

Northcentral Pennsylvania Conservancy
Pre-Planning Report
September 10, 2004

Background

This report is a synthesis of information gathered from several sources and is intended to highlight key issues facing the growth and development of Northcentral Pennsylvania Conservancy. The report draws information gathered from personal interviews, focus group meetings, a board discussion and a review of the organization's materials.

The purpose of this document is to initiate a discussion among the board members and other retreat participants on the issues and opportunities facing the Conservancy. While the process of collecting this information was extensive, it was by no means exhaustive. This information provides only opinions – nothing was done to verify or validate the opinions contained within the report. Therefore, the information should be seen as merely a starting point for discussion. The most important keys to the organization's decisions will come from the discussions that retreat participants elicit from this report.

Conservation Issues Facing the Region

"We have inadequate land use controls to achieve the protection of our natural resources."

"We really have an attitude problem. We live in such beautiful surroundings that people take it for granted."

"We need more open space – I don't care where it is or what kind it is. You can never have too much."

"People don't know they have a role in keeping this place nice. If people knew what was happening and how they could get involved, they would."

"As a culture, we've hit a wall. We've always looked at natural resources as raw materials. We need to shift our fundamental belief system to protect these natural resources."

"When do collective rights trump individual rights?"

Among the participants in the pre-planning process, several key issues emerged as very important for consideration by the Board and other retreat participants.

The biggest challenge facing the character of our communities is *sprawl and the pattern of development*. This part of Pennsylvania has the unique distinction of having negative growth **and** sprawl, with people moving out of the cities and into the rural areas. Housing patterns are consuming larger tracts with nicer, larger homes. With a growing market for trophy homes, people are being priced out of their communities.

With this development pattern, there is an inadequate governmental response. Some of the most significant issues were tied to the *inadequacy land-use controls, including planning and zoning*. Some parts of the region do have good comprehensive planning, while other parts lack any plans at all. Planning agencies need to be led to ensure the necessary follow-through.

While creating good plans by itself is a challenge, *integrating the plans into the decision-making process is even more difficult*. Zoning and other ordinances to ensure effective planning are not readily accepted, and in some cases, are greeted with open hostility. Much like planning, some communities have good comprehensive zoning programs, and some have none at all. Communities desperate for economic growth are unwilling to restrain development when it comes.

Part of the challenge for conservation is the *lack of a perceived threat*. With more than 77% of the area forested, the incremental impacts of insidious development are not obvious until it is too late. People are not looking at the incremental loss until there is a substantial change in the character of their communities.

One need tied to this issue was a more *coordinated pattern of conservation* focused on greenways and habitat corridors. Such connections would be more valuable conservation activities, and would do much to accomplish more with limited resources. It could be important to accomplish multiple community objectives, including water resource protection and land conservation.

Local municipalities have primary control and rarely collaborate. Counties have little authority of key decisions. Leaders are reluctant to work together and lack important tools to do their job. As a result, any development is seen as good development regardless of the impact or cost of such decision.

The pressure created by sprawl in the region is not driven by tremendous population growth, as it is in many communities in the country. In this region, pressure to move to the undeveloped areas stems from *continued decay of the urban core*. Many felt that downtown redevelopment lies at the pressure to consume more pristine lands for new development.

Water resource protection continues to emerge as a regional and state priority. The Conservancy may need to develop specific strategies on how to merge the land conservation and water resource protection efforts. Significant new regulations are coming from the Department of Environmental Protection that could focus attention on the conservation of stream corridors. In addition, regulations on water quality and sedimentation, including “total minimum daily loads” (TMDLs), could have a very large impact.

Forest management has been deteriorating in recent years. Forestry activities have focused on removing the highest quality trees, leaving weaker, poorer valued timber behind. The net impact is a loss of ecological value and viability because of the removal of the healthiest parts of the forest. Forest preservation issues may be among the most important focuses for the Conservancy.

The *mine-scarred lands* of the region could be a resource for development growth, but the reclamation costs have made them prohibitive for new development projects. Finding a way to

reclaim these lands, while focusing development into these areas, could provide a significant win-win benefit to the communities.

Hunting clubs were seen as landowners with great opportunity to develop shared benefits with the Conservancy. These groups have aging memberships and significant populations that provide great opportunity. Their lands are considered community open space, but they will not continue to be so if some degree of conservation is not implemented.

The Conservancy was perceived as well regarded and with a history of doing good conservation work. Yet the extent of that *perception is fairly limited*. Not that many people in the community understand conservation and land trust strategies. It remains a difficult challenge to get the message out to the public.

