



The Kohlberg Foundation Western Massachusetts Conservation Strategy

Assessment

BLOOMINGDALE **M**ANAGEMENT **A**DVISORS

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Overview

In 2005, the Kohlberg Foundation launched the 13-grant Western Massachusetts Conservation Strategy. Through the strategy, the Foundation funded efforts across a number of themes with the ultimate aim of advancing the state of land conservation in the region. This past fall the Foundation sought to reflect upon the experience of the initiative to date, and I was engaged to conduct an assessment.

The bulk of the assessment was conducted over a seven-week period between November 1st and December 17th, 2007. A progress review was held with Foundation staff on December 19, 2007. Follow-up interviews, synthesis, and writing occurred in January 2008. For the assessment, I reviewed grant reports and other documents related to each grant, held some 40 discussions with grantees, funders, stakeholders, and observers, and completed site visits with nine grantees.

The overall finding of this assessment is that the initiative has been successful in yielding advances in conservation in Western Massachusetts. Most all the objectives of every grant were met, and resulted in productive impacts in the context of the themes of the initiative. In some cases the results were truly outstanding, in nearly all others, they were solid. To be sure, there were also some limitations, driven primarily by questions of focus in the initiative.

Results

The results of the Western Massachusetts Conservation Strategy can be examined from numerous perspectives. The frames applied here are grants and themes. The grant perspective looks at each grant, across themes from the Western Massachusetts Conservation Strategy incorporated in the grant. The theme perspective looks across all grants touched upon by a given theme.

Grant Perspective

Grant outcomes were almost universally satisfactory. Grants to the Mount Grace Land Conservation Trust and Franklin Land Trust experienced especially strong outcomes.

- The grant to **Mount Grace** helped transform the North Quabbin Regional Landscape Partnership (NQRLP). Under the grant, NQRLP gained its first dedicated staffer, and it became better organized, advanced public funding and specific conservation opportunities, and enriched community support for conservation.
- The grant to the **Franklin Land Trust** (FLT) has helped transform the organization. FLT now has a strategic vision, more staff in crucial roles, stronger board commitment and a bigger project pipeline than at the start of Kohlberg's direct and indirect support for the organization. Added fundraising capacity has positioned FLT for substantial growth in revenue in 2008, especially from

donations. Added land protection staff capacity will help FLT continue its substantial growth in land protection work over the last several years.

Several other grants approached this degree of multifaceted conservation and organizational impact.

- The grant to **The Trustees of Reservations** (TTOR) helped advance land conservation in the Highlands region by increasing public funding, community support, and elements of land use planning.
- The **Open Space Institute's** (OSI) comprehensive pre-initiative assessment of Western Massachusetts afforded the Foundation fundamental information and invaluable perspective on the region, the players, and the issues. OSI's work with applicants to the Kohlberg-funded loan fund has been highly professional and thorough and its loans and loan-associated re-grants have been thoughtful and leveraged. In terms of the effects on borrowers, several, including MassAudubon and Sheffield Land Trust, were emboldened by the availability of loan capital to tackle especially daunting projects and/or to take on and surmount new fundraising obligations.

The rest of the grants yielded solid results.

- With Kohlberg support **Communities Involved in Sustaining Agriculture** (CISA) significantly expanded its work in promoting connections between local farm producers and local institutional food buyers. Under the grant, CISA has helped sustain existing farm-institution relationships and built new ones. Several issues in the institutional market should be noted, including seasonality of supply, the need for large quantities, one-stop shopping for multiple products, and competitive pricing, among other issues. To its credit, CISA has identified and is trying to address a number of market barriers, including those around meat processing capabilities.
- **American Farmland Trust** (AFT) also delivered strong results. Despite a state and national political environment that was unfavorable to the objectives of its Kohlberg grant, AFT's contributions helped lay the groundwork for increased funding for agricultural land conservation in Massachusetts from federal, state, and local sources
- Kohlberg's grant to **The Nature Conservancy** (TNC) resulted in increased energy and momentum for its newly formed Westfield River Forest Partnership, and this, along with digitized parcel data for some 30 towns, helped increase the efficiency and focus of conservation efforts in the Westfield River region.
- The **Massachusetts Land Trust Coalition** (MLTC) received funding from the Foundation to upgrade its website, to develop white papers for member land trusts on critical issues in land protection, and to administer a re-grant program. The

energy, ingenuity and commitment of MLTC has made this a very strong grant and the new relationship for the Foundation is proving most valuable. This has been especially evident in the case of the re-grant program, managed by MLTC, launched this past fall.

