

Connecticut Land Trust Service Bureau

Practice Note #4: Strategic Land Protection

It's no secret – much of Connecticut's open space is disappearing.... In a process that began in the 1950's, our state is becoming increasingly suburbanized. Forests are subdivided and cleared, scarce farmland converted to housing development. The scenic and resource impacts on our state are evident, as well as a cause for concern.

This is a critical time for land trust work. Connecticut land trusts can, to an important degree, help to determine what our state's landscape will look like in the future. At the same time, all lands are not "created equal." Scenic and conservation values vary, and open space acquisitions must be carefully selected. Even then, transactions can be complex and time consuming. To top it off, resources for acquiring open space are limited and difficult to come by. **For these and other reasons, strategic land acquisition is both critical and essential!**

Have a Vision and Map it! Think of your favorite woods, scenic vistas and other open spaces – will they always be there? As we've all probably learned, open space can no longer be taken for granted. *Now more than ever, land trusts need to be proactive. They need to help determine what the future open space in their towns will look like. Every land trust should have a defined process, including written criteria, for selecting qualified land and conservation easement acquisitions (LTA Practice 8A).*

Several approaches to identifying priority lands are available for use by land trusts. Choosing the best approach depends on many considerations, including the organization's objectives and the geographic scale at which it works. Fortunately, trusts can review and adopt prioritization approaches developed by others, in accordance with their needs. A variety of examples will soon be available through LTSB and LTA, for use by trusts seeking to launch a strategic land protection initiative.

Through one simple but effective approach, for example, several trusts in the state are using town tax maps to identify large parcels and/or parcels that abut their current holdings. One objective is to identify lands that, if protected, would increase the effective size of a protected open space, or link open space parcels together within a town or across town lines. In this regard, it is important to consider that planning for and securing open space is easier when carried out before any larger parcels have been subdivided. It is also important to verify that any new acquisitions also confer a conservation value above and beyond just size and location.

Conservation values can vary from trust to trust, depending on the trusts' particular mission, articles of incorporation, etc. (e.g., habitat, scenic, recreational). It is critical that the land trust adopt a set of ***Selection Criteria*** that reflect these values, to guide its acquisitions. These could include, for example:

- ◆ Size and configuration of the parcel
- ◆ Location, including proximity to other protected lands and open space
- ◆ Habitat or biodiversity value
- ◆ Agricultural value
- ◆ Scenic value
- ◆ Water quality/wetlands value
- ◆ Recreational value
- ◆ Cultural/historical value

Criteria not only help to focus the trust on important projects based on their merits: they also help to flag potential problems and issues that might otherwise be overlooked and communicate to landowners about the trust's policies and priorities. In some cases, they can also provide the trust with a justification for saying "no" to certain projects (LTA S&P Guidebook, Practice 8A).

Ranking systems that score criteria can be used to help the land trust establish priorities among a wide range of potentially interesting properties for acquisition. A sample ranking system can be found on LTANet.

Though it is important for each trust to engage in its own internal process of identifying priorities for protection within its service area, land trusts should also participate actively in broader planning initiatives for open space that involve town commissions, land use planning experts, town residents, and other interested parties. Under state statute, all Connecticut towns are required to develop a Plan of Conservation and Development. Land trusts can make significant contributions to these efforts in both the planning and implementation stages. Town Plans of Conservation and Development are key documents when subdivision set-asides are being approved, many of which go to land trusts. They are also useful for IRS approval of easement donations.

When it comes to familiarity with a town's natural resources, land trust directors are often among the top experts. They can contribute key information about important natural resources within the town and can identify places that merit protection. In this regard, it is important for trusts to have knowledge of the natural resources that characterize their holdings. A management or stewardship plan for each holding, however brief a document, should include this information (see Practice Note #6).

In some cases, statewide organizations and agencies have developed data layers and/or identified priority areas for conservation and protection in the state – both land trusts and broader planning initiatives should take advantage of these (e.g., CT Department of Environmental Protection, CT Regional Planning Agencies, The Nature Conservancy, Connecticut Forest and Park Association, Connecticut Audubon, Audubon Connecticut (formerly National Audubon), etc.).

The **Geographic Information System (GIS)** is just one tool for analyzing the complex data needed to design an open space network for a town and generate the corresponding maps. Though full GIS is usually beyond the financial and technical means (and needs) of most Connecticut land trusts, several organizations may be willing and available to provide these services. In open space planning initiatives involving town government, the costs are often covered from the town budget. Again, land trusts can make important contributions to the layers of data and information that go into any GIS analysis.

Identify and prioritize potential acquisitions - Once a potential open space network has been mapped, the land trust can begin to think about which pieces of the puzzle it is best positioned to acquire and manage. There are a range of institutional options available for protecting open space, and all should be considered in order to produce the best outcome (e.g., state or municipal acquisition, land trust acquisition, etc.). Once acquisition targets are identified, land trusts also need to **strategically choose the best option for acquiring and conserving the property** (e.g. fee purchase vs. easement, etc.). For more information, refer to LTA Standard 9.

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.