



Wheeling Township and Nerstrand: Landmark of the Past Symbol of the Future

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Sometimes people need a sign to get involved in their community. For residents of Wheeling Township and Nerstrand, 10 miles south of Northfield, that sign said "For Sale," and it sat on the 110 acres surrounding the Valley Grove Church. What followed that sighting was a successful local initiative to preserve that open space. The Valley Grove Preservation Society involved residents from the community and others with ties to the church and in six months, from June 2000 to January 2001, raised over \$400,000 to purchase the land and keep it open space forever.

Ken Sahlin and Peter McKinnon, both neighbors of Valley Grove Church, noticed the for sale sign on the farm next to the church in early June of 2000 and knew something had to be done immediately to prevent the sale of the land to a developer. For Sahlin especially, as treasurer of the Valley Grove Preservation Society, maintaining the area around the church was vital. The Valley Grove Church actually has two buildings, the old church, which is listed on the National Historical Society Register, and a newer building. The church is in Wheeling Township, just outside the City of Nerstrand, and is just one mile from the entrance to Nerstrand Big Woods State Park. The property for sale sat right between the church and the park.

Nerstrand is a small city of about 250 just 10 miles from Northfield. Its rolling farmland is facing development pressures as Northfield and the nearby Twin Cities grow and expand. Even though the city and township are small (450 township residents), the communities are strong, and people are committed to preserving the rural and small town feel of the place.

For Sahlin, the preservation effort was logical: "We were already taking care of the building, so we went on to take care of the land, otherwise the church would've been desecrated with big houses around it. We couldn't stand the thought of losing the beauty of the silhouette of the two churches facing each other on the hill. Especially with the park right there." Gary Wagenbach, a biology professor at Carleton College, concurs. "One needs to think of the natural context of land and soil and how people relate to it...the seventh-generation rule should be the standard for decision-making for use of resources."

The reason for the sale was a common one. The farm passed from one generation to the next, and the heirs were not interested in farming. They put the land up for sale, hoping to make as much as they could. Development pressures being what they are, the most likely

buyer was a developer. The Preservation Society had to act fast.

The Fundraising Challenge

The challenge was to come up with the money to buy the land. The sellers were asking \$3,726 per acre. After seeing the Edina Realty sign in June, the Preservation Society decided to buy the land. They put \$3000 down as earnest



Valley Grove historic church

money and signed a purchase agreement that gave them six months to raise the remainder of the money. Where were they going to come up with \$414,750 by January 2, 2001?

They were starting with nothing, and getting money from other non-profit organizations was unlikely because most usually don't award funds to groups trying to buy land. Business based foundations were no help at all, as they like to focus on people rather than land. Six months of fundraising, including direct mailings and phone calls, began immediately.

Sahlin and McKinnon both spoke of going into

the project already assuming it was accomplished. "We were going to make it no matter what; it was going to happen," McKinnon said. Not everyone was as convinced. Wagenbach admits that, "at first, there was turmoil and uncertainty." But there was a small group who believed strongly in the project, and others began to come around as well when those few "rose to the occasion" and contributed their time and funds because they felt strongly that a response was needed.

However, not everyone in the Nerstrand community was a believer - or a supporter - of the project. Some residents were upset that the land would no longer be used for agriculture. They saw little benefit of an easement preventing development. All they saw was that the land was no longer going to be farmed. Others just thought the Preservation Society was crazy -- that they could never accomplish their goal. McKinnon insists there was little active opposition, but there was indifference and a belief that the endeavor would fail.

Once word of the project got out, however, there was little doubt that they would succeed. An article by Carleton graduate Karin Winegar, a writer who was married in the Valley Grove Church, appeared in the Minneapolis Star Tribune and increased enthusiasm for the endeavor. More than 400 people from around the country donated money to help purchase the land, and many became repeat donors. People who had been married in the church, who had ancestors buried in the churchyard, even one who had been arrested there nearly 30 years earlier, wrote moving letters along with their donations. Twin Cities' area organizations held fundraisers for the project.

Again, however, support from Nerstrand residents was disappointing, especially from

older, more established members of the community. The best support came either from those who had been in the community less than 25 years or those who had moved away. Donations were strong at the beginning, then there was a lull. Near the project's end, when it became clear that theirs would be a success story, the pace picked up again.

An Oak Savanna

One of the early ideas was a hope that the state would buy the 31 acres at the back edge of the property and make it part of adjacent Big Woods State Park. The Preservation Society worked with the Minnesota Parks and Trails Council, a non-profit organization, on this idea. The deal, however, fell through. The state was unable to come up with the necessary funds, and would have only been able to pay \$500 per acre in any case. In addition, the Parks and Trails Council did not want to place easements against development on the property, important to the Preservation Society.

The Preservation Society was thrown for a loop. "It's important to know where the money had to stand at any time," McKinnon says. They knew they had to have \$414,750 by January to purchase the land. The McKinnons stepped in again, buying the 31 acres that the



Oak Savanna

group had hoped would become a part of the State Park. McKinnon's construction company and residents Doug and Mary Jones both gave loans that served as a bridge until the rest of the money could be raised.

