



Western Reserve Land Conservancy

land • people • community

Conserve, Connect, Sustain

Strategic Plan 2022

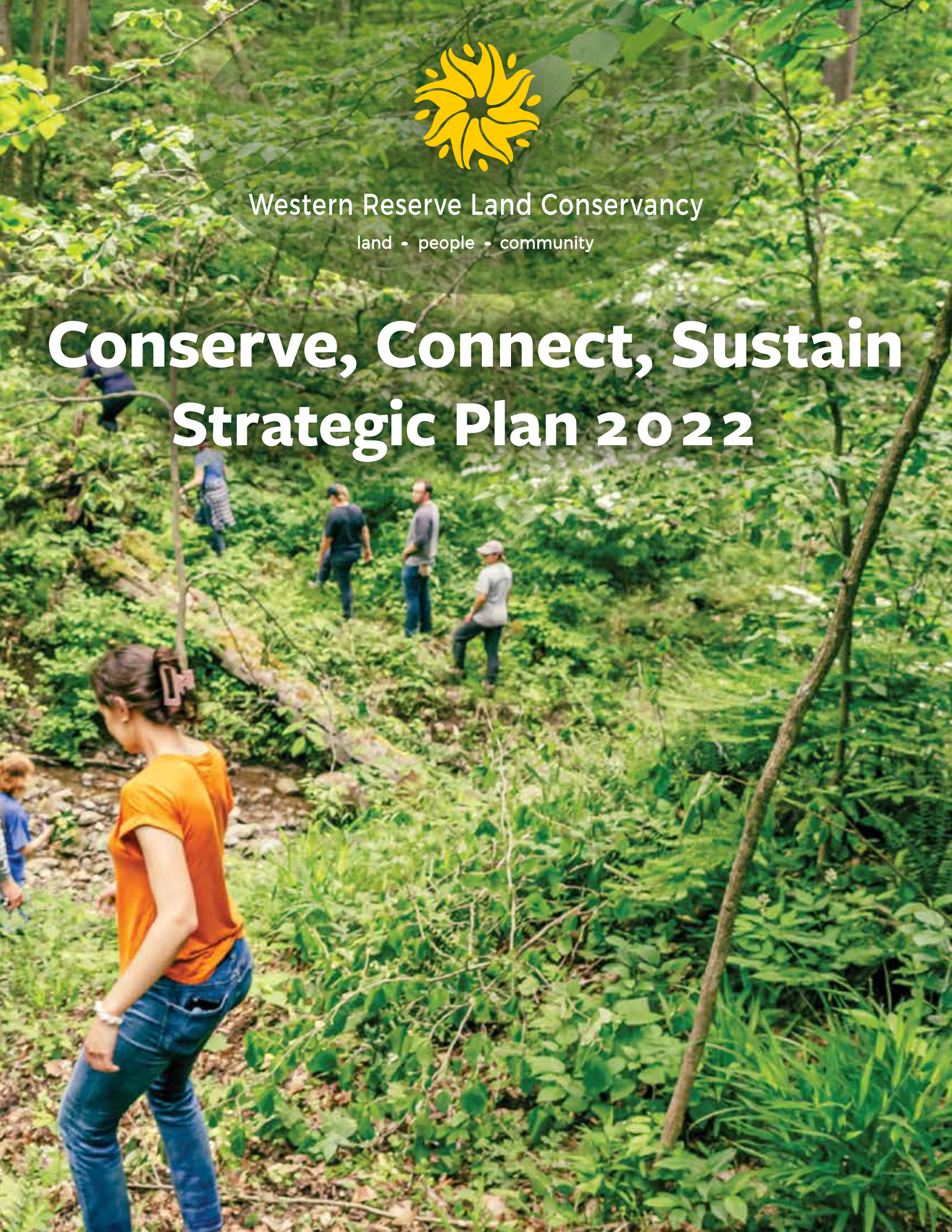


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GREAT GAINS IN A CHALLENGING CLIMATE

As we continue to adjust to the profound effects of the first worldwide pandemic in a century, repercussions are still being realized and will long be felt. Western Reserve Land Conservancy adapted strategically and effectively to the pandemic, shifting both program priorities and workplace norms to make great strides over the course of the last plan period that began in 2018. We continue our commitment to Conserve, Connect, and Sustain the land and water resources that serve as the foundation of healthy communities.

