THE IMPORTANCE OF ACCREDITATION

A Discussion with Volunteer-Led Land Trusts

Photo credits (left to right): Central Savannah River Land Trust; Northeast Wilderness Trust; Caledonia Conservancy
The accreditation process involves:

- Assembling an application team
- Assigning tasks
- Collecting information
- Assessing current policies
- Completing baseline documentation reports
- Adopting new standards and procedures
On challenges of accreditation

- “We had to adopt a whole new set of policy statements, which were overdue and appropriate. I felt the requirements were reasonable. It was just a matter of collecting the information. [Accreditation] was an inspiration for us to finish all of our baseline documentation reports. That was the single largest expenditure of time but well worth it and necessary.”—Clive Gray of Greensboro Land Trust, Vermont

- “It’s a tremendous investment; it takes a lot of time. It is tricky. It involves everything: finances, templates for easements, etc. It’s very complicated. Off and on, the board would ask, ‘Why are we doing this?’ We had to resell our reasoning for undertaking the process to people on the board a couple of times.”—Charlie Tennessen of Caledonia Conservancy, Wisconsin

- “There was some dissension due to the time and effort and funds that were being expended, which were subtracted from working directly on land protection.”—David Bingham of Salem Land Trust, Connecticut
Is it worth it? Accreditation benefits include:

- Increased credibility among donors and community
- Feeling part of a “sphere” of accredited land trusts
- Renewed focus for your land preservation efforts
- The process streamlines procedures and creates “buy-in” for policies among board and staff
On benefits of accreditation

- “I felt it would strengthen the organization, and there was no reason we shouldn’t do it or be outside the accredited sphere. On one of our latest easements, the landowner said he wouldn’t be interested in donating if we hadn’t been accredited.”—Clive Gray of Vermont’s Greensboro Land Trust, Vermont

- “I know [the accreditation] means a lot to the donors. In a land trust, things are long-term. You may talk to a person at a picnic, and then five years later, the conversation leads to results. Being professional and solid really means a lot over the long haul.”—Charlie Tennessen of Caledonia Conservancy, Wisconsin
How they did it

- “We assigned a single board member as taskmaster, to assure all tasks were completed and to assemble the entire package. Responsibility was given to each of the other board members for one or two of the standards, to be sure they were met by our organization. The standards associated with financial transactions and reporting were done by the treasurer, land acquisition records were assembled by the land acquisition chair, etc. Standards that were easily documented were assigned to newer board members or those who had less time to help.” —David Bingham of Salem Land Trust, Connecticut

- On our [accreditation] committee, we had board members from every part of the organization. I think that made a difference. Now the organization understands its own policies and procedures and understands why it has them. If policies are in the way and you don’t understand them, they’ll get ignored.” —Charlie Tennessen of Caledonia Conservancy, Wisconsin
“I think it was a very healthy process and I would recommend it. One feels part of a collection of land trusts that have passed a certain hurdle. It’s made us feel very good. I think it would make other small land trusts feel the same way.”—Clive Gray, Greensboro Land Trust
“There is a lot to gain in the process, even if you are unable to complete it the first try. We postponed our first application when it was clear we needed to work on a number of policies and procedures that were not in place after we began the application process. When we did reapply, we knew far more about what was needed and how to get it done.”—David Bingham, Salem Land Trust
“The stamp of accreditation will allow the organization to grow in the future. A lot of our land’s been donated. Going forward, there’s property we have our eyes on. Once you’re accredited, you can say to prospective donors, ‘Look what we’ve done. We’re a solid organization. We’re going to take care of that land.’ Accreditation helps you sell that idea.”—Charlie Tennessen, Caledonia Conservancy
27 volunteer-led land trusts have achieved accreditation, as of 2015. Will yours be next?

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