Other items mentioned through the process include:

- Continued perception that environmental and conservation groups are trying to take away property rights.
- Deer herd populations are destroying habitat and diminishing the health of the forests.
- Schools could be more engaged in conservation work. Liability concerns and costs prevents schools from taking field trips, as they once did.
- A bond package could be coming from the Governor's office soon.
- The availability of water may be a growing issue if development continues pace.

Many *trends* were identified that might have significant influence on the work of the Conservancy. While the Conservancy probably can't change the direction of these trends, it can make plans to address these influences.

- Counties are funding open space measures in other parts of the state. Similar efforts could follow in this region as the perceived need to conserve land increases.
- The current state administration has a strong focus on tourism, rural parks and forests. The state is likely to put a lot of money in economic development efforts that expand natural resource protection.
- Property values are changing by the month.
- The related transfer of wealth that is coming in the next 20 years could have huge financial potential to land conservation.
- The exodus of 18-24 year olds is tremendous – Pennsylvania has the largest “brain drain” in the country.
- The number of people who hunt is dwindling rapidly. These people were connected to the outdoors and committed to conservation. Younger people without that connection may not have that commitment.

- Changes in the field of conservation are coming. IRS regulations and potential legislation emanating from the Senate Finance Committee may significantly change the face of conservation in the coming decade.
- There is a continued exodus from education as teachers retire. This provides an opportunity for the land Conservancy to recruit a strong, motivated volunteer pool.

Advice to the Conservancy

“The Conservancy needs to bring people together and figure out where they can partner. It can be a facilitator of many different interests.”

“The Pine Creek area is very important. I’m totally in favor of concentration on that area.”

“Always try to think ‘out of the box.’ It can really help.”

“Easements alone won’t save landscapes. Saving 10 acres here and there won’t do it.”

“Until the Conservancy came along, there wasn’t anything we could do.”

There was no lack of advice on the direction the organization should take as it plans to move forward. Below is some of the most consistent advice offered to the Conservancy.

Programmatic Recommendations

1. **Make one-on-one contact with landowners on a proactive basis.** Local landowners are much more willing to do something voluntarily on their land than have it imposed by law. This is a critical niche for the Conservancy, facilitating the efforts of landowners to protect their land. It is also critical that the organization demonstrate that it is accomplishing more than just fundraising.
2. **Link conservation with other important community priorities, including water resource protection.** Implement a proactive conservation program driven by a comprehensive land conservation plan that addresses a variety of community priorities, including protection of ridgetop views, riparian habitat, trail buffers, old growth and fragile ecosystems. Engage in focused conservation efforts on the Susquehanna and Pine Creek Watersheds. Consider getting involved in acid mine clean-up and redevelopment.
3. **Raise awareness within the public about conservation and the benefits it holds for the community.** Very important to draw the many different viewpoints into the discussion. The Conservancy needs to facilitate participation by the many stakeholders, and not be exclusionary with who influences conservation efforts in the region. Private landowners may be the single most important audience. Others include estate planners, attorneys and bankers.
4. **Get involved in planning efforts that can support conservation.** Work with the planning community and stay engaged in the planning efforts of others. Take a proactive role in open space planning and ensure it gets implemented. Work to shift attitudes and improve enactment of regulations and plans. Convene critical players and facilitate their participation in planning and long-term community decision-making.

5. **Help bring legitimacy to the conservation efforts of others, particularly the counties and the state.** Through advocacy and partnering, the Conservancy can help extend its reach to support the work of local and state agencies focused on conservation efforts.

Organizational Recommendations

6. **Continue to evolve the board toward a governing role.** The board and staff have grown the organization together. As the staff becomes more capable and complete, the board needs to emphasize its role as a governing leader. The group in particular can focus on growing its fundraising leadership and individual involvement in building the financial health of the organization. As part of this process, continue to clarify the role of the board and the staff related to both governance and management.
7. **Grow the capacity of the staff to lead the organization.** Current staff has strong talents and skills to support the work of the Conservancy, but the functions are spread across too few people. Increasing the capacity of the staff to cover all of the conservation, stewardship, outreach, fundraising and administrative functions is essential.
8. **Continue to grow the annual giving program.** The Conservancy needs to develop sources to match state funding for conservation. Building this source of unrestricted revenue may be very important. The program needs focus and structure to take it to the next level, and leadership from both board and staff to make it successful. The anticipated fundraising plan should be very important in guiding these activities.
9. **Find permanent funding to support activities unlikely to be grant funded.** The Conservancy's advocacy and facilitator role is essential, but is more difficult to fund than its direct conservation work. Through an endowment or similar means, the Conservancy needs to find the funding to ensure its ongoing role in less direct but still important conservation activities.
10. **Develop good and clear financial information at the core of the organization.** Be very clear where the organization is financially, and use that as part of the decision-making process.
11. **Clarify and communicate what the purpose of the Conservancy is.** Clarify the role of the group toward issues like riparian protection, open space protection and other environmental issues. Increase awareness about conservation in general, and the work of the Conservancy in particular.