- While narrow in scope, the grant to the **New England Forestry Foundation** (NEFF) will help increase understanding of the choice forestland owners face between conserving and managing their land or holding and selling it for development, yielding valuable facts for land conservationists.
- The Foundation funded the **Berkshires Natural Resources Council** (BNRC) to produce baselines for a number of conservation easements it held. These baselines were completed, thereby improving the basis of BNRC's land stewardship efforts, and strengthening its hand in any possible future disputes over these conservation restrictions. Yet, in my view, BNRC has the potential to play an even larger role in conservation than it currently does, and the compelling opportunity to support BNRC, and the broader conservation community in Berkshire County, appears not to have been fully developed.
- The **Land Trust Alliance** (LTA) produced an assessment of the needs of land trusts in Massachusetts, conducted organizational assessments of Mount Grace and Franklin Land Trust, and passed-through organizational development grants to these two groups. A larger aspiration of this grant was to advance the relationship between LTA and the Massachusetts land trust community, which has been strained in recent years. Progress on this aspiration was limited by the depth of these strains, and by parallel organizational development efforts which may have been of greater value to the land trusts involved.
- The grant to the **Trust for Public Land** resulted in some success, though it was geographically limited. With support from Kohlberg, TPL helped advance CPA and greenprinting in Deerfield, pursued additional CPA and greenprinting efforts in other, neighboring towns, and developed a system to help towns predict their APR scores. Still, progress was not as broad as had been hoped for and this, in my view, may have been the result of a mismatch between TPL's relatively low staffing, focus on the entire Connecticut River, and the realities of home rule.
- **MassAudubon** is a part of the Western Massachusetts Conservation Strategy, however, given the timing of their grant from the Foundation, they were not covered in this assessment. It should be noted that they took successful advantage of the loan fund and repaid their loan quickly.

Theme perspective

The Foundation's Western Massachusetts Conservation Strategy revolved around five guiding themes: capacity building, public funding, collaboration (between larger and smaller nonprofits, and between nonprofits and government), community support, and working landscapes¹

The strongest themes were capacity building and public funding. **Capacity building** was present in nearly every grant in the initiative and it was a clear success. Organizational and partnership-level capacity was increased, as in the case of, for example, Franklin Land Trust, Mount Grace/NQRLP, CISA, and MLTC indicates. And in terms of tools to help facilitate and focus conservation, there was the OSI loan fund and digital parcel mapping by Mount Grace and TNC.

Public funding was also a success. At the local level, as Figure 1 indicates, TTOR, Mount Grace and TPL have made progress on CPA in 20 western Massachusetts towns. It should be noted that Kohlberg involvement contributed to a significant proportion of CPA activity in the region since the initiative was launched (See Figure 2). At the state level, education efforts by AFT and others contributed to increases in funding for agricultural land preservation, and other conservation programs. And at the federal level, several grantees successfully accessed federal funding programs, while ideas and analysis from AFT influenced the debate on future federal agricultural land preservation funding.

Results within the three remaining themes, while in certain instances outstanding, were more geographically and/or programmatically isolated and generally did not reach critical mass. To be sure, there were strong results within **collaboration**. Most notable was the strengthened relationships between NGOs and government within the NQRLP.² Within the theme of **community support**, outstanding advances came out of the work of Mount Grace staff in the NQRLP region and the work of TTOR staff in the Highlands.³ The results on **working landscapes** were mixed, with stronger impact in farming than in forestry. Both farmland and forestland were protected through capacity increases and the loan fund supported by Kohlberg, and CISA's work on institutional markets helped strengthen farming. Still, to substantially strengthen farming and forestry, both quite worthy objectives, the scale and inter-connectedness of these impacts would need to be much larger.

