Section 3: Intersections of Political Organizing

3.1: Background

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Background

“Organizing people is an art: it’s messy and has few hard rules. It is full of different personalities, strong egos, opinions and feelings of ownership and turf.”

Above all, political organizing takes leadership to transform a vision into reality. Individuals or organizations leading a political effort, whether to pass a ballot or to change a zoning ordinance, must have strong communication skills, the ability to foster teamwork, and the understanding of local politics and how government works. The approaches, participants, and processes will vary, depending on the goal and nature of the campaign; further, how those at the steering wheel organize these efforts may both build support for future efforts and, in some cases, conflict with future campaigns.

Ballot campaigns to raise funds for land conservation are typically considered quick, messy, one-time efforts. Land trusts need to know the different circumstances defined by state enabling acts to issue bonds and how to get their initiative or referendum on the ballot. This may require a shotgun approach to target the spectrum of interested and affected stakeholders and, potentially, tacit targeting of a city or county board. In the case of referendums where the legislature or local elected county officials have a say in referring measures to the ballot, it is important to recognize that local boards may have frequent turnover, potentially with dynamic changes in sentiments towards conservation and finance.

Campaigns for adopting land use regulations are often longer processes with many meetings that some citizens might not have the time, patience, attention span, or interest to engage in. Participants will encounter lots of give-and-take and will need to employ an especially focused approach, targeting a governor, leader in the state assembly, or local or regional government. These government officials have their own demands and pressures, which need to be understood. The reputational risks of being associated with regulation must also be considered. Some land trusts have partnered or more loosely affiliated themselves with other citizen planning groups that take the spotlight in advocacy and education/outreach work.
No matter the campaign, organizations leading political efforts must create and clearly articulate their vision, manage the various stages and steps of the overall campaign process, and obtain commitments and support via relationships, partnerships, and coalitions.

Passing Ballot Measures for Funding Conservation

State and local ballot measures have been the bread and butter of recent public funding for conservation. Between 1988 and 2008, 76% of land conservation ballot measures were successful, resulting in passage of 1,595 ballot measures nation-wide (meeting the majority or supermajority vote requirements in their communities) and raising over $46 billion for local open-space preservation (Press, 2008). While 2009 saw a noticeable decrease in measures proposed and percent passed, The Trust for Public Land’s LandVote determined that over $600 million of conservation funds were approved, suggesting that even in dire times, ballot measures will continue to play an important role in funding local conservation initiatives (TPL, n.d.).

Private land trusts can and do play a number of roles in these efforts, from designing to promoting open space ballot measures. The Trust for Public Land (TPL), for example, drafts bond measures, conducts polling and research to demonstrate where ballots will likely succeed, shares those results with commissioners and planners to secure their support, and recruits strong local partners (TPL, 2005). In Gallatin, Montana, for example, TPL helped pass a bond to support buying conservation easements on ranch lands. Gallatin County, a strongly Republican ranching community in southwestern Montana, became the first county in the state to adopt funding for land conservation. The momentum supporting this prototype rippled to several other local governments, including Missoula County, where residents approved a $10 million open space bond in 2006 by a 70% majority (ibid). Another outgrowth of the citizen support garnered from this ballot campaign was the creation of a specialty “Open Land” license plate that generated more than $400,000 for the Gallatin County’s Open Space Program (Gallatin County, 2008; personal communication with Ernest Cook, Senior Vice President, TPL).

Research by several organizations and academics suggest several steps to passing successful ballots (Newsome and Gentry, 2009). These include:

- **Listening**: understanding the values and demands of voters
- **Engaging communities and people of color**: a number of recent studies indicate that these often overlooked community members support conservation initiatives, in many cases more than white community members
Once the ballot is passed, ensuring that the benefits of funding are equitably shared: this will be important for ensuring the continued support of coalitions of different groups.

The Conservation Campaign, a non-profit national organization that focuses solely on political action to gain public funding for conservation funding provides a number of publicly accessible resources on its website. One such interactive and detailed resource, the Campaign Toolkit, outlines the steps for a successful campaign, including:

- **Laying the Groundwork:** Understanding the political landscape includes identifying voters’ concerns, potential allies, and opponents. It also should include meeting with public officials prior to launching a campaign to hear their political concerns and to build strategies that meet these concerns (but that do not become partisan or support a particular candidate).

