



Wisconsin Land Trust Excellence & Advancement Program (LEAP) Program Description

*A Partnership between the Land Trust Alliance (the Alliance) and
Gathering Waters Conservancy (GWC)*

The Land Trust Alliance and Gathering Waters Conservancy have a common goal: we want to help land trusts achieve excellence. We have teamed up to deliver a coordinated and intensive multi-year program of services and support for Wisconsin land trusts.

Wisconsin land trusts play an essential role in protecting the state's natural and working lands. From Great Lakes shoreline to prairies and trails, from forest lands and farms to kettle lakes and scenic landscapes, land trusts work cooperatively with Wisconsin's landowners to protect our most important resources. This hard work has paid off in the land we see protected today, yet we recognize there is much more work to be done. In addition, to ensure the permanent protection of these lands, land trusts must ensure their own sustainability, effectiveness, and credibility.

If a land trust lacks the ability to function effectively, not only are its protected lands (and other lands deserving protection) at risk, but also its credibility as a public charity. The land trust movement as a whole, and America's natural heritage, cannot afford to see land trusts shutting their doors, or falling short of their legal responsibilities.

In this context, and with recent Congressional scrutiny of conservation easements and other land protection tools, the Land Trust Alliance created the Land Trust Accreditation Commission in 2006. This independent, voluntary program will recognize land conservation organizations that meet national standards for excellence, uphold the public trust, and ensure that conservation efforts are permanent. There are now 113 accredited land trusts across the country, including one in Wisconsin.

To address the challenges inherent to land trust operations, and to promote excellence among Wisconsin land trusts, Gathering Waters Conservancy and the Land Trust Alliance, with the aid of land trust leaders in Wisconsin, joined forces to develop and launch a new, comprehensive, 3-year initiative in Wisconsin - the **Land Trust Excellence & Advancement Program (LEAP)**.

For contact information please see the final page.

LEAP Program Description (Summary)

LEAP will provide Wisconsin land trusts with tailored training, consultation, technical assistance, and other support they need to become more effective at protecting land and ensuring organizational sustainability. Components of LEAP will also include the facilitation of strategic collaboration among land trusts to address regional conservation challenges.

The LEAP Program will fund an array of organizational improvement services for Wisconsin land trusts to help build their overall capacity to conserve and steward land, as well as prepare for Land Trust Accreditation. LEAP will draw from the strengths of similar programs in other states (Michigan, Connecticut, Indiana, North Carolina, and Maine) while taking into account current trends in the Wisconsin landscape for private land protection.

Many elements of the program, including training seminars, regional collaboration initiatives, and a peer mentoring program will be available to all Wisconsin land trusts. In addition, there will be a limited opportunity for interested and qualified land trusts to benefit from an intensive program of individualized support, mentoring, and consultation.

In particular, the individualized services will assist participating land trusts in assessing their organizational needs, then implementing a long-term action plan for ensuring sustainability, and, in some cases, preparing for accreditation. The program will utilize customized tools to achieve the goal of strengthening all Wisconsin land trusts. While active participation is required for any worthwhile effort, we will work to ensure program elements are affordable for all land trusts.

Goals

One of Gathering Waters Conservancy's programmatic goals is to see sustainable land trusts working in all parts of the state, as the demand for private conservation increases. Similarly, the Alliance aims to build strong, respected land trusts, increase land trusts' ability to save more land strategically, and enable them to meet their obligations to their communities to protect land in perpetuity. The LEAP programming will be developed to address these mutual goals.

LEAP goals, developed collaboratively with Wisconsin land trust leaders are to:

- Strengthen each individual land trust's operations and expertise to improve the quality of land conservation as well increase the pace of conservation and ensure its permanence;
- Enhance and strengthen an already accomplished land trust community in Wisconsin by facilitating relationships among land trusts that encourage individual land trusts to be engaged in the larger land trust community;
- Educate land trusts on the accreditation process and prepare land trusts that are interested in pursuing accreditation; and
- Advance strategic, collaborative conservation so that priority lands and water resources across the state may be protected effectively.

