

The Importance of Being Accredited

Small, all-volunteer land trusts find that the hard work of accreditation pays off

By Kirsten Ferguson

The success of any organization relies on reputation. But reputation can be especially important to small land trusts that are staffed solely by volunteers, as they often rely primarily on gifts of donated conservation easements to meet their land preservation goals.

As Charlie Tennesen learned while serving as a board member of Wisconsin's Caledonia Conservancy, an organization's positive reputation can turn a casual chat with a potential easement donor into a valuable land transaction years later. "In a land trust, things are long-term," he says. "You may talk to a person at a picnic, and then five years later the conversation leads to results. Being professional and solid really means a lot over the long haul."

That understanding was a driving factor behind the efforts of Charlie and the Caledonia Conservancy—which is dedicated to preserving a trail system for equestrians, naturalists and outdoor recreationists—to become accredited through the Land Trust Accreditation Commission.

Although admittedly time-consuming, Charlie believes the accreditation process gave his small, all-volunteer land trust the credibility it needs to protect their most coveted pieces of property. "The stamp of accreditation will allow the organization to grow in the future," he says. "Once you're accredited, you can say to prospective donors, 'Look what we've done. We're a solid organization. We're going to take care of that land.' Accreditation helps you sell that idea."

Clive Gray, board chair of the all-volunteer Greensboro Land Trust in Vermont's Northeast Kingdom, echoes Charlie's belief that the accreditation seal—earned by his group in 2009—will be critical to future efforts to preserve farm, forest and open land in the picturesque lake town of Greensboro. "On one of our latest easements, the



Caledonia Conservancy (WI); Photo by Sandy DeWalt

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landowner said he wouldn't be interested in donating if we hadn't been accredited," Clive says.

That is not to say accreditation was easy for both groups, with Clive taking the lead on ushering Greensboro Land Trust through the process of collecting information, adopting new policy statements and finally finishing baseline documentation reports for their easements.

At Caledonia Conservancy, Charlie chaired a committee that took more of a group approach to the accreditation application, parceling out duties to board members from every part of the

organization. "I think that made a difference," he says. "Now the organization understands its own policies and procedures, and understands why it has them. If policies are in the way and you don't understand them, they'll get ignored."

Clive agrees that the experience strengthened his organization. "I think it was a very healthy process and I would recommend it," he says. "One feels part of a collection of land trusts that have passed a certain hurdle. It's made us feel very good. I think it would make other small land trusts feel the same way."