

# Key Elements of Effective BOARD COMMITTEES

**B**oard committees are responsible for accomplishing the detailed work of the board, shaping policies, drafting organizational plans and working to accomplish annual goals. Committees make the performance of the board more effective and efficient, especially if each board director invests time and energy, and staff liaisons provide adequate guidance and administrative support. Committees provide a way for important work of the board to be accomplished between board meetings, enabling members to apply their expertise through research, analysis and discussion of complex problems. Effective use of committees also removes time-wasting discussion of minutiae from the board meeting. As you look at all the goals to accomplish in your strategic or annual plan, aren't you glad there are committees to help with the work?

Committees usually include at least a few members from the board of directors, but their reach and effectiveness can be greatly increased by the participation of interested volunteers from the community. Before nominating someone to the board of directors, many savvy organizations use committee appointment to learn more about an individual's commitment to the organization, and to observe his or her skills and personality traits. This can be a valuable tool for developing and testing new leadership, while cultivating a deeper level of commitment to the organization.

Let's look at some factors to consider when you develop board committees for your land trust.

## Review the Nonstock Corporation

**Law** that governs nonprofits in your state. Some states have regulations such as limits on board director terms of service and requirements for the number of board directors that must serve on committees of the board. An important phrase to look for in your state law is "except as set forth in or authorized by the articles of incorporation or bylaws" or words of similar meaning. That phrase provides the land trust with the flexibility to differ from

default provisions in the statute and to write a governing stipulation better suited to its needs in its articles or bylaws.

**Examine your land trust's corporate documents** (bylaws) for stipulations regarding committees. Most land trusts' bylaws list the standing committees of the board and include a provision for creating new committees. Bylaws may give the board general authority to create committees as needed, or may stipulate the process of appointing the committee chair, define who may serve on committees, or set guidelines for creating committees.

## Determine if a committee is needed.

Are your board meetings long, do they deal with minutiae (we've observed boards discussing the colors of napkins for an upcoming special event), are issues repeatedly discussed and not resolved? If so, it may be appropriate to refer issues to committee for review. Committees are a terrific resource for addressing complex issues in a small group and providing recommendations to the board. They do not replace the function of the board or the responsibility of the board to make decisions. They recommend solutions, policies

and actions, which the board must approve or deny through a formal vote.

**Determine the type of committee needed** based on the nature of the work—is it ongoing, project-specific or honorary? Following are a few typical committee types.

**STANDING:** The permanent committees of the board may be outlined in the bylaws. Common standing committees for land trusts are Executive, Board Development or Governance, Fundraising or Fund Development, Land or Conservation, Membership, and Outreach or Education. Smaller boards often combine some of these committee functions.

**AD HOC:** Temporary committees or work groups may be created for a specific project. These committees meet as often as necessary to complete the project, then cease to exist. Examples of ad hoc committees include event planning, audit oversight and research.

**ADVISORY:** These committees are usually created to provide ongoing expertise on a specific issue, such as land stewardship or legal issues.

**HONORARY:** This is not a working committee, but a source of prestige, comprised of individuals that have name recognition and bring instant credibility to the land trust, frequently to attract resources.

## Define the purpose of the committee.

The scope of effective committees should be carefully defined so they are responsible for conducting meaningful work for the board that significantly advances the goals of the organization. A written committee commission or charter defines the purpose, responsibilities and authority of the committee, and may also include details such as who is eligible to serve, how members are selected, how the chair is appointed and size. The committee charter ensures that board and committee members have clear responsibilities and understand their role in the organization.

BY Suzanne Elera

## SHARING IDEAS, OFFERING SUPPORT

"MANY AND VARIED IDEAS ...  
CAMARADERIE ... MUTUAL SUPPORT."

That's what one participant found valuable about the second annual Land Trust Board Member Summit, held October 12 at Rally 2009 in Portland, Oregon.

Launched at Rally 2008 to give board members a forum to meet one another, share ideas and concerns, and provide feedback on their needs to the Land Trust Alliance, the second annual Summit hosted 100 people representing more than 70 land trusts from 27 states!

The half-day session was kicked off with a presentation on "Thriving in Tough Times" by Susan Lykes, Land Trust Alliance board member and board member emeritus of Teton Regional Land Trust in Idaho.

Susan asked board members to help their land trusts keep perspective in these times, resist the urge to hunker down, focus strategically on donors and supporters, and take time to recharge—including through ongoing learning at Rally and beyond.

The remainder of the Summit was devoted to breakout discussions for board members. Susan and several other Alliance board members were on hand at the tables to share their personal experiences on boards large and small, local and national.

"I'd emphasize to first-timers how really valuable this type of event is for mentoring and learning," said Mary Anne Williams, vice president of the board of Lookout Mountain Conservancy in Tennessee. Many attendees planned to summarize what they learned for their full board and staff back home.

One participant said she took home "several great concrete ideas for friend-raising and outreach for support." Another cited the "sharing of ideas, either as problem-solving or confirmation of best practices" as a valuable part of the session. Some left with ideas on how to improve board recruitment and training; others appreciated discussions about the accreditation process.

And several participants were interested to learn that their fellow board members shared many of the same challenges they did, regardless of the size of their organizations or from where in America they came.

Of course, the Summit left these board members wanting more: more training from experts, multi-sessions for board development, forums in regional venues, and more opportunities to discuss issues with board members at similar organizations. With that kind of drive to be better board members, their organizations are sure to thrive. 🍌



CONSERVATION TRUST FOR FLORIDA

A mix of board members, advisory committee members and one staff member of the Conservation Trust for Florida at a 2008 retreat.

