

ESSAY ELEVEN

BY Tammara Van Ryn

A Rewarding Journey

It was August 1997. I put my house in New Hampshire on the market and said goodbye to many good friends to start a new chapter in my life as the New York director of the Land Trust Alliance. That was 15 years, and many changes in the Alliance and the land trust community, ago.

Land trusts grew rapidly in the 1990s. With growth came increased obligations to donors, taxpayers and the broader land trust community. The Alliance responded in kind by significantly increasing its public policy initiatives and expanding its field programs. In 2006, it also created an independent program, the Land Trust Accreditation Commission. I was honored to be selected as the founding executive director of the new entity.

The first meeting of the Commission in May 2006 was both exciting and daunting. Good thing we didn't know how hard the volunteer board would have to work to build the new program from the ground up! Despite the challenges, commissioners were motivated by the goals of the program to foster excellence by building strong land trusts, to increase public trust in land conservation and to encourage the long-term protection of land.

Since then, the Commission has worked with more than 200 applicants, extraordinary organizations that are each unique yet linked by a commitment to *Land Trust Standards and Practices*. The accreditation program has transformed the way many land trusts approach their work. Here are just a few examples of how important the lens of external verification can be to the land trust community.

- **Excellence** | A land trust that accepted a consulting contract for work that furthered the land trust's mission passed part of the funds through the organization to the board chair's consulting firm at the client's request. During the accreditation review, the land trust revisited its conflict of interest policy and stopped the practice.
- **Trust** | A land trust that received significant public funds that were temporarily restricted inadvertently classified them as unrestricted. Through the accreditation review, the land trust came to better understand nonprofit accounting standards and



now correctly classifies the funds as temporarily restricted, ensuring that the public's dollars are accounted for as intended.

- **Permanence** | A land trust that drafted a particular easement with a clause allowing for extinguishment of the easement by mutual consent of the parties inadvertently carried over that clause into other easements. As a result of the accreditation review, the template easement was changed and the land trust adopted strict procedures to prevent extinguishment.

Across the country, land trusts that are accredited or are planning to apply are challenging themselves to put the systems in place needed to run their organizations well and conserve land forever. In anticipation of accreditation, land trusts have completed backlogs of baseline documentation reports, increased efforts to annually monitor conservation easements and to inspect fee properties, and committed more money to the stewardship and defense of conserved lands.

In 2013, the first organizations to be awarded accreditation will apply for renewal. This important process ensures that these organizations are still following best practices, even as leadership changes. It also fosters continuous improvement as the accreditation program adapts to reflect the evolving land trust community.

For me, having witnessed half of the Alliance's 30 years firsthand, it has been an incredibly rewarding journey to watch the land trust community join together with a commitment to strong ethical practices, sound transactions and the permanent stewardship of land and conservation easements. 🌿

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