When Dirk Peterson of the Department of Natural Resources mentioned the DNR's Forest Legacy Program, the Preservation Society was instantly interested. The Legacy Program pays 75% of the value of the land, \$238,000 in this case, in exchange for an easement placed on the deed of the land. The easement specifies that there will be no development, farming or any other changes to the land - ever. In addition, the owner promises to preserve or restore the original landscape. The program fit the Preservation Society's goals and provided needed funding. It was a match.

They enrolled the land in the program and, in March, were awarded enough money that combined with the donations they received; they were able to buy the land.

The funding also helped to pay for planting the oak savanna, and will help to cover the costs of maintenance for five years. In five years the prairie and the trees will have grown enough that they can sustain themselves. When they started, they hadn't even been thinking of a prairie. Now, Valley Grove Church is surrounded by one of the largest oak savannas ever created from scratch in Minnesota. The Preservation Society and the McKinnon properties are both protected under the easement and were planted as one contiguous parcel.

Impacts on the Community

The Valley Grove Preservation Society's purchase of the land is already having an impact on the Nerstrand/Northfield area in

more ways than one. Wagenbach says, "A number of people who were involved with the project are using Valley Grove as an example of what a non-governmental organization can do in terms of stepping up to the line to buy property and to put out the call for support."

More importantly, the project preserves the land and strengthens the community. Wagenbach insists that people need to think about how they utilize the land. "There's the rural context where people are tied to the land in direct or indirect ways. The people involved [in projects such as this] should be nearby neighbors or a larger set of people who care about or value a particular place in the landscape and who look to the long-term." Wagenbach calls the Valley Grove project an "example of what's possible in terms of community response. The crisis helped mobilize people."



Oak Savanna dedication

McKinnon sees the Valley Grove's purchase of this land as an anti-sprawl tactic. By buying the land, the Preservation Society let people know that there are alternatives to simply selling off the land to developers. As a result of this project, he says, a number of people have become interested in conservation easements. They see what is happening elsewhere, with land being eaten up by development, but Nerstrand residents have the

chance to do something before it hits them. "100 years from now, that's going to be a 110-acre prairie. There may be houses all around it, but that piece of land will still be there."

Words of Advice

Peter McKinnon points to Ken Sahlin as the driving force behind this project. Part of his advice to communities interested in sustainability work is, "Make sure you have one person like Ken Sahlin.... Ken worked day and night on this project. Without him, nothing would've happened." He jokingly claims that the rest of them were just there to say, "Whatever you need, Ken." While this is certainly an exaggeration, Sahlin, McKinnon, and Wagenbach all expressed belief in the need for a small group of people who are especially committed to and passionate about any project being undertaken. According to Sahlin, every project needs "one or two people who have the vision and can see the end. Most organizations have two or three people really active, and the rest are just there."

But McKinnon stresses that there needs to be "a whole group or network of people involved. Small groups fail because of burnout." This, according to Wagenbach, is key to the success of similar projects. "There has to be a broad base of participation by not only interested citizens who step forward at first, but a broad base of perspectives, viewpoints, and participation. Any organizing effort needs a wide variety of inputs. Civil society requires informed citizens." There will be arguments, of course. But if people "agree to disagree, to air disagreements," they will end up contributing. And "if everyone contributed even in a small way to the community around them every year, amazing things would happen." McKinnon agrees. While he admits he's frustrated by not seeing more people from the immediate area help

them, in a way he understands. "People want to know: how does this affect us? It's right next door to us, so I'm looking right at it. It affects Ken, too, because he sees the church from his driveway." Others on the Preservation Society Board have ties to the church. The key is making people appreciate how the preservation of the land benefits them.

McKinnon and Sahlin also emphasize the importance of staying organized. Throughout the project, Sahlin kept a binder with records of every action and transaction they undertook. He was also responsible for sending out thank-you letters to donors and invitations to various events. "You have to keep all your ducks in a row," McKinnon says. "Don't forget anyone; be professional, take care of accounting. You can't go off half-baked."

Most of all, everyone stressed the importance of a positive attitude. "I'm an optimist," McKinnon said. "There was no question in my mind that this was going to make it." Wagenbach entered the project knowing they'd lose nothing by trying and that they intended to do their best. And Sahlin advises other communities in similar positions to "Just go, and go until you get it done, no matter what people say. Believe that you're going to accomplish it."



Oak Savanna dedication

Finally

On Saturday, June 9, 2001, the Valley Grove Preservation Society hosted a dedication for the new oak savanna. Between 150 and 200 people were present, including writers Karin Winegar and Peter Moore, Minnesota Public Radio's Michael Barone, and of course, many members of the Nerstrand and Northfield communities. The afternoon's events included traditional Norwegian folk songs, a jello contest, and tours of the prairie led by Professor Wagenbach. The dedication itself culminated with the presentation of three burr oak trees that have been planted in honor of Ken Sahlin's boundless energy and persistence for this project.

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