

**A02. Countdown to 2020: Tips and
Pointers for Land Trusts Preparing
for First-Time Accreditation**

Friday, October 12 | 10:30 a.m. - Noon

Room 306

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BENEFITS OF ACCREDITATION

WHAT IT MEANS TO LAND TRUSTS, DONORS, GOVERNMENT, AND THE PUBLIC

The accreditation seal is a mark of distinction among the almost 1,000 Alliance-member land trusts across America. Being accredited helps your land trust to stand out, to say to landowners, funders and other supporters: "Invest in us. We have proven we are a strong, effective organization you can trust to conserve your land forever."



100% of applicants report their organization is stronger and more efficient after the process

The public is increasingly demanding accountability from government and nonprofit organizations, including land trusts. Independent accreditation provides third-party assurance of quality and permanence of land conservation that the public and donors look for, and publicly recognizes your land trust's ability to protect important natural places and working lands forever.



66% of renewal applicants reported the process improved the ability to preserve and/or steward land or conservation easements.

Applying for accreditation affords land trusts the opportunity to review and implement policies and procedures that help streamline operations and lead to more effective land conservation. Renewing accreditation fosters continuous improvement and enables organizations to confirm they are consistently following national standards and meeting current requirements.



67% of first-time applicants reported the process increased engagement of their board.

"There are numerous benefits to being an accredited. For one, when we talk with landowners about how their land will be cared for in the future, we always talk about how we are nationally accredited, how we must live up to the dozens of standards and practices and how we can be trusted with their land. The accreditation seal is a symbol of that trust. Secondly, we have specifically asked funders if the national accreditation means anything to them. Every funder indicated they would prefer to provide their funding to an accredited land trust over a non-accredited trust."

**— CHRISTOPHER BEICHNER, president and CEO
Allegheny Land Trust (PA),
accredited in 2011; renewed in 2016**

Once your organization achieves accreditation you can proudly display the accreditation seal on your accredited land trust's publications and website. Being accredited also provides your land trust with some of the following tangible benefits.

Conservation Defense Insurance

Accredited land trusts are automatically eligible for an annual premium discount of \$11 per insured unit when they enroll in the conservation defense insurance program offered by TerraFirma Risk Retention Group LLC.

Directors & Officers Insurance

Chubb Group of Insurance Companies has instituted a new Directors & Officers liability insurance policy rating structure designed especially for Land Trust Alliance member land trusts*. Accredited land trusts who are Alliance members will receive an additional 7% renewal premium credit (subject to the applicable rates filed in each jurisdiction) in addition to the preferred rates already enjoyed by those with standard membership status.

LAND TRUST 
ACCREDITATION
COMMISSION

An independent program
of the Land Trust Alliance

The accreditation seal is awarded to land trusts meeting the highest national standards for excellence and conservation permanence.

www.landtrustaccreditation.org



GuideStar®

Accredited land trusts receive an external review with a five-star rating from the Commission.

Examples of State Incentives

- 🌿 Colorado: Landowners desiring a state tax credit for a conservation easement donation in Colorado must work with a holder certified by the state. There is an expedited certification process for accredited land trusts.
- 🌿 Louisiana: Land trusts must be certified to hold and conserve certain mineral interests; documentation of land trust accreditation expedites the certification requirement.

Examples of Public and Private Funding Incentives

- 🌿 Doris Duke Charitable Foundation provides funds through Open Space Institute for its resilient landscapes initiative. Extra points are awarded to accredited land trusts or land trusts that are committed to becoming accredited.
- 🌿 Chester County, PA includes land trust accreditation in its eligibility criteria for funding for its Brandywine Headwaters Preservation Program.
- 🌿 The Gaylord and Dorothy Donnelley Foundation provides land trusts that have already received support from the foundation with unsolicited grants of \$10,000 each when they earn accreditation.
- 🌿 The 1772 Foundation considers a number of factors when evaluating grant applicants, including whether a land trust has prioritized accreditation.
- 🌿 A new program in Texas requires land trusts to be accredited to receive matching funds for projects near or adjacent to Texas state parks.
- 🌿 When seeking to become LEED-certified, a project proponent may opt to provide financial support to an accredited land trust to obtain credit for the “protecting or restoring habitat” certification element.

