

2019 Land Trust Survey Results

April 2019

Summary

In collaboration with the Land Trust Council, Gathering Waters staff distributed a survey to member land trusts in March 2019 in order to gauge needs and opportunities. Survey results are informing the Land Trust Council's priorities and Gathering Waters' future programs and services.

We asked survey respondents to rate the importance of particular topics for the Land Trust Council to focus on, as well as their level of interest in a range of shared services. The choices offered in the survey instrument were based on topics and services previously identified by member land trusts, including suggestions for sessions at our annual conference.

It's important to note that these topics and services represent new or additional areas of potential focus to support land trusts and land conservation in Wisconsin, and are not intended to replace fundamental services and training opportunities that Gathering Waters already provides.

The survey also asked about communication channels for receiving information from Gathering Waters and approaches for facilitating communication among land trusts.

Based on the initial review of survey results, the Land Trust Council intends to prioritize the following in their discussions this year:

- Developing a **model conservation easement** for Wisconsin.
- Identifying **climate mitigation strategies** for land trusts, including best practices for siting renewable energy, and appropriate language in easements.
- Developing **additional GIS services**.
- Convening attorneys and land trust practitioners to develop strategies for **recruiting additional legal expertise** to represent land trusts and landowners in conservation transactions.

Another topic that ranked highly was **understanding strategic collaboration options and implications (e.g., partner, subsidiary, merger or acquisition models)**. This is an area that Gathering Waters is already paying close attention to, and we plan to develop summaries of recent Wisconsin land trust experiences as a complement to the Land Trust Alliance's national [guide on mergers](#), among other learning opportunities.

The survey indicated that **Currents** (Gathering Waters' technical e-Bulletin for land trusts) and our **eNews** are the most common means of receiving information from Gathering Waters, and **we will continue to offer valuable and timely content and resources through these email channels**. We encourage our land trust members to remind their staff and board members about these digital publications and to ensure that they are receiving them.

In order to facilitate information sharing among land trust practitioners, we will also pursue the creation of a **listserv or a similar platform** to enable land trust staff and board members to interact with one another.

As we prioritize these topics, shared services, and communications efforts, Gathering Waters and the Land Trust Council will continue to track the other areas that respondents rated highly, and we encourage our land trust members to be in touch with their thoughts, questions, or concerns.

Methods

We sent the survey link to point people at 38 land trusts (all Gathering Waters member land trusts, except for the three statewide groups), asking that they share the survey invitation with their staff and board members.

- In the one month the survey was open, we received 121 responses, representing 30 land trusts.
- Land trusts with more than one staff person accounted for 93 responses; land trusts with one or fewer staff (considered “all volunteer land trusts”) accounted for 28 responses.
- The highest response rate per land trust was 14, 10 land trusts had just one response, and one respondent didn’t supply land trust information.

Roles represented by respondents:

- 46% (55) board members
- 11% (13) board presidents
- 25% (30) staff
- 15% (18) executive directors
- 3% (4) other (who identified as committee members or past board members)

Results

PRIORITY TOPICS

We asked respondents to **rate the level of importance** for the Land Trust Council to take on the following topics. Again, this is in no way an exhaustive list, and doesn’t exclude other ongoing and emerging topics.

- Understanding strategic collaboration options and implications (e.g., partner, subsidiary, merger or acquisition)
- Implications of areas in the state not currently covered, or under-represented, by a land trust
- Current and future pool of attorneys, appraisers, and accountants specialized in land trust work
- Climate change: developing messaging, speaking with one voice
- Climate change: identifying strategies for mitigation (e.g., siting renewable energy, including appropriate language in easements)
- Developing a model conservation easement for Wisconsin
- Financial planning and investment alternatives for land trusts

See Figure 1, Topic Ratings.

- “Climate change: messaging,” and “Climate change: strategies for mitigation” received the highest percentage of “extremely important” ratings (35% each), followed by “Developing a model conservation easement” (27%) (Figure 1)
- When combining “extremely important” and “very important” ratings, all choices received 60% or higher except for “Implications of areas in the state not currently covered, or under-represented, by a land trust” (45%).

- Top choices combining “extremely important” and “very important” ratings were:
 - Climate change: strategies for mitigation (70%)
 - Understanding strategic collaboration (68%)
 - Developing a model conservation easement (67%)
 - Climate change: messaging (66%)
- When filtering for staff and board member responses, and for staffed and all-volunteer land trust responses, topic priority ratings were similar.

