

Evaluating, Selecting & Approving Conservation Projects

PURPOSE:

This policy establishes the requirements for evaluating, selecting and approving conservation projects.

POLICY:

A well-defined process and established criteria for selecting projects allows the Land Trust to find a balance between being strategic and being opportunistic. By focusing on its strategic priorities, the Land Trust can protect more significant lands. The project selection, evaluation and approval process serves to produce information that guides and focuses the Board's deliberations on the important issues, including public benefit and project risks. To ensure that the Land Trust carefully evaluates, selects and approves conservation projects, WCLT will:

1. **Develop a Land Protection Plan** that identifies specific natural resources or geographic areas where it will focus its work. The Board will approve, and revise as needed, a *Land Protection Plan* that identifies resource lands of highest priority interest. The Land Protection Plan must be congruent with the Land Trust's mission and be developed using available natural resources data, and community, staff and board knowledge and expertise.
2. **Establish selection criteria** for land and easement projects and a process for project evaluation and selection. The selection criteria must be consistent with the Land Trust's mission and goals, focus on the resource and public benefit value, address project feasibility and cost effectiveness, and evaluate each property's overall significance and priority (see *Policy 8.2 Project Selection Criteria & Evaluation Process*).
3. **Provide review and approval by the Board** of every land and easement transaction. The Board will receive timely and adequate information prior to each approval phase of the project transaction process: Phase I: Project Prospectus & Selection Approval, Phase II: Project Scope & Due Diligence and Phase III: Project Legal Review & Final Approval, and when significant changes occur in the project scope or budget (see *Procedure 9.1(a) Project Transaction Process*). The Board delegates approval authority to the Executive Committee in circumstances where an approved project has a significant change in scope or budget requiring an emergency and/or timely decision. Subsequently, the Board shall review and ratify all Executive Committee project transaction decisions at the next scheduled Board meeting.
4. **Establish a system of project documentation** that tracks the evaluation, selection and approval of each conservation project. Project data will be collected, synthesized and presented to guide the Board on whether and how to protect the property. The project documentation will include:
 - *Documentation of conservation values* based on a site inspection and appropriate secondary data sources.

- *Determination whether the property meets applicable federal, state or local requirements for public benefit and tax incentives*, especially the conservation purposes test of IRC 170(h), when applicable.
- *Identification of risks to the protection of the project's important conservation values* and options for reducing the risks and/or modifying the project.
- *Assessment of the Land Trust's skills and resources to protect the important conservation values* on the property including its capacity to perform any perpetual stewardship responsibilities, or whether to engage in a partnership with other qualified conservation organization(s).
- *Documentation of any project partnerships* to clarify, as appropriate, the goals of the project, roles and responsibilities of each party, legal and financial arrangements, communications to the public and between parties, and public acknowledgement of each partner's role in the project.
- *Documentation of the evaluation and selection of the best conservation tool* for the property, with the landowner's involvement.

5. **Use the Board's discretionary role to make final** decisions on the selection of projects. The selection criteria will be used as a guide to decide the eligibility of a project, but the Land Trust may use other factors in making a final decision. The Board may approve low-scoring projects provided all of the following are true:

- No reasonable conservation alternative exists to protect the land;,
- The project is consistent with the Land Trust's mission;
- Public benefit will be derived;
- The project will not be an unreasonable drain on the Land Trust's resources;
- and
- No ethical or public image problems are involved.

Approved: August 1, 2005

President, Board of Directors