



## RESEARCH REPORTS

# Private public-interest land use planning: Land trusts in the upper Midwest

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*ABSTRACT: Public-sector planning for private land has not, by itself, addressed the wide range of land use problems in the United States. In the last decade, local and regional land trusts have emerged to compliment and supplement those actions of public-sector planning directed toward land conservation and preservation. There are indications that the growth of these organizations will continue. The institutional aspects and conservation activities of these new players in the land use policy game are worth looking at in determining what opportunities exist for satisfying the goals of public and private interests.*

**P**UBLIC-sector planning for private land in the United States is all pervasive. Zoning regulations are nearly ubiquitous in the nation's urban communities and increasingly common throughout rural areas. State-enabling legislation for incentive-based tax policy for agricultural land protection exists in all states, and similar practices for industrial land development, downtown redevelopment, and historic preservation are standard in cities, counties, and states. In the last decade, direct action policy in the form of land and easement purchase, for example, for urban redevelopment, parks, and open space and agricultural land protection, has become as customary as such activities have been in Europe for the last 50 years.

But, with notable exceptions (4, 11, 17), these systems of land use planning have not yet provided a rational, efficient, or equitable structure for managing land use (7, 12, 20). There are not well-planned cities; clearly defined urban edges; or healthy belts of agricultural, forestry, and open space land that are assured of long-term, sustainable management. Incentives to landowners and land developers to capture land value often thwart public efforts to plan land use effec-

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tively (2, 10). Feasible public-sector policy too often becomes the policy with the lowest common denominator, that is, the policy that will satisfy most, if not all, concerned and active constituencies in an area (3, 7).

The current system of land use planning makes it difficult to initiate widespread action to preserve and protect critical land resources. By the time a majority of citizens in a locality can be mobilized to action to protect a critical resource, too often much of that resource has been severely degraded or has disappeared. It is in this setting that land trusts have emerged as private-sector, public-interest planning advocates and actors that can function to protect and preserve critical land resources before a consensus for public policy action has materialized.

### A brief history

Land trusts have been defined as "non-profit organizations that work within a local community, a state, or a regional area for the direct protection of lands having open space, recreation, or ecological importance" (6). The first land trust was founded in Massachusetts in 1891. But only recently have these organizations grown rapidly and assumed a prominent role in the protection and conservation of selected natural resources.

In 1965, there were only 79 land trusts in the United States. Within a decade, another 175 had been founded, and by 1985 this number had doubled again to more than 500 land trusts operating throughout the coun-

try (19). While these organizations have just begun to have an impact on land protection, they have preserved more than 1.7 million acres through direct land and easement purchase and have helped to transfer acquired property to third parties, often the public sector. More than 350,000 citizens have been involved in of these organizations (6).

The recent dramatic growth of land trusts is expected to continue. One unofficial estimate is that in the 3 years since a national survey was conducted in 1985 the number of organizations has grown from 500 to more than 700. In addition, the recent widespread interest in privatization suggests that land trusts may be able to play a crucial role in the future of land use planning policy (5, 9, 13, 16, 18). While land use planning for private land is always a politically difficult task, in an era in which the public sector is being exhorted to reduce its role, extensive expansion of this function is uncertain. Land trusts that exist to accomplish public-interest goals through private initiative and means can complement and supplement public sector planning by taking on focused and/or sensitive land use planning projects.

Although there is an emergent popular literature on land trusts (1, 15), there is little research on their operations (8, 14). Herein, we report research conducted on local and regional land trusts in a five-state area of the upper Midwest. Presented is information on the institutional aspects and conservation activities of the organizations—data that were part of a larger research effort on the role land trusts might play in the future provisions of outdoor recreation.

### Study methods

Our study involved a telephone survey of local and regional land trusts in the Great Lakes Region, as identified in the 1985-86 *National Directory of Local and Regional Land Conservation Organizations* (19). The study region included Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, and Wisconsin. The region was chosen for study because of the significant number of land trusts in the area ( $n = 75$ ) and the feasibility of study. During the interviews, we collected data on each organization's background, membership, finances, and operations.

It total, 62 of the 75 land trusts completed

the survey. Response rates ranged from 100% (n = 3) in Indiana to 66.7% (n = 8) in Wisconsin; total response was 82.7%. The 13 organizations that were not surveyed were unreachable—the contact number was disconnected or the organization had disbanded. In no instance did a contacted organization refuse to complete the survey.

## Results

**The organizations.** More than 61% of the organizations were established between 1961 and 1980. The range of organizational foundation dates, however, was broad, from pre-1900 to 1984. The mean age for the organizations was 25.2 years; the distribution was bi-modal with one mode being 8 years and the other being 16 years.

