
Practice 1A: Mission

- The board adopts, and periodically reviews, a mission statement that specifies the public interest(s) served by the organization.
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Practices 1A and 1B are the “planning practices” and specify the need for a clear mission statement and a process, such as a strategic plan, for establishing and evaluating land trust programs. A mission statement is important in that it embodies the work of the land trust and can be used in bylaws, in tax-exempt applications, in fundraising solicitations, and to explain the land trust’s work to the public. It forms the touchstone for the organization. Likewise, some form of forward-looking plan with strategic goals is also essential for a land trust. How complicated this process is, how long it takes and what it encompasses depend on the particular circumstances of each land trust. A young, small land trust may use a simpler and quicker planning process than an established organization with multiple programs and a large staff. In either case, planning enables a land trust to chart its future and ensure that it is able to meet the land protection and stewardship obligations it accepts. Both the mission statement and planning process should reflect the needs and priorities of the constituency the land trust serves.

The Importance of a Clear Mission

All land trusts have an official statement of purpose in their incorporating documents, such as articles of incorporation. This statement usually is, and should be, a broad, general statement crafted to allow the land trust ample freedom in its operations and to comply with state and federal requirements for nonprofit, tax-exempt status. These “official” purposes are necessary and legally binding: the land trust is bound to operate in accordance with them. If the land trust wishes to deviate from its original statement, it must file and get approval from the IRS and appropriate state authority for a change of purpose. This statement either becomes, or is refined to be the land trust’s mission statement.

A clear mission is the cornerstone of a land trust’s success. When board chairs and chief executive officers across the nation were asked to list the characteristics of an effective organization, their most frequent response was: a clear sense of mission accompanied by goals to carry out that mission. *Profiles of Excellence*, a book based on five years of research into what makes nonprofits effective, notes:

For the nonprofit in search of excellence, mission really matters. There is simply no substitute for a clearly focused statement of purpose. Nonprofit groups that give short shrift to their missions will almost always find the going bumpy. Those that invest the time and effort necessary to formulate a sound mission statement build a platform from which to soar.

Why is a clear mission and goals so essential?

- **It keeps the organization on track and harnessed to its public purpose.** Without a clear mission and purposes, and clarity about whom the land trust is serving, the land trust may stray away from its charitable purposes. The land trust may start to serve just a small portion of the community or the interests of one or just a few board members. Because land trusts deal in highly valuable assets, they have a special burden to ensure their operations provide a clear and broad public benefit.
- **It helps ensure the organization's resources are used effectively.** The work to be done in the pursuit of land conservation is endless. Without a clear mission and goals, a land trust may undertake too many unrelated activities or jump from crisis to crisis with little to show in real results. A land trust that keeps itself focused on clear goals will have true achievements to show in the long run.
- **It builds cohesion among board, volunteers, members, and staff (if there is a staff).** People are motivated to work for nonprofits because of their vision of what can be achieved. A clear mission inspires people to work hard for the land trust and helps minimize conflicts and personality differences when they arise. The process of developing that vision is one of the best ways to bring together board and staff.
- **It enhances the organization's image in the community.** For the land trust to win and maintain the support of landowners, donors, members, and public officials, the land trust must be able to convey a simple, consistent, and quickly understood reason for its being—and a firm commitment to achieving the goals it has set for itself.

Developing and maintaining a clear mission takes time and attention. It may never seem as urgent as the next land deal or current fundraising needs. But a clear mission and the goals to achieve it are the key to long-term success, for land acquisitions and fundraising alike.

Peter Drucker, the management guru, defines three “musts” in developing a successful mission statement:

- **Look at strength and performance.** The organization should do better what it already does well (if it is the right thing to do).
- **Look outside at the opportunities, the needs.** Where can the organization, given its resources and what it is competent to do, really make a difference and really set a new standard?
- **Look at what the people in the organization really believe in.** Nothing will be done well unless the people who will be carrying it out are committed to it.

Examples of Mission and Goals Statements

The following are examples of mission and goals statements from the former strategic

plans of three somewhat different land trusts. Note that these mission and goals statements may have changed as these organizations have evolved their programs. The Jackson Hole Land Trust in Wyoming has a typical program heavily focused on land transactions:

Mission: The purpose of the Jackson Hole Land Trust is to protect open space through voluntary, nongovernmental means. The land trust prefers to maintain private ownership as well as the existing historic, scenic, wildlife, and agricultural uses of the land.

Goals: To permanently protect land.

To educate and inform landowners, professional advisors, and the general public about private sector land conservation.

To responsibly steward Land Trust holdings through monitoring and land management.

To build and maintain an effective organization.

The Little Traverse Conservancy in Michigan has a strong land protection program and also operates an environmental education and membership program:

Mission: The purpose of the Little Traverse Conservancy is to protect the natural diversity and beauty of northern Michigan by preserving significant land and scenic areas and by fostering appreciation and understanding of the environment.

Goals: Identify and protect significant and scenic land in northern Michigan by acquiring title or conservation easements.

Manage and monitor preserves and easements, and enforce restrictions to protect natural values.

Provide educational opportunities to foster appreciation and understanding of the environment and encourage conservation of natural resources.

Effectively communicate with members and the public to promote greater involvement in the Conservancy's activities.

Continually improve the effectiveness and involvement of the board, staff, and volunteers.

Obtain and manage funds to carry out the Conservancy's work in a fiscally responsible manner.

The New Jersey Conservation Foundation, a statewide land trust, is a large organization with an ambitious agenda that combines the functions of advocacy, environmental education and land protection:

Mission: The purpose of the New Jersey Conservation Foundation is to promote the conservation of natural resources through open space preservation and through advocating a system of environmental regulation compatible with New Jersey's natural resources.

Goals: To preserve open space in order to protect critical natural ecosystems and to provide for recreational and educational pursuits.

To serve as a recipient of donations, including land, and to acquire land for transfer to other entities in furtherance of natural resource conservation.

To assist government in preserving various types of open space throughout the entire state.

To demonstrate, promote, and publicize new techniques that preserve open space and agricultural lands and encourage appropriate land use.

To advocate laws and regulations designed to promote the conservation of natural resources.

To provide for environmental education through publications and special programs, and to serve as an information and reference center.

To provide liaison among citizen organizations, industry, and governmental agencies concerned with environmental matters.

While these statements do not explicitly state the beneficiaries of their programs, the public benefits are well stated and it is clear these benefits accrue to the general public in the areas in which these trusts operate. Many land trusts add phrases like "for present and future generations" to make it clear that they serve a broad public.

Links to Other LTA Resources

- [You Can Get There From Here: Developing a Vision for Your Land Trust. Rally 2004 Workshop.](#)

Links to Other Helpful Resources

- [Basics of Developing Mission, Vision and Values Statements – Management Assistance Program for Nonprofits .](#)

Helpful Publications

- For further discussion of developing a mission statement and other useful topics, see *Managing the Nonprofit Organization: Principles and Practices*, by Peter F. Drucker, 1992. Published by Harpers Collins Publishers.
- For further discussion of the key elements to nonprofit success, see *Profiles of*

Excellence: Achieving Success in the Nonprofit Sector, by E.B. Knauft, Renee A. Berger, and Sandra T. Gray, 1991. Published by the Independent Sector.

More Examples from Land Trusts

- [Vermont Land Trust – Mission & Outcomes Statements](#)

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