

Land Trust Standards and Practices



Guidelines for the Responsible Operation of a Land Trust

The Land Trust Standards and Practices are widely accepted ethical and technical guidelines for the responsible operation of a land trust.

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Introduction

The [Land Trust Standards and Practices](#) (Standards) are operational guidelines for land trusts. They are designed to help organizations operate in an ethically and technically sound manner. The Standards reflect the values and concerns expressed by many voices in the land trust community.

The Standards consist of 12 broad principles, which are divided into 59 practices and 188 practice elements that describe the actions required to meet the Standards. The practice elements vary in their focus—ethics, legalities, running an effective organization, supporting the land trust movement as a whole, optimizing public relations, and more.

The Standards are guidelines; there are many ways for a land trust to implement the practices, depending on the size and scope of the organization.

The Standards provide multiple layers of benefits:

- The concrete, widely accepted guidelines help *individual land trusts* operate responsibly and successfully.
- The *land trust community* as a whole gains credibility from its constituent land trusts continuously

striving towards conformance with high standards of behavior.

- The *public* benefits from the quality of conservation achieved by well-run organizations.

The [Land Trust Alliance](#) (LTA) originally developed the Standards in 1989 with the encouragement of land trusts, recognizing that a strong land trust community depends on the credibility and effectiveness of all its members. LTA has revised the Standards over the years to incorporate the insight of hundreds of conservation leaders from across the country; the most recent revision process took place in 2017.

More than 1,000 land trusts have adopted the Standards.

Who Should Use the Standards?

The Pennsylvania Land Trust Association strongly encourages all organizations that acquire land or easements for conservation purposes to adopt the Standards as their guiding principles and take steps to bring their operations into alignment with the Standards.

In addition, local governments may find Standards 8 through 12, which pertain to land and easement transactions and stewardship issues, useful in shaping their land protection programs.

Adopting the Standards

To be eligible for LTA membership and its attendant benefits, a land trust must adopt the Standards.

A land trust does not need to have fully implemented all of the practices in order to adopt the Standards. For LTA purposes, adopting the Standards means that:

- The land trust has reviewed the Standards.
- The land trust agrees that the Standards are the technical and ethical guidelines for the responsible operation of a land trust.
- The last trust's board of directors commits to implementing the Standards as guidelines for the organization's operations.

LTA provides the specific wording to be contained in a [board resolution](#) adopting the Standards.

For more information, visit the Standards and Practices page under "For Land Trusts" on the LTA [website](#).

Implementing the Standards

Implementing the practices outlined in the Standards helps land trusts be effective in their conservation work and remain stable over time. It requires a comprehensive review of organizational procedures and practices and the commitment to make the modifications necessary to come into alignment with the Standards.

LTA offers tools to assist organizations seeking to implement the Standards. These include guides, workshops, and webinars, and resources at [The Learning Center](#) (available to LTA members).

The Pennsylvania Land Trust Association can provide Pennsylvania land trusts with various levels of technical assistance to help organizations understand organizational deficiencies vis-à-vis the Standards and take steps to implement practices. The Association has offered most of the Standards curriculum courses at the Pennsylvania Land Conservation Conference and stand-alone seminars and will continue to present these courses. Stay tuned to [ConserveLand.org](#) to find out about upcoming events.

2017 Revisions

The 2016-2017 revision process, the first since the 2004 revision, involved input from land trust leaders all

across the country (more than 1,600 comments were submitted), and resulted in changes to the format and content of the Standards. See the changes (as highlighted by PALTA) in this [version](#) of the 2017 Standards.

The [Land Trust Accreditation Commission](#) will fully integrate the 2017 edition of the Standards into its accreditation system by 2019. Most of the core indicators will remain the same; low-risk or redundant indicators will be removed, while additional indicators in high-risk areas will be added.

How Does a Board's Exercise of Judgment Intersect with the Standards?

The board of directors of the Pennsylvania Land Trust Association, acting on the unanimous recommendation of PALTA's 29-member policy advisory committee, directly addressed this question in an open communication to the land trust community dated September 13, 2016:

Previously adopted organizational policies, Land Trust Standards and Practices (S&P), and other codes of behavior are no substitute for board judgment as applied to specific circumstances. These policies and codes provide crucial guidance to boards and often reflect decades of collective wisdom applicable to most situations. However, a board may reasonably—and sometimes must—act contrary to these adopted policies and other rules in order to responsibly direct the land trust. Land trust board members and staff should understand that in adopting organizational policies, including commitments to follow S&P, the Accreditation Commission's Requirements Manual, or other codes, they must not cede their ultimate decision-making responsibility as applied to specific circumstances.

This is not to say that deviating from adopted policies and codes is a trivial matter; it most certainly is not. Before a board or staff chooses to act contrary to adopted policies or codes of behavior, they should first deliberate whether to do so.

They should consider whether short-lived benefits, wishful thinking, or groupthink might be clouding their judgment; they should consider undesirable precedents they might inadvertently be setting; they should consider whether consultation with someone outside the organization is desirable.

If ultimately, a decision is made to deviate, the board or staff should (in most situations) document the reasons for the decision—to ensure rigor in the analysis and help future boards and staff understand the organization’s past actions. (This may also be necessary in regards to indicator practices if the land trust is accredited or will seek accreditation.)

View the complete text of the communication at http://conservationtools.org/library_items/1435.

Resources at ConservationTools.org

To find more information on the topics covered by this guide, see the right column of the on-line edition at <http://conservationtools.org/guides/14>

Submit Comments

Help improve the next edition of this guide. Email your suggestions to the Pennsylvania Land Trust Association at aloza@conserveland.org. Thank you.

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