the protection of 17 acres of pasture behind the historic santuario (chapel) in Chimayo, New Mexico, from encroaching residential development (along with other preservation efforts in and around the village); and

• the purchase of development rights on more than 10,000 acres of ranch and farmland in Montana, located in the path of looming suburban sprawl outside of Bozeman. (“These are second- and third-generation ranchers and farmers who are traditionally very conservative, but have a strong connection with their land and are willing to give up development rights at a discounted value in order to make sure the land stays as it is for ranching and farming,” says Rogers. “It’s very inspiring.”)

Much of TPL’s work involves facilitating land-use and purchase agreements between local community and political groups with varying agendas and municipal, state, or the federal government. TPL is not a long-term landowner or steward; the Atlanta BeltLine land, for example, will ultimately be sold to public entities. Increasingly, the organization is finding ways to partner with public and private groups to raise funds for joint projects.

Thus in 2003, TPL’s challenge in northern New Hampshire was to preserve about 170,000 acres by “limiting what you might call back-country sprawl to protect critical wetland and water resources at the headwaters of the Connecticut River,” Rogers explains. But another goal was to support the traditional local economies—timbering and forest products—while providing public access to these lands that include recreation activities such as hunting, fishing, hiking, snowmobiling, and other ways the people who live in the north woods use the land.

TPL negotiated the purchase of the entire property and then sold about 25,000 acres to the Nature Conservancy (which sold it, with an easement that permanently preserved the land, to New Hampshire’s Fish and Game Department). The balance of the 170,000 acres was sold directly to the state’s Department of Resources and Economic Development, which put an easement on the land stipulating development restrictions, public access, and timbering parameters, and then sold the restricted fee to Lyme Timber Company, which manages the land and harvests wood sustainably under those dictates.

“This is the sort of complex and creative, multiparty, multipartisan approach that is becoming more common in land conservation,” Rogers points out. “We have a lot of very entrepreneurial, creative individuals who are based throughout the country—a lot of local gray matter—who respond to projects locally.” (Many of those people are Harvard alumni; see page 78.)

James Langford, for example, a native of Calhoun, Georgia, where he returned to live a few years ago, was cofounder and principal of Harbinger Corp., a pioneering e-commerce firm. He is also something of an independent scholar in archaeology, and runs The Coosawattee Foundation, which has focused on researching early Native American sites in northwest Georgia. “This is a moment of unprecedented change in the landscape. In my lifetime, in my home county, there were dirt roads that now have major housing developments on them,” he says. “And you’ve got children who are afraid to go out in the natural environment; they’re afraid of bugs, of animals. The human connection to the land is...being diminished every day and I see people who understand that loss, and mourn that loss. That’s why they want to live near parks and green space; that’s why visits to historical sites are at an all-time high.”

In Greater Atlanta, he says, 46 acres of trees are cut down daily to make way for commercial and residential suburban developments. Only 3.6 percent of the city’s public land is devoted to parks and green space; in cities like Boston, New York, and San Francisco, the figure is around 18 to 20 percent. Langford joined TPL two years ago because he sees opportunities, such as the Beltline, to reverse these statistics.

Many new and younger Atlantans don’t have cars and want bikeways, walkways, and trolleys to get around, plus parks that connect neighborhoods, “because they want a vibrant inner-city life,” he adds. “If you’re anti-sprawl, then you’ve got to be pro-density.”

Rogers sees the Beltline as a national model for reinvestment in public, urban life—and in human health. “We believe in an integrated landscape—from inner city to wilderness. It’s all important, and when it gets sliced and diced and shaped, you lose the sense of it as a whole,” he says. “We’re talking about the mental...