



Mississippi Valley Conservancy

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**ALMA BLUFFLAND PROTECTED THROUGH CONSERVATION AGREEMENT
WITH SALE OF PROPERTY
Conservation Agreement with Mississippi Valley Conservancy
Connects Buyer and Seller Visions of Future for the Land**

BUFFALO COUNTY, WI – February 23, 2018 – In conjunction with a change of ownership, the bluffland above the town of Alma has been added to the list of properties now protected by an agreement with Mississippi Valley Conservancy. When Larry Jost decided to sell the bluffland property he had climbed and enjoyed in his youth, he wanted to pass it on with the knowledge that the historic, geographic, and ecological value of the land would remain unchanged. When Alma’s Mayor, Jim Wilkie, learned of Jost’s interest in selling the landmark bluff, he had the future of Alma in mind. The visions and values of both parties are now connected through their agreement with the Conservancy.

Jost and a childhood friend, both born and raised in Alma, had for years enjoyed the land for recreation and hunting. Later in life they partnered on some property investments which included the landmark bluff above the town. When the time came to divest of the land, due to his partner’s failing health, Jost looked into the possibility of a conservation agreement to protect the land. “I was told by an excavating contractor that a road could be built to the top and then a house could have been built,” said Jost, “I didn’t want that to happen, I wanted to permanently protect the property.” Neither he or his friend could stand the idea of development on the bluffland. So Jost went in search of a buyer who would value the conservation plan. Among the many people with whom he discussed the property sale was Mayor Jim Wilkie.

Wilkie has his own vision for the land which is adjacent to his property and towers above his great-great-grandfather’s brick home where he now lives. Being fully aware of the historic significance of the property as well as its value in Alma’s tourism economy and the town’s very identity, he wasn’t interested in seeing it changed. Looking ahead, he’s interested in the success of the “Flyway Trail” project that will one day connect Wabasha with Winona via a bike trail on the Wisconsin side of the Mississippi River. To that end, he serves on the board of the Buffalo County Land and Trails Trust. He sees Alma and its bluffs as a jewel on that trail, and on the Wisconsin Great River Road, and that’s something he doesn’t want to see changed. So when

Larry Jost told him about his plan to put a conservation easement on the land, the idea was agreeable to Jim Wilke, and he decided to purchase the land for its value to the community.

The property consists of 15 acres of scenic cliffs and bluffs overlooking the Mississippi River valley. The adventurous who climb to the top will find three limestone points looking out over the Mississippi River. The largest of the points includes a historical feature known locally as “Lincoln’s Cave,” due to a carving of the profile of Abraham Lincoln’s face. A crawl through the short tunnel puts one on top of a steep cliff with expansive views of the Mississippi River and the Minnesota bluffs. Visitors to Alma, boaters on the Mississippi River, and those driving along the Great River Road (Highway 35) or County Road E can enjoy the exceptionally scenic rock cliffs and wooded bluff that are now protected.

According to Larry, the site is of important historical significance. When steam ships came out of Lake Pepin, at the mouth of the Chippewa River, they could see “12-mile bluff” (Alma is twelve miles south of the Chippewa River). The name was changed to Alma in the mid-1850’s.

The property plays an equally significant ecological role, according to Abbie Church, conservation director of the Conservancy. The property’s ecological features include oak opening, defined by the Wisconsin Natural Heritage Inventory as a *globally imperiled* natural community. Oak openings, often surrounded by prairie habitat as can be found on this property, serve as crucial habitat for declining pollinators and grassland-nesting bird species. Signs of foraging pileated woodpeckers can be found in standing dead trees, and soaring bald eagles and red-tailed hawks can often be seen above the bluffs.

“This transaction is a great example of how a conservation easement can serve as a legal tool to allow a landowner to sell land while having a say in the future use of that land,” said Church, “In this case, Larry had a vested interest in seeing that the land not be developed, the woods clear-cut, or the historical features of the Lincoln’s cave destroyed by a future owner. He found the perfect buyer in Jim, who shares his values in recognizing that Wisconsin’s scenic bluffs are a tremendous asset to the local community and to the wildlife that call this area home.”

According to Carol Abrahamzon, executive director of the Conservancy, the wishes of both buyer and seller were entirely compatible and the Conservancy was able to negotiate a conservation agreement customized to what the land itself can support and customized to the wishes of both parties. “Our role now is to ensure that the land protection provisions in the agreement are upheld in perpetuity – not just by the next owner but by owners far into the future,” she said, “With his purchase of the land, Jim Wilkie is carrying on what Larry Jost started – protecting the scenic beauty of the bluffs that can be seen and enjoyed by all traveling the Great River Road through the City of Alma now and forever.”

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ABOUT MISSISSIPPI VALLEY CONSERVANCY

Founded in 1997, Mississippi Valley Conservancy is a nationally accredited regional land trust that has permanently protected nearly 20,000 acres of scenic lands in southwestern Wisconsin by working with private landowners, businesses and local communities on voluntary conservation projects. The focus of the Conservancy is to conserve the forests, prairies, wetlands, streams and farms that enrich our communities, for the health and well-being of current and future generations. Learn more at www.MississippiValleyConservancy.org.