- **Building the Coalition:** Creating a campaign committee with clear and specific delegations; reaching out to both the obvious and non-traditional partners (e.g., real estate groups, senior citizens, police and firefighters, hunters and fishermen, farmers and ranchers, ethnic groups, churches, educational organizations, tourism boards, and groups advocating civil rights or affordable housing); and recruiting volunteers and supporters.

- **Getting the Message Out:** Creating a simple, clear and consistent message that is “heard, believed, remembered and repeated” and, used in direct mailings, grassroots efforts, and other forms of outreach.

To take on this type of work, a land trust needs to be highly skilled in organizing people, identifying potential opponents and proponents, getting supporters to the polls, and educating people. Additionally, there are lots of mindless tasks such as reviewing voting patterns and party affiliation lists that will take time and resources away from other endeavors.

**Adopting Land Use Requirements**

While assuring passage of a ballot measure requires getting supportive members of the community to the voting booth, the adoption of a new zoning ordinance, subdivision rule, or land use plan entails its own opportunities and challenges. Many complications stem from the huge, regional differences across the US in attitudes toward and processes for adopting zoning requirements.

In addition, many land trusts view the process for adopting zoning requirements as a contentious, time-consuming, and often ineffective process dominated by politics, special interests, and entrenched power structures. Common criticisms of the zoning process, as described by Fleischmann (1989) include the following: (1) elected officials are simply trying to appease as many constituents as will secure their reelection; (2) elected officials make decisions in order to avoid public protest; (3) that elected officials tend to favor development for the perceived fiscal benefits that will be
brought to their city or county; (4) minorities and poor residents are excluded; and (5) real estate markets are disrupted and property rights restricted.

These and other conventional views of local regulatory processes, however, are not fully supported empirically. With regard to the view that the zoning process is a highly charged political process, Fleischmann (1989) indicated that citizen-raised objections actually made up the minority of applications filed and few proposals had significant numbers of opponents. Additionally, elected officials reversed less than 15% of staff recommendations (ibid).

In a standard process for adopting land use regulations, there are usually three different arenas for public input: public hearings, public comment periods, and citizen-based commissions. The first two may be viewed as one-way forms of communication, during which the public expresses its views to an agency or elected officials. Little to no dialogue or learning takes place during these processes. In the third case, leading citizens representing different views are appointed to make either decisions or recommendations to elected officials.

- **Public Hearings**: Public hearings are required by state laws to precede a vote on an ordinance or plan by a planning commission or governing body. Planning commissions—comprised of laypeople appointed by elected officials, review zoning proposals—hold public meetings, and make recommendations to elected bodies (e.g., a board of county commissioners or a city council). The elected body then has the authority to amend zoning ordinances or other land use regulations.

These hearings are preceded by a public notice, which typically is published in local newspapers, posted in government agendas, and mailed to affected parties approximately two weeks in advance. Hearings are often formal, with a presentation of a proposal by its proponent or sponsor, followed by comments from members of the public in attendance. Since many hearings occur late in the planning process, these and other stakeholders tend to be disinclined to consider alternatives deeply because public officials are exhausted and applicants have already invested a great amount of time in the process. Thus the hearing is an ineffective arena for public engagement. Other venues, like neighborhood and community-wide meetings, stakeholder group meetings with planners, and focus groups may provide additional arenas for engagement (Innes and Booher, 2000; Kelly, 2010).

- **Public Comment Period**: In addition to submitting comments in hearings, the public may also submit written comments to planning boards prior to these public meetings. Local procedures may require that comments be submitted at least a week before meetings and that duplicate copies be provided. These materials will then become part of the official record and retained by the planning board or commission.

- **Citizen-based Commission**: Citizen advisory committees and broad collaborative groups are often convened by local governments to represent a
variety of views and to make policy recommendations. Recommendations from these groups have varied success in terms of application. Factors like access to funding, technical assistance, staff support, timing, and the prior existence of networks of people and organizations focused on a particular issue may be crucial to being taken seriously (Koontz, 2005).

