

## **Retirement Leads to Civic Engagement**

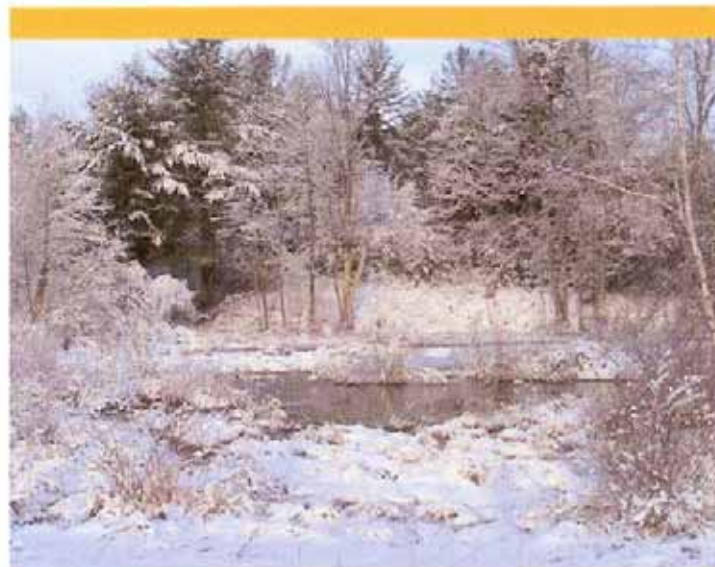
*By Jeffrey Swain*

This is a story about me and an organization with which I have become affiliated since my "retirement" from full-time work. I always put "retirement" in quotes because I believe it is a relative term, with a different meaning for each person. As far as my wife and I are concerned, retirement in the traditional sense is an oxymoron. For us, since we retired several years ago from public service careers, it has meant transitioning from working full-time to something else where we can contribute to the community, give back, have a sense of fulfillment, have our efforts appreciated, and "stay connected." Of course, to be entirely honest, it has also meant more time for family, friends, and travel.

Shortly after my "retirement" from full-time employment, while deciding how best to "stay connected," I had a serendipitous meeting with a former business colleague who introduced me to ESCOT (the acronym for Executive Service Corps of Tri-Cities, Inc.). ESCOT is a non-profit corporation with a twenty-year history in the Capital Region, and is an affiliate of ESCAN, the umbrella national corporation. I am now on ESCOT's Board of Directors, and over the past several years have worked on five ESCOT consulting projects serving community-based non-profits.

But, I'm getting ahead of myself. Over the years of its existence, ESCOT has developed a very solid reputation as an experienced, affordable, and well-respected management consulting organization that recruits and deploys professional volunteer consultants.

ESCOT'S mission is "to assist not-for-profit organizations, governmental units and educational institutions solve operational issues and organizational problems by providing high-quality consulting services at minimal cost. Its volunteer consultations work to benefit the community by assisting these organizations in delivering effective service to their clients. In fulfilling this mission, ESCOT provides opportunities for rewarding community service for its corps of volunteers."



*Hand Hollow Conservation Area*

For most of its twenty years, ESCOT had been an entirely volunteer organization, both board and consultants. Only recently a part-time executive director has been retained to help expand ESCOT's presence in the community. ESCOT's unique nature is largely that "retired" professionals have the opportunity to continue to use their substantial experiences and skills as volunteers in leadership-type consulting work. ESCOT's consultants have had long and distinguished careers with some of the Capital Region's leading non-profit organizations and government agencies. We volunteer our time to improve the local community by strengthening service organizations.

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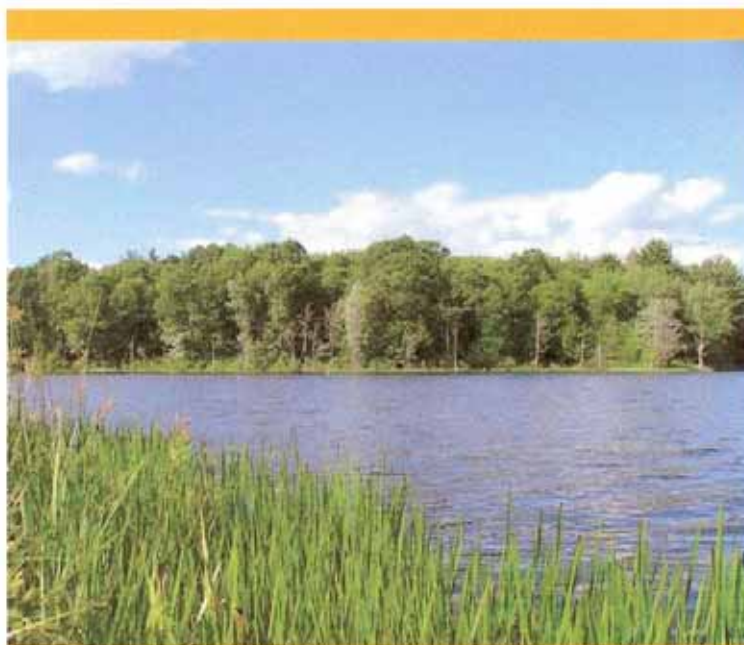
*"The services offered allow the clients to gain access to the wisdom, dedication, and experience offered by the diverse group of volunteers."*

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### **Consulting services**

Consulting services are provided in a wide variety of areas including, but not limited to, the following: board development, fiscal practices/budgeting, human resources, management auditing, organizational development, strategic planning, employee training, information technology, and marketing. ESCOT charges clients a very modest fee for projects based on project size, project complexity, and ability to pay. The services offered allow the clients to gain access to the wisdom, dedication, and experience offered by the diverse group of volunteers. Typically, ESCOT consultants work in project teams of two to four persons depending on the project's size and scope and are reimbursed for out-of-pocket expenses such as mileage and parking. Currently, ESCOT has the resources to undertake and complete between six and eight projects each year.

