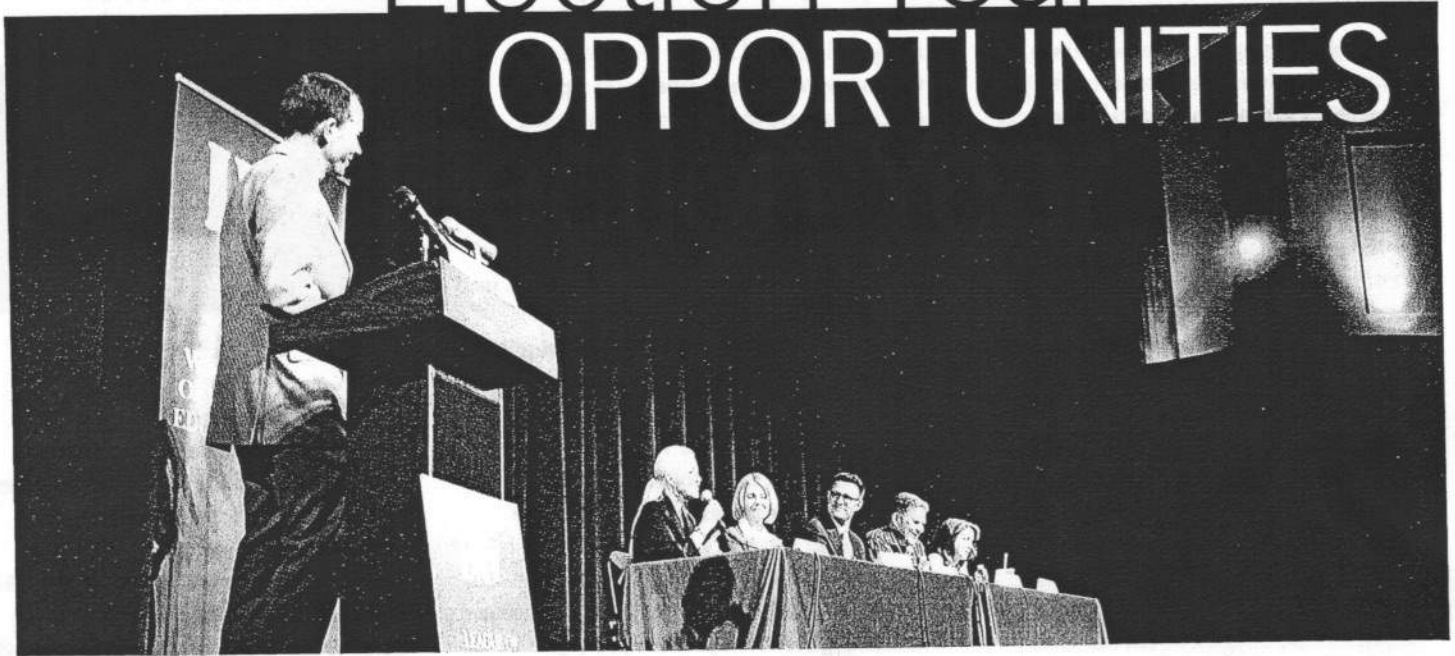


BY Sean Robertson and Catherine Ward

Election Year OPPORTUNITIES



COURTESY OF TYW/WASHINGTON PUBLIC AFFAIRS NETWORK

// Election season is prime time for land trusts to reach out, educate and advocate because public officials are back home and looking for opportunities to connect with their constituents and talk about issues that matter to the community." —Andy McLeod, Advocacy Director, during the Land Trust Alliance's June 2016 webinar

Being a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization focused on protecting a community's special places doesn't mean a land trust has to stay silent while campaigns are going on. In fact, our June webinar featured land trusts that have discovered election season is a great time to cement relationships and raise their profiles.

It is important, of course, that land trusts heed the bright line prohibition on candidate endorsements. At the same time, the law allows land trusts to advance their missions as campaigns occur and to highlight issues of importance to the public.

During the webinar, Rich Cochran of Western Reserve Land Conservancy in Ohio shared a story from when he was a volunteer for a small local land trust 20 years ago. "We reached out to our state representatives, Sherrod Brown and Steve LaTourette, and invited them on a canoe ride. They liked the idea so much that they brought their daughters with them, and we had a family day at the lake and got to know them quite well."

The fact that these local representatives went on to be a senator on the short list for vice president and a powerful friend of House Speaker

John Boehner on the Appropriations Committee drives home the importance of engaging at all levels of government.

In the years that followed, Cochran and many of the conservancy's board members became politically active as individuals, contributing to campaigns and hosting fundraisers while studiously avoiding use of the organization's name or resources. He found that "if you're giving \$1,000 to \$5,000, you are a major player in the campaign and you are going to get face time with the senator."