The most frequently mentioned purposes of the groups included preserving land resources, preventing other land actions, education, and protecting wildlife resources (Table 1). In most cases (61.3%), the pur-

**Table 1. Purpose of land trusts in the upper Midwest (n = 62).\***

Purpose	Number	Percent
Preserve land resources	38	61.3
Prevent other land actions	15	24.2
Educational purposes	12	19.4
Protect wildlife resources	9	14.5
Preserve water resources	6	9.7
Outdoor recreation provision	3	4.8
Protect historical/archeological site	1	1.6
Unclear at the start	2	3.2

\*Respondents could choose up to two responses.

**Table 2. Current membership in land trusts in the Upper Midwest (n = 62).**

Number of Members	Number	Percent
No members	9	14.5
1-100	12	19.4
101-500	14	22.6
501-1,000	5	8.1
1,001-2,000	7	11.3
2,001-5,000	5	8.1
5,001-9,000	5	8.1
More than 9,000	3	4.8
Did not know	1	1.6
No answer	1	1.6

**Table 3. Factors that bond land trust members (n = 50).\***

Bonding Factors	Number	Percent
Land preservation	38	76.0
Appreciation of natural beauty	22	44.0
Prevention of land degradation	5	10.0
Environmental education	4	8.0
Preservation of rural character	4	8.0
Land stewardship	4	8.0
Individual initiatives	4	8.0
Birding	3	6.0
Other	2	4.0
No answer	2	4.0

\*Respondents could choose up to two bonding factors.

pose of the organization had not changed.

If the purpose of the organization had changed since foundation, we asked the respondents to describe how the purpose had changed. The most frequently mentioned changes include the addition of an outdoor recreation provision, an increase in the organizational scope, and an emphasis on land preservation and protection.

Membership in the trusts varied widely across organizations. For example, 14.5% of the organizations indicated that they had no members; membership in the remaining 85% of the organizations ranged from 1 to more than 9,000 members (Table 2).

In terms of future membership, the majority of organizations (58.5%) indicated that they felt it would increase. About 37% of the respondents felt that membership would remain about the same; only one organization stated that membership most likely would decline. In 92% of the cases, membership was open to the public; only four organizations had a restricted membership. If membership was restricted, it was limited either to community residents or to persons invited by the governing members.

The vast majority of trusts (94.3%) indicated that there were factors that helped bond members to the group. While the responses varied, the most common bonds were land preservation and appreciation of natural beauty (Table 3).

We also asked the land trusts about their current financial situation. Specific areas of inquiry included methods of financing, financial health, and budget/treasury information. Donations/dues was the primary source of funding for the vast majority of land trusts (91.9%) (Table 4). A number of organizations used such mechanisms as endowment funds, sales, and fund drives.

Asked to rate the overall financial health of their organization, 38.7% of the respondents said it was very good; 48.4% indicated that the financial health was good. Only six organizations (9.7%) indicated that their financial health was not good.

To further assess financial health, we cross-tabulated the financial health variable with membership, finances, philosophy, ownership/management of land, and potential rating. Financially healthy organizations were more likely to have members than financially unhealthy organizations—50% of the trusts that rated themselves as financially unhealthy had no members; 85.5% of the trusts that rated themselves as financially healthy had members.

A large percentage of the organizations (83.9%) maintain a staff (Table 5). While more than 75 of the staff members were volunteers, nearly two-thirds of the paid staff were full time. The size of staff was skewed

**Table 4. Financing mechanisms of land trusts (n = 62).\***

Financing Mechanism	Number	Percent
Donations/dues	57	91.9
Endowment	22	35.5
Sales	21	33.9
Fund drives	17	27.4
Small grants	14	22.6
Program fees	12	19.4
Land donations	5	8.1
No answer	1	1.6

\*Respondents could choose up to three methods of financing.

**Table 5. Staff composition of land trusts (n = 52).**

Staff Type	Number	Percent
Paid		
Full time	700	14.3
Part time	429	8.8
Volunteer	3,751	76.9
Total	4,880	100.0

toward the low end of the scale. Nearly 60% of the trusts had less than 10 members on the staff, and only 13% of the trusts had more than 50 people on the staff.

**Activities.** An important part of the survey involved information on protection and preservation activities of the land trust. In particular, we asked about the philosophy of the organizations, land protection techniques, ownership/management, access to land, and land use priorities.

We asked respondents to rate their organization's philosophical orientation in terms of preservation and use. Of 62 organizations, 35 (56.5%) indicated that they were oriented primarily toward preservation; 22 (35.5%) said they maintained both a preservation and use orientation; and 3 (4.8%) rated themselves as primarily use-oriented.

Respondents described a variety of techniques used in land protection and preservation (Table 6). The primary techniques were land acquisition, easements, land transfer, land management, and advocacy.

