





Every board creates its own set of rules and mores that guide how the board members will work together.

# Growing A STRONG BOARD

BY Marc Smiley

After 17 years of being connected to the Thousand Islands Land Trust in Clayton, New York, Susan Smith had just assumed the position of president of the board in August 2008 when tragedy struck in November. Aaron Vogel, the executive director of the trust, died suddenly. “We were absolutely devastated,” said Smith. “And we had to deal not only with our grief, but how to keep the land trust running after this great loss.”

With only two remaining full-time staff, the Thousand Islands Land Trust board had to quickly come together to notify members and supporters about Aaron’s death, and make some hard decisions about what projects could continue and what needed to be put on hold.

Andrew Wood, then director of land conservation, was asked to assume the role of acting executive director. “This happened right at the beginning of the recession, and the board had to immediately look at the budget to make sure we were meeting our obligations,” said Wood. “But we got through this terrible time because of the strength of our board. Their cohesiveness kept us going. The board has a very strong committee structure, and the work was divvied up among the committees.”

**INSET:** A beautiful koa tree preserved by ranch owners David and Josephine De Luz, The Nature Conservancy and Hawai’i Island Land Trust in a conservation easement that protected over 4,500 acres of the Kukaiau Ranch on the Big Island.

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Had Thousand Islands Land Trust not had a strong board to lead it through this difficult time, the organization may very well have floundered in the grief and confusion after Aaron's death.

### The 'Why' Part is Easy

Small, medium and large land trusts across the country must all face the challenge of building an engaged, effective board of directors.

When it comes to board development, it's easy to answer the question "why?" If a land trust is successful in building its board, nearly every other issue it faces will get easier. Need money? Need accountability? Need community connections? It all starts with the people who lead the organization. If they do their jobs effectively, funding, follow-through and community connections will be there.

The tougher question is "how."

Doug Sensenig, executive director (and only staff person) of the Hawai'i Island Land Trust, believes it starts with a clear understanding of what it means to be a good board member.

"Don't accept people just to fill seats or a particular characteristic," he explained. "You need to make sure they will actually bring in their board participation. I'm not as impressed by people's résumés as much as by what they bring in their passion to the organization."

### Start with Engagement

Perhaps the biggest challenge common to land trust boards is engagement. When the fires are burning hot early in a land trust's life, a board is often very engaged. But as things move from start-up to maintenance, enthusiasm can wane and the board can sometimes come up wanting.

One key principle for successful board engagement is making sure everyone has a job to do. At the Coastal Mountains Land Trust in Camden, Maine, engaging the board is serious business. Every board member has a specific responsibility to know and monitor the trust's compliance with a particular standard from *Land Trust Standards and Practices*. By sharing ownership and giving board members a particular role to play surrounding standards and practices, the trust ensures board engagement on key issues.



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"The result was that the board had the opportunity and the obligation to become fully aware of the organization's policies and how it implements those policies," said Scott Dickerson, executive director of the 24-year-old group with five staff members. "Boards don't spend a lot of time keeping themselves conversant on policies and procedures. They tend to rely on professional staff [when they have them]."

"For our board members who went through that process, they became fully conversant. It was great," Dickerson said.

One of the benefits of that investment was a more streamlined accreditation process when the time came to apply. For Coastal Mountains, its focus—led by board engagement—in the standards and practices meant their challenge was less about compliance and more about preparation. That's different than most land trusts preparing to climb the hill of accreditation.

Doug Sensenig has seen the challenge of board development from both sides; he served as the board president for Coastal Mountains Land Trust before heading west to serve as the executive director for the Hawai'i Island Land Trust.

From his experience at Coastal Mountains, Sensenig believes strongly in giving people an assignment. "Everybody should have something they are working on all the time. Keep people busy and engaged," he said. "You have to be respectful of their time and limitations, but it's very important to get everyone to feel that they're contributing—more than just showing up at a meeting every month."

### Expand the Circle of Involvement

Another approach to building ownership and engagement of the board is for the board to share responsibility for the critical governing functions with a larger group of leaders. In Oregon's Rogue Valley, the Southern Oregon Land Conservancy (SOLC) has created a Trustee Council to share critical responsibilities with its board of directors. Diane Garcia, executive director for the 32-year-old land trust with three full-time staff, explained how it got started. "We picked up on this idea as part of our strategic planning. We needed help with fundraising and it was the right time for something—it just clicked."