Western Reserve Land Conservancy is a nationally recognized leader in the work of natural lands preservation and a groundbreaking force in urban revitalization. As the organization considers the future, several opportunities exist that could benefit from our substantial expertise and resources. The challenge is to remain focused on our core capacity and strategic strengths and to be disciplined about expansion. **The intent of this plan is to identify areas for strategic program expansion and impact and how best to leverage the resources from the philanthropic campaign while continuing to invest in our capacity and current and future leadership.**

Accredited by the Land Trust Alliance, we are the largest land trust in Ohio and one of the largest in the country. With roots dating back to the 1980s, the Land Conservancy is the product of a unique merger of 13 conservation organizations into a single enterprise. Presently, the Land Conservancy serves 28 Ohio counties stretching from the Sandusky Bay to the Pennsylvania border, and from Lake Erie to Steubenville. We have permanently conserved nearly 70,000 acres across 850 unique properties, including the creation and expansion of 190 public parks and preserves.

The Land Conservancy’s multi-disciplinary focus on conservation and urban revitalization positively impacts the environment, physical and mental well-being of people, economic growth, and safety. Our work includes accelerating the pace of conservation efforts to meet the pressures of sprawling development, protecting habitat for rare and endangered species, expanding public access to the outdoors, educating children and teens about the wonders and importance of nature, and replacing vacancy with vital trees and greenspaces in our cities. Our team is adept at forming partnerships, securing funding, utilizing political and social influence, advocating, and initiating and managing complex projects.

This plan seeks to build on that legacy and, in so doing, retain the same entrepreneurial spirit that has defined our results-oriented, can-do ethos.

Notable Accomplishments

- Nearing completion of our first comprehensive philanthropic campaign. We are projected to raise \$45 million by June 2023, exceeding our original goal by more than 35 percent.
- Shifted our management structure, evolving the Management Team so that it is no longer chaired by the President and CEO, demonstrating the impressive depth of the organization’s management and leadership capacity.
- A second wave of leadership has assumed key roles to guide the work of the Thriving Communities team, solidifying the importance and future of urban greening and revitalization work to the Land Conservancy’s agenda.
- Completed a comprehensive Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice (DEIJ) plan this year that includes a series of strategies that impact workforce, workplace, and marketplace & community.

Our 2022 Strategic Plan reflects both the organization’s evolution and the realities of our new world.

CONSERVE, CONNECT, SUSTAIN

We seek to conserve and restore land in a great diversity of places; to connect people (and communities of people) with land and water resources and to connect preserved land to other preserved areas; and to sustain a thriving organization built to adapt and endure.

The 2022 Strategic Plan charts a focused path that builds on this mindset in a meaningful way. The strategic theme of this plan – Conserve, Connect, Sustain – was first defined in 2013, and these parameters were chosen to stand the test of time as the work, people, and impact of the Land Conservancy evolved. They have done this, and with this plan, will continue to remain at the core of our work.

VISION & MISSION

The current Vision and Mission Statements remain relevant and were unchanged in the plan process.

Vision Statement:

Thriving, prosperous communities nourished by vibrant natural areas, working farms, and healthy cities.

Mission Statement:

To provide the people of our region with essential natural assets through land conservation and restoration.

Visionary Outcome: During this plan period we will develop a concise portfolio of metrics and complementary goals that speak to individual programs and organizational impact. Specifically:

Natural Areas Conservation	Climate	Urban	Agricultural Land	Connections
How should we measure near term and long term impact?	How can we measure carbon drawdown, environmental resilience, and related impact?	Establish new metrics that will be relevant in cities: tree canopy, proximity to natural resources, etc.	Farmland conservation requires very different metrics, some of which are related to soils and some of which are related to economic viability.	Our work aims to connect people with land and also to create connections between parks, preserves, and other conservation areas. How do we measure this aspect of our mission? Education and outreach is an aspect of this category.

