We spoke with the team at Harford Land Trust, located in Bel Air, Maryland, to get their perspective and experience about preparing for and navigating the first-time accreditation process.

For 30 years Harford Land Trust has protected lands in Maryland's Harford County. They were started by a group local residents who were passionate about preserving the natural systems and working lands of their community. For most of HLT's history, they have only had one staff member, their Executive Director, and today they are still a small-staffed land trust with three paid staff. Small but mighty, Harford Land Trust has helped protect more than 12,000 acres of farms, forests, and community parks, holds conservation easements on 1,400 acres of land and owns 340 acres dedicated to public enjoyment.

Congratulations on being awarded first-time accreditation! What did the process look like for Harford to decide to apply?

Harford Land Trust: Harford Land Trust (HLT) utilized an Alliance Readiness Grant* to hire a consultant to assess our readiness for accreditation in 2018. The roadmap, prepared by the consultant, helped us focus our efforts on essential readiness actions such as annual monitoring, current condition reports, financial reserves, board policies and recordkeeping. When we entered the first-time lottery in 2021, we felt confident we were ready.

*Note from Commission: Contact your Alliance Field Services staff to learn more about opportunities for first-time applicants.

What was the most challenging part of the application process? What Commission and Alliance resources were most helpful with the application?

Harford Land Trust: The most challenging part of the application process was setting aside the time to work through the application questions and compile required documentation. The online portal was user friendly and much preferred to the stories we had heard about past applicants needing to submit paper applications. That being said, our team did print out the entire compiled guidance from the Alliance related to Land Trust Standards and Practices and the Commission's Requirements Manual in a larger reference binder, which proved to be an invaluable resource.

How did Harford Land Trust approach the application process?

Harford Land Trust: HLT’s application was staff led. As a small team of three staff, the executive director completed the bulk of the application, and our Land Programs Manager completed the land transaction and stewardship components. The Board was attentive and supportive of the demands on staff time and participated very actively in the call with Commission's review team.

Now that you’re accredited, how has your organization been strengthened by going through the accreditation process?

Harford Land Trust: In numerous fora, we've been delighted to tout, "Harford Land Trust is a nationally accredited land
trust." Simply being accredited has made us hold our heads a little higher. Donors and partners take notice. We have also benefited greatly from the improved policies that we created as part of the accreditation process.

What advice would you give an organization that was considering applying for first-time accreditation?

**Harford Land Trust:** Don’t apply until you are ready. Hire a consultant with experience in assessing land trust accreditation readiness early in the process. Have a roadmap of prioritized actions to keep your land trust on task as you prepare.

**Photo Credits in order of appearance:**


2. Harford Land Trust Staff -- credit Topher Stevenson. From left to right, Jackie Koehn, Land Programs Manager, Kristin Kirkwood, Executive Director, Nina Depkin, Outreach & Development Manager

3. Belle Vue Farm -- credit Harford County Government. Harford Land Trust's efforts led to the September 2020 sale of the 347-acre Belle Vue Farm to Harford County Government. The property contains a mile of undeveloped Chesapeake Bay coastline and joins a total of 1,200 acres of public parkland on Harford County’s Oakington Peninsula. [More information.]

4. Foster Branch Park -- credit Eric Bach Studio. Joppatowne's Foster Branch Park is Harford County's newest public park, purchased in January 2024, through a collaboration with Harford Land Trust, Maryland Department of Natural Resources, and Aberdeen Proving Ground (APG). The 129-acre park will provide much needed public parkland to an area with very little remaining open space. [More information.]

5. Stoney Demonstration Forest, Grays Run Tract -- credit Harford County Government
In late December 2020, 905 acres of hardwood forest were permanently protected and added to Maryland's Stoney Demonstration Forest in southern Harford County. This significant conservation success is the result of a multi-year partnership between Maryland Department of Natural Resources, The Conservation Fund, Harford Land Trust, and Aberdeen Proving Ground. [More information.]

Thank you to Harford Land Trust for sharing their accreditation story. Are you interested in sharing your story with the land trust community? Please contact us at info@landtrustaccreditation.org.