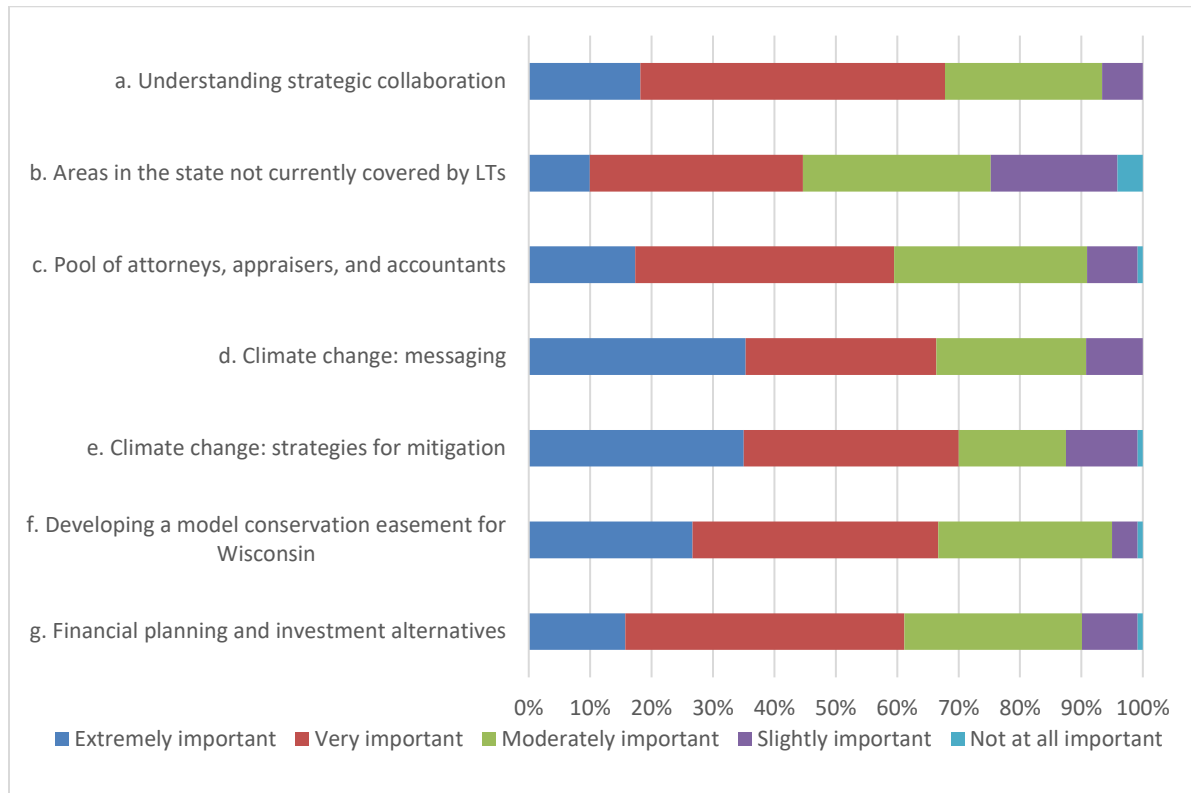


Figure 1. Topic Ratings. Please rate how important it is to you that the Land Trust Council take up these topics (N = 121)

When asked to **choose which topic is most important**, the top three were: Climate change: Identifying strategies for mitigation (25%), Understanding strategic collaboration options and implications (22%), Developing a model conservation easement for Wisconsin (nearly 20%), (Figure 2).

