

RILTC 2024 NETWORKING EVENTS SUMMARY

In December 2024, the Rhode Island Land Trust Council hosted a series of networking events across the state, focused on the themes of **land stewardship, volunteers, and municipal land trusts.**

We asked participants about their challenges, their priorities, and how the Council could better provide assistance, and now we're sharing what we learned.

WHERE WE WENT



Thanks to:
Aquidneck Island Land Trust
Scituate Land Trust
South Kingstown Land Trust
for hosting!

WHO WE MET

Aquidneck Island Land Trust
Bristol Land Conservation Trust
Burrillville Land Trust
Coventry Land Trust
Cumberland Land Trust
Foster Land Trust
Friends of Canonchet Farm
Glocester Land Trust
Hopkinton Land Trust
Narragansett Land Conservancy Trust
Narrow River Land Trust
Norman Bird Sanctuary
Richmond Rural Preservation Land Trust
Scituate Land Trust
Smithfield Land Trust
South Kingstown Land Trust
The Watch Hill Conservancy
Warwick Land Trust

WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU!

The Rhode Island Land Trust Council is conducting a census of all Rhode Island land trusts. This census will help us develop a better understanding of land trust needs, challenges, and successes. Fill out the census today to make sure your land trust is represented!

[HTTPS://TINYURL.COM/RILTCCENSUS](https://tinyurl.com/riltccensus)

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WHAT WE LEARNED:

WHAT ARE YOUR LAND TRUST'S BIGGEST PRIORITIES?

Expanding Land Conservation & Access: Prioritizing the protection of ecologically significant land, working farmland, and important open spaces while improving public access and engagement with conserved lands.

Securing Sustainable Funding & Resources: Strengthening financial stability through grants, fundraising, and partnerships to support both land acquisition and long-term stewardship.

Building Organizational Capacity & Partnerships: Enhancing board development, volunteer recruitment, and collaboration with municipalities, state agencies, and other conservation groups to amplify impact.

WHAT ARE YOUR LAND TRUST'S BIGGEST CHALLENGES?

Sustaining Volunteer Engagement & Capacity: Many land trusts struggle with recruiting, retaining, and managing volunteers, particularly for land stewardship and board leadership roles.

Funding for Land Protection & Stewardship: Limited financial resources make it difficult to acquire, steward, and manage land effectively. Land trusts face ongoing challenges in securing grants, garnering support from municipalities, and accessing funding for long-term stewardship.

Navigating Municipal & Landowner Relationships: Land trusts face obstacles in navigating policies and funding with cities and towns. They also face challenges engaging private landowners in conservation projects and responsible land management activities.

RESOURCES IDENTIFIED ACROSS NETWORKING EVENTS

- **Master Gardeners:** Friends of Canonchet utilizes this group. Participants need to fulfill volunteer hours, creating a strong recruitment tool.
- **Boy Scouts:** Connect with local troops to assist with volunteer stewardship projects across the state.
- **URI for Invasive Species Removal:** Coventry Land Trust partners with URI for removing invasive species.
- **URI Pollinator/Native Plant Resources:** Used by land trusts for native plant resources and pollinator-friendly plantings.
- **Youth Conservation League (YCL):** Managed by Audubon Society of RI, this program provides a youth workforce for stewardship projects, such as clearing trails or repairing rock walls. It's a great opportunity for land trusts to engage youth volunteers, particularly in partnership with YCL.
- **Game of Logging:** The premier chainsaw safety and productivity training program in the country, offering hands-on chainsaw safety training.

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The Rhode Island Land Trust Council leads efforts to conserve land in Rhode Island by supporting land trusts and their collaborators through capacity building, convenings, and public engagement and by advocating for sound land conservation policies.

We asked participants if there are any new or different ways that RILTC could better help land trusts.

Facilitating More Land Trust-to-Land Trust

Mentorship: Many land trusts face similar challenges but operate at different scales. Creating a formal mentorship program or peer-to-peer learning exchanges could help smaller or emerging land trusts learn from more established ones.