The literature tends to support the importance of professional planners’ advice, the desire to avoid citizen harm or conflict, and local context as three key factors influencing local officials’ land use decision making. Local context variables like population growth, demographic characteristics, economic base, political pressure, and commitment of local officials have also been found to play a role (Koontz, 2005; Fleischmann, 1989; Burby and May, 1997; Last, 1997; Fleischmann and Pierannunzi, 1990).

In this business-as-usual model for engaging the public, public hearings are typically attended by avid proponents and opponents of a measure, comments may be limited to two to three minutes—with uncertainty as to if and how planners and elected officials use that input in making decisions—and no real dialogue occurs (Innes and Booher, 2000). However, many local governments have adopted more open, interactive, and collaborative approaches to planning.

One of these collaborative methods is the planning charrette. In this creative process, a group of interested citizens and experts is convened to focus around a specific design problem or proposal. Developers, planners, attorneys, other experts, and citizens work for several days or weeks through the public process to create a collaborative vision. This vision may alleviate fears and concerns because participants are offered a better sense of what they are working towards, and it has proven to be a persuasive process for energizing and motivating people (Lennertz, 2003; Kelly, 2010).

Charrettes may start as a prototype or pilot project and, in some cases, have given cities the courage or support to replicate such collaborative efforts or to build upon these visions. In the city of North Augusta, South Carolina, for example, the Leyland Alliance worked with the city and a stakeholder group to help the local government meets its goal of connecting the city to the Savannah River. After the success of the first charrette, which led to the conversion of old rail lines to hiking trails and connected hikers, walkers, and bike riders to the riverfront, the city had the confidence and momentum to take on other efforts, including the construction of a new, transformative city hall building that overlooks and celebrates the riverfront.

Land trusts have played varying roles in charrettes. The Lopez Community Land Trust, which works with the citizen groups and county, state, and local jurisdictions on charrette prototypes in Washington, has convened participants on topics ranging from affordable housing to food issues, bringing people of specialized areas together to create community visions and outline next planning and implementation steps for the collaborative vision. Others like the Grafton Land Trust in Massachusetts have played a more participatory role in charrettes to create visions for the historic mill village of Farnumsville and the Blackstone River.

While conventional views of zoning may, in some cases, amplify the actual
polemics of public processes for land use regulation, the process is no doubt a political one. According to Duane (2007), who looked at integrating science into land use plans, successful ingredients to engage in this arena include:

- Using a rhetorical framing strategy that emphasizes broadly-supported anthropocentric goals, rather than narrower biocentric goals;
- Distributing relatively weak science or spatial detail on where biologically important resources exist until broad political support for the program has been achieved;
- Integrating leadership by political actors with very different political philosophies and constituencies, rather than from a single perspective;
- Looking for a sophisticated development community with large players who are experienced with working in complicated regulatory environments;
- Identifying strict state and federal regulatory regimes that could constrain development unless a comprehensive strategy was developed; and
- Taking steps to abate organized opposition by commodity extraction or other intensive land use industries.

Potential Intersections
The campaign processes for ballot measures and zoning requirements share many of the same features, in terms of the type of leadership needed, stages of polling and community engagement, and so on. Yet, while many land trusts have engaged and have great experience and insight in campaigns for ballot measures, very few have done so with zoning. By recognizing the overlaps and places of synergy, the land trust community can begin to consider whether and how to utilize additional public processes and conservation tools.

Leadership and Stages of Political Organizing
A team should do much of the political organizing work, meaning that leaders will need to be able to create effective partnerships within and between organizations. The National Trails Training Partnership provides a number of highly relevant resources for land trusts and other conservation groups seeking to engage in political organizing. One of these resources—a collaborative effort between urban planners, a design firm, greenway and trails groups, and the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation—outlines the following steps that leaders should consider:

- Conducting meetings, making public presentations, and distributing news releases and media advisories (i.e., a database of media outlets and contacts) about the vision/effort;
- Recruiting and holding on to public support;
• Eliciting and being sensitive to public support;
• Conducting interviews (by phone, appointment, or canvassing) with community members and elected officials;
• Distributing questionnaires (by mail or local newspaper) for input and to raise awareness; and
• Implementing marketing strategies to establish identity (through a logo and slogan), to gain exposure, and to create name recognition with a spokesperson or good writer (e.g., a volunteer college student from a media or communications department).

