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The Commission awards the accreditation seal to land conservation organizations that meet national standards for excellence, uphold the public trust and ensure that conservation efforts are permanent.

Withdrawal of an Application for Accreditation

Information about the reasons for and process involving voluntary and required withdrawal by applicants

Introduction

Since the inception of the accreditation program in 2007, a land trust has had the option to voluntarily withdraw its application at any time prior to a final decision being made by the Land Trust Accreditation Commission. Beginning with 2010 applicants, the Commission may require an applicant to withdraw from the accreditation program in certain circumstances. This fact sheet provides additional information on withdrawal, including why a land trust may be required to withdraw, the process, common triggers, and next steps for withdrawn organizations.

Purpose of Accreditation

Accreditation is a systematic and objective verification process that results in public recognition of those organizations demonstrating compliance with established quality standards. The Commission verifies a land trust's compliance with *Land Trust Standards and Practices* and accreditation program requirements via a sample of the practices (indicator practices). The verification process is a two-part review of an organization. The first part examines the governance of the organization, and the second part evaluates the organization's land transactions and stewardship.

Types of Withdrawal

Voluntary

Land trust accreditation is a voluntary program. An applicant may experience unanticipated events that preclude it from completing the accreditation process, and an applicant may withdraw at any time during the application process for any

reason. Once the Commission has made a decision to deny accreditation, however, the application process is complete, and an applicant may not withdraw from the program.

Required

The Commission has the option to require an applicant to withdraw in the following circumstances: the applicant has not provided sufficient evidence that it is implementing *Land Trust Standards and Practices* at the time of application and would need substantial additional time or resources during the accreditation process to confirm compliance or correct areas of noncompliance; the applicant is not a strong candidate for accreditation and is unlikely to be successful, or has not demonstrated that it has the capacity to be successful, in the accreditation process at this time; or, the applicant has willfully disregarded a non-indicator practice that could put the applicant organization at risk or threaten the credibility of the accreditation program.

Process

When an organization voluntarily withdraws or is required to withdraw, its application status on the Commission's website is changed from "applied" to "application withdrawn," and will remain that way for one year. No accreditation fees will be reimbursed, and the application materials will be destroyed and cannot be returned. A decision to require withdrawal is not subject to appeal. The land trust may re-apply for accreditation at any time, but it should first address all areas of concern raised by the Commission (see "Next Steps for Withdrawn Organizations").

As part of fostering continuous improvement in the land trust community, the standard review process does allow a limited opportunity for applicants to take corrective action or provide additional information in cases where there are a small number of areas that need to be addressed. However, when an organization does not provide sufficient evidence to show compliance in a multitude of areas, the Commission will require withdrawal as early in the application process as possible. The Commission has found that allowing an opportunity for further remediation in the application process in these circumstances requires substantial time or resources from the land trust and the Commission. The goal of accreditation is to verify an organization's compliance at the time of application and is not intended to be a training period for a land trust to develop compliance.

Characteristics of Withdrawn Applicants

Since the program began, approximately 12 percent of applicants have withdrawn from the program. These land trusts show no one demographic similarity; rather, they range in conservation project portfolio size, date of incorporation, staff size, and budget size.

The Commission carefully considers each applicant individually, and each withdrawn group had a unique set of circumstances that led to the recommendation to withdraw. However, each land trust that withdrew had systemic and cumulative issues within the organization and application that were collectively too great in number to address during the application process. The common characteristic among the majority of withdrawn groups through 2010 is the failure to demonstrate compliance with the following indicator practices: board approval of land transactions (practice 3F), financial records (6B), capacity (7A), project selection and criteria (8B), title investigation and subordination (9H), appraisals (10B), and funding for easement and land stewardship (11A and 12A).

Next Steps for Withdrawn Organizations

An organization that is required to withdraw may be accomplishing important conservation outcomes in its community. However, the Commission is unable to verify the organization's compliance with *Land Trust Standards*

and Practices. Requiring an organization to withdraw from the accreditation process allows the organization to take the additional time needed to meet the accreditation requirements.

The Commission provides each organization that is required to withdraw with a letter summarizing the Commission's concerns with the application and what the land trust can do in a future application to demonstrate compliance with the indicator practices. The Commission offers an opportunity for a conference call with the land trust to review the contents of the letter. This call is a chance for the land trust to ask questions about the Commission's findings and discuss the next steps for the organization. It takes the place of the applicant call and follow-up letter. The Commission's decision to require withdrawal cannot be changed as a result of this call.

The Commission encourages land trusts that have been required to withdraw to contact the Land Trust Alliance and consider sharing the letter from the Commission with the Alliance staff. As a training resource, the Alliance may be able to assist the land trust in developing procedures and policies that will help the organization demonstrate compliance with *Land Trust Standards and Practices* in a future application.

Frequently Asked Questions

? *What is the usual timing of a required withdrawal decision?*

The decision to require withdrawal is made as early in the process as possible, typically shortly after the review team has examined the entire application and before any applicant conference call. In the Commission's experience, when an organization does not provide sufficient evidence in a multitude of areas, a conference call does not resolve the significant challenges. Requiring withdrawal as early in the process as possible helps conserve the Commission's and applicant's resources.

? *Does the Commission screen pre-applications for the possibility of withdrawal?*

The pre-application provides information for the Commission to verify if an applicant meets the eligibility and pre-application requirements. Applicants also provide a Land Conservation Project List as part of the pre-application that the Commission uses to select projects for review. The pre-application contains only limited data and does not contain information on compliance with all of the indicator practices. Acceptance of a pre-application is not an indication of whether or not the land trust will be accredited and ultimately successful in the program. Only the complete application contains the evidence to evaluate compliance or noncompliance with the indicator practices.

? *How are decisions to require withdrawal communicated publicly?*

The Commission does not announce decisions to withdraw accreditation. Information about specific withdrawn applicants is not included in eNewsletters or in press releases. However, withdrawal is a public status and is listed on the Commission's website for one year.

The Commission does not share any information about any specific applicant or accredited land trust other than its public status as per the Commission's Confidentiality Policy. If someone asks about a land trust that has withdrawn – either voluntarily or required – the Commission will only state that the land trust's application is withdrawn; no information on the reasons for withdrawal will be shared nor will a distinction be made between voluntary and required withdrawals. The Commission can speak generally about withdrawal and provide information and lessons learned from its experiences and those of applicants, such as what is included in this fact sheet.

? *Have any withdrawn applicants successfully earned accreditation?*

Yes. Most land trusts that have withdrawn from the program have worked diligently to meet *Land Trust Standards and Practices*. For some, this has involved formalizing systems and/or adopting new policies. Many withdrawn applicants simply need time to put the systems in place and to retain documentation of their efforts. Other withdrawn applicants benefit from additional training or coaching. When the Commission requires withdrawal, it provides the land trust with a detailed set of findings from the review of the application which can serve as a roadmap for future success. In fact, there are a number of previously withdrawn applicants that have gone on to successfully earn accreditation.

Contact Us

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For more information, also see the *Applicant Handbook*.