Collaboration and Consistency
ENSURING FAIRNESS IN THE ACCREDITATION PROCESS

Almost 100 land trusts will achieve land trust accreditation or renewal in 2014. With over 100 more currently in the process, how is consistency ensured in accreditation decisions, given the uniqueness of each land trust and the varying backgrounds of the people making those decisions? That is a question periodically asked of the Land Trust Accreditation Commission, and one that was integral to the design of the process.

“There are probably people out there who think some commissioners or staff members are more strict and can sway a decision,” says Steve Swartz, who volunteers hundreds of hours each year as a commissioner in addition to serving as general counsel to the Humane Society Wildlife Land Trust in Washington, D.C. “My response is to reassure them that the Commission is committed to fairness and to explain the number and extent of controls in place to keep that from happening.”

From the very start of the application review process, staff and commissioners disclose any previous relationships with each applicant—from a joint land transaction to a personal friendship that could, or might be perceived to, impact their impartiality. Each commissioner is then paired with a Commission staff reviewer, and both review their assigned application.

MaryKay O’Donnell, the Land Trust Alliance’s Midwest conservation manager, recently participated in an application review so she could better understand the accreditation process.

“The number one takeaway for me was that the Commission is extremely concerned about fairness. They have taken extraordinary steps to make sure every land trust going through the process is treated equally,” says O’Donnell.

That includes having a thorough training program for commissioners and staff reviewers, and recruiting commissioners from different regions and sizes of land trusts. Detailed review forms guide each review team in evaluating the same factors for verification. O’Donnell adds that Commission staff members also attend weekly case review sessions to discuss trends among applicants and unusual cases that arise.

“If the issue cannot be resolved through these established protocols, then the full Commission discusses the issue and determines whether the land trust is implementing that particular practice,” O’Donnell explains.

“There is never a situation where one commissioner or staff person solely decides that an organization is or is not compliant,” Swartz says. “We always have two sets of eyes from the beginning.” As the applicant moves through the process, the number of people evaluating each potential instance of noncompliance only increases, adds Swartz. “By the time a final decision is made, all commissioners and staff review the report and only the full Commission makes the final decision.”

The goal is to have a level of scrutiny that prevents inconsistent decisions, Swartz says, as each review team must justify its recommendation to the larger group. “Even if the staff member and I are on the same page, the Commission might look at our report and say, ‘Why are you being stricter here, and cutting a break here?’ The entire process is geared toward self-policing. It is a collective process with lots of different voices, discussion and oversight. It is fundamentally impossible for any one person with strong views to have that much say.”

Sharon Goldsmith of Plexus Consulting Group in Washington, D.C., helped to design the accreditation program, basing it on rigorous national and international standards. “I think the program is one of the most transparent that I’ve ever been involved in,” she says. The Requirements Manual—which is publically available and based on precedents from decisions made by the Commission—speaks out exactly how applicants will be evaluated, and “is one of the most comprehensive manuals of its kind that any accrediting organization has produced.”

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