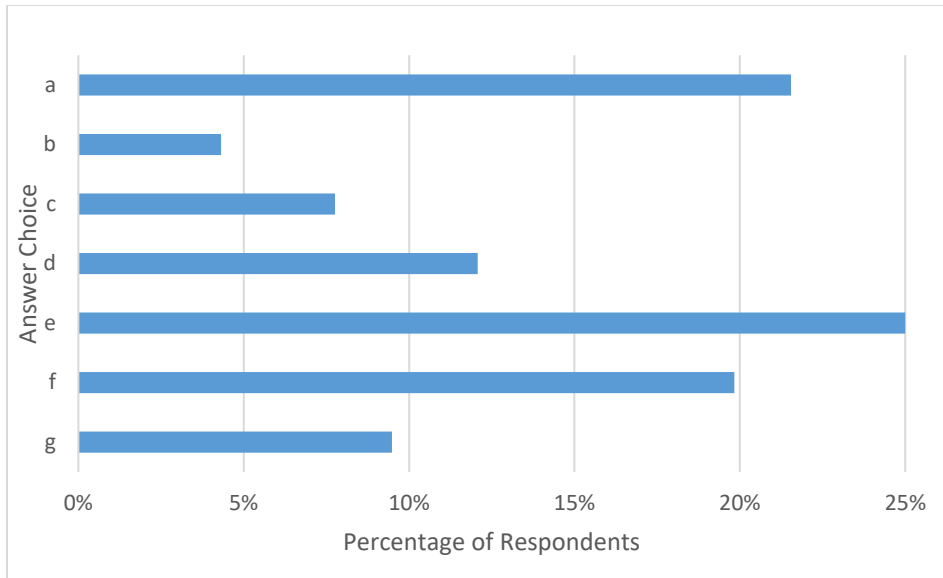


Figure 2. Most Important Topic. To help us better understand your land trust’s priorities, please select the letter that corresponds to the topic that is the MOST important to you. (N=116)

When segmenting staffed and all-volunteer land trusts, the same topics emerge as the top three, however for all-volunteer land trusts, “Developing a model conservation easement for Wisconsin” comes out on top.

Respondents’ comments and suggestions underlined the land trust community’s ongoing policy, funding, and conservation concerns, which will continue to be central to Gathering Waters’ work. These comments are summarized on page 8.

SHARED SERVICES

We asked respondents to **rate their level of interest in a selection of 15 types of shared services** (Figure 3).

- Developing and sharing templates (23%), Intern/volunteer program services (22%), and Shared grant writer (21%) received the highest percentage of “extremely important” ratings.
- These were followed by Shared GIS software license and GIS services (both 19%), and Legal services (18%), Marketing services (17%), and Communications services (16%).
- When combining “extremely interested” and “very interested,” the same eight services were selected by a combined 50% or more, though legal, marketing, and communications surpassed GIS software license and GIS services.

