

Why save it? Just pave it – Conservation becoming tool of choice in Morgan County



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By Guest Columnist **CHRISTINE MCCAULEY WATTS**, *executive director of Madison-Morgan Conservancy*

Would you like fries with that? Or fruit salad? We don't always choose the healthier option, do we? It is our right. But at least the option exists these days: a sign that healthy choices are trending. Could it be that protecting a sense of place is beginning to trend, too?



Christine McCauley Watts

Here in this bucolic place I call home, a healthier lifestyle actually seems to be trending. Some of our landowners are making better choices, protecting their land instead of carving it up into McMansion subdivisions. McMansions, after all, are certainly not trending these days.

Tightly knit towns, swaths of verdant pastures with cattle on the rise, fields of cotton and wheat, bottomland hardwood forests and working forests, all punctuated with a house or barn here and there, sometimes a historic house calling out our past – this is Morgan County.

It is probably too much to ask for it to stay that way. Landowners, after all, have a choice, and often times a duty, to realize some economic gain for generations' toil on the land. Recently, we have seen farms converted to asphalt and rooftops, bought, subdivided, and sold by investors, not for the good of Morgan County's land or for sustainable development, but simply for profit. They have every right, but to us, it's the fries – tasty on the tongue, toxic to the body.

On a positive note, by the end of 2020, Morgan County will be home to over 5,000 acres of land permanently protected by conservation easements. That means individual landowners have voluntarily given up development rights and donated that economic value to a land trust. These conservation easements protect public conservation values like prime agricultural soils, wildlife habitat, water quality, tree canopy, etc. that future generations will undoubtedly want and need. Now, that is the fruit salad – not as tasty as fries, but makes you sexy inside and out.



A conservation easement in Morgan County protects water quality and wildlife habitat. Credit: Scott Finsthwait, via Madison-Morgan Conservancy

We are at a crossroads, or a tipping point. The land use choices made in the next 20 years will permanently diminish, or retain, our ability to grow food, swim in our creeks, or find peace in an otherwise urban and exacting world. It's a race, and conservation may not win. It rarely does. But, here in Morgan County, we are better prepared than most for conservation to at

least balance the impact of an ever-expanding Metro Atlanta. Having the only countywide conservancy in Georgia is a start.

For 20 years, on the shoulder of the Southeast's largest and fastest-growing metropolitan area, the [Madison-Morgan Conservancy](#) has been protecting farms, forests, and front porches for future generations by helping farmers market their products, by helping landowners protect their land and restore their historic structures, by protecting endangered properties through its revolving fund, and by growing a conservation ethic in Morgan County's youth through the Junior Conservancy.



Morgan County is on the eastern border of an ever-expanding metro Atlanta. Credit: Madison-Morgan Conservancy

These conservation services, provided within a hyper-local area, have resulted in significant gains in natural resource conservation, farmland protection and historic preservation, and have perpetuated a culture of conservation rarely found elsewhere in Georgia. The conservancy will continue its work to incentivize sustainable growth, but it is the existing landowners who will dictate our future sense of place.

Incentivizing conservation is not easy, thanks to the way “[highest and best use](#)” is calculated in terms of a land use that will realize the greatest price for land. HBU makes buying land in order to farm it infeasible in metro Atlanta or in any metropolitan area, systematizing the unrelenting loss of farmland the entire nation is facing. However, thanks to [provisions](#) in the U.S. Farm Bill, certain tax incentives, and philanthropy, the private nonprofit sector is figuring out how to incentivize conservation.

Donating a conservation easement is the tool of choice here in Morgan County, but landowners have other options, including selling transferable development rights (TDRs) and participating in the new [Working Farms Fund](#) in partnership with the Conservation Fund. The conservancy also has a strong partnership with the Georgia Trust for Historic Preservation's [Places in Peril](#) program, which helps communities save significant historic structures. The Morgan County Board of Commissioners and City of Madison have

contemplated and instituted innovative land use regulations to allow for a balance of sustainable development and conservation. Our toolbox is almost full. Now all we need is for our landowners and investors to want fruit salad.

The Madison-Morgan Conservancy's [Endangered Properties Revolving Fund](#) will use all the tools in the toolbox to incentivize the protection of significant and endangered places. Only with the added bonus of being a nonprofit can it work, and this is how:

- People who would like to see Morgan County retain its farms, forests, and historic structures contribute to the fund;
- The conservancy buys the endangered farm, forest, or historic structure; a conservation easement or other protection measure is placed on the property;
- And, finally, the conservancy sells the property to a conservation buyer who agrees to rehabilitate or manage it to a certain standard.



The Foster-Thomason-Miller House was first project of the Madison-Morgan Conservancy's Endangered Properties Revolving Fund. In 2019, the house was saved and sold to a conservation buyer. In 2018, the house was named as a "Place in Peril" by the Georgia Trust for Historic Preservation. Credit: Tony Clark, via Madison-Morgan Conservancy

Any loss incurred during this process is absorbed by the fund. For our profit-minded board members (of which, thankfully, we have many), this takes some getting used to, to say the least. Thanks to their management, the conservancy's first project netted a whopping \$1,196.

You could call Morgan County's conservancy metro Atlanta's last stand for something green. A grand experiment in land use. A pipe dream. Hopefully one day, we'll call it a success. After 20 years in this business, we have reason to hope. It will be the next twenty that make the mark.

Note to readers: In addition to serving as executive director of the Madison-Morgan Conservancy since 2003, Christine McCauley Watts has served as director of Buckhead Heritage Society and Chattahoochee Hill Country Conservancy



The Junior Conservancy gathered in 2019 at the barn in historic Malcom's Crossroads. Credit: Madison-Morgan Conservancy