Accreditation Accolades

- 🌿 “Land trust accreditation is a powerful tool to strengthen land trust operations, foster public trust, and ensure the permanence of land conservation. The Kresge Foundation awarded a challenge grant to the Land Trust Alliance to help build an endowment for the accreditation program so that the costs of the program will remain affordable for land trusts. We viewed this investment in the accreditation program as a logical complement to our historic support for land acquisition by land trusts. It also was a good fit with Kresge’s values of advancing environmental stewardship and institutional transformation.”

LOIS R. DEBACKER, Managing Director, The Kresge Foundation

- 🌿 “I interviewed several land trusts to work with me on my conservation easement for the family ranch, and I chose the Texas Land Conservancy. Now that they have the accreditation seal—just two months after I completed my easement—I’m really pleased that I chose them because that really validates that it is a solid organization.”

JOYCE LUCAS, Landowner, Birk-Sommerfeld Heritage Ranch, Texas Land Conservancy, accredited in 2011, renewed 2016

- 🌿 “The world our land trusts function in doesn’t stand still, and neither can we. As we all grow and change, it’s critical to the credibility of the land trust movement and to our own organization that we maintain the highest standards and practices through the renewal of accreditation process.”

STEVE ROSENBERG, Executive Director, Scenic Hudson (NY), accredited in 2008; renewed in 2014

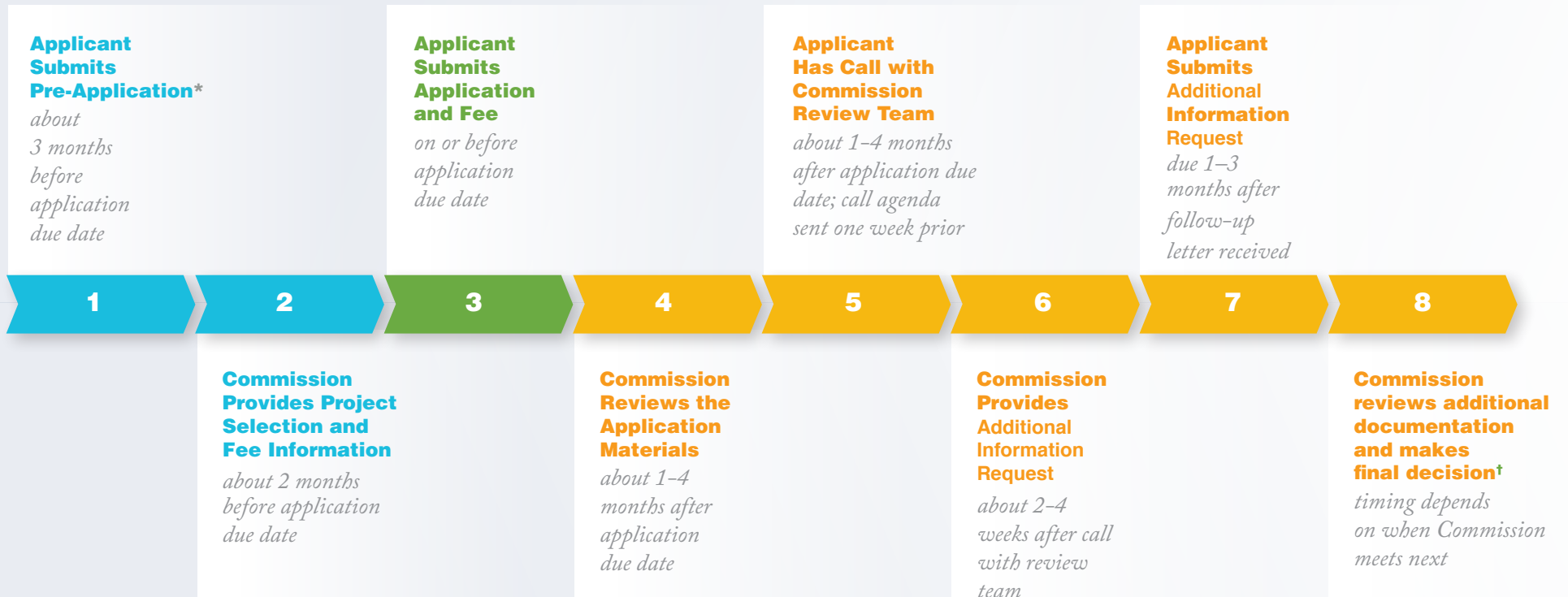
- 🌿 “Accreditation is a remarkably detailed process that leaves no stone unturned. Whether you are an established land trust with many properties, or younger and growing like ours, it is a huge learning process that provides you the opportunity to examine your work with a talented team of experts. There is no better way to ensure the collective strength of the land trust movement.”