Critical Issues for Strategic Planning

Based on this input, several fundamental issues emerge that must be addressed by the Board at the retreat. These questions become the starting point for our discussion, which can be expanded as necessary to provide direction to the development of a more specific strategic plan. The list of critical issues and their priority will be discussed at the beginning of the retreat session.

1. What is the most appropriate pro-active focus for our conservation program? Where should we target our acquisition and easement work? What criteria will we apply to the opportunistic conservation efforts to complement our proactive agenda?
2. What should our role be in the community issues strongly related to conservation, including regional planning, water quality protection and mining land restoration? These

issues have a very direct role in the pace and direction of development. Should we have a role in tying them to conservation efforts?

3. How can we best build the profile of conservation in the community? How can we build the profile of the Conservancy as a key partner and problem solver in the community?
4. How can we grow the capacity of the organization to better meet the challenges we face? Can we involve others more completely in the governing processes? How might we move our staff to a greater level of specialization, and thus a greater level of effectiveness?

Questions in the Focus Groups and Interviews

The following questions were used as a guideline for gathering information from the focus group participants and interviewees. Not all of the participants were asked all of these questions, but all of the questions did get asked through the process.

1. What do you see as the most important conservation issues facing our region? How important are these issues compared to other community priorities?
2. What overall niche or role should the Conservancy play in the protection and management of lands in our region? How broad should its scope be?
3. Currently the Conservancy works in a region that includes the following areas (show a map). What do you see as the most important lands to protect within this region? Is there any land or any area that in particular should be protected?
4. How well recognized is the work of the Conservancy? How is the organization perceived within the community?
5. What trends – political, economic, social, technological or philanthropic – are most important for the Conservancy to consider as it plans for the future? How will these trends affect the work of the Conservancy?
6. What one or two critical issues must the Conservancy address as it plans for the next five years?
7. Are there any other ideas or suggestions you have for the Board as it moves into its strategic planning?

Questions from the Needs Assessment Questionnaire and Discussion

The following questions were included in the board questionnaire.

I. Board Governance

1. Do all board members know and understand the mission of your organization?
2. Do all board members understand their personal liabilities and legal responsibilities?
3. Is the board's time spent developing and setting policies for the organization rather than on day-to-day operations?
4. Is the current size of the board appropriate for accomplishing its work?
5. Is the organization able to draw in capable people when vacancies exist, keeping the complement of board positions at full capacity?
6. Does the organization have set procedures for electing board members and officers, and for staggered terms of members and term limits?
7. Does a nominating committee develop criteria for recruiting and selecting new board members, based on the current needs of the board?
8. Does your organization have an orientation for new board members that covers roles and responsibilities as well as specifics about your programs?
9. Does the organization provide training for all board members, future officers and committee chairs?
10. Are members recognized and appreciated for their contributions and accomplishments?
11. Are materials such as the agenda, minutes of the last meeting, and background reports mailed to board members before the board meeting?
12. Does the board have effective working committees, such as finance, fundraising, personnel and community relations, that report regularly to the board?
13. Do the committees include both board and non-board members?
14. Are committee members provided with job descriptions?
15. Do board members have a good record of attendance at board and committee meetings?
16. Is there a clear process of conducting discussions and making decisions at meetings?
17. Does the meeting agenda state clearly the purposes of the meeting?
18. Do officers, chairs and board members understand their roles during meetings?
19. Is time spent on discussion, prior to action, appropriate?
20. Are all members, including new members, encouraged in board and committee meetings to present their views, opinions and ideas on both old and new business?
21. Does your organization have a positive climate, enabling people of diverse perspectives to resolve differences and remain involved?
22. Does your organization identify the skills and interests of all members in order to maximize the volunteer satisfaction in board roles and assignments?
23. Are routine matters requiring board action handled efficiently during meetings?

