

BY Rose Jenkins

Land Trust   
 Accreditation Commission  
 An independent program of the Land Trust Alliance

# Getting Accredited, **GROWING STRONGER**

**W**hat's the hardest part about accreditation? The work it takes to get there.  
 What's the best part about accreditation? The work it takes to get there.

When you ask land trust leaders what they gained from accreditation, they talk about various benefits—like credibility with landowners and funders, or readiness for a legal challenge or an audit. But overwhelmingly they say the number one benefit of accreditation is that the process improved how their land trust does its job.

At the Granby Land Trust in Connecticut, board member David Russell says, “We literally had no written policies before we started this process.” Since its founding in 1972, board members had been going about their work fairly informally. Since achieving accreditation, they have checklists and procedures to ensure quality. They also got their files out of founders’ and board members’ basements, collecting them into well-organized, backed-up archives. Russell says, “The quality and accessibility of our records was turned around 180 degrees.”

It took 18 months for the land trust’s board, volunteers and two-person part-time staff to complete the process, but Russell says, “It’s absolutely worth it. It has made us much better.”

At the quasi-governmental Louisville and Jefferson County Environmental Trust in Kentucky, staff used the accreditation process to knock out important tasks that usually got sidelined—like updating older easements, revisiting their policies and organizing their files. Lisa Hite says, “There was a lot of work that we don’t get to do on a day-to-day basis, but because we were putting a concerted effort into accreditation, it forced us to just do it. It’s like you get your adrenaline going and you’re going to get that stuff done!”

Henry Tepper, a former Land Trust Accreditation Commissioner, says that most land trusts working toward accreditation see the challenges as opportunities. He says, “I talk to land trusts all the time who say that it was sometimes very hard, but it caused us


to take a hard look at our internal practices. What we learned caused us to do better.”

Tepper says that the standards of professionalism and quality required for accreditation are increasingly expected of land trusts. “Even though it’s a challenge in terms of time, in terms of organization, in terms of cost, in this day and age it’s a cost of doing business,” he says.

In a recent survey, 100% of newly accredited land trusts reported the process made them stronger. Land trusts applying for renewal also use the opportunity to identify and address significant challenges.

Fortunately, it’s not just land trusts that are improving. The accreditation process is improving too. In response to feedback from land trusts that the process was too cumbersome, the Accreditation Commission made four major changes:

- Easier planning—with a revamped accreditation website
- Straighter path—with fewer steps that take less time
- Lighter load—with reduced documentation requirements
- Better tools—with an improved online renewal application

As a result, on average, land trusts will complete the process 30% faster. Now it’s easier to grow stronger. 

## Accreditation is 30% **LESS WORK.**

The completion of the “Improving the Journey” project keeps accreditation effective while making it more efficient. This saves accredited land trusts time to do what they do best: save the places people love.

