

Connecticut Land Trust Service Bureau

Practice Note #12: Land Trust Staffing

The Land Trust Alliance Year 2000 Census found that staff employed by the nation's non-profit land trusts grew by 82% between 1998 and 2000, a period when the total number of land trusts grew by just 4%. Most new staff are hired on a part-time basis. It's no wonder that so many trusts in the country are hiring staff, given the potential benefits. Staff can help the land trust with a wide variety of activities including:

- Administrative work (e.g., building and maintaining files, managing correspondence and meeting related documentation, keeping important information flowing among board members, etc.),
- Public outreach and education (e.g., preparing brochures, organizing talks by conservation specialists for the membership, addressing local students, etc.),
- Fundraising (managing the membership giving program and maintaining the database, organizing and implementing capital campaigns and special events, foundation research and grant writing, etc.),
- Stewardship (identifying management needs and developing plans, posting boundaries, building and maintaining trails, controlling invasive species, maintaining contact with abutting landowners, regular monitoring of land and easements, and organizing volunteers to assist with all of these),
- Acquisition (identifying priority parcels, carrying out background town hall research, negotiating purchases and donations, etc.).

Staff are often recruited from the land trust's service area. As a part of the community, they can help build the relationships that help to further the activities and objectives of the trust.

Many Connecticut land trusts are resistant to hiring staff, even part-time. In a survey carried out in 1998, only 13% of Connecticut trusts were staffed, compared to 37% in New York and the rest of New England. Recent studies have shown that Connecticut land trusts have lower levels of membership and acquisition than their peers in neighboring states. On average, budgets and endowments are also lower.

Some trusts believe that their work should be all-volunteer, a value that may originate in Connecticut's early pioneering of the land trust concept. They believe that members prefer to see all support dedicated to the acquisition or stewarding of land. In practice though, fees from membership fall far short when it comes to purchasing land in Connecticut's pricey real estate market. Nor will they guarantee that a trust's land and easements are being properly stewarded.

Membership may indeed, if asked, be willing to support a staff person, especially if that person will leverage additional funding and help to ensure good land management practices. An effective staff person will bring in more money than the cost to the trust. As a way to save on costs, trusts can band together and hire staff jointly. This would have the added benefit of helping to promote conservation collaboration across a broader landscape.

Some trusts fear that bringing on staff will dampen the verve of their volunteer board members. At the same time, many land trust directors feel “maxed-out,” claiming “we’re just volunteers – we can’t be expected to do it all.” If managed properly, staff can have a multiplier effect adding leverage to the work of directors and volunteers and keeping the work of committees focused and moving forward. Staff can never do all the work of a trust – this takes a number of people and a wide variety of skills and talents. Staff can be hired to complement and/or fill in gaps in board member skills (e.g. hiring a steward and leaving fundraising as a board function, or vice versa).

Other trusts perceive staff as an administrative burden and an additional legal responsibility. In practice, however, virtually all of Connecticut’s land trust staff have been hired under short term contracts that are easily administered and that confer little associated liability.

The fact is, land trust directors assume a wide array of legal responsibilities when taking on this role (see Practice Note # 2). In some trusts, these responsibilities are not being met. The result could jeopardize the credibility of the land trust movement as a whole (e.g., failure to monitor or enforce easements could lead to a legal challenge and/or ruling that could weaken the use of easements as a conservation tool).

So, is staffing the answer? While it may not be for all trusts, many Connecticut trusts should seriously consider it. Perhaps the most telling justification is the fact that most trusts that have contracted staff have recognized the benefit and are working to keep them on board.

Here are a few suggestions for trusts that do decide to move ahead with hiring staff:

- ◆ Prepare a detailed job description that outlines the tasks to be performed. Be sure that all of the directors on the board are clear about the position and what it will accomplish.
- ◆ List the qualities and qualification that the staff person would need to possess, in order to be successful within your trust.
- ◆ Secure adequate funding for start-up. Keep in mind that, though the staff person can help raise additional funding, it may be unreasonable to expect that a new staff person to cover his or her own cost after just a few months. Expect this to take at least one year in order to avoid disappointment.
- ◆ To attract a good pool of candidates, advertise the job as much as possible. Arrange interviews with several board members and discuss impressions of each candidate and their qualifications as a group. Try to reach consensus on the final selection.
- ◆ Assign one board member to be the staff person’s primary contact and supervisor.
- ◆ Evaluate the position and progress regularly, to keep activities on track and heading for success.

For more information on staffing, refer to Standard 7 of the LTA Standards and Practices, as well as to the information and resources available through the Land Trust Alliance and LTANet.org.

This Practice Note is funded in part through a New England Leadership Grant from the Land Trust Alliance (LTA) Northeast Program underwritten by LTA's generous individual and foundation supporters.