

BY Francesca Dalleo

LAND TRUST ACCREDITATION
COMMISSION 
An independent program of the Land Trust Alliance

Requirements that Minimize Risk

When all-volunteer Chebeague and Cumberland Land Trust faced an easement crisis in 2014, board members were forced to deal with issues well beyond anything they had ever been through.

In 1997 a family enlisted the land trust’s help to place a conservation easement allowing for limited development on an oceanfront estate. However, when the family sold the property to a developer in 2014, and then the developer sold a portion of the land to the town providing the public access to the shorefront, the family sued both the town and the land trust.

Accreditation has long required that accredited land trusts secure funds sufficient to cover long-term costs of stewarding and defending the land and conservation easements they hold (see indicator element 6A5). Through a combination of reserved funds and insurance, the land trust was able to navigate three years of litigation and ongoing increased stewardship demands. Eventually the court ruled in its favor and public access to the shoreline was assured. And according to board President Penny

Asherman, it is hard to imagine having this success “without the discipline, procedures and the rigor we gained through the accreditation process.”

Soon after the Land Trust Alliance revised *Land Trust Standards and Practices* (the Standards) in 2017, the Land Trust Accreditation Commission set to work on aligning the accreditation requirements with the new Standards, relying on guidance from land trust practitioners and advisers, its own decade of experience and testing draft requirements with the land trust community.

This new and improved 2018 *Requirements Manual*, released in March, is more straightforward and reduces the amount of time land trusts spend applying for accreditation. “Already we are hearing from land trusts that they appreciate how clear the 2018 manual is,” says Commission staffer Jennifer Brady-Connor.


“Transitioning to four primary categories—Governance, Finance, Transactions and Stewardship—really simplified the process and reduced redundancy,” says Katrina Shindledecker, director of conservation at Hudson Highlands Land Trust in New York. “This new format gives greater specificity about how indicator elements are verified, making it easier for me to compile documentation for accreditation.”

Shindledecker especially finds the new Finance requirement 6A4—that organizations build and maintain sufficient operating reserves to sustain operations—critical for land trusts to avoid risk. She recognizes that “dedicating the resources to build and maintain operating reserves is foundational for land trusts that are committed to protecting land and easements forever.”

Another updated requirement in the Transactions category is helping Hudson Highlands Land Trust avoid risk. The requirement now states that, starting in 2019, verbal notification to potential land or conservation easement donors will no longer be sufficient.

Shindledecker explains how that’s a good thing. “I have been told so many times by easement donors, ‘I don’t remember your saying that,’ and have then fallen back on the fact that the information is in the packet of material we give prospective grantors,” she says.

She notes that the updated requirement is also simpler as it no longer requires information submission for other low-risk items.

“The new manual and updated requirements are even better tools to help our land trust avoid risk,” she says, “and position us well for the future.” 

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KEVIN BRUISE PHOTOGRAPHY

At Knight’s Pond Preserve, saved by the Chebeague and Cumberland Land Trust in Maine.

YOU CAN FIND THE *REQUIREMENTS MANUAL* AT WWW.LANDTRUSTACCREDITATION.ORG/STORAGE/DOWNLOADS/REQUIREMENTSMANUAL.PDF.