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Editorial: Generous gift propels Kestrel Land Trust's preservation goals for mountain ranges

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The \$350,000 donation from a Valley resident to the Kestrel Land Trust to preserve land on the stunning Mount Tom and Mount Holyoke ranges is a precious gift indeed. The woman, who chooses to remain anonymous, said she was inspired by the beauty of the ranges and the confidence she has in the trust, which works to protect land in 19 area towns. That is a ringing endorsement of the work Kestrel does and we congratulate the land preservation group.

The sum is the largest gift it has received in its 43-year history.

As always, the Kestrel Land Trust will use the money to raise substantially more by securing funds through municipal, state and federal conservation programs. Working with the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation, the National Park Service, seven towns where the mountains are located and willing landowners, the trust estimates it will be able to acquire \$3 million worth of land or development rights with the \$350,000.

That is an impressive multiplier.

The beautiful ranges, which have inspired artists and offer stunning views of the Pioneer Valley, have been in the Kestrel Land Trust's sights since the nonprofit conservation group was formed in 1970. Already 10,000 of the 16,000 acres have been protected, including 7,340 acres of state parkland.

Kestrel has been mapping the remaining 6,000 and identifying about a dozen people who own the 1,000 forest or farm acres that the group hopes to protect within the next year. Kristin DeBoer, the trust's director, told a reporter recently that her group is thinking big with its plans to secure that much land within 12 months. Given its track record, we are confident it will succeed.

A variety of trees cover the steep slopes of both ranges, including birch, beech and hemlock on the north side and oak and hickory on the south. There are also more than 30 miles of trails for hiking, walking, cross-country skiing, horseback riding and hunting. Ecologists see it as an area that can adapt to climate change due to its micro habitats, its diverse terrain and its unusual east-west orientation. That adds substantially to its public value.

The land trust's most recent conservation acquisition on the range came two years ago when it purchased 337-acres in Belchertown, along with the Department of Conservation and Recreation, for \$1.4 million. Besides the trust, funding came from Massachusetts Audubon, Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, Trust for Public Land and Friends of the Mount Holyoke Range State Park. In September, Kestrel and the town of Amherst created the 20-acre Ricci Conservation Area at the foot of the range on Bay Road in Amherst at a cost of \$535,000.

While it focuses on Mount Holyoke and Mount Tom, the trust is not turning away from its efforts to protect other prize properties in the area. Last week it offered to give the town of Amherst a hand in holding onto 20 acres off Belchertown Road being eyed for use as a community farm, with gardens tended by townspeople and schoolchildren. A few weeks ago, Town Meeting rejected a request to use nearly \$42,000 in Community Preservation Act money to pair with a state grant to buy that land for \$150,000.

Assistant Town Manager David Ziomek said officials will try again in the spring, going through the formal process that includes securing the town's CPA committee's approval.

But in the meantime, officials are working with Kestrel to ensure the land is not lost to development. The Valley is fortunate to have such a capable watchdog, backed by generous people who believe that this sort of work is for eternity.

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