The trustees are high-profile community leaders willing to open doors, make contributions and ask others to support the land trust. They are not board members, and do not share the burden of month-to-month governance. That job falls to the board itself.

"We've been building our board for some time. Once we realized we could build the Trustee Council as another option, our current board president stepped in and made it happen," Garcia explained.

With the often challenging role of fundraising covered well by the trustees, the SOLC board can pay more attention to other governing functions that require engagement and focus. Strategic direction, financial accountability, conservation priorities and leadership development are the jobs of the board. The SOLC board continues to be responsible for ensuring adequate resource development, but they have a



**FAR LEFT:** Board members working together for a common goal helped Coastal Mountains Land Trust raise the funds to restore this historic, sod-roofed stone hut on its Beech Hill Preserve overlooking Penobscot Bay.

**LEFT:** Board member Charles Bennett, trustee Deborah Ameen, Ken Rhee and board member Donna Rhee at an event held by the Southern Oregon Land Conservancy. Board members share fundraising efforts with a Trustee Council.

BENJAMIN MAGRO

SOUTHERN OREGON LAND CONSERVANCY

strong cadre of connected community leaders to share that burden.

“This allows me to interact and support my board in a totally different way,” Garcia said. “I’m happy with my board—I value and appreciate them for what they bring. I have ecologists, geographers . . . a lot of very good skills. And they are passionate and committed. But I also have my trustees.”

“We can relax about having board members who contribute meaningfully to the land trust but don’t love to raise money,” Garcia adds. “That opens the door to a lot of potential board members who might otherwise have decided not to get involved.”

Garcia explains that the board hasn’t lost its involvement in fundraising, it just has support from another group. “I have 24 people who actively participate in fundraising. Everyone on the board is involved in some level of fundraising, but trustees are helping us connect with the various communities in our region that we never could reach before.”

As for keeping her trustees engaged, Garcia has this advice: “They need to be contacted and kept involved. Not in a false way, but in a genuine way that makes them really important to your organization’s success—which they are!”

### Understanding Board Culture

Another critical issue for boards is how they change over time. Every board creates its own set of rules and mores that guide how the board members will work together. These rules are often “unwritten rules,” but they are among the most strongly held within any group.

Scott Dickerson explained the challenge of working with the changing dynamics of a board. “The board’s culture changes when any new member becomes part of it. Every time a new person comes

in, they have to learn about the organization, and about that culture,” he said.

“Understand from the very beginning that the board is going to change, the culture is going to change, and the way it addresses issues is going to change—sometimes very dramatically.”

Every land trust board gets to choose what its culture will be, and can directly determine how its members will participate and follow through. Groups can sit back and let this culture emerge, or they can decide what they want. To be most effective, the board should consider what it can do to create meaningful engagement for members. It should find ways for people to support the work of the board in roles other than on the board. But above all, it should decide what it wants and hold itself accountable.

As Doug Sensenig sees it, “Put the effort in up front. Make sure you have a strong orientation of what the job is. But then you have to make sure that everyone is contributing,” he explains. “People need to be clear about what they are willing to do.”

As Andrew Wood of Thousand Islands Land Trust will tell you, it also helps to build a better board if everyone genuinely cares about each other. “There are a number of nonprofits in this town and there’s a lot of crossover of board members. We are the only ones, though, who hold our meetings at different houses and then have dinner afterwards. It becomes a social occasion, and an amazing way of bonding. We know each other well. All the other boards tell us they are jealous!” 🍌

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## Help for a Land Trust at a Sad Time

It was a bitter-sweet time for the Thousand Islands Land Trust. Shortly after losing its executive director, Aaron Vogel, the trust earned accreditation. Executive Director Andrew Wood credits the accreditation application process with making the leadership transition go smoothly. “I shepherded the committee that put the notebooks together for our application, and when the board named me acting executive director, I consulted those notebooks frequently. We had everything about the land trust in one place, and the more you know about your organization the better off you are. The accreditation process was essential for my learning and for the transition.”