

From Good to Great

Feedback from land trusts improves the accreditation and renewal processes

"Five years ago accreditation was known within a small community of land trusts and partners, but the tide is changing. Accreditation is growing in the eyes of our conservation funders, landowners and our membership as a demonstration of our stability and effectiveness," says Jessica McDonald, development director at Greenbelt Land Trust in Oregon, an organization awarded renewed accreditation in 2014. "It really draws the question down to 'are we doing what we say we do?'"

The accreditation program has reached more than 40% of eligible participants since it was founded in 2006. There are now 301 accredited land trusts that protect more than 75% of land and easements held by land trusts.

With two rounds of renewal applications complete, in mid-2014 the Commission wanted to know how well the renewal process worked and how it could be improved. Executive Director Tammara Van Ryn turned to Connie Manes, a land trust expert who works with many land trusts in Connecticut (see p. 14), to help. "I was asked to interview land trusts that had gone through renewal," says Manes, "and provide the Commission with candid feedback."

Commissioners reviewed the interview results along with nearly 30 other data sets at a retreat in late summer 2014. Highlights include the following, and a full report is on the Commission's website:

- Accreditation is achieving its goals; 96% of first-time applicants report the process strengthened their organization

and 63% report it being easier to meet agency/funder requirements.

- Accredited land trusts want the program to remain strong and credible.
- Renewal applicants spend up to 40% less time than first-time applicants on the accreditation application process.
- Some accredited land trusts feel challenged to quantify the return on investment provided by accreditation, noting the benefits are hard to quantify and the time investment is significant.
- Applicants find the Commission's instructional materials overwhelming.
- Renewal identifies and corrects weaknesses that may impact a land trust's ability to uphold the public trust and ensure the permanent protection of land.

To address the findings, the Commission developed a year-long program improvement plan. "It was amazing to participate in the Commission meeting to see how thoughtfully commissioners considered

the data and how creative they were with ideas for improving the program. These volunteers work really hard on behalf of the land trust community," commented Laura Johnson, then vice-chair (and now chair) of the Alliance board who attended the Commission's planning meeting.

Van Ryn notes that the proposed program improvements range from revamping communications materials to modifying accreditation requirements. "We hope that land trusts of all sizes will find the materials easier to understand and navigate when the improvements are complete in 2015." One example of an improvement that saves applicants considerable time is the revised project documentation checklist, which reduces the look-back period for many practices from 10 to five years. This results in less time sifting through records for older documents that may no longer be relevant when evaluating if a land trust is currently meeting the requirements.

The changes make a difference to commissioners as well. "It is really important to me as the executive director of an accredited land trust and as a commissioner that we ask land trusts to provide only the essential data needed to verify if they meet the accreditation requirements," says Molly Doran, executive director of the Skagit Land Trust and a volunteer commissioner. "I see these small program improvements as going a long way to increasing the program's efficiency while maintaining its rigor." 