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Local-national partnerships create wins at the ballot box

At first glance, the city of New Bedford, Massachusetts, appears to be an unlikely place for the Land Trust Alliance to get involved in a ballot measure aimed at passing a conservation-oriented property tax surcharge. With approximately 95,000 residents, New Bedford is the sixth-largest city in the state, and it struggles with many of the urban challenges facing similarly sized industrial communities across the nation.

Convincing voters to agree to pay extra taxes for any reason is a challenge in any municipality, but particularly in places like New Bedford, where unemployment and infrastructure issues often take center stage in public funding discussions. “In a working class community, where there aren’t as many funding sources as in more affluent communities, preservation projects are often the first to go,” explains New Bedford native Alicia Pimental, who serves as communications and outreach manager for the Buzzards Bay Coalition (BBC), an accredited land trust.

Nonetheless, in early 2014 a partnership of the Alliance and The Trust for Public Land (the partnership) identified an opportunity in New Bedford to encourage voters to adopt the Community Preservation Act (CPA). CPA is a smart growth tool that helps communities preserve open space and historic sites, creates affordable housing and develops

outdoor recreational facilities. By adopting a local property tax surcharge, local governments receive matching funds from the state’s Community Preservation Trust Fund. Since CPA became law in 2000, 158 cities and towns have adopted it and \$1.4 billion has been raised statewide.

As one of the only communities in the Buzzards Bay region of southeastern Massachusetts that hadn’t already opted in to CPA, the partnership was certain that with the right messaging campaign the citizens of New Bedford would see the benefits of voting in favor of the 1.5% property tax increase. To gain local footing, the partnership worked with the BBC as its partner on the ground and provided education outreach funding to support the project.

“When we talked about what the city could do with the extra funding, people responded very positively,” Pimental says. In November, New Bedford’s voters made their voices heard and adopted CPA at the ballot with 54% of the vote. New Bedford is one of the largest cities in the state to adopt CPA, which will raise at least \$1 million annually for community preservation purposes.

“I found it very encouraging to see the stewardship ethic of this community,” Pimental says. “People around here really care about preserving what makes New Bedford a special place, and as a native, that’s a great feeling.”

Forming Local-National Partnerships

The Alliance/TPL/local-land-trust-partner collaboration in New Bedford is one of six examples from last November’s election cycle (see page 25). All but one of the ballot measures were successful. The partnership was made possible with funding from the Knobloch Family Foundation.

To start the process, the partnership identified ballot measures across the country that could increase open space and natural resource conservation funding, help build local organizational capacity and serve as examples to others. Next, the Alliance reached out to local land trusts that could bring to the table the intimate knowledge of the local culture, politics and conservation priorities necessary to run a successful campaign. “Without the involvement of a local group anchored in the community, it would be difficult for any national organization to lead a successful campaign alone,” says Mark Ackelson, president emeritus of the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation (accredited), conservation finance advisor to the Alliance and campaign coach for the land trusts.

“I’m a huge believer in the land trust movement, and this partnership program has reinforced to me how important land trusts are to their communities,” Ackelson says. “They can play several roles with the

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All ages benefit from the open space sales tax in Larimer County, Colorado.

ballot measures, such as leaders, spokes-people and educators.”

The Alliance coached the land trusts’ staff and board members on education and advocacy work. In conjunction with local land trust leaders, TPL’s conservation finance experts provided research and technical assistance to local elected officials to design ballot measures that would have a strong chance of garnering voter support. Its field staff assisted with feasibility research, polling and voter communications, including targeted mailings and digital outreach. “It’s fairly typical that land trusts and grassroots organizations are very thinly staffed and short on resources. We are trying to help them see they can tap into this partnership to vastly expand their capabilities and develop funding to accomplish their missions,” Ackelson explains.

Land Trusts Can Lobby

It’s a common misconception that land trusts can’t participate in ballot measure campaigns. While endorsement of candidates is strictly prohibited by the IRS, land trusts can and do lobby within limits, including advocating on behalf of state and local conservation funding measures. See www.lta.org/issues-action/tools-tips/politics-whats-allowed.

And looking at the big picture, dollars generated by measures approved by voters provide important matches for federal and state farm and ranchland, water quality, wild-life and recreation projects.

Providing Experience and Expertise

In South Carolina the partnership provided expertise and funding to assist the Beaufort County Open Land Trust (BCOLT) in educating voters about a proposed \$20 million bond issue on the ballot last November.

Although Beaufort County has a strong history of support for conservation efforts, this was the fourth such initiative since 2000 and support for the measure was less certain. A feeling was growing among some in the community that enough land had been preserved, says Lisa Lord, Rural and Critical Lands Program administrator for BCOLT. To counter that message, Lord collaborated with the partnership to spread the word about the economic and quality of life benefits of preservation.

Although Lord, a natural resource biologist, knew her community well, this was her first time running a public education campaign. She relied on the experience of her counterparts at the Alliance and TPL to help her effectively communicate key messages to county voters.

“They helped me get over the learning curve. They were that instant resource for all of the questions I had and that was very

valuable,” Lord says. “Rather than spending hours researching on the Internet, I could get answers from them quickly and then spend my time out in the community.”