TERRI LANE, Executive Director, Northwest Arkansas Land Trust (AR), accredited in 2015



Timeline for First-Time Accreditation

For detailed information on each process step below, visit www.landtrustaccreditation.org/first-time-accreditation.



* Applicant Registers through Lottery Registration in early summer of year preceding application

† Applicant Receives Commission Decision about 10 months after application submitted

2018 Requirements Manual **First Look at New Documents**

Background

The Land Trust Accreditation Commission's [2018 Requirements Manual](#) incorporates the 2017 *Land Trust Standards and Practices* and the corresponding indicator elements. The indicator elements include some new high-risk areas that will help position accredited land trusts for the future. Based on these new indicators, the Commission developed corresponding new requirements; these are shown throughout the Manual with a "Starting in ..." notation. Accredited land trusts are expected to begin meeting these requirements in 2019, or as noted.

In order for the Commission to verify that a land trust meets these new requirements, the accreditation application includes documents or evidence not previously requested by the Commission. Because the accreditation application is used to verify a land trust meets the accreditation requirements, it is essential each land trust has all of the applicable documents.

The online accreditation application for 2019 and beyond is still under development (as of March 2018). To help land trusts in the interim, the Commission is providing this planning tool to summarize the new documents a land trust will need as part of its accreditation application. Please note that this document is a companion to the complete Manual and the final, complete accreditation application. It is not a substitute for either document. The final, complete reference copy of the accreditation application will be available in summer 2018.

Please contact the Commission (info@landtrustaccreditation.org or 518-587-3143) for additional information.

New Documentation Required Beginning in 2019

The accreditation application includes pre-application materials, application questions, application documents and documentation from land and easement projects ("project documentation"). The new documents planned in the "application documents" and "project documentation" portions of the accreditation application are outlined below. The Commission is not planning to include new types of documentation in other parts of the accreditation application.

The list of new documents or evidence listed below is organized into four groups (Governance, Finance, Transactions and Stewardship), which aligns with how the Manual and accreditation application will be organized. Some documents only need to be provided if the situation applies to the land trust. These are generally noted with a statement: "*If your land trust...*"

Governance

New Application Documents

- 📄 Statement describing the procedures for a) recruiting board members and b) training new board members
- 📄 Strategic goals or strategic plan
- 📄 Statement describing a) how the board establishes the strategic goals or strategic plan and b) the date the board last reviewed them
- 📄 Records policy that also covers and stewardship records (*in addition to organization and transaction records per the previous requirements*)

