

Collaborating **FOR CONSERVATION**

IN 2006, THREE NEIGHBORING, all-volunteer, 25-year-old land trusts in Maine decided to try something new to facilitate their systems and strengthen their ability to protect lands in their towns and service areas. The Falmouth Land Trust, Chebeague and Cumberland Land Trust and Oceanside Conservation Trust of Casco Bay needed assistance with their administration—filing, mailings, database maintenance and general behind the scenes type of work. Instead of each of them hiring an administrative assistant, they developed the idea of the Portland North Land Trust Collaborative. The trusts signed a memorandum of agreement, received a start-up grant from the Davis Conservation Foundation, and hired me.

Getting Organized

The primary intent of the Collaborative and of my position was clear: help the trusts and the board members with the tasks that keep them from doing the work they are most passionate about: working with their neighbors to steward and conserve their communities' treasured places. My first six months focused on gathering multiple boxes and filing cabinets from basements, libraries and banks all over the area and condensing them at the shared office in downtown Portland. I also spent time cultivating relationships with the board members, attending board meetings and other events. And I learned the ropes of the databases, membership programs and newsletter schedules.

It was clear to me that the strength of the Collaborative lay in the ability to “do more for less.” Developing efficiencies in the tasks was an obvious place to start. A single database to manage all three trusts' membership and protected property information combines the best of the three trusts' information management techniques. Newsletter articles I write are printed in all three newsletters. Best practices are shared between the three trusts, enabling greater organization and effectiveness.

“After years of struggling with competing demands on a volunteer board of trustees, the Collaborative has opened new vistas for

our trust, letting our board concentrate on acquisition and stewarding activities, and enhancing our ability to maintain adequate records and databases and follow through on tasks,” says Sean Mahoney, Collaborative Steering Committee, Falmouth Land Trust. “Just as valuable, if not more so, the Collaborative allows our local trust to look beyond town boundaries and to focus on regional issues, such as wildlife corridors that cross town lines, regional conservation planning, and the benefit of sharing with, and learning from, other land trusts.”

The Next Stage

With the impact of increased efficiency, the incredible commitment of the board members, and the response from the land trust community in Maine, the Collaborative applied for and received grants from the Maine Coast Protection Initiative and the Horizon Foundation for Capacity Building. We were ready to answer the question: what else?

Although the initial purpose of the Collaborative was to assist the trusts administratively, the goal was to encourage regional cross-town boundary conservation defined by watersheds and ecosystems. The mere act of gathering all three boards into the same room laid the groundwork for these conservation projects. Through the “Capacity Building Activity,” which has now spanned

a full year and included three joint board meetings, nine working group meetings and many hours of preparation, coordination and follow-up, we are deep into the next full phase of development.

The newly defined mission of the Collaborative is to strengthen land conservation in the region by coordinating and integrating the goals of the individual member land trusts and developing synergistic collaboration. The Collaborative will work to achieve these goals through developing operating efficiencies in administration, project creation and implementation, and communications with the following three primary objectives: 1) develop and implement a regional conservation plan, 2) help the trusts prepare for and attain accreditation and 3) continue to attend to the administrative needs of the member land trusts.

Conservation Planning and Accreditation

The Portland North Regional Conservation Plan is a two-step process. The first step involves developing an analytical and regional conservation tool comprised of multiple GIS layers and illustrating the conservation values articulated by the member land trusts as represented by the Conservation Planning Working Group. The Center for Community GIS, a program of the Quebec Labrador Foundation's Atlantic Center for the Environment, is partnering with us to gather the data and create the displays. The second step will focus on creating action steps for the member land trusts and the Collaborative to achieve the conservation vision.

“The regional conservation plan that we are developing through the Collaborative fulfills a dream many of us have had for years: build a comprehensive resource map with available data, solicit input from our communities on what they value, and work in partnership with our neighbors to implement an expansive conservation vision,”

BY Christina Soto

A Commonality OF PURPOSE

says Jonathan Labaree, Collaborative Steering Committee, Chebeague and Cumberland Land Trust. “We live on the front lines of sprawl in Maine. If we don’t identify the key places our communities cherish and put a regional plan in place to conserve those resources, we will have let our communities, and our children, down. The challenges we face are regional in nature—our strategy for facing those challenges needs to be as well.”

For accreditation preparation, the Collaborative has been accepted into the pilot Maine Land Trust Excellence Program, which is designed to provide financial assistance to the trusts in their efforts to prepare their individual applications for the Land Trust Accreditation Commission. The Collaborative applied as the coordinator of the three trusts’ efforts with the goal of developing efficiencies in the process, thus reducing the overall time, energy and funding needs. Our hope is that we will be able to share some of our findings with other small lands trusts and collaborations to make the process of preparing for accreditation more accessible.

Going Forward

An ultimate goal of land conservation is the protection of open spaces for ecological, agricultural, recreational and cultural reasons. It seems to me that another very important goal has to be focused on attracting and involving as many people as possible in the effort to accomplish the above goal. These three land trusts are deeply rooted in their communities—protected properties are next door, volunteers’ names are familiar and events are local in location and theme. The work of the Collaborative, while building the partnership and realizing the potentials of working collaboratively, is simultaneously strengthening the trusts’ ability to work with, and in, their communities.

