

BY Edith Pepper Goltra



ADVICE FOR TRANSITIONING TO A Governing Board

What does it mean when a land trust board evolves past a common notion of a “working board” to take on a larger focus on governance? This is a critical transition, but not without its challenges.

When a land trust makes a leap to grow the organization, several changes are common. First, staff members (often newly hired) take on functions once carried by the board volunteers. Conversely, the board moves away from regular program and project management to become “governors,” responsible for the core governing functions of strategic direction, fiscal oversight, leadership development and resource development. Board members become more prized for their connections and

relationship skills, and less focused on the details of getting work done.

In this article, land trust board members, staff and consultants consider the challenges that governing boards face and offer pointers for making your board as engaged and effective as possible.

Clarify Roles and Responsibilities

A significant issue for governing boards seems to be the very act itself: governing. Board members may be comfortable focusing on details and program particulars—getting down in the weeds, so to speak—but engaging in higher-level thinking and scrutinizing the organization’s affairs may be less intuitive.

Members of a nonprofit board always wear two hats (if not more). First, the board must govern: set the direction, make policies and provide resources to keep programs running. Second, board members, as individ-

Opposite: Staff and board members of Monadnock Conservancy in New Hampshire visit a potential land project site.

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uals, typically serve as program volunteers, wearing a very different hat as an unpaid staff person. This work can be technical (such as legal analysis of transactions) or simple (helping with an event). Switching back and forth between governing leader and volunteer implementer can cause confusion. In many cases, board members tend to veer toward the support role, which is often the more hands-on role. However, participation as an unpaid staff member will never eclipse the number one job of providing direction to and oversight of the land trust on behalf of the community at large.

“When staff is in place, the board’s role should be to establish policies and parameters—and then step back, giving staff the leeway they need to implement them,” says Tim Jacobson of Visjonær Consulting.

Board chair John Garvey of Ausbon Sargent Land Preservation Trust agrees, but says that it’s a delicate balance. “The board can’t cede all authority to the staff. You have to remain vigilant about the health of the organization. One of the best things you can do is hire an outstanding executive director.”

In order to be successful at their jobs, many board members need navigational assistance. The executive director can play a big role, says Marla Cornelius of CompassPoint Nonprofit Strategies. For example, the executive can recognize that he or she is responsible for giving the board the necessary tools, resources and information to effectively govern; likewise, board members can embrace the executive as an active partner in the governance process. This mutual respect and trust between the executive and the board fosters a cooperative environment, which naturally helps the organization thrive.

Board members also have dual roles in the financial realm. On the one hand, they are tasked with safeguarding the financial health of the organization; on the other, they may be asked to cultivate and solicit support from individual donors. Despite its importance, many board members are uncomfortable wearing the fundraising hat.

“It’s very common to hear new board members say, ‘I’ll get on the board but I don’t want to fundraise,’” says Sharon Danosky, a consultant with 30 years’ experience with nonprofits. “And yet stewardship of donors—taking them for a walk in the woods, explaining what the land trust has been doing—is just as important as asking for a gift.”

Ausbon Sargent’s executive director, Debbie Stanley, helps her board members with cultivation and stewardship of donors. At the land trust holiday party, for example, she made sure the board members spoke to donors and personally thanked them for their support.

THE EVOLUTION OF A GOVERNING BOARD



Ausbon Sargent Land Preservation Trust celebrated 25 years in 2012.

For its first 10 years, New Hampshire’s Ausbon Sargent Land Preservation Trust had one staff member and a working board of directors. “You had passionate people who wanted to protect land but didn’t necessarily have experience with governance and financial issues,” says Executive Director Debbie Stanley.

In the early 2000s, Ausbon Sargent went through a time of struggle and self-reflection. “We realized that if we wanted to accomplish all the things in our strategic plan, one full-time staff person wasn’t going to be enough,” says Stanley. “Our fundraising was going to have to increase. We had to get to know our members and make them feel a part of us.”

The land trust brought on more staff—it now has eight—and transformed the board into more of a governing body that would focus on shaping policy, defining outcomes and raising funds. The board recruited individuals with deep financial, management and legal experience to help bring the organization to the next level. The strategy has worked. “We recently completed a successful \$2.5 million capital campaign for a stewardship endowment,” says board chair John Garvey. “That’s something we wouldn’t have been able to accomplish 15 years ago without our current board.”

