

Building People Power

Land Stewardship Action Fund's Local Impact

By Emily Minge

Did you know that the Land Stewardship Project has a partner organization, Land Stewardship Action Fund (LSAF), that can engage directly in elections and with candidates at all levels of government? In 2018, LSP's board of directors created LSAF because the membership realized we could no longer sit on the sidelines in the current political environment. To make a bigger difference to advance our values of stewardship, justice, democracy, community, and health for people and the land, we need to engage LSP's members in elections at all levels and support candidates for office who will lead with us and champion our priorities.

This year, leading up to the fall elections, LSAF will focus on engaging members, supporting candidates, and building power at local levels of government. This includes elected county commissioners, township supervisors, Soil and Water Conversation District officers, and the appointed positions within their scope.

Why is local government the right path for LSAF this year? We've had conversations with members from across the state, staff from each of our organization's teams, LSP and LSAF board members, as well as various partner organizations, where we asked questions such as: What do you think is our role to play in elections? What level(s) of government have the biggest impact on our farm and food systems? What we heard in these conversations is that our base feels directly impacted by local government bodies. Additionally, LSP staff members say that local governments have the most direct impact on their area of work because they implement programs and distribute funding to farmers.

By focusing on local government, LSAF aims to build trust in government institutions. Our member conversations have shown that our base has a higher level of trust in and relationship with local

government compared to state or federal government, due to the localized nature of the offices. Local candidates are often an acquaintance to many voters. We've also heard that folks are less intimidated engaging with local government compared to the state or federal level when it comes to running or applying for positions as well as getting involved as a constituent. Leveraging this existing level of trust, we can start getting people involved locally to break down



LSP's board of directors created LSAF as it became clear we could no longer sit on the sidelines in the current political environment. (Photo by Sarah Goldman)

the perceived barriers around engagement and then encourage them to continue taking action at higher levels.

LSP's policy team has organized in many situations where county and township governments are the decision makers. These include our work opposing factory farms and manure digesters, promoting local groundwater protection/soil health programs, and changing zoning ordinances to reduce barriers for beginning and emerging farmers wanting to transition into agriculture. Therefore, it's strategic to promote the power of local government, engage our base around these races, and support candidates who will be champions on these issues.

Throughout LSP's history, we've seen the importance of local government when

it comes to some of our milestone wins. Minnesota is a state with strong local control laws, which means that each level of local government can create stricter regulations than the level above it. For example, if a county sets a cap of 2,000 animal units per livestock operation, a township within the county can create their own cap of 1,999 or lower. Additionally, county or township officials can put in place a manure digester moratorium, even if the state or county they reside in doesn't have such a restriction.

Local control has allowed LSP's members to enforce the animal unit cap in Minnesota's Winona County and put in place a county-wide ban on frac sand mining. It also prevented a large concentrated animal feeding operation from being built in nearby Dodge County. This was all possible because of community voices and widespread public pressure. But to be heard and successful in preserving local democracy, community members need people in local offices looking out for them and their neighbors.

Community Impacts

For example, LSP members in southeastern Minnesota's Fillmore County are pushing back against the county board's decision to double the animal unit cap in a region struggling with nitrate pollution problems. Despite public pressure, including a petition with over 300 community member signatures opposing the raising of the cap, the board voted for the increase. Many LSP members and others felt as if their voices didn't matter, and are

wondering what can be done to protect their water, land, and community. Is the next step changing who leads the county government?

There are also many proactive measures LSP members are pursuing at the local level to build the farm and food system we want and need. As was highlighted in the last *Land Stewardship Letter*, Minnesota's Olmsted County implemented an innovative and, thus far, highly effective, groundwater and soil health program, incentivizing farmers to implement regenerative practices. This happened because the county board of supervisors, the elected SWCD officers, and SWCD staff identified the problem, came up with a proactive solution, and made it a priority.

A policy priority for LSP's Land Ac-

LSAF, see page 13...

cess and Emerging Farmer working group is passing county and township ordinances that would support multi-family and multi-generational farming by allowing additional residential dwellings on farms without obtaining conditional use permits. Many farmers struggle to find housing when acquiring land, and this solution would allow for communal style farming and for retiring farmers or non-operating landowners to start the land transition process with beginning farmers without having to leave their homes. County and township boards appoint planning and zoning commissions, and they are the ones that will make the decision to approve such an ordinance.

Making it Possible to Step Up

County and township boards also appoint Economic Development Authority Boards to make decisions regarding financial investments that boost the local economy. This includes investing in regional food markets (such as farm-to-school initiatives) and processing and storage infrastructure. Currently, LSP staff in western Minnesota are in conversation with Economic Develop-

ment Authority staff there about this type of investment to support local farmers and create pathways that make small scale and specialty farming more viable, therefore getting (and keeping) more farmers on the land while maintaining the money and what's produced in the local economy. This is all possible, but it takes people who want to champion regional food systems applying to be on their county or township Economic Development Authority board. It also takes allies serving on the county or township board to appoint these potential champions.

There are countless ways that local government — from county to township, from elected to appointed positions — impacts our farm and food system. That means there are countless ways we can all work to create a just and sustainable farm and food system. But it takes people who can advocate for our needs to step up and fill public positions. LSAF's goal is to make those voices heard by supporting those who care about the future of their local community and want to make it a better place — one vote at a time. If you'd like to get involved, see the sidebar below for information on contacting me. ☐

Emily Minge is a Land Stewardship Action Fund political organizer.



During conversations with members from across the state, we're hearing that local government bodies have a major impact on their lives. (LSP Photo)

Want to Have a Policy Impact? Connect with Land Stewardship Action Fund

In February 2018, the Land Stewardship Project's board of directors created the Land Stewardship Action Fund (LSAF), a 501(c)(4) partner organization, because they recognized the power that comes with being able to drive forward the mission and goals of LSP with an expanded set of political and electoral tools.

LSAF came out of the realization that our members and leaders could no longer sit on the sidelines in the current political environment, but instead must proactively engage in elections so that we have a say in who is elected and representing us.

For more information on LSAF and to get involved in such initiatives as voter education and deep canvassing, see landstewardshipaction.org or contact Emily Minge at eminge@landstewardshipaction.org, 612-400-6353.



Sharing Stories

The Land Stewardship Project is collecting the stories of rural residents who question the “get big or get out” narrative and the power and bullying tactics wielded by Corporate America. The *LSP Powerline Story Center* is seeking firsthand reports and stories from rural residents across the Midwest who oppose the power of Big Ag, and are seeking ways to fight back. Have factory farms or other major unwelcome developments arrived in your community, or are you worried that such developments are being proposed? Is local control and the ability of rural communities to determine their own future important to you? Would you like to talk about a type of food and farming system that relies on small and medium-sized operations that contribute to local economies while building healthy soil?

To submit your story, see landstewardshipproject.org/powerline. If you have any questions, contact Brian DeVore at bdevore@landstewardshipproject.org or 612-816-9342. ☐

