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ILLINOIS CLEAN ENERGY COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

A TRANSFORMATIONAL MOMENT

In 2023, when I was hired as the first executive director of Prairie State Conservation Coalition (PSCC), the organization was on a path to growth. Established in 2005, PSCC is a nonprofit that provides a collective voice for land conservation in Illinois, offering educational, collaborative and networking opportunities, and advocating for strong statewide land conservation policies that benefit all Illinoisans.

Soon after I arrived, we began developing a strategic plan that would position the organization to expand while better serving our constituents. As part of the plan, we intended to raise funds to help support land conservation in Illinois.

In mid-2023, we learned that PSCC would receive a major grant. Originally expected to be \$42 million, the final grant actually totaled \$47.1 million! This amazing grant was completely unexpected by PSCC. Although we were hoping to raise better prospects for statewide conservation funding through PSCC, we never expected to receive such a large grant at this stage. Suddenly, we were in the enviable position of being on an accelerated path to growth.

By **CYNTHIA KANNER**



↑ Prairie State Conservation Coalition's Chairman Brook McDonald (left) and Executive Director Cynthia Kanner (middle) present a special recognition award to Dennis O'Brien (right) of the Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation.

ILLINOIS CLEAN ENERGY COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

← The Prairie State Conservation Coalition was surprised to receive a large grant that will help it expand upon decades of solid progress in preserving and expanding natural areas and wildlife habitat in Illinois.

“Land conservation and nature-based solutions are a cornerstone of environmental health. They are a positive solution for the environment and for people.”

—JERRY ADELMANN, board member of the Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation

A LASTING IMPACT

This amazing grant came from the Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation (ICECF), a long-time partner that had decided to wind down its operations.

“In our 25 years, we made a significant impact on energy efficiency and on the preservation and enhancement of natural habitats and wildlife areas throughout the state of Illinois,” says Dennis O’Brien, who served as ICECF’s executive director. “However, we were getting to the point that we would become less effective and would need to decrease the size of the grants we were administering if we didn’t make a significant change.”

On deciding to wrap up its work, the organization looked to how it could have a lasting impact by making a single grant “that would allow an organization such as Prairie State Conservation Coalition to effectively take up the mantle of helping preserve natural areas and wildlife habitat in Illinois,” says Jerry Adelman, who served on the board of directors of ICECF.

No doubt, there are several factors that went into PSCC being chosen as the recipient of this transformative grant. For more than 20 years, PSCC has supported land conservation and biodiversity protection in the state, representing more than 40 conservation organizations that have together protected over 200,000 acres. ICECF had attended PSCC’s annual conference over the years and provided grants to help fund our work and strengthen the organization, including a two-year grant that was received just months before I started as executive director.

“Over the years, the Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation had provided support for Prairie State Conservation Coalition and for many of our members, but certainly not at the level of this final grant,” says Brook McDonald, board president of PSCC and president/CEO of The Conservation Foundation. “This grant will help Prairie State Conservation Coalition be an even more effective voice for land conservation in Illinois.”

WHAT’S NEXT?

PSCC plans to significantly expand its reach and services. In 2024, we created the Prairie State Conservation Fund, which will award grants to eligible organizations statewide for land acquisition and purchase of conservation easements; stewardship of natural habitats and wildlife areas preservation; and capacity building. Additionally, a portion of the grant will be used to support the work of land conservation organizations led by Black, Indigenous and people of color. We plan to increase the fund to at least \$100 million while working with others to create a feasibility plan to encourage more funding even within the state apparatus in the years to come.

PSCC has spent much of the past year planning and making certain that we have all the systems, people and programs in place to accept, responsibly manage and grow the fund, and ultimately implement grant programs and further support land conservation organizations.

We are fortunate that ICECF provided a great template and solid foundation for

how to do this. As a result, PSCC will adapt and customize many of its processes. Some of the systems we need to implement such a large grant and redistribute it effectively include accounting, auditing, legal, investment plans, special committees, staff, HR/benefits, tech/computer systems, communications, compliance with privacy and other regulations/legislation, new policies and procedures, and even setting up office space for new grant program staff.

ATTRACTING A LARGE GRANT

While this major grant was a surprise, I do think it came about in large part because PSCC had worked over the years to build a solid organization that was well positioned to take on this major responsibility. Some of the factors that I believe helped PSCC attract such a large grant include:

- A solid organizational structure.
- An active, dedicated, experienced and knowledgeable board of directors.
- Follow-through on what we say we will do.
- Competence, commitment and confidence in managing our resources.
- Consistent networking and relationship building to expand our reach and ensure our organization’s voice is heard.
- Telling our story of competence and successes.
- Being innovative in our approach.

This year is an exciting year for PSCC—in addition to implementing plans for our new fund, we are also celebrating our 20th anniversary! We started the year with our annual conference in March, which attracted our largest and most varied crowd ever. With more than 150 attendees, 35 speakers and 54 sponsors, our conference set a solid foundation for our future success.

As we move forward, PSCC will spend a good part of 2025 focusing on making certain that all our systems are in place, launching our programs and growing our impact. We are honored and excited to take up the mantle of the Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation and be active, dedicated stewards of the land. ☺

CYNTHIA KANNER is executive director of Prairie State Conservation Coalition, an Illinois nonprofit association of land conservation organizations.