

# Building Land Trust Capacity Through Organizational Assessments

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ASSESSMENTS go

by *Henrietta Jordan*

with assistance from *Katrina Howey and Sylvia Bates*

"Do it, just *do it!*" That's the advice Edisto Island Open Land Trust Executive Director Marian Brailsford has for land trusts thinking about undertaking a Land Trust Organizational Assessment. Alan Brooks, executive director of Quoddy Regional Land Trust in Downeast Maine, agrees. "Organizational assessment is useful for any land trust, especially one that is trying to work more strategically or is hoping to become accredited. For any land trust that wants to measure how well it is implementing *Land Trust Standards and Practices*, the organizational assessment is an essential precursor."

Why would a land trust, struggling to complete urgent land protection projects, pause to evaluate its performance? Is dedicating board and staff time to completing a Land Trust Organizational Assessment, a tool developed by the Land Trust Alliance to help land trusts measure their implementation of *Land Trust Standards and Practices*, truly worth the effort?

Kevin McGorty, director of Tall Timbers Land Conservancy in Florida, believes it is. "It's a wonderful, wonderful tool," he said. "For land trusts large and small, land trusts that are just starting out and land trusts that are well-established, it is an extremely worthwhile exercise to go through."

Land trusts undertake an organizational assessment for a variety of reasons. Some assess their implementation of *Land Trust Standards and Practices* to inform their strategic planning; others want to address specific organizational challenges such as board or staff succession, expansion of programs or staff, or strengthening their land protection programs. For some land trusts, organizational assessment is a prerequisite for grant funding or a requirement for membership in a statewide land trust council.

Organizational assessment has long been recognized as an important component of building capacity in nonprofit organizations. In *Strengthening Nonprofit Performance: A Funder's Guide to Capacity Building*, Paul Connolly and Carol Lukas write: "Organizational assessments are useful diagnostic tools to ensure that the capacity building focuses on the right issues. Comprehensive assessments also help the organization see all aspects of its own functioning, an invaluable first stage in the learning process. . . . A comprehensive assessment will help an organization see beyond the immediate concern to core organizational capacity issues that will determine its character, scale, reach, and impact for the future."

Connolly and Lukas describe six components of organi-

zational capacity: mission, vision, and strategy; governance and leadership; program delivery and impact; strategic relationships; resource development; and internal operations and management. There are many different assessment tools available that can help nonprofits assess their strengths in these areas. For example, *BoardSource* offers a comprehensive self-assessment kit boards can use to survey their members, compile the results and generate reports. Peter Drucker, long considered one of the most influential leaders in nonprofit theory and practice, has developed a self-assessment tool based on what he believes to be five essential questions every nonprofit should answer. The McKinsey Capacity Assessment Grid, available from the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, provides a comprehensive look at organizations over seven dimensions. Several different organizational assessment questionnaires are available from the Free Management Library [www.managementhelp.org], and the Institute for Conservation Leadership offers self-assessment workbooks for all-volunteer as well as staffed organizations [www.icl.org].

But the Land Trust Alliance's interactive workbook, *Assessing Your Organization: Using Land Trust Standards and Practices* is the only assessment tool that specifically measures implementation of *Land Trust Standards and Practices*, the ethical and technical guidelines for the responsible operation of a land trust. For that reason, it is especially valuable to those organizations that want to evaluate the effectiveness of their land protection programs as well as their governance and management structures.

## One Land Trust's Experience

In 2004, the Mountain Lake Land Trust (not the land trust's real name) called a regional Land Trust Alliance office to inquire about having a facilitated assessment of how well it was implementing *Land Trust Standards and Practices*. There were other issues as well: MLLT had several new board members and needed to update its strategic plan. Formerly an all-volunteer organization, it had recently hired its first staff person. To better understand the challenges the land trust was facing, an LTA staff member talked at length with the new executive director, and they agreed that LTA would conduct a guided assessment based on *Assessing Your Organization: Using Land Trust Standards and Practices*. The board scheduled a four-hour board retreat for the assessment; the

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LTA staff member agreed to facilitate. To get a sense of MLLT's structure, goals and policies, the facilitator requested that some background documents be sent to her ahead of time.