Efforts from mobilizing for a ballot might help in future efforts in a number of ways. For example, mailings to constituents about a proposed ballot might identify donors and supporters for future efforts.

**Community Engagement**

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Source: National Survey of 800 voters (178 of whom identified themselves as people of color) conducted on behalf of The Nature Conservancy in September 2009 by David Metz, Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates and Lori Weigel, Public Opinion Strategies.

Gaining public support may require not only new skills and sources of funding, but new partners. Conservation, as expressed in a ballot or proposed regulation, must appeal to and benefit a broad community. The conservation movement must also reach out to those it historically has not. We have begun to see, for example, partnerships with developers via conservation and cluster developments; however, communities of color have largely been overlooked. By 2050, the number of people of color in the US is projected to more than double, becoming the majority of the population at nearly 220 million (Bonta and Jordan 2007). A sustainable movement, one that is relevant to the public and political conscious, will need to be relevant to a wider audience. This will require understanding a range of new communities and finding effective ways to engage with them.

Moving in these new directions will be easier for some organizations than others. There are, however, a number of resources available for guiding organizations to build meaningful public participation and support. The Center for Diversity and Environment, which provides services for environmental leaders and organizations to strategically diversify their operations, offers a number of resources on engaging people of color and building community. One such resource, by Bonta and Jordan (2007), suggests several best management practices, including:

• Collaborating with groups that already effectively work with communities of color, including organizations of color, such as Latino Issues Forum, youth-
serving organizations, urban parks and recreation departments, and schools. These tend to have proven track records, respect, and trust in their local communities. Partnerships with such organizations should be based on equity of power, resources, and sharing of benefits over the longer term;

- Working with foundations and conservation groups with shared interest to diversify by sharing information, lessons learned, and efforts;
- Expanding partnerships with labor, civil rights and faith movements; and
- Engaging young people by connecting them both to nature and leadership opportunities.

Several land trusts have worked with communities of color and other nontraditional partners on such initiatives. In its efforts to become a welcoming organization that reflects the diversity of Massachussetts, The Trustees of Reservations (Trustees) has taken steps “to enhance conservation awareness across all communities and prepare the next generation for environmental stewardship” (The Trustees of Reservations, 2007). Trustees’ 2007 Strategic Plan includes some of the steps they have outlined to engage with broader audiences: creating a Diversity Council, developing an organizational culture that recognizes the value of diversity, applying communication tools to attract and engage a wider constituency, collaborating with new partners, and reaching out to minority populations to learn more from and adapt to their knowledge and values.

In California, the Big Sur Land Trust (BSLT) has committed to “engaging with community members whose interests may have been ignored or not served by the land conservation movement” (BSLT, n.d.) By addressing community concerns like economic vitality, food protection, and affordable housing, BSLT strives not only to preserve land and waterways, but the very vitality of communities. Whether engaging with broad-based organizations to develop urban parks and recreational opportunities or providing donations following severe wildfires to support evacuated residents, BSLT has taken steps on several fronts to work with new partners and in collaborative processes to create healthy and thriving communities.

These and other experiences suggest that engaging new partners in campaigns requires time and openness to the goals of potential new partners.

Potential Conflict and Benefit

While campaigns may support each other, they may also lead to a number of frustrations and conflicts with other efforts. Some of these potential areas of conflict include:

- A short-term focus on raising money without a long-term commitment to the partners and community will defeat efforts to build sustainable coalitions;
- Failing to meet commitments over time will lead to suspicion and skepticism; and
- Choosing distracted or less adept partners may cause frustrations for other partners.
Spangler (2003) notes that keeping a coalition together may require catering to some sides more than others, reconciling different tactics (conciliatory versus confrontational), and carefully defining relationships, distributions of power in decision making, and acknowledgement for contributions.

Joining or forming a coalition, Spangler (2003) continues, is both a rational and an emotional decision. Should a land trust determine that a coalition will provide the effective means to pursue its goals and objectives, and that working with other organizations will not be overly complex and troublesome, the land trust may enjoy a number of benefits, including:

- Exposure and access to more expertise and resources (technical, financial, and personnel);
- Opportunities for new leadership to emerge;
- Greater relevance and heightened public profile; and
- Strength in numbers and interests that will be difficult for opponents to dismiss.