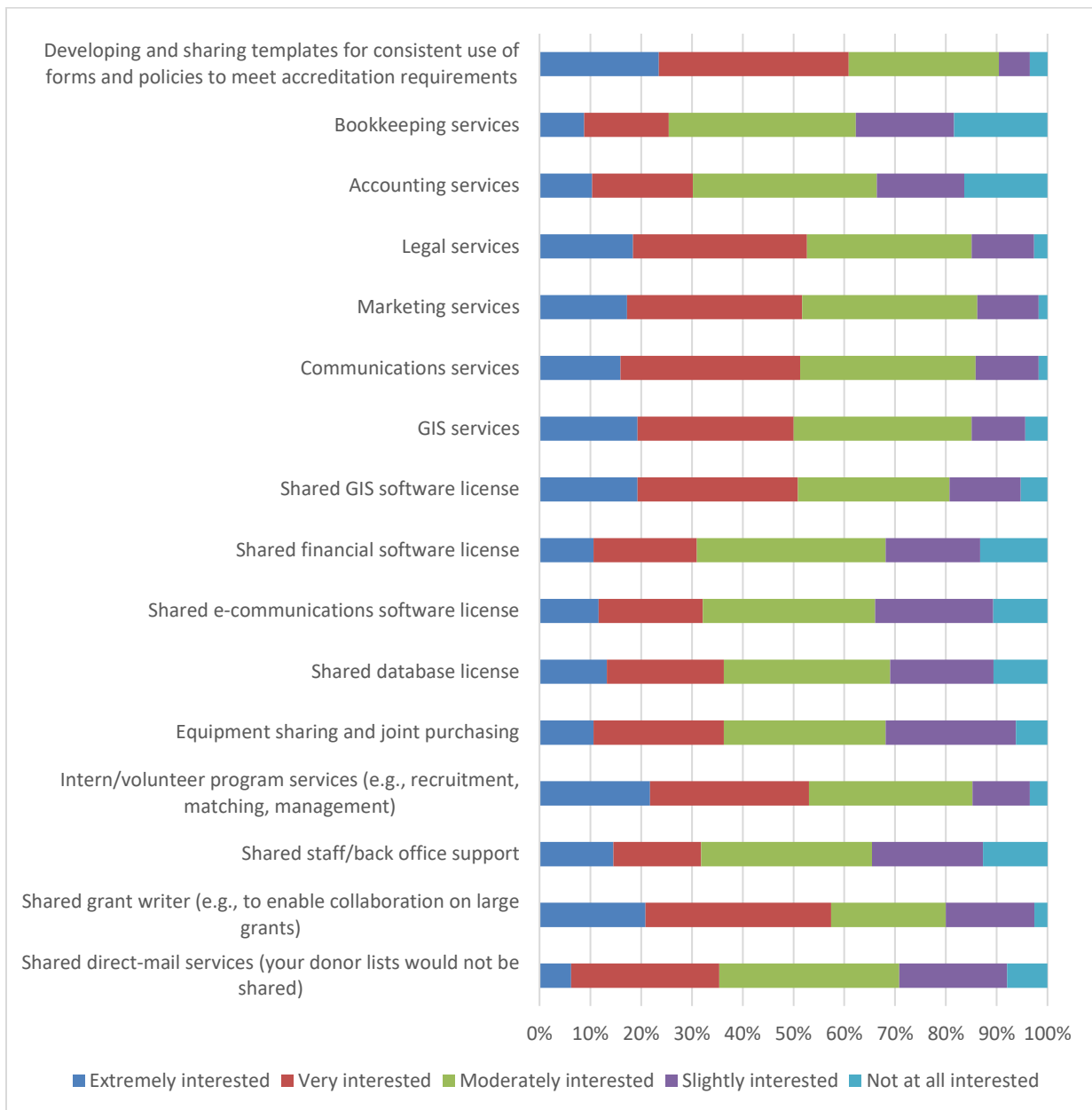


Figure 3. Shared Services Ratings – All respondents. Level of interest in having Gathering Waters and the Land Trust Council explore shared services in support of WI land trusts (N=118)

- When including *only all-volunteer land trusts* (Figure 4) Developing and sharing templates, Marketing services, and Shared grant writer all received the highest percentage of “extremely interested” ratings (26%).
- Legal services followed (23%), as did Shared staff/back office support (also 23%), which did not come up in the top ratings among all respondents.

- These were followed by Intern/volunteer program services (19%), Communications services (16%), GIS services (15%).
- When combining “extremely interested” and “very interested” ratings for all-volunteer land trusts, the same services as with all respondents were selected by 50% or more, with the addition of Shared direct-mail services (58%).