Resources for Board Members

Share *Saving Land* magazine with your whole board! While every member land trust of the Land Trust Alliance receives three copies of each issue as a member benefit, individuals who join the Alliance at the \$35 level and above will receive their own copy of the magazine. Invite your land trust board members to join as Alliance individual members at www.lta.org/join.

Sign up your board to receive the free *Field Guide*, a quarterly newsletter that delves into the complexities of specific issues facing board members. Go to www.lta.org/boardservices to subscribe and see samples of past editions.

“So even though they say they don’t like fundraising,” says Stanley, “our whole board is actually engaged in fundraising.”

Maintain Efficiency and Strategic Thinking

Board meetings are an important part of life for every land trust. Everyone has grappled with how to keep their board meetings interesting, dynamic and strategic—especially as the organization grows and the amount of information increases.

“I think it’s important for governing boards to change their board meetings to match their new governing role,” says consultant Heather Yandow with Third Space Studio. She suggests condensing programmatic information and sending it out in advance so that it doesn’t chew up a lot of time at meetings. “Board meetings should be where people come to discuss the meaty questions facing their organization. If you can keep discussion at a high level, people will function strategically and give their best thinking.”

Ryan Owens, executive director of Monadnock Conservancy, agrees. “We had so many projects coming up before the full board for deliberation, on top of endless program reports. The meetings were all going over the allotted time. We needed a way to save time without sacrificing insightful discussion.”

Monadnock decided to make better use of its time by adopting what Owens calls “a conscious deference to the work of its committees.” It bulked up on documentation coming out of committee meetings in

advance of board meetings. It also adopted a consent agenda, which groups the routine, procedural and informational items in a single motion for an “up-or-down” vote (a specific item can be moved to the full agenda for individual attention upon request). Owens and the board specifically set aside a 30-minute block at each board meeting to allow for high-level strategic discussion on issues, thereby ensuring that important policy and mission questions weren’t being lost in the shuffle.

Cultivate Leadership and Plan for the Future

As organizations evolve, they need to be thoughtful about how they grow their boards and recruit new leaders. “You need to look at your strategic plan and consider what you’ll need to implement the plan well,” says Yandow. Whereas working boards tend to attract passionate conservationists, governing boards may attract a broader mix of skills, including those with leadership experience, retired executives, philanthropists, thought leaders, lawyers and accountants.

Succession planning for the board is a job for the governance or board development committee. “The committee needs to be out connecting with people in the community and demonstrating the relevance of the organization so that people want to serve on your board,” says Tim Jacobson.

Ausbon Sargent Land Preservation Trust puts a great deal of emphasis on succession planning. The Leadership Committee

assesses the skills and strengths of current board members and determines, based on term limits, exactly which skills will be needed in the future. Often, they place individuals on committees and make sure the fit is right before broaching the idea of a leadership position. “I’ve been on boards where you pick the person who says ‘yes.’ But we are very intentional,” says John Garvey. “We try to look ahead and anticipate the kinds of things that will happen and take actions accordingly.”

Board leadership is essential for a land trust’s success. But finding exceptional people to serve in those leadership positions is not always easy. Jacobson explains that a good board president must have business acumen, a passion for mission and charismatic energy—in addition to walking a tightrope between staff and board and taking on incredible responsibilities. One of the most important aspects is simply being a positive cheerleader, Jacobson says. “You can have a good business person, but if he or she doesn’t have great energy, your board meetings may be boring and lack momentum.”

Finally, a core principle of effective and responsible land conservation is the concept of perpetuity. Land trust accreditation is a major step in this direction. “The organizational assessment allows for succession planning to happen because land trusts set up policies and procedures,” says Sharon Danosky. “It really helps boards become the best they can be. Land trusts that have gone through the accreditation process say their boards of directors are far stronger because of it.”

The principle task for governing boards is to *oversee* the management of the organization rather than doing the management themselves. Boards adapt to the particular characteristics and needs of land trusts, and they evolve organically over time. What matters is that boards demonstrate leadership and vision; work collaboratively with staff or volunteers; and safeguard the organization on behalf of the community. 🍌

EDITH PEPPER GOLTRA IS A FREELANCE WRITER IN MASSACHUSETTS AND CAN BE REACHED AT EDITH_PEPPER@YAHOO.COM. THANKS TO MARC SMILEY OF SOLID GROUND CONSULTING FOR HIS PEER REVIEW.