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By Paul Smart

New era WLC head DeWan passes the baton

Longstanding Woodstock Land Conservancy President Michael DeWan speaks about his replacement, Kevin Smith, with the same enthusiasm with which he's tackled all WLC issues throughout his tenure of recent years. And his good friend and successor, Smith, speaks of DeWan in as solidly glowing a fashion.



Michael DeWan and Kevin Smith

Dion Ogust

The shift is happening almost a year earlier than expected because of new business concerns on DeWan's part, who says it represents new horizons for the "little land conservancy that could."

Everyone is still high on the recent SUNY New Paltz gathering that brought all the region's top conservancies together to not only share concerns, but plan for joint projects over the coming years. And there are a host of new projects specific to Woodstock and its environs that Smith is excited about.

"The Conservancy has proven what is possible when a community unites around a common goal: protection of the land that we cherish," Smith and DeWan wrote in this year's WLC Winter Appeal Letter, sent out earlier this month. "We write to you now with deep gratitude — and the wish to celebrate what we have accomplished together over these many years with a call to action...in order to fulfill our mission for the next 20

years, we must renew and strengthen our bonds, forge new relationships, and deepen our commitment to do this work together.”

Smith, who moved to Woodstock with wife Kali Rosenblum in 1985 after several years in Italy, is a native Midwesterner who has made his professional mark as a practitioner of Structural Body Work, or “Rolfing” as it is best known. He moved to the Hudson Valley on the recommendation of friends at the Omega Institute and became involved in Land Conservancy actions to save the Zena Cornfield very early on, when Gay Leonhardt was still heading the then-fledgling organization.

An avid mountain biker with a keen sense for the physical, Smith has long lived off Cooper Lake Road, nearby DeWan and his wife, regional planner Deborah, as well as Omega director Elizabeth Lesser, who has also served for years as a WLC board member. He spent a number of recent years as the Conservancy’s board secretary, and then shifted to vice president around the time longstanding WLC Director Dale Hughes moved on and the board hired John Winters as its new day-to-day operations head.

Key to Smith’s heart, the new Land Conservancy president said in a recent interview, may be his work in recent years to spur greater awareness of the state’s Bluestone Wild Forest property, located between Onteora Lake and Morey Hill, and partly situated within the Woodstock town limits. There, he’s been in league with the Open Space Institute, Catskill Center for Conservation and Development and state Department of Environmental Conservation to create new multi-use trails and other attributes that will allow him to share the beauty he’s found so close to home.

“I want to do whatever I can to help to preserve this natural beauty and these natural resources that have made us such a strong community,” says the man who came here from Tuscany, and before that the Colorado Rockies. “There’s such potential here...the citizenry of Woodstock really values what it has. I am glad to be working with it in such an important aspect.”

Smith said that, although it was as yet premature to talk much about upcoming land saves and other activities currently in the works, “The community will be hearing a lot from us in the coming year.”

He pointed out how the past year yielded the closing out of the WLC’s Save Overlook campaign, with hundreds of acres on the iconic mountain’s upper reaches saved, the opening of its new Sloan Gorge Preserve, with one of the Northeast’s first interpretive geology trails, and the co-sponsorship of the November 10 SUNY New Paltz regional conference for landowners interested in their conservation options. Along the latter lines, Smith said that new grants currently pending will aid the WLC’s work with other land conservancy organizations in the region “to avoid redundancies and improve efficiency,” the better “to preserve the Woodstock we love for future generations.”

DeWan, who will be forming a new real estate appraisal firm — DeWan & Schott Appraisal Associates, LLC, to start in the New Year — said that he had been planning to hand over the reins to Smith in about a year’s time, until the owner of the business he

had been working for (and will now be essentially taking over) decided to retire a year earlier than planned.

“It just became quite obvious this autumn that I couldn’t do it all,” said DeWan, who’s been WLC President for the past nine years. “It was a good time. John Winters, our director, has proved himself both very capable and very enjoyable to work with; and Kevin seemed more than ready to step up to what was needed.”

DeWan said Smith fit into an enthusiastic line of WLC leaders that have included him, Leonhardt and Jude Hersey, and is compatible with the organization’s new emphasis on outreach and increasing support for its activities.

“Kevin’s an inveterate outdoors person and good at working with everyone,” DeWan said. “It’s like all the stars are aligning right now... this is a very exciting time. It’s as though the land trust movement has grown up out of its adolescence.”

Smith thanked DeWan for his “passion and tireless dedication,” and looked forward to working with his predecessor as a wise and committed board member.

As for his new outfit’s more controversial issues, if they could even be so-called, Smith noted how the uproar surrounding artist Willi Neumann’s placement of a simple red frame on the edge of the Zena Cornfield had proven the value of that property, and the WLC’s mission, to all involved.

Finally, as to the entity’s pending acceptance of the town’s Comeau property as a protected land in the near future, an issue that arose briefly during this past fall’s political debates among board candidates, Smith noted that he couldn’t say much, as the last of a series of legal actions against a town vote for the Land Conservancy is still up in the air.

“The Woodstock Land Conservancy Board of Directors is deeply appreciative of the trust and responsibility placed in the Conservancy, first by the Town Board in early 2003 when it ratified the specific language and terms of the easement, then by the voters in November 2003, when the permissive referendum passed by an overwhelming majority,” Smith wrote in a careful statement on the issue, showing his thoughtful style in action. “It is the hope of the Conservancy that in generations to come, our community will look back with gratitude upon the decisions made by voters and town government to permanently protect the irreplaceable natural resources of Comeau. To that end, we look forward to working closely with community members and representatives of town government, to ensure that the wise stewardship and multiple uses of Comeau outlined in the easement will be safeguarded now and in the future.”

As DeWan pointed out, the stars do seem to have aligned nicely.

For more about the Woodstock Land Conservancy, call them at 845 334-2418 or visit www.woodstocklandconservancy.org.