

# Managing Community Expectations & Perceptions to Protect Your Organization's Reputation

Rhode Island Land and Water Summit  
March 14, 2015



# How Does Your Community Perceive Your Land Trust?

- persistent perception that land trusts are well-endowed and primarily serve the wealthy. Rich landowners that want a tax break.
- Locking up land that the public can't access creates a perception of elitism and excessive environmental protection

# How Does Your Community Perceive Your Land Trust?

- Worse a Bully against property rights.
- Land trusts in the cross hairs of taxpayer groups and libertarians
- What is Open Space?

# The Piedmont Environmental Council Case



## The Piedmont Environmental Council Case

- Placed a CE on a 1200 farm in Virginia in 2000
- In 2006 sold 64 acres to Mrs. Boneta at much reduced price because CE limited changes to historic farm structures and only one 1200 square foot apartment in the Barn.
- Almost immediately after purchase began to violate CE.
- PEC, sought to monitor and was refused access. After seeking to address violations (illegal residential use beyond apartment) with landowner to no avail PEC filed a lawsuit to enforce CE



## The Piedmont Environmental Council Case

- Libertarian groups came out against PEC.



*Ron Arnold, executive vice-president of the Center for the Defense of Freedom, said “the problem boils down to the easements and the groups that take it upon themselves to enforce them.*

*“Piedmont Environmental Council is the poster child for banning conservation easements,” Arnold said. “The well-intentioned land protection idea has become an utterly vicious weapon that PEC uses to intrude upon, bully, demoralize and destroy good-hearted property owners. Run by wealthy, connected, untouchable zealots, PEC needs a good whipping at the bar of public opinion. Time for PEC to be shut down for the good of all.”*

## The Piedmont Environmental Council Case

### Take Aways

- At a Rally Workshop on this Case PEC's Stewardship Director indicated that lesson learned was have a communication strategy in place for every public action you take.
- They got caught flatfooted and had to catch up to the story and try to get out ahead of it. Articles, Blogs and social media content.
- Case was settled in 2011 but PEC is still responding to posts and has a set response on their website.





# Recent Aquidneck Land Trust Case



# Sports Complex



Lawn Area  
 Meadow Area  
 Additional Drainage Areas  
 Sportfield Area  
 Bio-Retention

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- Main Access point at Oliphant Lane.
- Emergency Access point at Mitchell's Lane.
- Baseball Fields: 4 (1 Softball, 1 T-Ball, & 2 Baseball)
- Multi-Use Fields: 6
- Passive Open Space / Flex Space
- Connections to the Sakonnet Greenway Trail to the North & the South - expansion & buffering of SGT
- Existing Wetlands protected
- Concessions/Restrooms: 2
- Parking: Approximately 330
- Equestrian Trailer Parking: 4
- View Shed remains open space for Agriculture
- Extensive native ecosystem development
- Playground/Picnic Grove/Natural Playground
- Spiral Knoll Viewpoint
- Extensive Bio-retention & LID Systems
- Buffering from adjacent properties



# Sports Complex



PLATS & LOTS



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Town of Middletown Recreation Facility  
May 20, 2014



## The Sports Complex The Facts

- Somehow you think that protecting Open Space is as wholesome as apple pie! Not always!
- ALT/Town of Middletown protected 68 Acres in 2008
- In order to protect this Tibbets/Boulevard Nurseries corridor from residential tract development, in 2008 (with complete transparency and disclosure),
- ALT agreed to allow the town the right to construct sports fields and yes even field house near WM Rd.
- In 2014 Town decides it wants to look at building some fields but wants to do it the right way and hires a consultant to do a Master Planning Process.
- I sat on Master Planning Committee and had to vote to approve plan
- The Master Plan is essentially a build-out of what the Conservation Easement allowed.
- ALT views recreation as a important community conservation value



## The Sports Complex The Facts

- Therefore ALT felt ok with that compromise in 2008.
- 6 lacrosse fields, 4 baseball fields, 2 concession stands, Parking, driveways and entrances off a primary and secondary roadway
- Removed fieldhouse anyway!
- Local Farmer who leases land shows up on the front page of local paper – loss of land will make it hard for him to keep farming
- Objectors start as abutters – non of whom responded to ads for Master Committee Members – but before long its all taxpayers
- ALT remains neutral on what the right plan should be due to cost and need and writes an editorial to that effect – It complies but . . .
- ALT upsets every one!



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**MASTER PLAN**





Objectors run an excellent campaign

- Start with Facebook Page
- Table at Farmers Market
- Petition
- Daily Letters to editor
- Newspaper articles
- Recruit wildlife experts
- It becomes the largest Town Council hearing in 5 years.

(7) Save Middletown's Open Spaces

The screenshot shows the Facebook page for 'Save Middletown's Open Spaces'. The page has 763 likes and a cover photo of a field. The 'ABOUT' section states: 'We are committed to protecting the natural and rural character of a healthy and affordable Middletown.' There is a link to 'Ask for Save Middletown's Open Spaces's website'. The 'PHOTOS' section includes a newspaper article snippet with the headline 'to draw a crowd' and a photo of a blue heron. The 'POSTS TO PAGE' section shows a post by Jack Kelly from yesterday at 6:12am about a blue heron at Tibbels Farm, and a post by Dick Davis from March 10 at 6:10pm about a red-winged blackbird. A recent post from the town of Middletown is also visible, titled 'Middletown, RI - Planning Department - East Main Rd. Rec. Facility - continued public hearing...'. The right sidebar shows a list of people who liked the page, including Rick Lombardi, Trudy Coxe, and Donna Harvick.



# DECISION ON MONDAY!

## Take Aways

- Have ESP as to what will happen in the future!
- Just because sport field approved in one location doesn't mean it will be in another
- Stay out of the line of fire where possible but when its necessary clearly state your position
- Be totally transparent as to compromises being made at time of conservation transaction
- Be immersed in your community to counter bad publicity with good on other projects
- Do the due diligence to diffuse issues as they come up.