

Nonprofit Name Change



Sometimes it makes sense for a nonprofit to change its name to better reflect its mission and work, distinguish itself from other organizations, or otherwise improve its marketing.

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When, Why, and How to Change

These resources explain which circumstances may (or may not) prompt an organizational name change, factors to consider when going through the process, tips for choosing a new name, and how to change an organization's legal name with the appropriate authorities.

Some nonprofits hire a consultant to navigate all or a portion of the process, while others handle it internally.

Time for a Name Change?

["The Art of the Rebrand: When, Why, and How to Rebrand Your Nonprofit"](#)

["Time for Your Nonprofit to Change its Name?"](#)

["Does Your Nonprofit Need a New Name?"](#)

["Nonprofits, Aiming for Relevance, Try on New Names"](#)

["Does Your Nonprofit Need a Rebrand?"](#)

Choosing a New Name

["5 Ways to Ensure Your Nonprofit's New Name Hits the Mark"](#)

["How to Create a Memorable Nonprofit Name"](#)

["Choose a Name for Your Nonprofit"](#)

["Choosing a Nonprofit Name: 4 Key Areas to Consider"](#)

Legal Considerations

[IRS webpage about name changes for exempt organizations](#)

["Name Changes: How to Do it Right"](#)

["How to Change a 501\(c\)\(3\) Corporation's Name"](#)

["Be Judicious If Your Name is Fictitious: Tips for Nonprofits Using DBAs"](#)

New Name, New Logo

In many cases, nonprofits choose to create a new logo as part of the name change process; since names and logos are closely connected components of an organization's brand, it makes sense to change them at the same time. These articles offer tips and inspiration for designing effective logos. (Even if a nonprofit hires a designer to create its logo, understanding key design principles can help the organization work with the designer.)

["Charity Branding Tips: A Logo Design Guide for Nonprofits"](#)

["25 Powerful Nonprofit Logos, Deconstructed"](#)

["7 Stellar Nonprofit Logos to Learn From"](#)

["75 Best Nonprofit Logos: Does Your Logo Communicate Your Mission?"](#)

["50 Best Nonprofit Logos"](#)

Rollout of New Name

Once a nonprofit decides to change its name, it needs to formulate a plan for the rollout of the new name (and, often, a new logo to accompany the name). There are several questions to consider, including:

- When will the organization officially make the switch?
- How will it inform its supporters, the media, and other stakeholders of the new name?

- Anything with the organization’s old name (websites, print materials, property signs, etc.) will have to be updated. What needs to be updated and immediately and what can wait?

For many organizations, especially those with a long track record and significant community presence, it can take months or years before the new name fully catches on with media and the public (and even then, some people will likely continue using the old name). Organizations with large staffs can sometimes also have trouble getting employees to use the new name consistently.

See [“How to Build Support for a New Name”](#) as well as the firsthand insight in the next section for advice about ensuring a smooth, effective transition to the new name.

Observations by Organization Leaders

Several Pennsylvania conservation organizations have gone through the process of changing their names. Below, four people involved in the efforts share their observations.

Berks Nature

(formerly Berks County Conservancy)

Quoting executive director Kim Murphy in 2019:

For years we encountered confusion about our name: people called us a conservatory and confused us with the county or with the conservation district. We hired Crossroads Studios (CS) to help us evaluate this issue. CS conducted numerous focus groups drilling down to what people recognized about our work and what resonated in the field. They cross referenced these opinions and information with hard data on language that resonates with people regarding the environment.

If your organization is considering a name change, I highly recommend working with a consultant on this process; this ensured that there was some strategic evaluation and selection of our new brand. CS looked at things that we never would have seen on our own. In the end, our name change to Berks Nature has served us well, elevating people’s understanding of who we are and what we do.

Lancaster Conservancy

(formerly Lancaster County Conservancy)

Quoting director of urban greening Fritz Schroeder in 2019:

We dropped the “county” from our name for several reasons:

- Our name has too many letters and is a lot of letters without “county.”
- The full name and logo was hard to read on most signage where the logo is reduced in size to a 50-cent piece.
- “County” is inferred in the name already.

We were entering our 50th year and knew we needed to update our brand. The old logo disappeared on signage (was very hard to read) and the design element or mark was confusing to look at (forest, stream, and tree). We wanted and needed something that was updated. We were willing to think and design outside the box.

We decided we didn’t want a logo that included blues and greens, because it seems like everyone has done that. Ultimately our new logo really isn’t outside the box. It is modern and timeless and lends itself to multiple applications (with trees, without trees, using individual trees as standalone elements).

We put together a subcommittee to oversee the process. We worked with our longtime design firm on multiple designs and parsed it down to the new logo. (We had already made the decision to remove “county” [based on the information above]).

