

BY Russell Shay and Sean Robertson

ENGAGING THE Whole Community

When I began working with land trusts, most of them were “selling” land conservation to landowners, one at a time. Many land trusts have come to realize that that is not enough; that they have to make the case for land conservation to their entire community. Across the country, successful land trusts are connecting people to conservation through the community members’ own existing, closely held values. Land trusts are engaging the community in conservation decisions, creating ownership and lasting support.

This isn’t so much education about facts and figures and theories—although that is certainly part of it. It is more about values, and about using stories that carry the message, choosing the right anecdotes, language and style, and also the right messenger.

The need to engage people who aren’t already members of our organizations comes home quickly when we are seeking help from the public’s elected representatives. Help stopping a highway being built through our preserve. Help steering development away from our best farmland. Help putting a measure on the ballot to secure public funding for land conservation.

In a democracy, our elected officials are supposed to do what the people want them to do. How people feel about an issue is very important to elected officials of all stripes—the city councilman, the county supervisor, the state representative, and yes, the member of Congress. And the more people concerned about an issue, the more elected officials pay attention.

The rejection by Congress of high-profile environmental initiatives such as climate legislation, compounded by the current federal fiscal crisis, has led many people to question whether Congress can really do anything to help the land trust community.

I believe the answer is yes. That answer is based on our ability, as 1,200 local organizations, to build community support for our missions. Land trusts’ abilities to win friends at the local level put us in a unique position. We have succeeded where many others have failed. We are translating local community support into political support that transcends party lines. Right now, the Conservation Easement Incentive Act has more co-sponsors than any other tax bill. Before this year is over, we have a good shot at having a majority of House Republicans

Congressman Mike Thompson (D-CA) won top honors at Solano Land Trust’s Aim for Ag and Open Space Sporting Clay Shoot. Executive Director Nicole Byrd took home the dubious “Duck and Cover Award” but had a great opportunity to thank the Congressman for his leadership in introducing the Conservation Easement Incentive Act.



and House Democrats, which would be a powerful testament to our strength.

If every land trust accepts the responsibility for building public support for its work, and extends its outreach to its elected officials, there is no limit to our ability to win public support. Will it be harder in this time of budgetary constraints? Of course. But as Congress contemplates major shifts in the federal budget and its priorities, takes on major tax reform, and deals with the expiration of the current income and estate tax regimes (due at the end of 2012), do land trusts have the ability to make a huge difference? Yes we do. —RUSSELL SHAY

Everything on the Table

The Budget Control Act passed earlier this year created a 12-member Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction to come up with a plan to cut the federal deficit by at least \$1.2 trillion over the next 10 years. Their plan will be put before the House and the Senate for a yes or no vote, with no amendments allowed. This “supercommittee,” half Republican and half Democrat, half from the House and half from the Senate, faces a tough challenge, and a short deadline—they must reach an agreement by December.

Interestingly, thanks to outreach by land trusts over the past decade, many of the leaders appointed to the supercommittee are current or past supporters of the enhanced easement incentive, including Senators Max Baucus (D-MT), Rob Portman (R-OH), and John Kerry (D-MA), and Representatives Dave Camp (R-MI), Chris Van Hollen (D-MD), Fred Upton (R-MI), Xavier Becerra (D-CA) and James Clyburn (D-SC).

Given the supercommittee’s extraordinary powers, much of Congress’ regular business is on hold or is being viewed through its lens, making this the most unpredictable Congress in a generation. Stay tuned to www.lta.org/policy for the latest updates.

Farm Bill Fast-Track

The bipartisan leadership of the House and Senate Agriculture committees has appealed to the supercommittee to include a complete rewrite of the 2008 Farm Bill in their deficit

reduction package, cutting \$23 billion from various programs (over 10 years). That could mean a huge shortcut for a new Farm Bill, bypassing the usual public markup of bills by the House and Senate, and amendments in committee and on the floor.

The good news for conservation programs—probably reflecting the influence of conservation friends on the supercommittee—is that it appears that the package is looking at much larger cuts from subsidy programs than from conservation. For the latest Farm Bill news and our proposals, visit www.lta.org/farmbill.

Senate Spares Charitable Deduction

President Obama recently sought to cap the effective benefit of charitable tax deductions at 28% to pay for his jobs bill. That could reduce charitable contributions by an estimated \$7 billion per year, according to Independent Sector, a national association of nonprofits with whom the Land Trust Alliance is working closely on this issue.

Fortunately, our collaborative efforts to demonstrate the importance of charitable deductions were so effective that the Senate replaced this provision before bringing the jobs bill up for a vote.

Despite this victory, it is entirely possible that restrictions on charitable giving incentives will re-emerge at another stage in the deficit reduction process. You can help defend the charitable deduction by adding your name to a national sign-on letter and

using other sample materials on the Independent Sector website: www.independentsector.org/charitable_deduction.

Your Toolkit for Local Funding

Do you want to create public funding for your land conservation projects, but don’t know where to start? The Alliance is teaming up with The Conservation Campaign (TCC), the only national organization that focuses solely on political action to secure public funding for conservation. Together with its public charity affiliate, The Trust for Public Land, TCC has helped generate over \$34 billion for conservation since 1996.

In partnership with land trusts and local officials, TCC supports creation and passage of ballot and legislative measures that create new funding for land conservation.

TCC offers many services to land trusts, including a “campaign toolkit” on its website: www.conservationcampaign.org. It’s not too late to consider a city or county ballot measure for November 2012. For help or more information please call TCC at 617-367-9092. 🌿



Senator Lisa Murkowski (R-AK), fourth from left, joined supporters of Great Land Trust on a tour of a 60-acre coastal park they recently donated to the City of Anchorage. She and Senator Mark Begich (D-AK) subsequently co-hosted a fundraiser that raised \$50,000 for park improvements.

In the Know

Status Check

As of press time, the enhanced easement incentive was still slated to expire December 31. For the latest information on how you can help make it permanent, visit www.lta.org/easementincentive.