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Freitag leaving position at Sycamore Land Trust

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Christian Freitag, right, helps cut the ribbon with Bill McCoy at the grand opening of the Columbia Mine property in 2013. Sycamore Land Trust purchased 1,043 acres at the Patoka River National Wildlife Refuge, helping tie together other parcels of land to create 5,000 acres of protected land in southern Indiana. Courtesy photo

Christian Freitag, executive director of Sycamore Land Trust for the past 18 years, has resigned to become president and director of the Conservation Law Center. Freitag will succeed W. William Weeks as president and director of the nonprofit environmental law firm in Bloomington.

Both Freitag and Weeks have been instrumental in establishing and directing their respective organizations.

Freitag began working at Sycamore Land Trust on May 8, 2000, as its first paid staff. He served as the development director on a part-time basis while he also was a doctoral student in the Indiana University School of Public and Environmental Affairs.

Weeks founded the Conservation Law Center in 2005 and earned a law degree from IU in 1979. He had previously served as executive vice president of the Nature Conservancy. Weeks will continue to serve at the Conservation Law Center as chairman of its board of directors.

While Freitag said he feels “bittersweet” about leaving Sycamore Land Trust, he is looking forward to his new duties.

“I don’t really have to leave my colleagues,” he said. “I get to continue those relationships from a different perspective.”

Freitag and Weeks have worked together for years, with the Conservation Law Center serving as attorneys for the land trust. The law center provides legal counsel without charge to conservation organizations and works to improve conservation law and policy. It also offers second- and third-year law students clinical experience in both Bloomington and Indianapolis. The law center currently is working with seven land trusts in Indiana and the Midwest.

Freitag earned a J.D. degree from IU’s Maurer School of Law.

Weeks said the search for his replacement was extensive and competitive. Even though Freitag already was in Bloomington, Weeks said he was the strongest candidate. Freitag will begin his new position in January after a six-month transition period.

“He’s done a really good job of making Sycamore (Land Trust) a well known institution,” said Lily Bonwich, director of development for the Conservation Law Center, about Freitag. “He can really help to build the Conservation Law Center’s name recognition.”

The Conservation Law Center, representing the Alliance for the Great Lakes and Save the Dunes, won a landmark case in February before the Indiana Supreme Court. The Supreme Court ruled for the public’s right to use the Lake Michigan shore as public land up to the ordinary high water mark, giving people the right to walk along the shoreline. The case of Gunderson v. State was just one of many the law center does as a nonprofit legal organization that integrates teaching into its practice, according to Weeks. More than 200 law students have been part of the center’s clinic, Weeks said.

Freitag said the new position is “something I’ve been preparing for my whole adult life.” With the law center serving as the primary lawyers for the land trust, Freitag said he understands the kind of impact the law center has with land trusts across the Midwest. “Also, they don’t get the publicity they deserve,” he said, referring to the Indiana Supreme Court case dealing with the Lake Michigan lakeshore.

A major source of pride Freitag said he has had working at Sycamore Land Trust is “that the people stood up and supposed it could happen. ... People should understand how much power they have to make a difference.”

Under his direction, Sycamore Land Trust has expanded from protecting 634 acres in Monroe, Bartholomew and Orange counties to protecting 9,426 acres through fee title or conservation easements in 17 counties across southern Indiana. The land trust also grew from a part-time staff of one to seven full-time employees, including an environmental educator who has

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worked with more than 5,000 students and adults in schools, community groups and retirement homes. The land trust has 16 public nature preserves and has helped protect more than 100 properties, totaling almost 20,000 acres.

In his new role, Freitag wants to continue working on projects but with a larger scope.

“One could envision land trusts from across the Midwest trying to put together land corridors,” he said. “Indiana, so far, hasn’t thought in those terms. ... The Conservation Law Center has the capacity to view things on that kind of scale.”

The land trust’s board of directors will craft a job description for a new executive director, according to Abby Henkel, communications director for Sycamore Land Trust. A national search for Freitag’s replacement will begin in the coming months, she said, adding, “It’s going to be hard to find someone to fill his shoes.”

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