

ATC's Strategic Planning and Reorganization

The Appalachian Trail Conference Board of Managers adopted a bold and ambitious plan to restructure and rename the organization – all with the goal to better protect and manage the Appalachian Trail. The plan emphasizes strategies to raise ATC's profile with the hikers and the general public, better connect it to the volunteers in the affiliated clubs who handle most of the day-to-day on-the-ground Trail work, and increase stable sources of future income to support its mission.

The strategic reorganization plan was endorsed by a 25-2 vote during a meeting on November 22, 2003, outside Shepherdstown, W.Va. The vote marked the end of the planning phase of a process that dates to 1991 but was accelerated in 2002 when ATC and the National Park Service's Appalachian Trail Park Office (ATPO) began a joint planning project.

A similarly overwhelming vote to change the name from Conference to Conservancy, based on several months of market research, came a year later. Supporters noted that the organization's primary mission has long been to care for the lands that buffer the Trail, with their wealth of natural and cultural treasures, but many thought only of meetings or coordination of volunteers when they saw or heard "conference."

The 2003 plan called for a major change in the governing structure of the organization, changes in the staffing structure, substantial expansion of the organization's regional presence, raising the Conference's public profile, and a new emphasis on environmental-quality issues.

The ATC and ATPO leadership had concluded – after a series of meetings with various constituencies, including a May 2003 strategic planning "summit" attended by more than 150 people – that "ATC and ATPO need to expand their capacities to address the needs of A.T. stewardship and visitor services" – in other words, do more with more. The main complaint a year before had been that ATC was being called upon to do more and more with the same or fewer resources. Some had urged reducing the workload by bringing in new partners, rejecting government mandates, and reducing or eliminating certain programs.

The plan describes seven strategies:

- Establish the most effective organizational structure to carry out the missions and objectives of ATC and the National Park Service's Appalachian Trail Park Office (ATPO).
- Expand both organizations' regional presence and leadership.
- Strengthen support for Trail-maintaining clubs and volunteers.
- Expand the organizations' roles in land protection, conservation (air and water quality, resource preservation, etc.), and interpretive education.
- Focus on communications and a more recognized image for ATC and ATPO.
- Increase membership.
- Increase permanent funding sources for ATC.

Changes in Governing Structure

The plan anticipates no changes in the experience ATC seeks to provide Trail users, and, in fact, is intended to enhance the ability of ATC and ATPO to protect the natural and cultural resources of the Trail and the Trail experience in a time when threats to the Trail are increasing.

Under the plan, the 31-member Board of Managers is being replaced by a Board of Directors of up to 15, to set strategic direction and provide high-level oversight. Candidates were nominated on the basis of their understanding of the issues faced by ATC, the advisory skills they would bring to

governance, and their ability to promote and support the organization. Regional representation is not a requirement on the new board. Current program-specific board committees have been reduced in number but expanded to include more nonboard members than before.

At the same time, regional representation and volunteer-to-volunteer connections will be the keynote of a new Stewardship Council. The council will coordinate policy development and oversee programs related to stewardship of the Trail and surrounding lands, referring policy recommendations to the board for final action. The plan also envisioned more clearly defining and strengthening the role of “regional management committees” in the Trail’s management system. What was basically the name of an annual meeting of Trail-managing partners in three regions has become a more formal body of clubs and agency partners, and there are four regional partnership committees, one corresponding to each of ATC’s regional offices. Each regional committee is represented on the Trail Stewardship Council.

Changes to ATC’s Internal Structure

Based in large part on discussions with Trail-maintaining clubs, the plan increases staff resources in ATC’s regional offices – where those resources provide the greatest benefit to the clubs that do the bulk of on-the-ground Trail management and maintenance. Based on the needs in each office, regional staff represent all of ATC’s major programs: trail and resource management, volunteer/club support and development, land protection, interpretive education, information services and fund-raising.

The expanded regional staff, headed by upgraded regional director positions, eventually will work out of “regional partnership centers” that will combine ATC regional offices with space for agency partners, work and storage areas for crews, space for volunteer training, and visitors centers that will provide information services, interpretive education, publications and merchandise.

At the central-staff level, the present five major program areas have been compressed to four, each headed by a new director selected between July 2004 and March 2005:

- Trail management and the ATC Land Trust have merged to become Conservation, which also picked up educational and outreach programs.
- Accounting became part of a new segment called Finance and Administration, which includes information technology, human resources, and general headquarters administrative functions.
- Development, or fund-raising, which included membership recruitment and services, has been slightly expanded.
- Public Affairs - publications, the Web, information services, interpretation, etc. – this year became Communications, with more of an emphasis on marketing the organization to the public.

(This article originally appeared in the program booklet of the 35th ATC Biennial Meeting, “Southern Highlands 2005”, held July 1-8, 2005, in Johnson City, Tennessee. During that meeting, ATC’s new name and logo were officially introduced; and members of the first Board of Directors of the Appalachian Trail Conservancy were elected.)

The Appalachian Trail Conservancy is a volunteer-based nonprofit organization dedicated to the conservation of the 2,175-mile Appalachian National Scenic Trail, a 250,000-acre greenway extending from Maine to Georgia. Our mission is to ensure that future generations will enjoy the clean air and water, scenic vistas, wildlife and opportunities for recreation and renewal along the entire Trail corridor. To become a member, call 304.535.6331, ext. 119, or visit our Web site at www.appalachiantrail.org. There, you will also find volunteer opportunities and general hiking information.