Advocating for Better Conservation Easement

Enforcement: Some land trusts struggle with difficult landowners or ambiguous easement terms. RILTC could help by advocating for clearer statewide policies or providing legal guidance and identifying mediation resources.

Exploring Regional Land Trust Collaborations:

Smaller land trusts expressed interest in working together regionally to pool resources for shared staffing, stewardship projects, or even joint land acquisition efforts. RILTC could facilitate these discussions and partnerships.

Assisting with Board Development & Leadership

Transitions: Many land trusts are facing leadership transitions and board capacity issues. RILTC should offer more targeted training or workshops on board recruitment, succession planning, and governance best practices.

Providing Guidance on Climate Resilience &

Carbon Markets: There is growing interest in how land trusts can play a role in climate mitigation, including forest carbon markets, coastal resilience, and habitat adaptation. More education and resources in this area could be beneficial.

Improving Community Engagement Strategies:

Some land trusts are struggling with community outreach and engagement, especially with younger generations and diverse communities. RILTC could help by providing guidance on storytelling, social media strategies, or partnership-building.

Addressing Farmland Access & Agricultural Land

Protection: The high cost of farmland and challenges with succession planning were recurring concerns. RILTC could expand efforts to connect land trusts with farmers looking for land, farmland protection strategies, and funding.

Updating the Resources Library:

Participants emphasized a need for shared templates, policies, best practices, and model documents. While RILTC does host a Resources Library, we should update the resources available and ensure easy access.

Expanding Stewardship Support:

GIS is a critical tool, but some land trusts need broader stewardship assistance, such as creating management plans, improving monitoring protocols, or tackling specific land management challenges like invasive species. RILTC should continue to provide these one-on-one services.

Helping Land Trusts Navigate Funding & Grant

Writing: While RILTC already assists with small grant funding for acquisitions & provides grant information online, there was a strong need for additional training & direct assistance in writing successful grant proposals, particularly for stewardship & capacity-building grants.



RILTC 2024 NETWORKING EVENTS: STEWARDSHIP

NEEDS

- **Ongoing Maintenance and Restoration Projects:** Many land trusts highlighted the need for consistent, long-term maintenance of conserved lands, particularly in managing invasive species, trail upkeep, and forest health.
- **Monitoring and Baseline Data Collection:** Several land trusts emphasized the need for improved monitoring programs, including baseline data collection to track land health, biodiversity, and habitat restoration progress.
- **Funding for Stewardship:** Access to funding for stewardship activities remains a significant need, particularly for restoration, invasive species management, and long-term monitoring.

CHALLENGES

- **Limited Financial Resources for Stewardship:** Many land trusts identified a lack of dedicated funding for ongoing stewardship activities as a major hurdle. This can hinder long-term conservation goals, especially for land restoration projects.
- **Balancing Stewardship with Acquisition Work:** Land trusts are often torn between securing new properties through acquisitions and focusing on the ongoing care and management of existing lands. Stewardship work can take a backseat when acquisition activities take priority.
- **Lack of Technical Expertise:** Some land trusts struggle with having the necessary expertise on staff for specialized tasks like habitat restoration, wetland management, or forestry.
- **Volunteer Retention:** Retaining volunteers for stewardship activities can be difficult, especially for long-term projects that require ongoing effort and commitment, as some volunteers may only participate in one-off events.

SUCCESSES

- **Invasive Species Management:** Many land trusts have successfully implemented invasive species removal programs, using volunteer labor or partnerships with local organizations for greater impact.
- **Volunteer Engagement in Stewardship Projects:** Stewardship activities such as trail work and habitat restoration are benefiting from strong volunteer involvement, especially through organized workdays and corporate volunteering events.
- **Data and Technology Use in Stewardship:** Some land trusts are successfully integrating GIS and other mapping/field tools to manage and monitor their properties, improving data-driven decision-making.