AN INCLUSIVE APPROACH THAT DISTINGUISHES US NATIONALLY

The Land Conservancy seeks to deliver impactful service to a great diversity of places and people, and during this plan period we intend to invest and excel in all of these programs and places. We view this broadly under the following structure: traditional land conservation and restoration work; conservation of agricultural land in rural areas; and restoration and conservation in cities. We cultivate a culture that embraces people with diverse and sometimes antithetical views. We have created a “Big Tent” under which all of us share values related to improving and preserving environmental conditions even if we do not share other values and beliefs. *We are nimble, flexible, and diverse. We take a holistic, comprehensive approach to land conservation.*



ORGANIZATIONAL PILLARS



Staff, trustees, volunteers, relationships with donors and partners.



Entrepreneurial, bold, collaborative, responsive to change, innovative, Do Tank, grateful.



70,000 acres of preserved land. More than 190 public parks and preserves. Planted thousands of trees, restored thousands of acres of land and water resources. Financial strength. Other organizations helped/launched.



DEIJ PLAN SUMMARY AND INTEGRATION

In July 2022, Western Reserve Land Conservancy completed a DEIJ Strategic Plan that included 16 action strategies for addressing and incorporating DEIJ principles into our workforce, our workplace, and our marketplace and community.

The integration of the DEIJ plan within this Strategic Plan demonstrates an organizational commitment to ensure that the work is woven into all aspects of our internal operations and external work. The 16 strategies are briefly described below. A more detailed version of the report is available by scanning the QR code or going to www.wrlandconservancy.org/DEIJReport

Workforce

- Structure of DEIJ Commitments
- Hiring/Recruitment
- Policy/Procedure Review
- Benefits Review

Workplace

- Training
- Empower Staff to Develop Employee Resource Groups
- Lead Work with Other Conservation Organizations to Integrate DEIJ Practices

Marketplace and Community

- The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) will be a Hallmark of our Organization and Work
- Maintain and Grow Relationships with City and County Leaders across our Region
- Build Healthy and Resilient Cleveland Neighborhoods through Vacant Land Reuse
- Make Land Conservation more Accessible to Under-Resourced Communities
- Influence Committees that Make Public Funding Decisions
- Outreach to Landowners of Color
- Seek Conservation and Preservation Projects in Black, Latino, Asian and Indigenous Communities
- Land Conservancy Programs to Engage Communities and Households of Color
- Increase Land Conservancy programming and engagement dedicated to LGBTQ+ communities



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STRATEGIC PLAN PROCESS

The 2022 Strategic Plan is the result of a concentrated process that launched in March and concluded in July of 2022. The plan was guided by an internal leadership team and with the assistance of Strategy Design Partners, an independent consultant. A Steering Committee comprised of nine Land Conservancy trustees helped guide the process. In addition, all Land Conservancy trustees were provided opportunities to participate in a series of 'parlor sessions' that focused on different topics central to the plan. Staff were engaged in six formal sessions, two involving all staff, and four smaller sessions that focused on specific strategic and operational topics. In addition, an Environmental Scan was conducted that engaged external partners in interviews as well as many interviews with trustees. A survey of all employees was also conducted and individual interviews with our employees took place.

The environmental scan confirmed:

- The Land Conservancy enjoys a reputation for excellence from its funders and program partners at both a regional and national level.
- The caliber and innovation of the work, the quality and expertise of the staff and its executive leadership, and the organization's prowess at securing influence and resources at the state and national level were well noted.
- An opportunity exists to create a more unified brand between the Land Conservancy and its Thriving Communities program. Early and necessary efforts to position the urban work in its first years have created a need to ensure that partners and funders fully understand that a single organization leads the work. Recent efforts to eliminate the use of the Thriving Communities Institute branding have been a good first step, but further study of this issue is recommended.
- The potential to invest more heavily in marketing and communications was a consistent theme. Like many effective organizations, we have focused on program delivery and never heavily invested in telling our own story. Given the impact of our work, an increased emphasis on communications can and should bring more people to appreciate and support the overarching impact we bring to the region.





RECOMMENDATIONS

Highlighting Climate Resilience

- A deliberate shift to measure and capture the impact of our work on making our region climate resilient and to update language to describe the organization’s work in this context.