Natural Lands

(formerly Natural Lands Trust)

Quoting senior director of communications Kirsten Werner in 2019:

Essentially, the name change was part of a larger, holistic rebranding process. During the rebranding discussions, we decided we wanted to update our logo to make it more graphic and weighty. So if we were going to change our name, this was the time, as we knew we’d be (slowly) updating all of our signage, printed materials, truck decals, and electronic content.

As Natural Lands has increased name recognition in the communities where we work, we've broadened our audience from not just folks in the know when it comes to conservation. We now regularly communicate with people who enjoy going for a hike on one of our preserves, or who follow us on social media to see awesome photos of butterflies and sunsets. These new supporters may not know a whole lot about the work we do to preserve open space. The word "trust" to laypeople connotes a bank, not a conservation nonprofit! (In fact, in preparing a PowerPoint for our board, I created a slide with all the various local financial institutions with the word "trust" in their names. It was rather visually compelling to see them all.) So, we simplified the name by dropping the word "trust" (though our legal name is still Natural Lands Trust, Inc.). We decided not to make a big deal about it. The only thing we did was add a wrap around the first edition of our magazine after the rebrand with the new name/logo and the phrase "Our name is smaller. Our work is bigger than ever." We did the same with a temporary pop-up on our website. The result from our members and supporters? A pleasingly insignificant response... just a few folks asking why and seeming quite satisfied with the answer. If you're contemplating a rebranding, it would be helpful to consider:

- **Budget:** You'd be shocked by how much stuff has your name on it and how much time and money it takes to change it all.
- **Patience:** It will be years before we update everything.
- **Work on a [DBA](#)** [doing business as paperwork] in advance. Our contracts still all have "Natural Lands Trust" on them because we neglected to coordinate a DBA ahead of time.

WeConservePA

(formerly Pennsylvania Land Trust Association)

Quoting executive director Andy Loza in 2021:

We started our re-branding effort with unanimity that our branding needed an overhaul but differing opinions as to whether a name change was in order. I'm not sure whether it was because of the third-party, expert perspective

brought by our branding consultant or people engaging more deeply in thinking and talking through the issues, but board and policy advisory committee members quickly came to see that our old name wasn't doing us any favors. The question then became: "can we find a better name that's worth the effort and cost of making the change and that we can all agree on?" Our consultant performed crucial work in intensively interviewing several dozen individuals about the organization and ultimately arriving at recommendations. Our ultimate choice—WeConservePA—hadn't been on anyone's radar screen until introduced by the consultant.

Once the best name option became clear, I spent a tremendous amount of time talking to the organization's members and stakeholders one by one about the proposed change. Since we are a member organization, it was necessary to have the members vote on the proposed change. Probably because we presented a compelling case and had prepared well, members voted in favor with only one dissenting vote.

We held off on announcing the name change until we had our new logo and other branding elements in place. We announced the name change via an email, our website, and a wrapper around our mailed annual program report. The key components were letters from the chair and me laying out the reasoning and process behind the change and a design featuring our new logo and other branding elements. Once we announced the change, we did not look back (although we will be updating our many previously published materials with the new name and branding for years to come).

Wissahickon Trails

(formerly Wissahickon Valley Watershed Association)

Quoting executive director Gail Farmer in 2021:

In recent years, we increasingly heard feedback that our name was a barrier to reaching new audiences. Our stagnant membership numbers were evidence supporting that feedback. The primary barrier was that for our name to be meaningful, a person had to understand what a watershed

is. We worked with consultants who conducted interviews and surveys and it became clear that a change was needed. Our rebranding effort included a new DBA (“doing business as”) name, logo, branded color palette, standard fonts, brand voice, and an entirely new website.

We conducted interviews with stakeholders, formed an *ad hoc* Branding Advisory Committee that included internal and external stakeholders, talked to peer organizations who had undergone name changes, and held workshops with board and staff. One of the challenges for us was that, owing to the breadth of our mission, we struggled to find a name that did not include jargon (like “conservancy” or “land trust” or “watershed”) but still reflected the full scope of our work. We eventually decided that our new brand name would be Wissahickon Trails, as trails are what connect people with every aspect of our mission. For example, when we protect open space, trails are how we share that work with the public. We decided to create a tagline to convey the breadth of our work: “Connecting land, water, and people.”

During this process, we learned how important our original name is to many of our stakeholders. To address this, we pivoted from calling our effort a “name change” to calling it a “rebrand” and emphasizing that our legal name will remain Wissahickon Valley Watershed Association. Not only was this adjustment more accurate, it helped some people accept the change.

The most important lesson we learned was to talk to people every step of the way. Constituents become attached to names, logos, materials—especially when your organization has been around since 1957. Rebranding is a great opportunity to invest in actions that deepen your relationship with your supporters. One of the things we did that really paid off was creating a tiered rollout process so that all our constituents, individually, heard about the rebrand from us first, before we made our public launch. We wanted folks to feel good about being in-the-know, and we wanted them to be ambassadors and help spread the word.

The latest version of this guide and related resources are posted at [WeConservePA.org](https://www.WeConservePA.org).

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