II. Planning and Evaluation

24. Does your organization have a systematic planning process?
25. Does the planning process draw in stakeholders from beyond the board to provide input and direction to the planning decisions of the organization?
26. Does the board develop realistic goals and effective strategies that support the mission and values of the organization?
27. Does your organization identify measurable results and time frames for achieving them?
28. Do the plans include project work plans that specify who is responsible for implementation?
30. Does your organization evaluate its programs, based on objectives and work plans?
29. Is evaluation built into the planning process?
31. Do the evaluations result in a positive, constructive context for improving effectiveness throughout the organization?

III. Personnel

32. Does your organization have written personnel policies, periodically reviewed by the board to keep them up-to-date and in compliance with legal requirements?
33. Does the board have a personnel committee?
34. Does the executive director have a written, realistic job description?
35. Is the executive director evaluated by the board at least once a year?
36. Does the board recognize its obligation to provide a reasonable salary and benefits package to its staff members?
37. Are the executive director, board president and board members clear about their roles, responsibilities and authority?
38. Does the board assume sole responsibility for setting policy?
39. Does the executive director assume responsibility for implementing the policies and administering the internal operations of the organization?
40. Are the relationships between board members and staff members characterized by openness, Conservancy and mutual respect?
41. If board members also serve as program volunteers, do they understand the different lines of authority for the two roles?

IV. Fundraising

42. Does the board understand its responsibility for ensuring that the organization has sufficient financial resources to conduct its operations?
43. Does the board have an active fundraising committee?
44. Does your organization have a fundraising plan that identifies the sources and uses of funds, focuses on diverse funding sources, etc.
45. Does the board participate in a variety of fundraising activities, including directly asking key donors for support?
46. Is fundraising a component of board recruiting criteria?

V. Financial Decision Making

47. Do board members understand their roles as community trustees who are legally responsible for the finances of the organization?
48. Does your board have a finance committee to oversee all of the organization's finances and make regular reports to the board?
49. Is the annual budget developed to reflect the purposes, values, and program priorities of the organization?
50. Does the board approve the annual budget?
51. Do all members understand the financial reports and balance sheets so that they are comfortable asking questions?
52. Has your organization established internal controls necessary to safeguard its finances?
53. Do the financial statements include amounts budgeted, amounts received and expended, and the variances, both monthly and year-to-date?
54. Does your organization have its finances audited annually by a certified public accountant who presents a report to the board?

VI. Marketing and Public Relations

55. Does your organization have a marketing plan?
56. Does your organization's planning include an assessment of your community's future needs?
57. Does your organization have an effective system for informing the public about programs and services?
58. Is there a system for receiving information, ideas, and suggestions from members and other potential "clients"?
59. Does your organization use the media effectively?
60. In your opinion, is the public's impression of your organization accurate?

Talley Results from the Organizational Needs Assessment

Answer Sheet

Board members returning questionnaires answered in one of the four following ways::

- ✓ **Y**= Yes, this is true for my organization.
- ✓ **N**= No, this is not true for us.
- ✓ **NW**= We do this, but it needs work.
- ✓ **?**= I don't know.

Board Governance					Planning and Evaluation					Fundraising				
	Y	NW	N	?		Y	NW	N	?		Y	NW	N	?
1.	9	2	1	2	24.	5	5	0	4	42.	11	3		
2.	3	3	3	5	25.	2	8	2	2	43.	9	3	1	1
3.	9	3	2		26.	5	8	0	1	44.	3	9	1	1
4.	12	1	1		27.	1	7	1	5	45.	10	4		
5.	11	2	1		28.	5	4	1	5	46.	7	1	1	5
6.	14				29.	3	3	3	6	Financial Decision Making				
7.	8	2	0	4	30.	2	4	1	8	47.	8	4	0	2
8.	9	4	1		31.	3	4	1	7	48.	8	2	3	1
9.	4	7	2	1	Personnel					49.	12	2		
10.	11	3			32.	5	3	0	6	50.	12	1	0	1
11.	9	5			33.	8	0	1	5	51.	8	1	1	4
12.	8	5	0	1	34.	10	1	0	3	52.	6	0	2	6
13.	5	3	3	3	35.	10	1	0	3	53.	12	1	1	
14.	2	2	3	7	36.	13	1			54.	12	0	0	2
15.	7	4	1	2	37.	13	1			Marketing/Public Relations				
16.	12	2			38.	9	1	2	2	55.	1	3	5	5
17.	14				39.	13	1			56.	3	2	4	4
18.	12	1	0	1	40.	13	1			57.	3	8	1	2
19.	12	1	0	1	41.	5	2	0	7	58.	2	4	2	6
20.	11	3								59.	4	4	4	1
21.	12	2								60.	3	4	3	4
22.	9	3	0	2										