TIPS & TRICKS

- **Streamline Stewardship Plans:** Land trusts that have created clear, written stewardship plans for each conserved property find that it helps maintain focus and ensures that stewardship tasks are well-prioritized and tracked.
- **Leverage Corporate Partnerships for Funding and Volunteers:** Many land trusts noted success in partnering with corporations for both financial support and volunteer labor. For example, companies like FM Global have been instrumental in providing volunteer workdays as well as donations.
- **Technology for Tracking and Data Collection:** Implementing GIS tools and online platforms for tracking property conditions, volunteer hours, and land management activities has been valuable for many land trusts, helping to monitor stewardship progress more efficiently.
- **Offer Stewardship Trainings:** Land trusts that provide training in stewardship techniques, like invasive species management or trail maintenance, have had more success in retaining and empowering volunteers.
- **Incorporate Educational Outreach:** Many land trusts have been successful in involving the public through educational programs about the importance of land stewardship, which helps raise awareness and recruits new volunteers.

RILTC 2024 NETWORKING EVENTS: VOLUNTEERS

NEEDS

- **Land Trusts are Highly Dependent on Volunteers:** Many land trusts reported they are heavily reliant on volunteers to carry out their work. Volunteers are essential for everything from trail work to land restoration and invasive species removal.
- **Young Volunteers are Especially Valuable:** There is a desire for more youth involvement, and several land trusts mentioned utilizing local schools, youth organizations, and scouts to fill volunteer needs.

CHALLENGES

- **Recruiting Consistent Volunteers:** While there is a pool of interested volunteers, many land trusts struggle with retaining them or securing consistent participation for ongoing projects.
- **Training and Retaining Volunteers:** Ensuring volunteers are properly trained and retained over the long term remains a significant challenge. Some land trusts mentioned that a lack of training, especially for specialized tasks, limits long-term engagement.
- **Balancing Volunteer Hours with Professional Work:** Land trusts are often understaffed, and many face challenges in managing the balance between volunteer-led efforts and professional stewardship or land management.

SUCCESSSES

- **Engagement with Youth:** Programs like the **Youth Conservation League (YCL)**, which provides a workforce for land stewardship projects, were highlighted as successful ways to engage young people in conservation work.
- **Collaborations with Local Groups and Organizations:** Land trusts are partnering with local organizations to access volunteer pools.
- **Specialized Volunteer Programs:** Some land trusts have successfully created specialized volunteer programs, such as **Game of Logging** (power tool certifications) or **Boys Scouts** for stewardship projects.
- **Corporate Volunteer Days:** Partnerships with businesses like **FM Global** and **Citizens Bank** have been successful, with companies providing volunteer days for employees to contribute to projects like bridge building or invasive species removal.

RECRUITMENT

- **Word of Mouth & Networking:** Several land trusts mentioned that relying on word of mouth and personal connections has been effective for recruitment, particularly through board members, staff, and existing volunteers.
- **Targeted Outreach and Partnerships:** Partnering with organizations that already have a base of volunteers, such as **Master Gardeners** or local schools, has helped land trusts access consistent volunteer labor.
- **Online Platforms for Recruitment:** Using platforms like **VolunteerMatch** and other local volunteer sites is becoming a useful way for land trusts to reach a broader pool of potential volunteers.

TIPS & TRICKS

- **Offer Training and Skill-Building Opportunities:** Providing training opportunities gives volunteers a chance to build skills, which enhances retention.
- **Set Up Structured Volunteer Programs:** Having well-organized volunteer programs or events with clear expectations helps to keep volunteers engaged.
- **Make Volunteering Fun:** Many land trusts mentioned having successful volunteer days that are not only productive but also fun, with meals, group activities, and social aspects. This helps build camaraderie and encourages repeat participation.
- **Thank Volunteers Regularly:** Recognition is crucial. Several land trusts emphasized that thanking volunteers regularly, whether through small gifts, shout-outs in newsletters, or volunteer appreciation events, helps with retention.