Strengthening a Solid Team and Planning for the Future

- Maintain and deepen our investment in human capital.
- A renewed commitment to organizational development and related policies that will support what is now a nearly 50-person operation will help solidify this growth and sustain our future.
- Succession planning for all members of the Management Team to ensure that broad capacity is developed and nurtured.
- Continued commitment from our Board to ensure that it enlists and engages trustees possessing the skills,

Revenue Diversification

- Intentional diversification of revenue sources led by Board and staff leadership that lessens our current reliance on net revenue related to conservation transactions and consulting and development and philanthropy. The plan addresses several new and expanded programs that can diversify sources of revenue for a more sustainable business model. Each of these programs represents a thoughtful balance between the potential for revenue generation, an alignment with core strengths, and mission impact.
- Expansion of the Land Conservancy’s current service area.
- Insight, and experience to serve the Land Conservancy while reflecting our commitment to diversity and inclusiveness.

STRATEGIC STRENGTHS

The Land Conservancy is an organization rich with capacity, talented staff, and access to resources. With each strategic plan process, we invest the time to identify those strengths that define us, and that we wish to deploy broadly for maximum mission impact.

Conservation + Revitalization Planning

Blend GIS and planning expertise with concurrence-based input to identify the most strategic and high-priority natural resources and opportunities for urban revitalization within a defined area.

Acquisition + Funding

Acquire various interests in real property; including easements or ownership to preserve land for its intended use; develop related public and private funding sources; do this for partners in a comprehensive manner.

Restoration + Land Management and Stewardship

Improve and restore water and land resources including urban reforestation; manage land in ways to be used within its context; own and manage portfolio of parks and preserves; develop and secure related funding from public, philanthropic, mitigation, and other private sources. Create baseline reports and natural resources surveys that establish conservation value of a property; monitor and enforce all interests in property in perpetuity.

Public Policy

Influence relevant policy at federal, state, and local levels; serve as trusted subject matter expert to government and elected officials.

Strategic Partnerships, Mergers and Coalitions

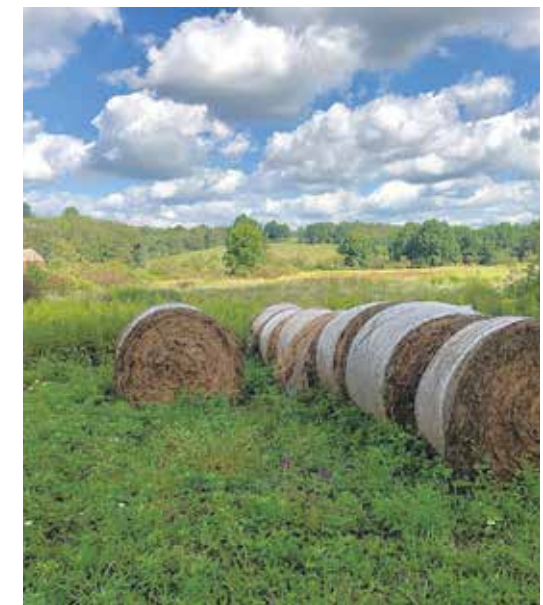
Engage stakeholders by cultivating relationships, establishing informal and formal partnerships, leading within coalitions – all grounded in principles of concurrence and focused on results.

Organizational Capacity and Fiscal Strength

Leverage deep expertise, strength of management team, strong financial position, and proven philanthropic excellence to benefit projects, partners, and spinoff new, mission- aligned organizations. Serve as fiscal agent for fledgling partners.

Emergent Strategic Strength: Education, Outreach, and Engaging People

Utilize deep and trusted community relationships to engage diverse audiences in greater appreciation of nature and related projects and programs. Utilize our portfolio of signature parks and preserves, deploy our expert employees and a regional network of experts, and do this broadly and consistently.



EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL FORCES

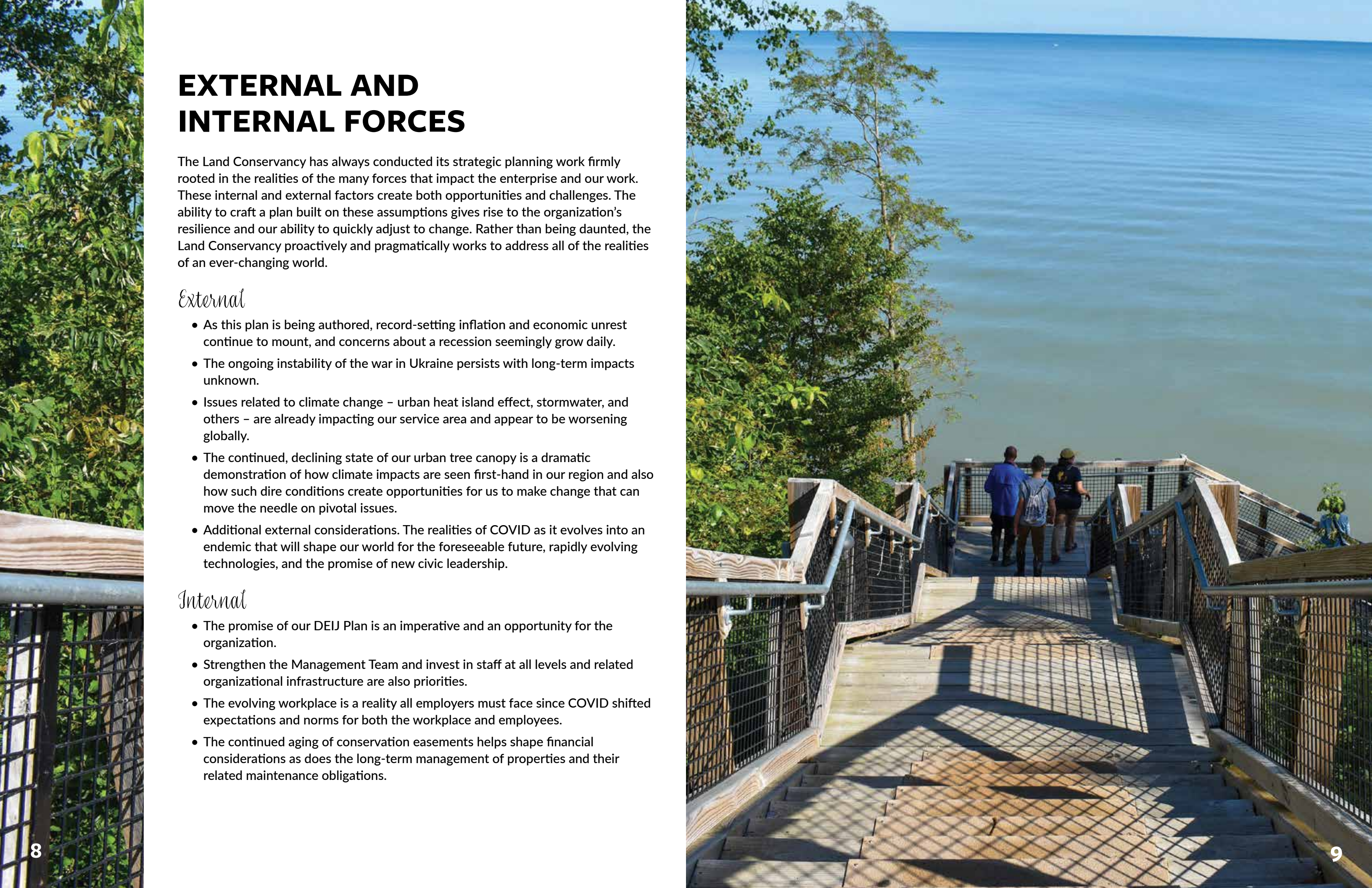
The Land Conservancy has always conducted its strategic planning work firmly rooted in the realities of the many forces that impact the enterprise and our work. These internal and external factors create both opportunities and challenges. The ability to craft a plan built on these assumptions gives rise to the organization's resilience and our ability to quickly adjust to change. Rather than being daunted, the Land Conservancy proactively and pragmatically works to address all of the realities of an ever-changing world.

External

- As this plan is being authored, record-setting inflation and economic unrest continue to mount, and concerns about a recession seemingly grow daily.
- The ongoing instability of the war in Ukraine persists with long-term impacts unknown.
- Issues related to climate change – urban heat island effect, stormwater, and others – are already impacting our service area and appear to be worsening globally.
- The continued, declining state of our urban tree canopy is a dramatic demonstration of how climate impacts are seen first-hand in our region and also how such dire conditions create opportunities for us to make change that can move the needle on pivotal issues.
- Additional external considerations. The realities of COVID as it evolves into an endemic that will shape our world for the foreseeable future, rapidly evolving technologies, and the promise of new civic leadership.