¹ This list is from the presentation to a convening of western Massachusetts funders held on June 2, 2005 that was organized by the Foundation. I have ordered the themes in my opinion of the degree of their presence in the grants under review. Note that I grouped CPA impacts under the Public Funding theme.

² The nascent and developing relationships among NGOs and between NGOs and government within the Westfield Highlands Forest Partnership also bear mentioning, as do relationships between TTOR and TPL and the towns in the Highlands and Pioneer Valley respectively.

³ For example, multiple and relatively well attended public meetings in both regions educated the public about critical local conservation issues, and in a number of instances sparked substantive interest by landowners in initiating a conservation transaction.

Observation

In my opinion, the results of the Kohlberg initiative appear stronger when they are viewed from a grant perspective than when they are viewed from a theme perspective. Why was success viewed so differently from these two perspectives? My hypothesis is that while the individual grants were generally well crafted and well executed, the focus aspects of the strategy could be strengthened. Certainly, by working with themes, the Foundation put itself on a path to far greater leverage and impact. However, based on the experience with the initiative to date, it appears that, among other things, a number of key themes lacked clarity and, theoretically, could have been more tightly knit.

Limitations

Two factors appear to have limited the impact of the initiative to date, the political environment and the focus aspects of the initiative. The political environment at the state and federal level precluded increases in public funding for conservation and this dampened the magnitude of the impacts that flowed from capacity building successes supported by the Foundation. That said, those same capacity building advances are likely to pay quite large dividends now that the political climate has changed at the state level.

Three aspects of focus posed challenges to the initiative: the number of themes, the definition of themes, and the overall objective. First, the initiative may have included too many themes. Five themes is a fairly large number to integrate and such a large number of themes fragments and dilutes effort. With fewer themes it might be able to align them more tightly and to put more resources into each, thereby possibly deepening impact to a threshold level.

Second, in some cases the themes were insufficiently defined. For example, “capacity building” is a broad term that can justify many things. In this initiative it seemed to involve both organizational development and broader conservation issues, such as baselines and digitizing parcel data. Working landscapes offers another example of a theme that might have benefited from greater specificity. Farming and forestry are complex systems, both economically and culturally/socially, and successful interventions in either one could absorb sizeable resources. This makes focus an essential pre-condition for successful action.

Lastly, the overall objective of the initiative was not as clear as it might have been. The interplay between the Foundation’s longstanding organizational relationships in the region and its objective for this initiative appear to be complex. This is understandable, yet even given these dynamics, future top-level objectives could be made clearer.