Outcomes

The expected outcomes of this three-year LEAP program are:

- At least twelve land trusts will participate actively in the customized services of the LEAP program during the course of three years, advancing their organizations toward full implementation of standards and practices, and preparing them for accreditation.
- Four to six participating Wisconsin land trusts will be accredited and/or prepared to submit a successful application to the Land Trust Accreditation Commission. A land trust's readiness will be determined by the organization's ability to document compliance with *Land Trust Standards and Practices*, which measure a land trust's ability to operate in an ethical, legal and technically sound manner.
- Five to seven Wisconsin land trusts will advance measurably through competitive grants which address key areas of organizational need, such as: filling vital staff positions, accomplishing high priority goals as determined by an organizational assessment or in a strategic plan, or completing other activities that strengthen the organization.
- At least two-hundred land trust board members and/or staff will receive training on a variety of topics from land transactions to organizational development, from stewardship funding to leadership.
- Two executive directors will attend an intensive leadership development course (a two-year program).
- A peer to peer mentoring network will be established to facilitate learning, sharing, and the development of a cohesive land trust community on the individual level.
- Strategic partnerships among land trusts will be enhanced and land trusts' connections to other community institutions will be strengthened.
- GWC and the Alliance will complete a comprehensive evaluation of the LEAP program, which will provide valuable information for improving services offered through similar, continuing programs nationwide.

LEAP Program Description (Details)

LEAP is open to all Wisconsin land trusts. However, the program will offer two categories of services: universal and customized.

Universal services will be open to all board members, volunteers, and staff members of Wisconsin land trusts. Customized services will be available by application and acceptance into the program (all member land trusts are invited to apply for the customized services).

Universal services will include:

- Trainings: Trainings will include in-person full-day trainings, multi-day conferences, webinars, and informative conference calls. Topics are guided by the land trust community and may include: board development, strategic planning, land transactions, conservation easement stewardship, fundraising, land management, record keeping, ethics, building a membership program, conservation planning, and conflicts of interest.
- Web-based Information, Communications, and Outreach Services: Available through GWC's 2010 website redesign, the Alliance's Learning Center, individualized staff support, and other group resource-sharing made available through LEAP, including Web promotions, newsletter support, and media relations.
- Competitive Grant Program: There is a small grant program to fund individual projects to provide capacity to make priority improvements based on a land trust's planning. Competitive grants will require an application and matching funds.
- Scholarships: Scholarships to attend local and national in-person and online trainings and conferences will be available for all member land trusts.
- Regional Collaborations and Organizational Relations Building: Activities will be coordinated by the Alliance and GWC program staff to facilitate and support networks and learning opportunities as well as community-based partner collaborations. Where appropriate, the LEAP program will foster land trust forums, regional meetings, and regional and/or project collaborations around the state.
- Peer Mentoring: Building on an already robust peer network in Wisconsin, the LEAP program will foster additional peer to peer mentoring opportunities.
- Executive Director Leadership. Two executive directors will have the opportunity to participate in intensive leadership training. This two year commitment includes training with the board chair.

Customized services:

Customized services will be available to Wisconsin land trusts after completing an application and being accepted in to the program. LEAP will invest in organizations with the greatest potential for increased performance and conservation impact. Wisconsin land trust leaders helped to develop and ground-truth the framework of customized services.

Because this is a rigorous improvement program, land trusts will be asked to take part in a ***Look Before You Leap*** webinar to better help them understand the program requirements and establish expectations. Generally, land trusts will be accepted into the program based on their readiness for LEAP and commitment to a sustained advancement effort.

We will prioritize and invest in land trusts that are growing, or are willing to grow, with consideration to preparing them for accreditation. To help each land trust meet its organizational growth and capacity-building goals, the Alliance and Gathering Waters will develop and implement an integrated service plan—a sustained series of direct services built into a cohesive organizational improvement plan. We will encourage land trusts to include preparing for accreditation as part of an organizational improvement plan.

Customized services will include:

- Organizational Assessments and Implementation Plans: Each participating conservancy will complete a guided organizational assessment that will measure progress against *Land Trust Standards and Practices* as a first step (organizations that have completed such an assessment within the previous two years may be excused from this step). Each participating land trust, with LEAP program staff, will use the assessment report to develop an implementation plan which includes an appropriate suite of services, a corresponding timeline, and progress measures. The results of the assessment and the priorities identified in the implementation plan will guide the use of any grant funds (see below). Land trusts will share the cost of the Guided Organizational Assessments by paying \$500 of the total cost (\$2,500-\$4,500).
- Advancement Grants: Based on the outcomes of organizational assessments and the needs of participants, the LEAP program will award grants for the land trust to accomplish one or more high-priority items for improvement. A cash match of 20% will be required. Grant monies are intended to help the participating organization implement a critical need – one that affects real change in the organization and allows the land trust to *leap* ahead. Based on prioritized needs, the grants may be utilized for increased or initial staffing, strategic planning, capacity evaluations, board development, creating or implementing long-term fundraising plans, developing conservation plans, catching up on missing baselines, improving monitoring programs, or other activities that will strengthen the organization and/or position it to apply for accreditation. Hiring a temporary staff person to help complete an accreditation application is also a reasonable use of an advancement grant. In addition to requiring a cash match, the LEAP program will ask for a plan that articulates how this initial investment will continue to support the growth and sustainability of the organization.
- Mentoring, Technical Assistance and Consultations: LEAP staff and consultants will deliver personalized assistance to help land trusts implement needed improvements. The subjects will be determined based on organizational priorities and the implementation plan developed from the guided assessment. These consultations could focus on a variety of needs including: preparation for accreditation, board leadership development, board/staff roles and responsibilities, policy development, setting up partnerships with local governments, technical expertise (such as launching a new web page or GIS system for easement stewardship), recordkeeping, stewardship, land protection, or strategic conservation planning – and will be individualized to the needs of the land trust. Consultations may be delivered to an individual land trust or to a group of participating organizations with similar needs. More experienced and successful organizations will be encouraged to coach other land trusts and one another and may be brought together periodically for peer exchange around common issues.