A couple of weeks before the retreat, the facilitator sent each board member a copy of the workbook. Because several board members were new at that time, she told them that no one was expected to know all the information covered in the workbook and that the retreat would also serve as an orientation for newer members. She asked the board members to answer the questions in their workbooks as best they could and bring them to the retreat for use as a discussion guide.



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The facilitator knew that there were some critical issues at MLLT that board members might find hard to discuss openly. So she enclosed with the workbook a brief, confidential questionnaire which she asked them to fill out and return directly to her. Their frank and honest responses helped her prepare for the assessment meeting.

At the retreat, the facilitator moved through the workbook by reading each of the

*Land Trust Standards and Practices*, asking for responses to the workbook's questions and checklists, and eliciting from the group a consensus rating as to how well the land trust was implementing each practice. With the insight she had gained from the responses to the confidential questionnaire, the facilitator probed some areas more deeply than others. There were spirited discussions about several of the practices, and board members aired issues that were causing tension in the organization.

Through the assessment, the executive director was able to get clarification of her responsibilities and authority, and the facilitator helped the group construct an organizational

chart that clearly delineated staff and board roles. Although the discussion had at times been difficult, board members left the retreat with a conviction that their problems were solvable and that the organization was actually doing better than they had thought.

A few weeks later, the facilitator sent MLLT a report of the assessment findings, complete with recommendations as to what the land trust could do to more fully meet *Land Trust Standards and Practices*. The report also contained suggestions for completing a new strategic plan with recommended action steps for the land trust to take over the next year.

Since the retreat, MLLT's board implemented the new organizational chart, successfully completed the first year of its new three-year strategic plan, developed its first-ever fundraising plan, and worked hard to improve organizational communications. MLLT also successfully recruited energetic and enthusiastic newcomers to the board with skills the land trust sorely needed. MLLT is about to close on its largest project to date, a conservation easement on a 600-acre family farm, and has five more projects in the pipeline. Board members report that they feel a renewed sense of energy and stronger commitment to the mission of the land trust.

MLLT's experience is by no means unique; scores of other land trusts have successfully used assessments to improve their organizations. While an organizational assessment cannot solve a land trust's every problem, it can be used to inform strategic planning; identify and address specific organizational challenges, such as board and staff succession; prepare for adding new programs and/or staff; identify training needs; and, in some states, serve as a prerequisite for grant funding or membership in a statewide land trust council.

### Using the *Assessing Your Organization* Workbook

As a condition of membership, all land trust members of the Land Trust Alliance agree to adopt *Land Trust Standards and Practices*. Land trusts seeking accreditation, an option that will be available in 2008, must demonstrate full implementation of 42 of the 88 practices—those that most clearly measure a land trust's ability to operate in an ethical, legal, and technically sound manner and ensure the long-term protection of land in the public interest. With its emphasis on building credible, effective and sustainable organizations, *Land Trust Standards and Practices* has become the guidepost to excellence for the land trust movement.

Four years ago, in order to help land trusts understand and more fully implement *Land Trust Standards and Practices*, LTA developed the 41-page workbook, *Assessing Your Organization: Using Land Trust Standards and Practices*. The workbook is organized into 12 sections, one for each of the 12 standards; each section lists all of the practices associated with that particular standard. Users are asked to apply a four-point scale to rate how well the land trust has implemented each practice and also to answer questions that illuminate various elements of the practice. For example, for practice 1B (Planning and Evaluation), the workbook asks, "Does the

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land trust have a strategic plan?" "If yes, what time period does it cover?" "If no, describe how the land trust establishes its strategic goals." "Does the land trust complete an annual workplan with specific goals and objectives?" And finally, "Does the land trust periodically evaluate its programs and goals?" One of the workbook's great strengths is that it helps users better understand what their organizations should do in order to fully meet the standards.

