

Integrity, Accountability and Service: How Commissioners Help Meet the Promise of Perpetuity

by Caity Pinkard



↑ The current board of commissioners, Des Moines, Iowa, 2022.

As one of the first commissioners at the Land Trust Accreditation Commission, Larry Kueter can speak firsthand to the values of the Commission and its board of commissioners. "After the Alliance established the Commission, I joined the board and served for nine years," Kueter recalls. "It was one of the most satisfying professional things I've ever done, filled with the most resourceful, engaging and intelligent people. Everyone who has been a part of it has loved it." An independent program of the Land Trust Alliance, the Commission was established in 2006 to build and recognize strong land trusts and foster public confidence in long-term land protection. The Commission is governed by a board of 18 hardworking volunteer commissioners with diverse expertise in land conservation, stewardship and management. The values of the Commission—"integrity, accountability and service"—apply

equally to the commissioners. While Kueter experienced the founding of the Commission, as well as its evolution over the following decade, commissioners from every era of the Commission describe their time on the board in similar terms.

"I knew what I was getting into," says Kevin McGorty, who served from 2009 to 2013. "But out of a spirit of giving something back, I knew I needed to serve on the board. I joined because of the quality and dedication of the commissioners to problem-solving and providing greater pathways for the land trust community."

Steve Swartz, commissioner from 2009 to 2018, shares the sentiment. "In my entire professional career, I've never been part of a group whose qualities—"intelligence, thoughtfulness, professionalism and integrity"—were so universal. Taken together, it remains the most rewarding experience of my professional life."

Of course, that doesn't mean being a commissioner is easy work. "This was weekend and night work," Swartz admits. "One of the commissioners wrote me a note saying, 'Are you ready yet?' but I knew the reviews took a long time. I thought I wouldn't survive more than one term. Nine years later, I was still on the board!" Despite the rigor of the work or perhaps because of it, commissioners are united by their shared passion for conservation and their belief in the value of accreditation to the land trust community.

"The best way to show that we are meeting the bar set for us—"to widely diverse audiences"—is to have an accreditation program: an independent system of rigorous review by experts from our field," says Molly Doran, commissioner from 2010 to 2020. "I think it is one of the most important things the community has done for the sustainability of the land trust movement. Commissioners focus on what's important, so the process remains a true peer review and gives land trusts the confidence that they are being evaluated fairly." As a result, the accreditation program has been an inward-looking process and a forward-looking one, evolving to strengthen the land trust community and respond to its collective challenges.

"The world around us changed, so we had to change to respond to those things," says Kueter. "The value of accreditation is being prepared to respond with credibility and professionalism."

To meet new challenges, commissioners work hard to understand the different issues that land trusts across the nation face. "We were always striving for the right balance between rigor, achievability and flexibility," Swartz says. This requires commissioners to find the middle ground between supporting land trusts through the process and challenging them to grow because of it. "It's a well-oiled machine, but a compassionate one that employs common sense," adds McGorty. "You have to build trust to build strong leadership and a lasting legacy of stewardship."

As the land trust community evolves, so too does the Commission. "I saw accreditation evolve substantially to become more accessible, to include land trusts of all sizes and with all types of programs and communities, and very importantly to meet emerging issues," Doran says. "I have also seen the massive and positive impact it has had on land trusts around the United States. Commissioners love the work of land trusts. There is not a question they cannot solve, and they are focused on serving land trusts and accreditation. In the end, that helps us continue to enjoy the charitable tools we all use."

For Kueter, this is the ultimate goal of the Commission: to ask land trusts to achieve excellence. "You have to hold yourself to

high standards because you don't know when you're going to need them. Having excellence in what you do has always been there and is always going to be there. We rely on public resources and public funding, and you can't get lazy. You can't get excellence backâ€”you have to work on it."

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