Conclusion

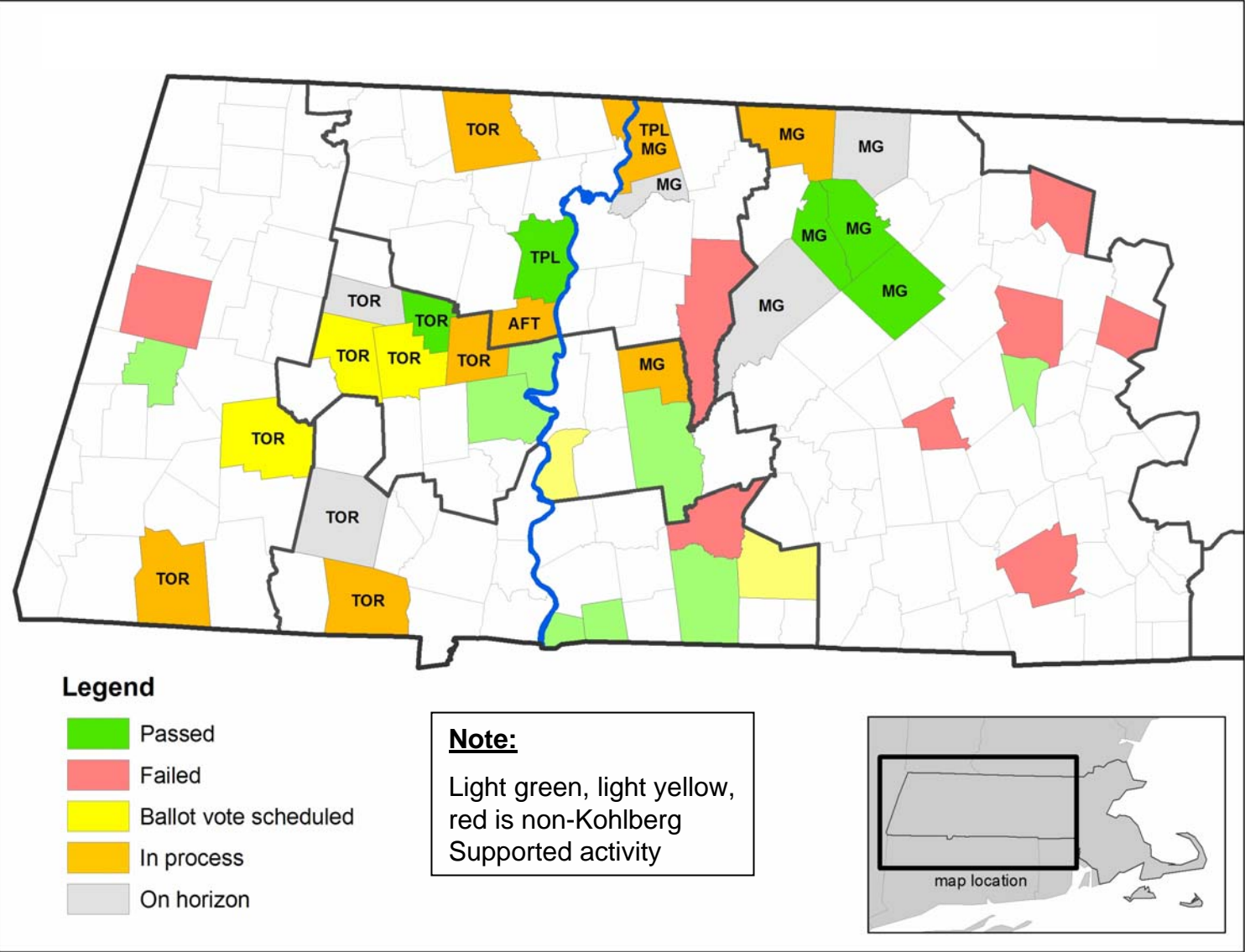
The Kohlberg Foundation’s Western Massachusetts Conservation Strategy has been a success so far, yielding numerous strong results for conservation in line with the objectives of the specific grants in the initiative. What’s more, by thinking of the set of grants as a whole, as an initiative, the Foundation has taken a significant step toward

thinking strategically about what its interests and objectives are for western Massachusetts, and how to realize them.

The initiative has provided a sound base of success and experience for the Foundation to reflect upon, and, if it so desires, to pursue further. When contemplating any future steps for the initiative, the Foundation might want to consider several actions:

1. Going deeper, for example, either within sub-geographies of western Massachusetts and/or themes, or by increasing the total investment across the same geography/themes.
2. Related to this, maximizing the focus of the initiative, ideally by simplifying the number of themes and/or the geography, and by tightening the strategic objective of the initiative. Even without taking these steps, greater focus probably can be realized just by clarifying the definitions of the current themes.
3. Exploring the interactions between a commitment to organizations and a commitment to objectives, and trying to maximize the clarity of its objectives within this dynamic.

Figure 2. All Community Preservation Act Activity in Western Massachusetts, 2005-2007



Source: Community Preservation Coalition; Kohlberg Foundation grantee reports; consultant interviews and analysis