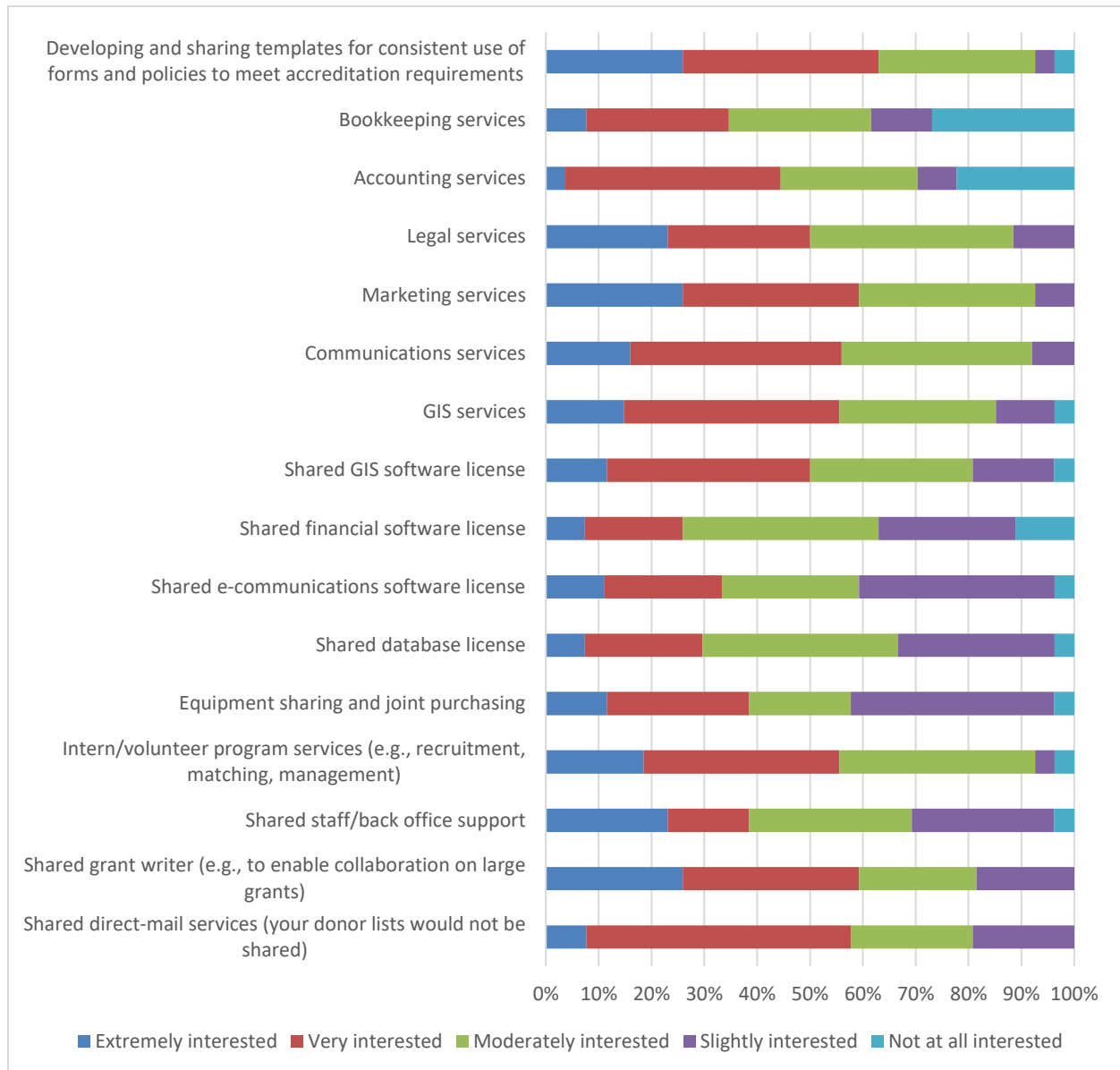


Figure 4. Shared Services Ratings - All-volunteer land trusts. All-volunteer land trusts’ level of interest in having Gathering Waters and the Land Trust Council explore shared services in support of WI land trusts (N=27)

Comments indicated support in general for exploring shared services opportunities where these would be likely to enhance cost effectiveness, efficiency, and performance. Respondents’ comments also elaborated on some of the top-rated choices.

- Respondents described types of helpful templates, such as policies, corporate organization and governance, land acquisition procedures, position descriptions, leases for rental houses and agriculture, property caretaker contracts, and insurance policies. While Gathering Waters is working to improve access to Wisconsin-specific resources for our member land trusts, we don’t want to duplicate existing resources available through the Land Trust Alliance’s Learning Center (learningcenter.lta.org), and the Nonprofit Risk Management Center (nonprofitrisk.org, accessible through affiliate status through the Alliance).
- Among GIS services, one respondent mentioned training on remote access/collector hardware and software for in-the-field use for monitoring/baseline documentation.
- Noting the significant cost of legal services, comments included interest in a pool of pro-bono attorneys for organizational legal advice and review of transaction documents, and to defend easements (for which land trusts should also be sure to take advantage of help available through Terraforma, terrafirma.org).
- Respondents also commented on other fundraising services, aside from a shared grant writer, such as fundraising software and a workplace giving program. Two inquired about a health insurance plan for all land trust employees (also dental, retirement). Gathering Waters is tracking developments in the availability of association health plans.

COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

Currents (Gathering Waters technical e-Bulletin for land trusts) and our *eNews* were the most frequently selected means of receiving information from Gathering Waters.