Feedback from the client organizations involved in the projects is the true test for the ESCOT consultants.



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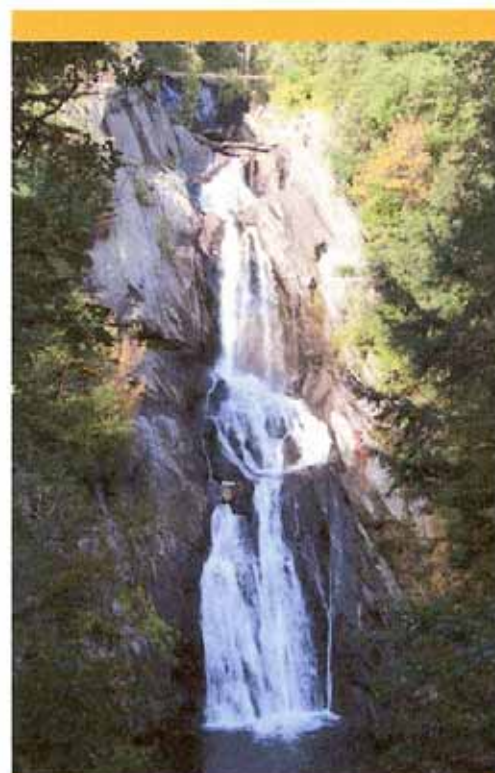
From among recently completed projects, the client representatives had these things to say: "Our agency was in need of some strategic guidance in organizational development of our long-term vision. ESCOT allowed our agency access to such services that had been otherwise unattainable due to budgetary limitations." And, "with ESCOT's help we formed a shared vision for our organization and the means to achieve it. The process was well-organized and we now have a clearer direction for the future."

Sentiments like these are a part of what drew me to ESCOT in the first place. So what is it about ESCOT that engenders positive client feedback and is attractive to potential volunteers? It is well-organized in how it conducts its business; we recently completed the updating of our own strategic plan—a good thing to do if we are urging others to do the same; also, new volunteers are required to participate in a thorough orientation in ESCOT's policies, procedures, and processes prior to being assigned to any project work. The Board of Directors is very committed and passionate about the mission, and not reluctant to check itself by inviting client organizations to give feedback, and by holding sessions for consultants to share experiences and discuss such questions as: What are client organizations seeking? What issues and trends are we encountering? What makes effective teamwork in the consulting group?

Annual meetings are held each year in the fall with a specific theme and provide ESCOT volunteers with a way of staying connected to some of the broader community issues. In the recent past, Judith R. Saidel, Executive Director, Center for Women in Government & Civil Society, and Teri Bordenave, President/CEO, Girls Incorporated® of the Greater Capital Region, reported on their findings in "High Tech Growth and Community Well-Being: Lessons Learned from Austin, Texas." In another session, the theme was "Let's Collaborate," and the gathering heard from the United Way executives of the newly restructured United Way of the Greater Capital Region, as well as a panel of agency executives who discussed some of their experiences with inter-agency collaborations. These are vitally important discussions in these times of shrinking resources.

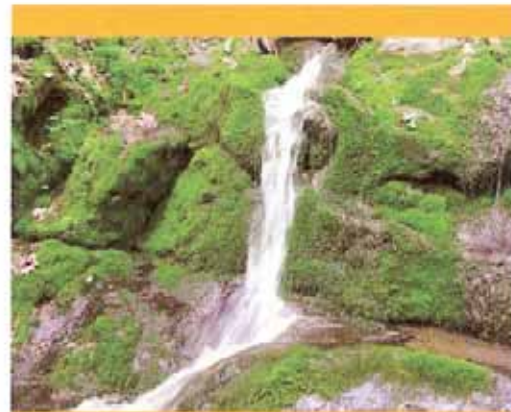
**Staying connected**

This brings me back to the beginning of the story; you can see why I'm affiliated with ESCOT, and



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am proud of the work we do. It has afforded me the opportunity to “stay connected,” use my skills and experience, meet new people, learn new things, contribute something of value to the clients, and, yes, even enhance my self-esteem when someone I respect says something nice about me. This is what Dr. Philip McCallion, Professor and Director of the Center for Excellence in Aging Services at the University at Albany School of Social Welfare, means when he refers to the principles of Civic Engagement. “These principles speak to our willingness to commit ourselves to assisting our communities with essential needs and moving beyond self to both identify and seek ways to address those needs. Through working in organizations that support the delivery of services or by volunteering in such organizations, each of us has come to recognize that our individual action can have a collective effect on the community if we choose to engage.”



Round Ball Conservation Area

It’s fitting that I close with those thoughts of Dr. McCallion since the Center for Excellence in Aging Services has recently launched a new effort called ExcelleShare, whose vision is “to establish a one stop Volunteer Resource and Support Center for leadership volunteer opportunities and capacity building assistance for non-profit and government agencies in the Capital Region, providing personal development, continued civic engagement, and innovative, up-to-date volunteer management models and techniques.” As I am now also working with this new initiative, I see it as having the potential to take the work of ESCOT and other similar programs to the next level of program development by establishing the one stop community location for both prospective leadership volunteers and community-based non-profits. ExcelleShare is in its early stages, but already there is good evaluative evidence that its vision can become a reality. 🐾

🐾 *Jeffrey Swain retired in 2003 as Deputy State Comptroller for the State and Local Retirement System. That position capped thirty-four years of commitment as a public servant both in the City of Rochester and for the State of New York. While in Rochester, Swain served as Commissioner of Recreation and Community Services, and Commissioner of Community Development.*