



Case Study

HOW CHANGES IN SENIOR MANAGEMENT DESTABILIZED A LONG-TERM PARTNERSHIP SAN DIEGO COUNTY, CALIFORNIA, U.S.A.

Staff turnovers reveal weaknesses in guiding partner documents that compromise a critical conservation effort to protect a North American desert in a highly developed landscape.

In the 1990's the economy in the U.S. was strong, fueled by a time of peace and the Internet boom. Development pressure in one of the country's most sought after "quality of life" regions, sunny San Diego, California, was fierce. The region is a hotbed of biodiversity and endangered species, a place where deserts, mountains and grasslands reflect a crossroads of the temperate and tropical worlds. San Diego County, about the size of the state of Connecticut, is home to more kinds of native animals and plants than any other county in the continental United States, and leads the nation in the number of native species at risk.

During this time, The Nature Conservancy and the County of San Diego developed an innovative approach to land protection in the region called the "Natural Community Conservation Plan" (NCCP), a policy designed to permit development on marginal lands while creating a network of conserved lands in the county. It was a proactive way to avoid controversy and regulatory conflict by identifying which lands were the most ecologically valuable and which could be developed. In 1997, the Conservancy began working with the County of San Diego (CSD) to fund acquisition for land that fulfilled both the Conservancy's conservation priority criteria and the NCCP regional preserve system requirements which had been developed locally.

As the Conservancy rapidly acquired land and conservation easements, CSD appeared to be the ideal entity to take over day-to-day management responsibilities. The Conservancy did not have the capacity to manage so much property, and the CSD wanted to own the land in order to fulfill the NCCP obligations. The situation seemed ideal. The Conservancy would acquire priority properties and then transition them to CSD for ownership and management – with resource management plans in place. The Conservancy could recover its initial investment, and still ensure that the land remained protected and well-managed.

But then the staffing changed, as did the economic and public debate context of the partnership. There was senior staff turnover at both the Conservancy and CSD, public interest groups began pushing for increased recreational access, and funding dried up due to lean economic times. The new person in charge for CSD was unwilling to pay in full for all future properties, which radically slowed negotiations. Unanticipated ambiguity in the founding document language of the NCCP led to a challenge regarding whether CSD was actually responsible for land management funding. The Conservancy also has a variegated history of how it funds land transitions. For instance, sometimes it provides an endowment for management, sometimes not.

4.B.1. Senior Management/Leadership Changes and Staff Turnover

This case reveals the following lessons in weathering fluctuating funding and unforeseen staff turnovers, especially at the senior management level:

1. Clearly establish who holds responsibility for long-term project and land management funding in the initial transition discussions, and what is/are the source(s) of that funding.
2. Create an ongoing, documented partnership maintenance strategy. Make sure that a coordinated plan exists for a new manager to review. Instead of having to build relationships from scratch, the new manager will have full knowledge of how the partnership(s) work.
3. Recognize that one large influx of public funding is not a guarantee of future funding at similar levels for years to come.

To correct the land management funding shortfall, the Conservancy and other partners helped pass a public funding mechanism that would allocate \$4 million per year for 10 years for NCCP management and monitoring needs. The coalition is considering a sales tax measure as well.

The CSD has not signed any fixed long-term management commitments, or allowed for amendments in the face of budget cuts. The specifics of the partnership are still evolving, but in the context of a growing and thriving coalition of local and public agencies committed to conservation in San Diego County.