Some land trusts use *Assessing Your Organization* as a self-assessment: board members work through it on their own over time, standard by standard, practice by practice. Or a board might assign certain sections to committees, e.g., asking the land acquisitions committee to tackle standards 8, 9 and 10, while the stewardship committee works on standards 11 and 12. In some cases, staff members complete the assessment and review their findings with the board.

Since the workbook is logically and coherently organized, from standard 1 (Mission) through standard 12 (Fee Land Stewardship), the self-assessment approach can work reasonably well—and for small land trusts lacking funds to hire an outside facilitator, it may be the only one they can afford. But it doesn't provide any independent evaluation of a land trust's plans, policies and procedures or assistance in their improvement. Without an outside facilitator, there is little opportunity for ground-truthing the responses to workbook questions. For example, the members of a board may confi-

dently agree that their land trust "complies with all applicable federal, state and local laws" (practice 2B), not knowing that their state's attorney general requires annual registration of all nonprofit organizations or that they have to provide workers' compensation insurance for their newly hired first employee. It's not that they are intentionally disregarding the law; it's that no one ever walked them through the maze of their state's requirements for employers and nonprofit organizations.

**The Facilitator-Guided Organizational Assessment**

For these reasons and others, most land trusts derive the greatest benefit from a guided organizational assessment led by a trained facilitator who is also able to review and comment on the land trust's governance documents and written policies and procedures. In this approach, the facilitator guides the land trust through the assessment process at a board meeting or retreat similar to the one conducted for Mountain Lake Land Trust. At least four hours of meeting time are needed to cover all 12 standards and 88 practices. Document review and writing the report generally takes the facilitator another 10-15 hours.

When board members embark on the task of assessing their organization, it's important for them to keep in mind that the workbook is a *tool*, not a test. Because the workbook

**Assessing Land Trusts in the South**

—Christina Soto

As with any tool, no two people use it exactly the same way. Thus, with organizational assessments, the Land Trust Alliance finds variations among how they are used in different regions.

"How we do organizational assessments in the Southeastern U.S. may differ from one land trust to another, and from how it is done more commonly in another region of the country," says Chuck Roe, LTA's Southeast director. "As with any good tool, it is adaptable to variables in the region."

Roe describes how an assessment typically works in his region: "Most often I or a contractor works first most closely with the land trust's administrative staff and board executive officers and principal committee chairs. What seems to work best is when they fill in *Assessing Your Organization* 'essentially in pencil,' and then bring it to the rest of the board members for group dialogue.



Since the release of the revised Land Trust Standards and Practices, more than 30 Southeastern land trusts have received guidance in organizational assessments from LTA regional staff (like Southeast Director Chuck Roe, right) or from our team of contracted counselors.

This may be done by first farming out the assessment in fractions to committee chairs. Then the entire board comes together at a single retreat session to combine the 'pieces,' discuss the assessment together, and collectively to chart their action steps and priorities for program improvement. In this way it becomes a blend of an assessment and an educational tool. It serves as an instrument for awareness and consensus building. The closer to total participation of the board in the process, the better."

Roe credits the Mountain Conservation Trust of Georgia with demonstrating another valuable use of an organizational assessment. Dr. Robert Keller describes its use in the first weeks upon being hired as the new executive director: "*Assessing Your Organization* was a wonderful 'welcome aboard' tool for me from my board president. The assessment served as a great baseline to say 'this is where we are' and 'here are our gaps.' We did the assessment together, allowing us to familiarize ourselves with the organization and define where we needed to go."

One use of an organizational assessment that everyone agrees on is its value in helping a land trust prepare for accreditation. "I like to use a particular analogy with the land trusts that I work with," says Roe. "I ask them, 'Imagine when you were preparing to take the SAT. Remember how helpful the practice exam was?'"

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asks for numerical ratings, it's easy to assume that "1" is "bad" and "4" is "excellent," which can trigger one's natural tendencies to avoid a less-than-perfect grade. But when land trusts understand the assessment as a measuring stick or map—one that shows them how far they've come as well as how far they have to go—the assessment findings are far more accurate and useful to them.

