,” said Alyson Fearon, the land trust's senior director of community conservation and resiliency. “That's the reason these credits appealed to us much more strongly than a straight carbon credit.”

By remaining forested, the Buena Vista Heights property will continue to absorb an estimated 128 million gallons of rainwater per year above a valley that has experienced flash floods, erosion and extended road closures because of landslides.

Forest carbon offset programs in the U.S. have faced increased scrutiny for [claiming to preserve trees](#) that were not under any real threat of being cut down.

As part of its verification process, City Forest Credits requires projects to demonstrate a “threat of loss” — evidence that nothing protected the trees from being cleared before the current preservation effort.

In the Buena Vista Heights Conservation Area, it was not hard to make the case that the parcels were in the path of development: They had been fully platted for a residential housing project,

and the land trust was still looking for ways to come up with the money to buy the land when they began exploring carbon credits.

“We had a funding gap that we were going to have to try and recover elsewhere in order to close on the property,” Ms. Fearon said.

The property was valued at \$700,000. Allegheny Land Trust bought it through a bargain sale, paying half of the appraised price while the seller can count the other half as a donation and claim it as a tax deduction.

Ms. Fearon said if the land trust sells all of the carbon credits at its preferred price, it could recover between \$100,000 and \$200,000.

The land trust is working with Bluesource, a large forest carbon project developer, to market the credits and educate potential buyers about what makes urban forest credits different.

It is seeking buyers that share its social and conservation mission. Ms. Fearon said the land trust expects boutique companies or regional companies might be interested, but the market is still new. Allegheny Land Trust is the first land trust in the country to preserve a property using a certified urban forest carbon project.

Ms. Johnston said part of the draw for buyers of urban forest credits is the projects’ prominence and accessibility in a community.

“Being able to physically go there, especially if it’s within your city or your state, can be very appealing,” she said.

The woods at Buena Vista Heights are already beloved by neighbors who live in the housing developments that hug the property’s western border.

The forest grew naturally from farmland that had been left fallow around 1975, allowing shrubs, maples and cherry trees to root. The woods are crossed by old farm runs that, with the prior owner’s permission, neighbors have used for hiking, hunting and mountain biking. A stream flows down through a ravine toward the Youghiogheny River.

“Most of our neighbors really feel strongly that it’s like their backyard,” Ms. Fearon said.

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