Limiting political activity to personal time did work for many years, but eventually the conservancy decided to establish a 501(c)(4) organization—the Western Reserve Conservation Education Fund—and a related political action committee. Cochran believes their \$75,000 in PAC contributions played a significant role in securing more than \$500 million in public funding for their priorities. Their elected officials have also been eager to cohost fundraisers for the conservancy.

Debates are another great way to broaden awareness and support for your priorities. The Washington Association of Land Trusts recently partnered with the League of Women Voters and others to host a forum for state commissioner of public lands candidates (pictured above).

"This is a very important elected office for Washington state, yet many people have never heard of it," said the association's executive director,

Hannah Clark. "It was incredible that we were able to get over 200 people out to hear the candidates' approach to helping communities protect the forests that they rely on for clean water, jobs, habitat and recreation. I was able to emphasize the necessity of partnerships between Department of Natural Resources and land trusts and our supporters got to speak one-on-one with the candidates afterward."

The accredited Land Trust for Tennessee and its partners teamed up to host a mayoral forum in Nashville. "The forum was helpful for a number of reasons," said President and CEO Liz McLaurin. "We asked whether the candidates would address the need for a park in southeast Nashville. It was amazing to get all the candidates on record one-upping each other in support of the park and the Nashville Open Space Plan. One candidate even said it was his top priority."

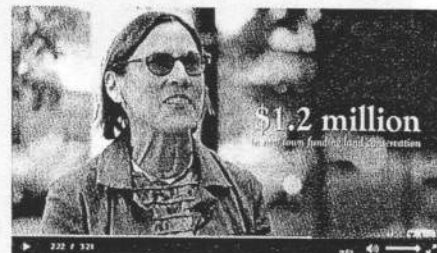
The land trust was mindful that, as a tax-exempt nonprofit, a failure to be even-handed could threaten its tax status and reputation. It invited all nine candidates, asked nonpartisan questions, gave equal time and met with each candidate beforehand. The result was a bipartisan event that, without alienating anyone, put conservation at the forefront and educated both candidates and constituents on issues affecting the conservation community.

Advocacy is a crucial part of a land trust's role in the community and there's no need to stop lobbying as the election approaches. You can still honor or criticize incumbents for specific official actions and invite them to your events in their capacity as a public official, but you should avoid mentioning their candidacy and provide written guidelines to discourage them from straying into a partisan stump speech. And if just one candidate shows up to a public event, giving them time at the podium or quoting them in your press release would be a mistake.

It's also critical to maintain the distinction between your land trust and the personal opinions of its leaders, especially with the ubiquity of social media. Your employees have every right to be politically active, but emailing a campaign from your office computer or wearing a campaign T-shirt to a land trust event could be seen as an endorsement. Even the split-second decision to share or retweet a partisan post could be problematic for an executive director who posts on behalf of the organization.

These rules are important, but don't let them scare you away from a great opportunity to spread your message and promote the great conservation work you are doing. We look forward to sharing your stories from this election season!

"So Much Power"



Mary McFadden in the new ballot video.

"There's so much power in asking voters to vote 'yes' for conservation," says The Trust for Public Land's Will Abberger in the new video on ballot measure campaigns from the Alliance and TPL.

While land trusts cannot support candidates, ballot measure campaigns are fair game! When the electorate takes on a legislative role, it's permissible for nonprofits to lobby voters to the same extent they can lobby any other legislative body.

Since 2014, a partnership between the Alliance and The Trust for Public Land has invested more than \$100,000 in grants to help land trusts across the country advance conservation funding measures that go directly before voters for their approval. This investment helped to enact more than \$11.4 billion in conservation funding.

The video tells the story of five successful measures, and there are more on the ballot this November.

See the video and learn more at www.lta.org/creating-new-funding.

NASHVILLE MAYORAL FORUM on LAND & WATER CONSERVATION



Wednesday, April 22 from 8 to 9:30am

The Cumberland River Compact, The Land Trust for Tennessee, Greenways for Nashville and The Nature Conservancy are sponsoring a Davidson County Mayoral Candidate Forum on Land and Water Conservation **AT THE RIVER CENTER** in the Bridge Building. The **Q & A WILL BE MODERATED BY WPLN'S BLAKE FARMER** which includes all eight of the candidates running in the 2015 race for the mayor's seat. Selected questions will be posed to address the candidate's views on the future of conservation in Nashville.

HOW WILL THE "IT CITY" - THE BOOMING ENTREPRENEURIAL, TOURISM & MUSIC HUB THAT IS NASHVILLE CONTINUE ITS ASTONISHING GROWTH AND YET NOT LOSE ITS LEAFY GREEN SOUL IN THE PROCESS?

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