Internal

- The promise of our DEI Plan is an imperative and an opportunity for the organization.
- Strengthen the Management Team and invest in staff at all levels and related organizational infrastructure are also priorities.
- The evolving workplace is a reality all employers must face since COVID shifted expectations and norms for both the workplace and employees.
- The continued aging of conservation easements helps shape financial considerations as does the long-term management of properties and their related maintenance obligations.





STRATEGIC FOCUS AREAS AND GOALS

Establishing clear, concise, and strategic goals to focus efforts over the plan period is intended to create a framework for an actionable, measurable organizational agenda. The work of each goal is linked to the other. Together, they create a comprehensive approach to achieving organizational growth and greater impact linked directly to mission, built on our organizational pillars, strategic strengths, and existing programs. Each of these goals fall within our enduring themes of Conserve, Connect, Sustain. An Action Plan will be created that details staff management and specific tactics and timing that

will serve as a road map to chart progress and impact.

In addition to the four goals enumerated below, we will continue to deploy all of our strategic strengths in our existing programs and projects (except as noted below). Development, communications, education and outreach, lobbying, conservation, stewardship, legal, finance, administration including technology and information management, conservation planning, GIS, project management, property management, and all other extant work will be prioritized and resourced.

Goal 1:

To increase our program impacts and revenue diversification through the strategic expansion of work based on our unique capacity and core strengths

STRATEGIES:

Priority Initiatives

- **Natural Lands Preservation + Restoration and Farmlands Preservation**
 - Expansion into Muskingum Watershed Conservancy District and western agricultural counties
 - Partnership based, revenue focused, and strategically phased to build relationships within the new area
 - Continued investment in stewardship and valued partnerships to expand opportunities
 - Develop roll out plan
 - Additional evaluation of potential expansion in coastal zone of Lake Erie during plan period
- **Carbon Credits**
 - Expansion of carbon credits work to broad geography, including new service area, in partnership with City Forest Credits (CFC) and others as means of diversifying revenue and leveraging unique, existing expertise. Pilot a national program with CFC to explore viability of a consulting practice
- **Elevation of Climate Resilience**
 - Strategic repositioning of existing programs to highlight and measure climate resilience impacts
 - Investment in and tracking of metrics that quantify measurable resilience impacts
 - Explore ways to incorporate environmental resilience into all projects and programs
- **Urban Reforestation**
 - Lead within Cleveland Tree Coalition to better position overall impacts as civic imperative
 - Work to achieve a partnership agreement with Bibb Administration that elevates impact and formalizes City commitment

- Continue to evolve the Reforest our City program with strategic increased planting, targeted engagement of private landowners and expanded stewardship training
- **Urban Greening and Revitalization**
 - Double-down on Cleveland, securing new public support for a comprehensive, replicable agenda before expansion to other markets
 - Explore options around vacant land stewardship, concentrated in primary investment neighborhoods
 - Explore potential partnerships to support Workforce Development
- **Education and Outreach**
 - Strategically grow program and explore our “place” in this space regionally and nationally; continue to develop and provide programs related to conservation education: continue leadership of the Lake Erie Allegheny Partnership for Biodiversity (LEAP) program, invest in partnerships with National League of Cities and similar, consider additional opportunities to participate in or build platforms to advance goals related to this topic
 - This is an emergent strategic strength at this time; during the plan period it is probable that it will mature into a strategic strength that will be comprehensively deployed
- **Additional Revenue Generating Programs**
 - Continue to explore new and expanded programs that diversify revenue by evaluating needed program investment relative to revenue generation and organizational impacts
 - Options include Green Burials, Timber Harvesting, Expanded Mitigation and Restoration, Camping AirBnBs, memorial and honorary activities such as planting trees
- **Metrics**
 - Develop a new and innovate portfolio of metrics that measure impact across a variety of programs and environments

Other Areas of Potential Growth

- **Sporting Circle**
 - Continue to evolve with focus on increased organizational engagement/contribution of members
- **Reinstitute the PAC/501(c)4 to leverage greater resources and influence**
 - Develop contractual or shared staffing plan with PAC
 - Develop annual operating funding strategy and secure multi-year commitments
- **Membership**
 - Conduct a feasibility analysis for a large-scale membership campaign
 - Explore other membership and outreach ideas such as a philanthropic “plant a tree” initiative (similar to the Jewish National Fund campaign in Israel)
- **Volunteer Program**
 - Explore expanded program to better serve stewardship, reforestation, and related program needs