If bond measures can be designed to benefit several groups, or various stakeholders can identify overlaps in interests that might be pursued in the regulatory process, these groups can band together to make sure that implementation does not get bogged down, that benefits are distributed in a timely and equitable manner, and that sustainable partnerships are formed to aid in future efforts. Similar opportunities appear to be available for efforts to design and adopt laws incentivizing or requiring more sustainable land use.

**Campaigns as Engines for Change Over Time**

Campaigns, especially for ballots, tend to be unstable, ephemeral organisms. Staff members are hired and volunteers recruited for five months, coalitions are formed, a bill is passed, and the coalition disintegrates. For example, the Pima County government in Arizona was propelled by Endangered Species Act provisions to develop a Multispecies Conservation Plan. The local National Rifle Association chapter, developers and homebuilders, the Sierra Club, and many others joined together to urge their respective cohorts to vote in favor of a $174 million open-space bond package. However, groups from this coalition tended to go their separate ways after the bond was passed.

Within the private land conservation sector, while the broad base of support for ballot measures may help in future conservation campaigns, there are few obvious examples of sustainable coalitions, whereby partnerships were created to pass bonds
but were then kept intact to support other campaigns. A series of recent ballot measures supporting an array of subjects including urban parks, wildlife areas, air quality, beach cleanups, and water quality have brought a number of non-profit groups and the Latino community in Los Angeles together. Similarly, New York State has passed a number of bond acts bringing together a range of stakeholders. But case studies, lessons learned, theoretical underpinnings, and techniques for maintaining such coalitions over time appear to be lacking.

However, a number of land trusts are beginning to engage in campaigns and their communities in new, innovative ways. In doing so, they confront a number of challenges, including being associated with politics, government, and regulation. This requires stepping out of the comfort zone and tinkering with the anathema of the landowners they work with: regulation. In 2004, 97 of the 100 fastest growing counties in the US voted for President Bush (personal communication with Ernest Cook, Senior Vice President, TPL). Land trusts entering this political arena will have to recognize, understand, and be adept at addressing Republican mindsets. For conservation funding ballot referenda, this may be comparatively easy. This conservation tool may be described as a free-market, landowner friendly solution that will not deprive owners of property rights or decrease property values. Support for new land use regulations poses higher hurdles. As such, while both types of campaigns tend to engage similar organizations and individuals, as well as tactics like polling and public surveys, campaigns for ballot measures to provide conservation funding and those to adopt new zoning/land use requirements tend to be considered different beasts.

**Discussion Questions**

- Why are conservation groups becoming more active in campaigning for passage of ballot measures, but not for new zoning requirements?
- What sort of messages can land trusts use to make conservation-based regulation/incentives palatable to hesitant landowners?
- How can land trusts make sure that facts (e.g., the negative net fiscal impact of most development) are included in public discussions?
- Where and how might land trusts help local governments create a credible process that citizens will engage in? How might they translate their credibility and harness the community’s values in the land into this process?
- While land trusts have been successful in getting bonds passed, there is some pressure in states like New Jersey to reduce taxes, including for open spaces preservation. How can land trusts respond?
- How might one create coalitions that are not ephemeral and that might develop into more sustainable advocates for better land use over time?
Organizations Doing Interesting Work

The New Jersey Keep it Green Campaign – The organization ran a successful campaign in 2009 that led to the passage of a $400 million bond to preserve clean drinking water, wildlife habitat, working farms, and natural areas. See http://www.njkeepitgreen.org/.

The National Trails Training Partnership (NTTP) – NTTP provides a robust library of campaigning resources and training tools for conservation groups. See http://www.americantrails.org/.

The Conservation Campaign – The Conservation Campaign provides leadership, expertise, and resources to mobilize public support to win ballot measures and legislation that create more public funds to protect land and water resources. See http://www.conservationcampaign.org/.

Trust for Public Land LandVote (TPL) – TPL provides a database and mapping systems as well as other publications on conservation ballot measures. See http://www.tpl.org/tier3_cd.cfm?content_item_id=12010&folder_id=2386/.