Land Trust Participation in Customized Services

LEAP will engage participating land trusts based on their current capacity, willingness to participate, and potential for growth.

When developing program elements and approaching land trust participants, particular attention will be paid to the following:

- The fit of the organization's goals with the purposes of the LEAP program
- The organization's potential for conservation impact in a particular region
- The likelihood that the program will have a positive impact on the organization's conservation efforts
- A board's understanding of and commitment to participating in the program and to improving the organization's effectiveness in the long term
- An organization's familiarity with Land Trust Standards and Practices
- The organization's capacity and desire to grow
- The organization's ability and willingness to embrace change
- Capacity to match and/or leverage funding from LEAP.

Timeline & Next Steps

During 2010 GWC and the Alliance engaged land trust leaders, developed the LEAP program structure, defined partnership roles and responsibilities, and fundraised for the beginning of the program.

Ongoing considerations include:

- Fundraising: a strategy for funding will be developed to increase the capacity of the LEAP program to deliver these described services. Although fundraising has gone well especially considering the economic climate, we fell short of our three-year funding goal. GWC and the Alliance will continue to approach funding entities and individuals to ask for their support of this new program. We have launched the program on time to ensure we can meet the needs of Wisconsin land trusts.
- LEAP services and program design will continue to be vetted by a core of Wisconsin land trust leaders on an ongoing basis and refined based on their input.
- Outreach: the LEAP program will be discussed in detail at the Annual Retreat for Land Trust Staff and Board Members on February 24-26 in Green Bay. We will also have a series of informational webinars on the competitive program called *Look Before You Leap*. We always appreciate feedback, so please contact MaryKay O'Donnell or Kate Zurlo-Cuva with questions and comments.

Program time lines:

Trainings:

- We have scheduled a series of “Ask an Expert” conference calls. Information on registration will be sent to your land trust’s staff and board members.
- We are in the process of planning in-person and webinar trainings for 2011, using information gathered from land trusts in the 2010 survey to guide the subjects and locations of the trainings.
- The Annual Retreat for Land Trust Staff and Board Members is being held in Green Bay on February 24-26. For more information and to register go to: http://gatheringwaters.org/assets/documents/2011_registration.pdf
- The National Land Trust Conference will be held in Milwaukee on October 13-16, 2011

Competitive Services:

- Applications for the first round of participants are due by **March 11, 2011**. Applications can be downloaded at: <http://www.lta.org/leap/> or <http://gatheringwaters.org/land-trust-services/leap/>.

Competitive Small Grants

- Applications for the first round of competitive grants will be announced this summer.

Peer-to-Peer Mentoring

- Planning for this program will take place in 2011 and will begin in early 2012. Watch for applications late in 2011.

Regional Collaborations

- Stay-tuned for additional opportunities in 2011.

Information Services – web:

- For access to Gathering Waters Conservancy’s redesigned website, go to: www.gatheringwaters.org
- For access to the Land Trust Alliance’s website go to: www.landtrustalliance.org
- For access to The Learning Center (the Alliance’s members-only web-based resource center - all board members, staff, and volunteers of Land Trust Alliance-member organizations have access) go to <http://learningcenter.lta.org/>. You need set up a password. If you have difficulty, contact MaryKay O’Donnell.

Executive Director Leadership Program

- A candidate has already accepted for the 2011 training. If you are interested in future opportunities, please contact Erin Heskett, Alliance Midwest Director, at 269-324-1683.

Scholarships:

- Scholarship opportunities will be announced periodically by email.



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For additional information on the LEAP program, please contact:

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