Finance

New Application Documents

- 📄 Budget for current fiscal year and minutes from board meeting where approved
- 📄 Most recent financial reports provided to the board, including a statement of financial position (balance sheet) showing unrestricted, board designated and restricted net assets and a statement of activities showing actual unrestricted and restricted revenue and expenses for the reporting period as compared to budget and board meeting minutes showing discussion of the financial reports
- 📄 Response to the following risk and control questions:
 - a) What are your land trust's greatest risks related to misuse of funds (theft, fraud, misappropriation)?
Attach or describe your corresponding internal controls or accounting procedures that prevent and/or detect misuse of funds
 - b) What are your land trust's greatest risks related to misstatement of funds (errors in reporting or presentation of financial statements)?
Attach or describe your corresponding internal controls or accounting procedures that prevent and/or detect misstatement of funds
 - c) What are your land trust's greatest risks related to making sure board-designated and donor-restricted funds are used appropriately?
Unless submitted elsewhere in the application: Attach or describe your corresponding internal controls or accounting procedures that prevent and/or detect diversion or depletion of board-designated or donor-restricted funds for other uses
 - d) How do your land trust's internal controls or accounting procedures manage risks associated with the payment of expenses for individuals who have access to checkbooks, bank accounts or investment accounts?
 - e) *If your land trust has staff:* How does the board manage risks associated with setting compensation for its chief staff person?
- 📄 Completed internal control certification
- 📄 Certificate of general liability insurance or equivalent documentation (such as premium summary, declarations page, other summary page)

- 📄 Dated evaluation of insurance needs by board or delegated entity (such as board or committee meeting minutes, analysis of insurance needs by delegated staff member, recommendations from insurance provider given to the board)
- 📄 *If your land trust expended more than \$750,000 in federal dollars and obtained a "Single Audit" for any of the following fiscal years (over accredited term at renewal, within past three years at first-time):* Schedule of Findings from most recent federal "Single Audit"
 - a) *If the findings indicate significant changes should be made to your land trust's financial procedures:* Statement describing actions taken to address the recommended changes
- 📄 *If your land trust did not have operating reserves to cover three months of operating expenses at the end of the last fiscal year:* Report from the board of its evaluation of operating reserve needs and its plan to address the needs (such as a plan that includes specific funding targets and specific strategies with timelines to meet the funding targets, a board report detailing other funds held by or on behalf of your land trust that serves as operating reserves)

Transactions

New Project Documentation

- 📄 Evidence of visual inspection prior to closing (such as site evaluation checklists, site visit report, date-stamped photos of the property, contemporaneous notes or internal communications)
- 📄 Form 8283 that includes the donor's cost or adjusted basis (*new addition to the previous requirements*)
- 📄 *If your land trust does not have the landowner's appraisal supporting the Form 8283:* Documentation that your land trust requested the appraisal and a statement explaining how your land trust confirmed it did not have concerns about the appraised value when signing the Form 8283

Stewardship

New Application Documents

- 📄 Documentation of a recent example of a record of substantive notice, approval, denial, interpretation or exercise of significant permitted right (such as a landowner's notice of the intent to build a permitted barn, the land trust's correspondence with a landowner denying a requested activity be allowed on the property, legal analysis to support interpretation of terms in the conservation easement, recorded deed for the exercise of an approved building envelope)
- 📄 Documentation of a recent example of how your land trust documented a significant change to the land (such as resulting from natural disaster or exercise of a permitted right) or change to the conservation easement (such as resulting from an amendment) (such as a monitoring report, baseline supplement or current conditions report that includes the date, written descriptions and photographs and/or maps)

New Project Documentation

- 📄 Documentation of a recent example of a record of substantive notice, approval, denial, interpretation or exercise of significant permitted right (such as a landowner's notice of the intent to build a permitted barn, the land trust's correspondence with a landowner denying a requested activity be allowed on the property, legal analysis to support interpretation of terms in the conservation easement, recorded deed for the exercise of an approved building envelope)
- 📄 Documentation of a recent example of how your land trust documented a significant change to the land (such as resulting from natural disaster or exercise of a permitted right) or change to the conservation easement (such as resulting from an amendment) (such as a monitoring report, baseline supplement or current conditions report that includes the date, written descriptions and photographs and/or maps)
- 📄 Conservation property inspection reports (*replaces other previously accepted forms of documentation, starting in 2020*)

Isolated or Rare Noncompliance

A land trust may have isolated or rare circumstances when it is not able to implement the indicator elements and show compliance with the requirements; this does not necessarily preclude it from being accredited or renewed. The Commission will review the facts and circumstances and may make allowances under certain circumstances described in the Manual. To save the land trust's time and help the application reviewers, the application will have a place in each group for the land trust to upload explanations to address areas where it did not meet the requirements.