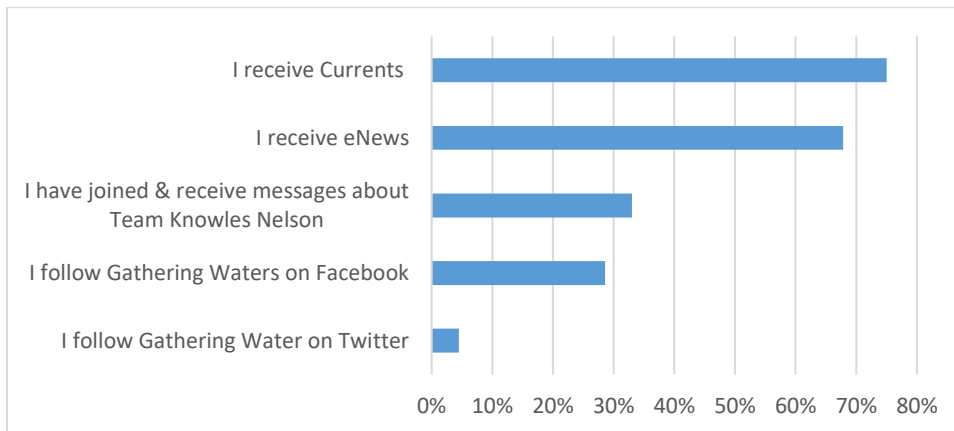


Figure 5. How do you keep up with information from Gathering Waters? Please check all that apply. (N=112)

Perhaps not surprisingly, there were mixed reviews in terms of likelihood of using a listserv (and few suggestions for alternatives). But with a combined 34% “very likely” or “extremely likely” to use a

listserv, it is worth pursuing this or a similar platform to enable land trusts to interact with one another, sharing information and seeking answers to their questions.

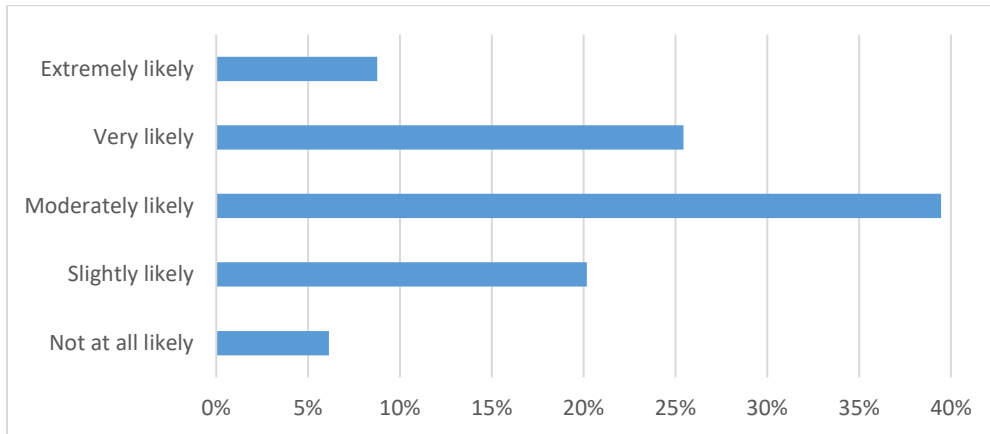


Figure 6. If there were a Wisconsin land trust listserv, the likelihood I would participate is... (N=114)

ADDITIONAL RESPONDENT COMMENTS

Many comments about topics and services affirm Gathering Waters’ initiatives. Policy advocacy, fundraising options and methods, communications, and best practices for land acquisition and stewardship, and board training are, and will continue to be, central to our work.

Policy advocacy: continuing work to engender support for land trusts by county and municipal politicians; exploring regulatory advocacy at the state level; and making the case that public recreation access is not appropriate for all land protected through support of tax dollars

Fundraising: alternatives to Knowles-Nelson (or expansions of what it covers, such as staff time); garnering new support from private/corporate sources; the potential for creating a revolving fund; pool of funds for travel assistance for training opportunities.

Communications and outreach: consistent messaging and materials for outreach to landowners, local officials, realtors; a speakers bureau; and communicating statistics and stories about statewide land trust work via a newsletter or report annually.

Land conservation: continued support and dissemination of best practices for easement monitoring, enforcement, and management plans; invasive species & land management demands, including in response to change, e.g., pest invasions, large scale fire, blowdowns; strategic conservation planning; focus on measurable outcomes.

Others comments reflected interest in collectively working to protect water quality; inventory and management strategies to support rare and declining wildlife; leveraging partnerships to support protection of large parcel waterfront properties, including sale of camps; and responding to easement/acquisition opportunities in parts of the state with hot, very fast-moving real estate markets.

Also mentioned were backup strategies, such as conservation restrictive covenants, as an alternative for sellers who seek assurance through a land trust holding a conservation easement on another land trust’s property; and creating backup easement holder opportunities.