RILTC 2024 NETWORKING EVENTS: MUNICIPAL LAND TRUSTS

NEEDS

- **Legal and Policy Support:** Municipal land trusts frequently require assistance in navigating legal frameworks, particularly around land use restrictions, zoning laws, and local government regulations. There is a need for more guidance on land trust policies that align with municipal goals.
- **Funding for Land Acquisition and Stewardship:** A significant need is for consistent funding to support the acquisition of land for conservation and the ongoing stewardship of municipal lands. Municipal land trusts also noted challenges with securing long-term funding commitments from local governments.
- **Public Engagement and Education:** Engaging local communities in land conservation and stewardship is a top priority. There's a need for tools and strategies to foster greater public involvement in land trust initiatives.
- **Staffing Capacity and Expertise:** Many municipal land trusts expressed the need for additional staff or volunteers with expertise in land conservation, environmental science, or land management to support their efforts effectively.

CHALLENGES

- **Securing Sustainable Funding:** A significant challenge is the difficulty in securing sustainable, long-term funding from municipal budgets. While municipal land trusts often receive support through local taxes or bond issues, these sources can be volatile or inadequate for long-term conservation and stewardship needs.
- **Balancing Multiple Priorities:** Municipal land trusts often face the challenge of balancing conservation goals with competing municipal priorities such as development, infrastructure, or commercial projects.
- **Complexity of Local Government Processes:** Working with local governments can be slow and bureaucratic. Many municipal land trusts expressed frustration with navigating the administrative hurdles required to gain approval for conservation easements or to secure funding for new projects.
- **Lack of Dedicated Staffing:** Many municipal land trusts struggle with a lack of dedicated staff or volunteers who have the time, expertise, or experience needed to manage complex land conservation initiatives.
- **Community Resistance to Conservation Efforts:** While some communities are supportive of land conservation, others resist municipal land trust projects due to concerns over land use restrictions, taxes, or the impact on local development.

SUCCESSSES

- **Partnerships with Local Governments:** Municipal land trusts are finding success in working closely with local governments to implement conservation projects, especially when the municipalities are proactive in setting conservation goals or policies.
- **Strong Public Support:** Many land trusts are benefiting from strong community engagement and support, driven by a shared understanding of the importance of conserving open spaces & protecting natural resources.
- **Volunteer Involvement in Stewardship:** Volunteers have been key in municipal land trust activities, particularly in hands-on tasks such as land monitoring, habitat restoration, and trail maintenance.
- **Use of Municipal Resources:** Some municipal land trusts are successfully leveraging resources from municipal departments, including parks and recreation, public works, and planning, to support their land conservation and stewardship efforts.
- **Education Programs:** Many land trusts are running successful educational programs to increase awareness of the value of land conservation and engage residents in land management decisions. These programs help build community buy-in for municipal land trust projects.

TIPS & TRICKS

- **Build Strong Relationships with Local Governments:** Successful municipal land trusts often stress the importance of building relationships with local elected officials and municipal staff early on to ensure political and logistical support for conservation efforts.
- **Public Outreach and Education Campaigns:** Educating the public about the value of conservation and the role of municipal land trusts is key to gaining support. Hosting community events, informational sessions, and volunteer workdays helps foster community buy-in and engagement.
- **Diversify Funding Sources:** To avoid over-reliance on municipal budgets, many land trusts are diversifying their funding sources by applying for state and federal grants, seeking private donations, and using fundraising campaigns like crowdfunding or membership drives.
- **Collaborate with Other Land Trusts and Organizations:** Partnering with other land trusts or regional conservation organizations can help municipal land trusts expand their reach and resources, especially when working on larger regional projects.
- **Leverage Municipal Resources and Public Services:** Municipal land trusts that have successfully worked with municipal departments (e.g., parks, planning, and public works) have been able to share resources, reduce costs, and align their efforts with other community priorities, like recreation or public access.
- **Use the Local Zoning Process to Your Advantage:** Municipal land trusts that work closely with planning and zoning departments have successfully used zoning laws to protect land or establish conservation areas, ensuring that conservation is integrated into municipal planning efforts.
- **Host Volunteer and Stewardship Days:** Organizing volunteer days or stewardship projects that are tied to public education initiatives can help engage local communities, bring in more volunteers, and raise awareness of land conservation efforts.