- 📄 If your land trust has an isolated or rare instance when it was not able to show compliance with the requirements (over accredited term at renewal or most recent at first-time): Statement and/or related documentation explaining a) that the circumstance was clearly isolated or rare, b) how your land trust typically complies with the requirement and c) the alternative steps your land trust took to mitigate risks associated with the non-compliance



ARE YOU READY FOR LAND TRUST ACCREDITATION?

Take our quiz to see if the time is right for your land trust

Accredited land trusts say that there is no perfect time to apply for accreditation – you just do it! However, there are key requirements a land trust must meet before it registers, and others it must plan to meet by time of pre-application and application. This checklist will help your land trust determine if it is eligible and ready to apply for accreditation. *For detailed information on the application process see the Applicant Handbook.*

Part 1: Is our land trust committed?

- We are committed to continuous improvement and being a strong land trust.
- We are committed to the long-term stewardship of the land and/or the conservation easements we hold.
- We are committed to upholding the credibility of the land trust community.

If the above statements are true for your land trust, continue on to part 2.

Part 2: Is our land trust eligible?

- We are a U.S.-based 501(c)(3) tax-exempt public charity or quasi-governmental organization.
- We have been incorporated for two years or more.
- We are focused on acquiring and/or stewarding conservation land or conservation easements.
- We have completed at least two land or

easement acquisition projects, either in the chain of title (conservation fee properties) or as the grantee (conservation easements).

If the previous statements are true for your land trust, it is eligible to register. Continue to part 3.

Part 3: Does (or will) our land trust meet these pre-application requirements?

- We adopted the 2017 *Land Trust Standards and Practices* as the ethical and technical guidelines for the responsible operation of our land trust.
- We have a baseline documentation or current condition report for each conservation easement we hold.
- We annually monitor each conservation easement we hold.
- We have a management plan for each conservation fee property we own.
- We annually inspect each fee property we

If your land trust cannot answer "yes" to all of the above statements, it can still register provided it can answer "yes" prior to submitting a pre-application. Feeling confident? Continue to part 4.

Part 4: Will our land trust be ready to complete the accreditation application?

A land trust should be prepared to demonstrate that it is implementing the requirements as described in the *Requirements Manual* at the time it submits its application. Although there are opportunities to undertake additional improvements during the application review process, land trusts that can answer “yes” to the following statements tend to have greater success in the application review process.

- We have duplicate copies of irreplaceable records stored in a separate location from the originals, and our original documents are secure.
- We have conservation easement and fee defense funding that meets or exceeds the amount specified by the Legal Defense Reserves Calculator. *See the Requirements Manual to learn how to demonstrate adequate funding and when a funding plan is acceptable.*
- We have conservation easement stewardship funding that meets or exceeds the funding requirements, or we have a funding plan in place. *See the Requirements Manual to calculate the minimum amounts the land trust will need to have for easement stewardship, and when a funding plan is acceptable.*
- We have adequate funding for conservation fee land stewardship. *See the Requirements Manual for more on how to demonstrate adequate funding for fee land stewardship.*
- We have the appropriate level of external financial evaluation in the form of an audit, review or compilation. *See the Requirements Manual for more information on the expected level of external financial evaluation.*
- We can demonstrate how our land trust reviewed and approved the most recent land transaction by providing material shared with the board or a committee before it reviewed the project; material shared with the board (or delegated entity) before final approval of the

project; and, minutes from the meeting where the project was approved.