At the assessment meeting, the facilitator guides board members through the workbook, standard by standard, practice by practice. Typically, there will be some disagreement among board members as to how fully a practice has been implemented, and a skillful facilitator will ask a few probing questions to help them come to consensus. The facilitator can also use the discussion as an opportunity to help participants explore their roles and responsibilities as board members, and to understand the value of planning and written policies and procedures. The review of standard 4, Conflicts of Interest, almost always provokes an animated conversation about how far the land trust should go to avoid and manage conflicts of interest and whether it did so successfully in the past (*see p. 18 for a curriculum book on this subject*).

Kieran Roe, executive director of Carolina Mountain Land Conservancy (NC), said about the facilitator-guided organizational assessment his organization undertook in 2003, "It caused us to ask some questions of ourselves that we might not have asked otherwise. Policies and procedures were suggested in response to questions such as 'Do you have a personnel policy?' and it made us realize that we needed to develop them."

The Agricultural Stewardship Association, in upstate New York, found that the board's participation in their guided organizational assessment was one of its most valuable aspects. Executive Director Teri Ptacek observed, "When a land trust grows and hires staff, the board is not as engaged in the organization's internal workings as it was when it was all-volunteer. Board members don't always understand what they need to do. It really is necessary to have the full board involved—it educates them about the intricacies, what needs to be done to implement *Land Trust Standards and Practices*."

Following the assessment meeting, the facilitator usually prepares a written report. Some facilitators provide only a filled-in copy of the workbook that reflects the consensus responses of the participants; others write an in-depth analysis of the land trust's governance and policy documents in addition to a synopsis of what was said during the meeting. A truly useful report will contain, at a minimum, a brief summary of the assessment meeting, a summary of the findings, recommendations for actions the land trust can take to more fully implement each standard, a list of the most urgent priorities the land trust needs to address, and additional resources and/or sample policies where land trusts can find more information.

Edisto Island's Marian Brailsford said of the report her land trust received, "It was very detailed and very, very useful. It really pinpointed our strengths and weaknesses and

specified areas to work on to help accelerate our goal of becoming one of the first accredited land trusts." Undertaking an organizational assessment does not guarantee that a land trust will become accredited, but it is an excellent method for an organization to identify areas that need work before applying for accreditation.

Other land trusts have noted how valuable an organizational assessment can be in developing their strategic plans.



Rich Knox, Maine Coast Heritage Trust

Alan Brooks advises land trusts, "The guided organizational assessment is particularly useful if you are at a point where you want to begin a new strategic planning cycle. You can use the assessment as a baseline showing where you are at and where you need to go and build this into the strategic planning process."

Asked how the assessment helped, Brooks said, "It made clear to the board what the key issues were for us. It dealt with each standard, analyzed it and gave suggestions. We were able to look at them and decide which were most important to implement first and which to do later."

Sometimes, the assessment enables the organization to see itself in a new light. Linda Garrett, executive director of Tug Hill Tomorrow Land Trust (NY), explained, "The most useful thing, aside from knowing where we were lacking in terms of *Land Trust Standards and Practices*, was having the board know that we were doing a good job. Many board members didn't realize we were doing as much as we are. To have someone from outside validating what we were reporting was helpful. They started to feel better about the organization and better about venturing into hiring staff."

Larger, staffed land trusts in which the board's role is primarily fundraising and policy governance may want to adapt the basic facilitated assessment model to better suit their needs. For example, they might ask a staff leader to delegate completion of individual sections of the workbook to an

**STAFF AND THEN-BOARD MEMBERS** of Quoddy Regional Land Trust gathered in May 2005 to celebrate receiving the 2004 Land Heritage Award from Maine Coast Heritage Trust. This group represents some of those who worked on an organizational assessment in 2005. From left to right: Robert Miller, Alan Brooks, Randall Kindleberger, Fred Stocking, Alana Peston.

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appropriate staff person or board committee and have the facilitator or the staff leader guide the board's discussion of the completed workbook or summary of the assessment findings. Under this arrangement, board members may get a deeper analysis of the organization's strengths and needs than if they all participated in a review of individual practices they have little direct experience with.