At the inaugural Board Member Summit at Rally 2008 in Pittsburgh, 100 board members from land trusts across the country gathered to discuss topics of shared concern.

Sitting in small groups focused on one specific topic, conversations ranged from the opportunities and challenges of all-volunteer and small-staffed land trusts; building a better board; fundraising and constituent building; strategic and long-term planning; self-evaluation and assessment; conservation defense; diversity; collaboration and more!

“I enjoyed hearing the best practices and experiences from a broad nationwide group, and I am energized by the commitment of a whole room full of board members,” said Stephanie Amick of the Hawaii Island Land Trust.

Other board members echoed her assessment, reporting:

“I gained insight into solutions to common problems.”

“I have a better understanding of current concerns for conservation easements.”

“Through discussion about board dynamics with other board members I was able to test my thoughts in a safe place out loud.”

The special daylong session was a first of its kind. Open exclusively to board members, the goal was “to help these leaders, who have the legal and fiduciary responsibility for the future of our land

trust movement, address the biggest challenges facing private land conservation in America,” said Land Trust Alliance Director of Education Renee Kivikko.

To that end, the day also included national briefings from Land Trust Alliance President Rand Wentworth and Alliance board members Peter Hausmann, Sherry Huber and Peter Welles. They outlined current trends in conservation and asked board members to prepare for big issues on the horizon.

The successful Board Summit will become a regular part of Rally. Asked what they would do with what they learned, board members listed, among other things, taking it to their board retreat; discussing a five-year strategic plan on future focus of the board; and implementing a board member orientation program. One particularly impressed board member said he was going to “Race home and implement the knowledge ASAP!”

John Willis, of the Oconee River Land Trust in Georgia, summed up his thoughts this way: “The next decade is critical for the land trust movement and it is for my own organization as well. The meeting suggested several useful ideas for restructuring and motivating the board and its members.”

WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU! WHAT ISSUES WOULD YOU LIKE THE ALLIANCE TO HELP YOU ON, AS A BOARD MEMBER? E-MAIL SAVINGLAND@LTA.ORG

President Lisa Hageman accepts Colchester Land Trust’s award for 100% participation in the Land Trust Board Member Challenge. Forty-four land trusts were recognized for their success in the Challenge during lunch at the Board Member Summit.



“The whole is greater than the sum of its parts” says Roger Berle, Collaborative Steering Committee, Oceanside Conservation Trust of Casco Bay. “My land trust holds land and easements solely on off-shore islands, so, in a sense, we constitute a virtual island unique among our peer mainland trusts. Our islands and our holdings tend to be more finite than mainland conservation parcels, making them both more visible and more vulnerable; perhaps, then, we are the proverbial ‘canary.’ We can and must readily see and judge whatever happens on and to them. And yet we are part of a larger ‘universe.’ Wind, (fresh) water, and visitors come to our properties from the mainland and all influence our lands and our lives. It is only sensible, then, that we acknowledge these influences and proactively address them through collaborating constructively with mainland organizations. Through such collaboration we can inform partners who can assist in developing more global understanding of issues unique to islands.”

Will these three trusts become one regional trust? That is a question out on the table, but it is not the assumed outcome. Certainly there is a model for that approach, and there are strong arguments for it as well: efficiency in programs, staff and funds; streamlined decision-making and priority setting; stability in the present and the future.

However, as long as we keep our eye on the future and build our capacity today, we are headed in the right direction—protected land well stewarded by a strong base of volunteers supported by sustainable organizations with deep roots in the community. 🌱

Jonathan Labaree, Sean Mahoney and Roger Berle served on the founding Steering Committee of the Collaborative, dedicating many volunteer hours over two years to this initiative.

CHECK OUT *THE COLLABORATION HANDBOOK* SOLD BY THE LAND TRUST ALLIANCE: WWW.LTA.ORG/PUBLICATIONS.



Board Member Challenge

These land trusts have succeeded at achieving 100% participation or a minimum of 50% participation since the last issue of the magazine. To see all successful groups, learn more about the Challenge or get your board involved, contact Suzanne Erera (serera@lta.org, 202-638-4725, ext. 324) or visit www.landtrustalliance.org.

100%



50% +

New York Agricultural Land Trust

Upstate Forever



Renewed their success in this category:

Ausbon Sargent Land Preservation Trust
 Boxford Trails Association/Boxford Open Land Trust
 Dutchess Land Conservancy
 Feather River Land Trust
 Genesee Valley Conservancy
 Kiawah Conservancy
 Land Trust for Santa Barbara County
 Land Trust for Tennessee

Palmer Land Trust
 River Fields
 Scenic Hudson Land Trust
 Six Rivers Regional Land Conservancy
 Southbury Land Trust
 Teton Regional Land Trust
 Walkkill Valley Land Trust
 Willistown Conservation Trust

www.landtrustalliance.org