



RiGHT held a local photography class in the San Luis Valley to capture the beauty of the area and connect people to the land.

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Making Land Conservation Real, Relevant and Urgent to a **BROADER AUDIENCE**

DURING A GROUP EXERCISE at the Rally 2012 workshop, “Engaging New Communities and Expanding Traditional Friends to Advance Mission,” participants were asked to list new audiences they want to reach. Here’s a sampling:

- Business owners
- Horse owners
- Trail bike riders
- Artists
- Latinos
- Young professionals
- Women’s groups

Many land conservation organizations today are recognizing the necessity to engage their greatest assets: the people in their communities. The goal is threefold: for the newly engaged to value the land as key to their own interests, to consider the organization a required part of the community and to understand the urgency of land conservation. A model program in Colorado offers practical steps to making land conservation real, relevant and urgent to a broader audience.

Colorado Conservation Trust (CCT), a strategic partner for Colorado’s conservation community, created a pilot Community Engagement program and selected two local land trusts to participate: Palmer Land Trust (PLT), a regional organization founded in 1977 that had already included community engagement in a recent strategic plan; and Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust (RiGHT), a local organization established in 1999 and new to community engagement. Working with Metropolitan Group (MG), a national communication and resource development firm with expertise in land conservation, CCT provided training and technical assistance, and funding support.

Building Local Strategies

PLT and RiGHT worked with CCT and MG to explore their communities’ priorities, create strategies and new messages to reflect those priorities, develop activities and programs to engage new audiences and infuse community engagement principles into their daily operations. Both land trusts followed a similar path:

1. Listen

The critical first step was listening to the community. Each land trust hosted a listening session, inviting about 50 people from across the community to discuss their values, the challenges and opportunities that lay before them, and how they perceived land conservation fitting into their lives. The next day, staff and board of each trust gathered for a visioning session to prioritize new audiences and integrate community engagement into their strategic plans.

2. Think creatively, guided by your strategic plan

Avoiding mission creep means tying community engagement directly to your strategic plan, and prioritizing activities that engage audiences and drive toward mission. Both PLT and RiGHT experimented with a variety of actions linked to their strategies.

PLT has developed relationships with organizations including local foods advocates, Denver Botanic Gardens, National Scenic Byways, open space and parks friends groups, Rotary, real estate brokers and hiking clubs. Each speaking opportunity leads to more connections, supporters and donors. A new business membership program created

relationships with businesses leading to both a new revenue stream and greater support from community leaders.

PLT has overhauled some of its events to be more community-focused. Its Southern Colorado Conservation Awards changed from being for conservation “insiders” to a true community celebration honoring conservation champions, from the zoo to educational organizations to local ranchers. After one mid-level donor heard these stories, he made a major gift. “We gave him more opportunities to give and he said no,” says PLT Executive Director Scott Campbell. “We gave him more opportunities to *get involved* and he gave more.”

RiGHT developed opportunities for the public to visit its conserved properties through tours, workshops and events—nine events on protected lands over a period of 18 months. These events have led to numerous new donors and the organization reaching its individual donor goal for the first time ever. The Hoedown, with Emma Gilmore’s brilliant welcome, is a prime example (see p. 38).

Beyond gift envelopes, RiGHT distributes a new kind of pledge card that offers diverse ways to engage with conservation, including volunteering, providing in-kind support for special events, joining RiGHT’s Facebook page and inviting RiGHT staff to speak to community groups. As a result, RiGHT has experienced a 20% increase in Facebook friends and has already been invited to speak to six community groups. RiGHT also uses a version of the pledge card internally, at its annual board retreat, to set goals and activities for engagement by board members along with the organization’s annual plan.

3. Start with manageable steps

Taking on a new approach can feel daunting for organizations already stretched thin and focused on the next urgent parcel of land to protect. Instead of jumping in all at once, you can begin with a series of small steps:

- Cultivate enthusiasm and risk-taking among board and staff.
- Ensure that board members reflect the communities that the organization serves and is striving to engage.

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- Use events—especially those held on the land—to build relationships and connect people more deeply to the land.
- Align your strategic plan and messages with community needs, values and interests.
- Increase informal presentations to community groups.
- Ask for action and commitments beyond donations to encourage engagement from a wider range of people.



Proven Success

Since PLT increased its emphasis on community engagement two years ago, its support base grew 25% the first year and an additional 40% the second. The organization now has significantly more people involved and contributing, a base that saved the day during the recession.

RiGHT is building stronger partnerships within the business community and has seen an increase over the past year in sponsorships, in-kind donations and volunteers who are now more effectively managed and engaged in the organization’s work.

Transforming Organizational Philosophy

Land trusts can immediately adopt many of the principles from the pilot program, without supplemental funding or added capacity. Ask simple questions like: “Is there a different way to talk about our work to make it more relevant?” “Are we doing all we can to engage our constituents in this activity, from planning to implementation?” “Who else in the community might be interested and from what vantage point?”

But community engagement cannot simply be a public relations campaign or a new page on the website. For an organization to truly reap the benefits of this initiative, it must transform the entire philosophy of the organization. The board and staff must strive to better understand their community and how it is changing. For example, every RiGHT board meeting includes time to share inspirational moments that help the organization better connect with its community. PLT weaves community engagement in every stewardship visit, forging deeper connections with landowners and looking for opportunities to engage them as champions, storytellers and connectors to other community members.

“This is a new way to do our work, and it can feel like a leap to get started,” says Jordan Vana with CCT. “My advice? Just try it. Align it with your mission and take the steps. It works.”

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Download the full report at <http://coloradoconservationtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/Community-Engagement-Pilot-Report.pdf>.