**Define the role of committees.** Generally, committees plan, research, discuss, implement and recommend; the board discusses, approves, denies or sends topics back to committee for further review.

**Integrate committees into the organization.** The committee has an essential role in the annual planning and programming of the organization as a whole. As the preliminary step in annual planning, which ultimately informs the budgeting process, each committee of the board should evaluate its past progress, brainstorm priorities and set programming goals. This discussion should include the organization's staff, and should be based on priorities set out in the organization's long-range plans. The annual goals, following discussion and approval by the board, form the basis for the organization's annual plan and the budget for the new fiscal year.

### COMMITTEE LEADERSHIP

The committee chair presides over committee meetings and coordinates the work, scheduling meetings, keeping committee members engaged, participating in planning and review, assigning tasks, coordinating with staff, recruiting and orienting new members, and reporting to the board. The committee chair must be acquainted with the goals of the organization and understand the committee's role in achieving them.

**Great committee meetings don't just happen, they are planned** by the committee chair and staff liaison through an action-oriented agenda. The agenda and any written material needed for preparation should be provided to committee members prior to the meeting so that committee time can be used for solution-oriented discussions. Contemporaneous minutes should be kept and distributed to committee members and the board secretary in a timely manner, indicating action items, persons



LAND TRUST  
Board Member Challenge

AS OF  
OCTOBER  
2009

## Board Member Challenge

**These land trusts have succeeded at achieving 100% board member participation or a minimum of 50% participation since the last issue of the magazine.**

To see all successful groups, learn more about the Challenge or get your board involved, contact Sara Duginske (sduginske@lta.org, 202-638-4725, ext. 344) or visit [www.landtrustalliance.org](http://www.landtrustalliance.org).

# 100%



Agricultural Stewardship Association

These land trusts have renewed their success in the Challenge at **100%** —

- Alachua Conservation Trust
- Central Savannah River Land Trust
- Eastern Sierra Land Trust
- Genesee Valley Conservancy
- Hudson Highlands Land Trust
- Kiawah Conservancy
- Lancaster Farmland Trust
- Minnesota Land Trust
- Peconic Land Trust
- River Fields, Inc
- Riverland Conservancy
- Sarasota Conservation Foundation
- Willistown Conservation Trust

# 50% +



Caledonia  
Conservancy

Catoctin  
Land Trust



Serving Special Places

These land trusts have renewed their success in the Challenge at **50%+** —

- Cayucos Land Conservancy
- Columbia Land Conservancy
- Columbia Land Trust
- Fairhaven – Acushnet Land Preservation Trust
- Headwaters Land Conservancy
- Land Trust for Tennessee
- Palmer Land Trust
- Scenic Hudson Land Trust
- Southbury Land Trust
- Summit Land Conservancy
- Thousand Islands Land Trust
- Woodstock Land Conservancy

[www.landtrustalliance.org](http://www.landtrustalliance.org)

responsible and next steps. Meetings should be efficient, but encourage time for camaraderie, beverages and snacks (no volunteer works well on an empty stomach!).

**Committees need the support of a staff liaison** with a clearly defined responsibility, who works in partnership with the committee chair. This staff liaison should not be directed to do the work of

the committee, but should be responsible for providing administrative support and staff-level details, and for ensuring that the committee members have the information and resources they need. The staff liaison also serves as a backup, covering for volunteers in emergencies, and communicating with appropriate board or staff leaders if there are serious problems within the committee that need to be addressed at a higher level.

## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

**Be cognizant of attributes of the 21st century committee member.** It is important to recognize demographic and societal changes when developing and managing committees. Time available for volunteer commitments, technology used for communication, work hours and today's family structure require us to update our approaches when defining the type, location, frequency and duration of meetings, when making committee assignments, in designing the recruiting process and in planning recognition events. Use technology to increase committee efficiency and convenience. Free technologies include [www.doodle.com](http://www.doodle.com) for scheduling committee meetings, [docs.google.com](http://docs.google.com) for sharing and collaborating on documents and [www.freeconference.com](http://www.freeconference.com) to convene meetings in a convenient virtual space.

## Celebrate success along the way.

Those of us in land trust work look out over a long horizon; some land deals take years, and we constantly talk about perpetuity. Take time at key milestones to demonstrate your appreciation for committee and board members' work by saying thank you.

## CONCLUSION

Keep your committee members engaged: never waste the precious resource of their time, feed and thank them, encourage camaraderie and have fun! Committees aren't the answer to all problems, but they are a powerful tool that is used effectively by many highly successful organizations. Using committees takes work, creativity, flexibility and a leadership team—the board chair, committee chair and executive director (if there is one)—motivating committee members to use their skills to help the land trust achieve its mission. 🌱

**CAROL MAYES AND SARA WILSON**, PRINCIPALS OF MAYES WILSON & ASSOCIATES, LLC, BRING 50 YEARS COMBINED EXPERIENCE IN BOARD AND ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT, STRATEGIC PLANNING AND CONSERVATION PLANNING TO THEIR CONSULTING SERVICES. THEY HAVE ASSISTED HUNDREDS OF LAND TRUSTS, COACHING BOARDS, STAFF AND COMMITTEES TO BUILD MORE EFFECTIVE ORGANIZATIONS.