

Land Trust Standards and Practices

Guidelines for the Responsible Operation of a Land Trust



The Land Trust Standards and Practices are widely accepted ethical and technical guidelines for the responsible operation of land trusts.

Introduction	1
Who Should Use the Standards?	1
Adoption of the Standards	2
Implementing the Standards	2
2017 Revisions.....	2
How Does a Board's Exercise of Judgment Intersect with the Standards?	2

INTRODUCTION

The [Land Trust Standards and Practices](#) (Standards) are operational guidelines for [land trusts](#). They are designed to help organizations operate in an ethically and technically sound manner. The Standards reflect the values and concerns expressed by many voices in the land trust community.

The Standards consist of 12 broad principles, which are divided into 59 practices and 188 practice elements that describe the actions required to meet the Standards. The practice elements vary in their focus—ethics, legalities, running an effective organization, supporting the land trust movement as a whole, optimizing public relations, and more.

The Standards are guidelines; there are many ways for a land trust to implement the practices, depending on the size and scope of the organization.

The Standards provide multiple layers of benefits:

- The concrete, widely accepted guidelines help *individual land trusts* operate responsibly and successfully.

- The *land trust community* as a whole gains credibility from its constituent land trusts continuously striving towards conformance with high standards of behavior.
- The *public* benefits from the quality of conservation achieved by well-run organizations.

The [Land Trust Alliance](#) (LTA) first published the Standards in 1989, recognizing that a strong land trust community depends on the credibility and effectiveness of all its members. LTA has revised the Standards over the years to incorporate the insights of hundreds of conservation leaders from across the country; the most recent revision process was completed in 2017.

More than 1,000 land trusts across the country have adopted the Standards.

WHO SHOULD USE THE STANDARDS?

WeConservePA encourages all nonprofit organizations that acquire land or easements for conservation purposes to use the Standards as their guiding principles and take steps to bring their operations into alignment with the Standards.

In addition, local governments may find Standards 8 through 12, which pertain to land and easement transactions and stewardship issues, useful in shaping their land conservation programs.

ADOPTION OF THE STANDARDS

WeConservePA encourages land trust boards to (1) adopt a policy that the board and staff will strive to bring organizational practices into conformance with the Standards and (2) periodically review elements of their operations to determine their progress and areas in need of improvement.

To be eligible for LTA membership and its attendant benefits, a land trust must adopt the Standards. A land trust does not need to have fully implemented all of the practices in order to adopt the Standards. For LTA purposes, adopting the Standards means that:

- The land trust has reviewed the Standards.
- The land trust agrees that the Standards are the technical and ethical guidelines for the responsible operation of a land trust.
- The last trust's board of directors commits to implementing the Standards as guidelines for the organization's operations.

LTA provides specific wording in a [model board resolution](#) adopting the Standards.

For more information, visit the [Standards and Practices page](#) on the LTA resource center website.

IMPLEMENTING THE STANDARDS

Implementing the practices outlined in the Standards helps land trusts be effective in their conservation work and remain stable over time. It requires regular review of organizational procedures and practices and the commitment to make the modifications necessary to come into alignment with the Standards.

LTA offers tools to assist organizations seeking to implement the Standards. These include workshops and written materials at their [Resource Center](#) (available to LTA members).

WeConservePA can provide Pennsylvania land trusts with technical assistance to help organizations understand organizational deficiencies vis-à-vis the Standards and take

steps to implement Standards-aligned practices. WeConservePA also offers a variety of conferences, workshops, and roundtables to help staff and volunteers improve their practices. Stay tuned to [WeConservePA.org/events](https://www.weconservepa.org/events) to find out about upcoming events.

2017 REVISIONS

The 2016-2017 revision process, the first since the 2004 revision, involved input from land trust leaders across the country (more than 1,600 comments were submitted), and resulted in changes to the format and content of the Standards. See the changes (as highlighted by WeConservePA) in this [version](#) of the 2017 Standards.

The [Land Trust Accreditation Commission](#) completed the integration of the 2017 edition of the Standards into its accreditation system in 2019.

HOW DOES A BOARD'S EXERCISE OF JUDGMENT INTERSECT WITH THE STANDARDS?

The board of directors of WeConservePA, acting on the unanimous recommendation of WeConservePA's policy council, directly addressed this question in an open communication to the land trust community dated September 13, 2016:

Previously adopted organizational policies, Land Trust Standards and Practices (S&P), and other codes of behavior are no substitute for board judgment as applied to specific circumstances. These policies and codes provide crucial guidance to boards and often reflect decades of collective wisdom applicable to most situations. However, a board may reasonably—and sometimes must—act contrary to these adopted policies and other rules in order to responsibly direct the land trust. Land trust board members and staff should understand that in adopting organizational policies, including commitments to follow S&P, the Accreditation

Commission's Requirements Manual, or other codes, they must not cede their ultimate decision-making responsibility as applied to specific circumstances.

This is not to say that deviating from adopted policies and codes is a trivial matter; it most certainly is not. Before a board or staff chooses to act contrary to adopted policies or codes of behavior, they should first deliberate whether to do so. They should consider whether short-lived benefits, wishful thinking, or groupthink might be clouding their judgment; they should consider undesirable precedents they might inadvertently be setting; they should consider whether consultation with someone outside the organization is desirable.

If ultimately, a decision is made to deviate, the board or staff should (in most situations) document the reasons for the decision—to ensure rigor in the analysis and help future boards and staff understand the organization's past actions. (This may also be necessary in regards to indicator practices if the land trust is accredited or will seek accreditation.)

View the complete text of the communication at http://conservationtools.org/library_items/1435.



This guide was developed by WeConservePA staff. The Land Trust Alliance's [website](#) was a significant resource in preparing it.

WeConservePA produced this guide with support from the William Penn Foundation, the Colcom Foundation, and the Community Conservation Partnerships Program, Environmental Stewardship Fund, under the administration of the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, Bureau of Recreation and Conservation.

© 2023, 2017 WeConservePA

Text may be excerpted and reproduced with acknowledgement of WeConservePA.

v. 4/6/2023