This was the approach used by Congaree Land Trust in South Carolina. Land Protection Director Jane Clarke recalled, "The board was not involved in the assessment. We wanted to roll up our sleeves and look at the assessment ourselves. Then the staff facilitated the discussion with the board. It was better to tell them where we were as opposed to having them guess. They know *what* we do, but *how* we do it is sometimes a bit of a mystery. We used the assessment tool to communicate with them about the land trust. Now we try to cover one standard at each board meeting. We look through the assessment and compare it with where the land trust is now. And we look at the facilitator's remarks to see if we have made the changes she suggested."

Following the assessment, the land trust may want to make additional arrangements with the facilitator for targeted coaching, to create a training and technical assistance plan describing what help the land trust will need in implementing the recommendations, or just to follow-up at regular intervals to evaluate the land trust's progress.

**Finding the Right Facilitator**

As more and more land trusts commit to the goal of fully implementing *Land Trust Standards and Practices* and prepare for accreditation, the demand for trained facilitators has increased dramatically. LTA has sponsored facilitator trainings in the Northeast, Midwest and Southeast, and more are planned throughout the country. LTA program staff in these regions can make referrals to consultants who have participated in LTA trainings.

There are not yet enough LTA-trained facilitators to meet the demand, but there are alternatives. Many organizational consultants who work frequently with land trusts use *Assess-*

*ing Your Organization* as a precursor to strategic planning and have developed considerable expertise in leading assessments. LTA Director of Standards and Research Sylvia Bates, who wrote the assessment workbook, has also prepared an instructional manual with useful information for new and experienced facilitators alike. In addition to leading facilitators through the assessment process step-by-step, the manual also helps them determine which assessment approach would be most appropriate for individual land trusts with specific needs.

For land trusts that use consultants who have neither training nor experience in leading guided assessments, there are two things you might want to consider when contracting with them: (1) the consultant should be thoroughly versed in *Land Trust Standards and Practices*; and (2) the consultant should be capable of analyzing and evaluating land trust policies and procedures.

**Organizational Assessments and Accreditation**

Beginning in 2008, land trusts will be able to apply for accreditation, which verifies that they have implemented the 42 indicator practices necessary to operate in an ethical, legal and technically sound manner and ensure the long-term protection of land in the public interest. As part of its application, a land trust seeking accreditation must show that it has undertaken an organizational assessment within the past two years.

Tammara Van Ryn, director of the Land Trust Accreditation Commission explained the rationale behind this requirement: "*Land Trust Standards and Practices* are the guidelines for the responsible operation of a land trust. While the Commission will only verify implementation of 42 indicator practices, it is important that land trusts think of their work in the context of the entire set of practices. Completing periodic assessments against the full set of practices can help organizations set benchmarks for continuous improvement. Assessments conducted in advance of applying for accreditation will help organizations identify areas they may need to work on before submitting their accreditation application."

Whether or not a land trust chooses to work towards accreditation, an organizational assessment will still help a land trust set priorities for its continuing evolution as an effective, ethical and technically proficient organization. "The organizational assessment was helpful for our board and for me, too, even though I have been involved with land trust work for years," said Ken Grudens, executive director of the Indian River Land Trust in Florida. "It gave me the structure to communicate to the board what we are not yet doing and where we need to direct our efforts. The organizational assessment opens your eyes to where you are in the context of the land trust movement." 🌿

*Henrietta Jordan* is northeast policy and assessments manager for the Land Trust Alliance. *Katrina Howey* is LTA's northeast program associate. *Sylvia Bates* serves as LTA's director of standards and research.

**Resources**

- If you are interested in a guided organizational assessment, please send an e-mail to Renee Kivikko, LTA's national services director, at [rkivikko@lta.org](mailto:rkivikko@lta.org).
- *Assessing Your Organization: Using Land Trust Standards and Practices* is available for sale, or as a free download from LTA's member-only online library at [www.LTAnet.org](http://www.LTAnet.org).
- Land Trust Alliance members can download a PDF of this article at [www.LTAnet.org](http://www.LTAnet.org).
- See p. 30 for details on cost-share grants for guided assessments in the Midwest.