Of particular interest was an assessment of those organizations that owned and/or managed land resources. We found that 50 of the 62 responding organizations (80.6%) owned/managed land. The trusts allowed access to the owned/managed land in most cases (96%). Most of the time (91.7%), public access, either with or without permission, was allowed. In some instances, access was restricted to members of the organization (8.3%) or selected organizations (2.1%). The respondents indicated that the majority (64.0%) of the land was located in a rural setting; 13 organizations (26.0%) owned/managed land in a suburban setting; and only 4 organizations (8.0%) indicated that their land resources were in an urban area.

Of the organizations that owned/managed land, 64% indicated that they owned/man-

aged more than one area. In fact, the modal response for ownership/management was from two to five areas. The total amount of land owned/managed by land trusts in the Great Lakes region and accounted for in the survey was 23,411 hectares (57,848 acres) (Table 7). About 86% of the trusts that owned/managed land resources also indicated that they own/manage surface water resources, in most cases, streams, rivers, or creeks. However, 13 trusts (30.2%) stated that the trust property contained a specific acreage of water, ranging from less than 0.4 ha (1 acre) to more than 40 ha (100 acres).

The land trusts allowed a variety of land uses to occur on the property they owned/managed. Primary land uses included outdoor recreation, wildlife habitat preservation, and outdoor/environmental education activities (Table 8).

We also asked respondents to rate a series of land use priorities using a five-point scale, from very important to not important. The land uses that were rated as most important were wildlife habitat preservation and wetland protection and preservation (Table 8).

### Conclusions

Land trusts are becoming an integral component of the current and future fabric of land protection and preservation. They represent a phenomenon to be monitored and encouraged by the public sector, and they represent an opportunity for public/private cooperation. Based on the survey informa-

**Table 6. Land trust protection and preservation techniques (n = 62).\***

Technique	Number	Percent
Land acquisition	48	77.4
Easements	18	29.0
Land transfer	15	24.2
Land management	12	19.4
Advocacy	11	17.7
Accept land donations	6	9.7
Lease land	5	8.1
Education	5	8.1
Joint ownership	4	6.5
Title restrictions	2	3.2
Fundraising	2	3.2
Consulting	2	3.2
Technical assistance	2	3.2
Land restoration	2	3.2
Land monitoring	1	1.6
No answer	2	3.2

\*Respondents could choose up to three land protection and preservation techniques.

**Table 7. Amount of land owned and/or managed by land trusts in the Great Lakes region.**

Total Land (ha)	Number	Percent
Less than 40	11	22.0
41-80	5	10.0
81-120	8	16.0
121-200	3	6.0
201-300	4	8.0
301-400	3	6.0
401-1,200	11	22.0
Greater than 1,200	5	10.0

**Table 8. Uses of land owned and/or managed by land trusts and land use priority ratings placed on that land by the trusts.**

Land Use	Uses of Land		Priority Rating (Mean Rating)*
	Number	Percent	
Outdoor recreation	47	94	3.229
Wildlife	41	82	4.735
Education	14	28	---
Forestry	6	12	2.630
Agriculture	5	10	1.870
Prairie	5	10	---
Open space	3	6	3.474
Botany	2	4	---
Research	2	4	---
Historic preservation	1	2	2.825
Wetland	---	---	4.354
Natural Hazard	---	---	3.070

\*5 = very important; 1 = not important.

tion, a number of conclusions are possible.

Land trusts are having an impact on land preservation and protection in the Great Lakes region. The majority of organizations (80.6%) own or manage land and/or water resources. While the extent of land protection (23,411 ha) is not extensive in view of the total land base of the region, the specificity with which the land is protected under the organizations is significant. While it is not expected that land trusts will undertake extensive land protection/preservation activities in the future, these organizations are contributing to land protection through important, single-initiative actions.

In particular, the organizations are responding to private initiatives that are not being addressed (or perhaps cannot be addressed) through public-sector action. Land trusts have the ability to focus on single land protection/preservation objectives without the compromises often forced upon public-sector initiatives. Through private, direct action, people are "getting what they want" in land protection. In addition, land trusts are willing and able to work in cooperation and partnership with public-sector organizations. Basically, land trusts represent an opportunity for public/private action in the shared goal of land protection/preservation.

Finally, these organizations represent an opportunity for land protection/preservation that can occur in a fast, efficient, and flexible manner. Land trusts have all the advantages available to the private sector in terms of land negotiations and fundraising. They may acquire land through fee simple, easement, donations, transfers, or leases. Additionally, they may purchase deed restrictions, directly manage the land in a particular fashion, or buy land and donate it to the public sector with administrative restrictions. Moreover, land trusts have the ability to "go out tomorrow" and act on a piece of land that is in danger of degradation or destruction. Also, land trusts carry none of the problems that often plague public agencies—poor image, sluggish action, and multiple-goal conflicts.

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