Leyland Alliance (LA) – A development company that creates a sense of place and community through principles of traditional neighborhood design, LA has convened hundreds of stakeholders in waterfront development planning charrettes in South Carolina and New York. See http://www.leylandalliance.com/.

Lopez Community Land Trust – Based in Washington, this community land trust convenes public charrettes on several topics. See http://www.lopezclt.org/.

Grafton Land Trust (GLT) – GLT works with federal, state, and local government on a range of projects, including charrettes, and has brought together five town boards and the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor in a partnership to preserve the 100-acre Hennessy Farm through an innovative limited development plan. See http://www.graftonland.org/.

Center for Diversity and the Environment – Offers resources and guidance to develop leaders, diversify institutions, and build community. See http://www.environmentaldiversity.org/.

Big Sur Land Trust – The organization has engaged Latino and broader community on several initiatives. See http://www.bigsurlandtrust.org/.

Trustees of Reservations – To engage broader audiences, the organization has crossed language barriers and taken a number of other steps. See http://www.thetrustees.org/.

Useful Readings/Works Cited


Gallatin County Open Lands Program (Gallatin County). (2008). Gallatin County Open Lands Board History and Strategic Plan.


3.2: Examples, sources of information and other key points from the discussion

Some of the examples, sources of information and key points from the discussion included the following:

- While political organizing to raise funds for voluntary purchases of land or to impose involuntary restrictions on land use leads to different outcomes, both activities also have much in common. For example, both:
  - Are political processes aimed at influencing the actions of voters and/or elected officials;
  - Build from deep understandings of local land use and other priorities;
  - Call upon specialized legal knowledge;
  - Require extensive reporting on lobbying activities and associated expenses;
  - Can be quite polarizing, by pushing a number of local hot buttons – increased taxes, government ownership or regulatory controls;
• Attract similar opponents, particularly those who gain financially from development;

• Attract similar supporters, particularly those who gain financially from land conservation—very hard to engage average people who just like open space, but have more pressing issues on their minds.

• The Hudson River Park (http://www.hudsonriverpark.org/index.asp) is an example of a 30-year effort to combine public and private resources in a mix of land uses along the Western side of Manhattan.

• Political organizing was key to both building consensus on a vision and a constituency to support its implementation.

• By focusing on areas of common/overlapping interests, winning coalitions for funding and regulatory efforts were built.

• Different coalition partners had different resources and skills—and they were applied in a coordinated manner to great effect.

• Fifty years of ballot measures for conservation funding in New Jersey have underscored the importance of regional planning for where and how the money should best be spent.

• Chester County, PA adopted a bond measure to fund open space acquisition, but required interested towns to prepare an open space plan first and then to direct the funds to identified priority sites.

• Land trusts face a continuing need to find and build from shared interests with urban communities, particularly those of color and those with fewer means such as access to clean air, water and local food, prevention of childhood obesity, as well as opportunities to make a good living.

• Access to local food is becoming a powerful argument in support of farmland preservation, broadening the discussion beyond “just protecting rich people's horse farms.”

• Going through a political campaign to raise funding for voluntary land acquisition in regions (such as the West) that traditionally oppose public land use planning processes may open the door to broader discussions of the most effective ways to apply the proceeds.

• The Santee River in South Carolina is an example of a case where the owners of lands protected by conservation easements banded together to lobby for tighter regulatory controls on further development in the region.

• At a minimum, land trusts need to understand the basics of the local zoning code and any proposed changes in order to avoid paying too much for the lands they acquire.
The “New Urbanist” model (see http://www.cnu.org/) starts by inventorying the physical/natural assets of a community and protecting as many of the public assets as possible as a way to increase the attractiveness of the surrounding development. Such an approach is being pursued in Ticonderoga, New York, as part of an effort to spark economic development by reopening the town’s physical connection to Lake Champlain.

Vermont’s efforts to combine affordable housing and land conservation offer valuable lessons on the opportunity to build sustainable villages in a rural economy.

Thought should be given to the growing opportunities to swap lands of equivalent economic and ecological/social value over time as part of the response to changing local circumstances (climate, economics, other).

If political coalitions come together to address a crisis, how can they best be kept together once the crisis has passed? Does this create opportunities for the educational and stewardship activities of more “mature” land trusts to have a wider impact?