- We have reviewed the application materials and assessed whether each document exists, where it is, and if it is of sufficient detail to demonstrate compliance. We have a plan to fill any gaps.

If your land trust cannot answer “yes” to all of the previous statements, it may still register. However, it will need to meet each of those requirements in order to achieve accreditation at the end of the application review process. Still interested? Continue to part 5.

Part 5: Is this the right time?

- We have a team of people who can dedicate the time to prepare and complete the pre-application, the application, and requested project documentation.
- We have the resources needed to cover the costs of applying for accreditation, including the registration and application fees.

If the above statements are true for your land trust, continue on to part 6.

Part 6: The Results, Please!

If your land trust is able to answer yes to all of the questions above, then now is a good time to apply for land trust accreditation. If it is not yet able to answer ‘yes’ to the questions above, more time may be needed to prepare for accreditation; visit the Land Trust Alliance’s Learning Center (learningcenter.lta.org) for accreditation information or talk to your Land Trust Alliance regional field office.

For more information about land trust accreditation or the process of applying for accreditation, visit www.landtrustaccreditation.org. You are always welcome to call or email the Accreditation Help Desk at 518-587-3143 or info@landtrustaccreditation.org.



Advice for Accreditation

Land trusts achieving accreditation are provided with the opportunity to offer advice to colleagues considering the process. Here is some advice from them to you!

- **Do what you can to ensure capacity** to manage the process.
- **Have one of your people become an "expert"** in how to get the project done. We sent our Stewardship Director to Rally to help him understand the process and carved out adequate time for him to do all of the things which needed to be done. Our application was very complete when we filed it with very little additional work to do after the initial submission.
- **Start early with the preparation**, and make sure you either have a very proactive committee chair, or hire someone to help keep you on track. We had a consultant who was also able to help us by sharing how other land trusts have done certain things/shared sample policies and procedures, etc.
- **Have one person lead the effort** that is extremely organized and not afraid to ask for help.
- **Have a strong team in place and commitment from the board.**
- **Go to Rally and attend any workshops on accreditation.**
- **Go for it!** Definitely do your research beforehand to understand what the process entails and stay organized.
- **Do your self-assessment diligently and pay a lot of attention to it.** Make sure you are ready before you even apply. We took about 5 years to get ready--with a volunteer board and part time consultants everything takes longer than you expect.
- **Read the *Requirements Manual* and *Applicant Handbook* many times.** Take those to bed with you! Talk to the commission, pick up the phone and ask them specific questions about certain attachments or practices if you have any questions.
- **Plan, plan, plan.** We spent several years getting our ducks in order before beginning the process. Once you commit, deadlines rush at you at lightning speed.
- **Accreditation was extremely beneficial** in aiding our older organization to analyze our current practices and update them to the current standards. It prompted us to organize our documents, which we always knew we needed to do but never had time for due to our work loads.
- **Document, document, document.** Start getting your property monitoring current, if it isn't already; make sure minutes are capturing your board discussions adequately and that those minutes are organized and easy to retrieve; engage your board secretary and treasurer, especially, in understanding the requirements in detail.
- **I was very glad we had digitized all of our property documentation** before we began. What we lacked was a good system for capturing all of the emails and attachments that were circulated before board meeting informing the board about acquisitions or gifts. It took a lot of time and searching to supply the evidence of the level of review and discussion that took place about a property.
- **It's worth it**, but give yourself plenty of time to get it done. Be organized and methodical in completing the application.
- **Do not hesitate** to call the commission to ask questions; they really do want to help!

LAND TRUST ACCREDITATION COMMISSION

An independent program of the Land Trust Alliance

PREPARING TO APPLY FOR ACCREDITATION

Things to share with others

| What I will share | Who With | By When |
|-------------------|----------|---------|
| | | |

Action steps to take

| What to do | By When |
|------------|---------|
| | |