More specifically, the partnership helped her craft a message that would resonate with voters and then figure out a strategic timeline. That meant waiting until six weeks before the referendum to blast their message through multiple channels. Email, opinion pieces in the local papers and educational mailers were all timed to go out right before the election when voters were focusing on the bond measure.

The partnership also worked with Lord to help her identify local leaders and supply them with research to turn them into advocates for the cause. For instance, Tom Davis, a well-regarded state senator, spoke very effectively during the campaign using research from BCOLT, Lord says.

The ballot measure ended up passing with more than 70% of the vote. Ackelson views the high approval rate as testament to the quality of the educational campaign run by Lord. “That showed us what somebody with knowledge and passion for the place could accomplish. With the assistance of the partnership, Lisa really got the tools she needed to run a successful campaign despite never having done this before,” he says.

Engaging Local Land Trusts

The situation was a little different in Larimer County, Colorado, where local partner K-Lynn Cameron—a former conservation director and current advisor to the executive board of Legacy Land Trust—was involved in educating voters on an issue up for debate in November 2014. The county was facing a ballot measure to extend the quarter-cent open space sales tax originally passed in 1995. That tax had been extended in 1999 for 15 years, and the county determined that the timing was right in 2014 to push for a 25-year extension.

Cameron had worked on the public education campaign for this issue in the 1990s,

when Legacy Land Trust was unwilling to get involved in anything it perceived to be political. Yet the tax had provided a steady stream of funding for another local land trust that was willing to support the issue over the years, and this time around Legacy Land Trust was far more willing to participate after a little nudging from the Alliance and TPL, she says.

Legacy Land Trust raised a total of \$16,500 to pay for an educational mailer that went to 35,000 households in Larimer County in October just before the election. “Having Mark help facilitate this connection with Legacy Land Trust was one of the most important results of this partnership,” Cameron says. TPL was also instrumental in conducting polling before the campaign to help figure out how to structure the messaging, she adds.

Assessing the Results

Following the 2014 election cycle, the Alliance and TPL have been evaluating their joint efforts. With five out of six initiatives passing, the results alone make a strong statement. Feedback from the local partners has been helpful, such as that from Cecilia Rosacker McCord in New Mexico, who worked on a ballot measure in Bernalillo County that passed by 72%.

“It was great in terms of getting our names out there in a way that we would’ve never been



TAPTEAL GREENWAY

In the past 20 years, the Tapteal Greenway has reached more than 10,000 students ages 2-71 with interactive exploration of the Yakima River environment.

November 2014 Partnership Ballot Measures

PLACE	LOCAL PARTNER	BALLOT QUESTION	PASS
Acme Township, MI	Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy (accredited)	Extension of open space mill levy	Yes (57%)
Beaufort County, SC	Beaufort County Open Land Trust	\$20 million bond issue for open space	Yes (73%)
Benton County, WA	Tapteal Greenway	Creation of a Conservation Futures Fund	No (47%)
Bernalillo County, NM	Rio Grande Agricultural Land Trust; New Mexico Land Conservancy (accredited)	Open space 0.20 mill levy	Yes (72%)
Larimer County, CO	Legacy Land Trust; Estes Valley Land Trust (accredited)	Quarter cent sales tax	Yes (82%)
New Bedford, MA	Buzzards Bay Coalition (accredited)	MA Community Preservation Act	Yes (54%)

For more information, see www.landvote.org

able to do without their help,” says McCord, executive director (and sole staffer) of the Rio Grande Agricultural Land Trust. She notes that more guidance from the Alliance and TPL after the election would have been welcome. Mark Ackelson remarks that in mapping out future plans for continued coordination between the Alliance and TPL on similar measures, follow-up tracking will be something that will receive more emphasis.

Research and planning for the next round is already under way, funded by the Knobloch Family Foundation through the 2016 election cycle. Plans include production of case studies and a handbook outlining the process for land trusts, Ackelson says. “We consider the work a great success to be replicated. Even in the one instance where the measure was not successful, we didn’t lose by much and we may revisit that area.”

The loss was in Benton County, Washington, where the creation of a Conservation Futures Fund was narrowly defeated. President Scott Woodward of Tapteal Greenway, the local partner, knew from the start he was facing an uphill battle, but polling data indicated that the measure

had a shot at passing. He relied heavily on the experience of the Alliance and TPL in orchestrating an educational campaign.

After the loss, the campaign committee felt that “the negative votes were uninformed votes,” Woodward says. “The precincts of the losses were ones in which the committee felt it didn’t do the best job on the ground in educating voters.”

Woodward reports that he and his allies are eager to bring this initiative before the public in the near future, and that they would definitely seek advice again from the Alliance and TPL. “Having them on your side is huge,” he says.

Alliance President Rand Wentworth says the organization stands ready to help. “Recognizing that the federal government is no longer the major source of funding for land conservation, we will continue to work with our members to support local and state ballot measures. A record \$13 billion in conservation funds was generated at the polls in 2014 alone. Clearly, with the right approach, America’s voters support land conservation. We should all be thinking about giving them that opportunity.”

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