Goal 2:

To leverage campaign resources successfully and strategically by employing capital for program impact and organizational sustainability and inform future fundraising initiatives

STRATEGIES:

- **Finance Committee recommends allocation procedures for funds in accordance with four identified uses that align with original campaign goals: Reserve, Endow, Revolve, and Spend**
- **Committee recommends framework for use of capital and how to comply with Land Stewardship and Legal Defense Fund requirements**

- Policies set for deployment of planned gifts as they become available
- Future fundraising goals and strategies should be shaped by the results of the campaign, by this plan, and by major stakeholders

Goal 3:

To significantly expand our market presence through the elevation of our organizational narrative and impacts, highlighting our capacity, impact, and national reputation

STRATEGIES:

- Invest in additional capacity to allow for more comprehensive communications efforts
- Conduct a study of our brand/name to determine how best to eliminate existing confusion and preferably invest in a single, long-term brand
- Specifically highlight leadership roles in urban reforestation, carbon capture, and climate resilience and create compelling narratives around each
- Translate results in accessible language that focuses on relevance of work and human impacts
- Promote the Land Conservancy's national reputation within our own region to position us as a partner of choice and to increase fundraising opportunities
- Develop an outreach plan for Board/staff leadership to engage with newly elected civic leadership with planned messaging and outcomes for each
- Highlight work related to DEIJ goals, strategies, and outcomes

Goal 4:

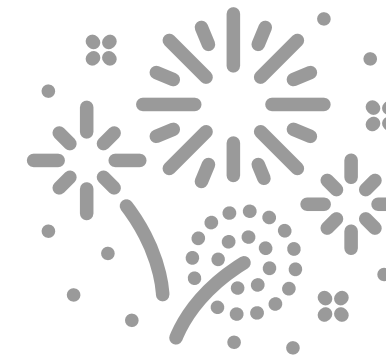
To continue to invest in and nurture the organizational capacity of our leadership team, staff and trustees

STRATEGIES:

- **Staff**
 - Continue to build the strength of the Management Team and increase organizational infrastructure with investments in HR that will streamline operations through an increase in organizational policies and procedures
 - Create a cohesive, unified team with additional opportunities to collaborate
 - Standardize annual investments in professional development and training; further develop management and leadership personnel to operate the organization
 - Update organizational structure appropriately to realize the promise of the plan and to streamline departmental management and collaboration
 - Fully integrate DEIJ report findings into standard operating procedures, annual activities, Employee Resource Groups, and ongoing management practices
 - Revisit and update our Core Values Statement
- **Board**
 - Continue efforts to diversify membership in terms of age, race, gender, geography, sexual orientation, and life experience
 - Enhance onboarding for new members with means to encourage engagement
 - Explore idea of having a more structured path to cultivate and prepare future Board leadership
 - Set policies regarding organization's potential future role as fiscal agent

- **Succession + Leadership**
 - Ensure continued investment in Management Team, organizational systems, and staff development to build capacity and institutionalize organizational values and strategies
 - Strategically engage Management Team members in key relationships to emphasize organizational capacity and strengthen partnership
 - Create opportunities to position the Land Conservancy's cutting-edge leadership on key issues for organizational benefit and to create new opportunities for impact
- **Other Infrastructure**
 - During the plan period we will invest in new capacity related to technology, workplace, and related areas
 - A new website will be launched. A new customer relationship management system will be implemented. Physical enhancements will be made to all of our offices in response to rapidly evolving workplace customs. Investments in GIS and other core capacity will continue

THE UPSHOT



At the end of the plan period, we will be a nationally recognized organization that impacts communities and people throughout Ohio. All of our employees will be deeply engaged in their work and will feel fully supported. Our revenue model will be more diverse, and our balance sheet will be larger and strategically deployed. We will be the highest performing land conservation organization in America, we will dramatically improve environmental conditions in our service area, and we will continue to raise the collective capacity of our conservation community through support, lobbying, and by example. While we plan in the presence of storm clouds, we remain extremely optimistic that we will continue to thrive, standing on our strong foundation, achieving amazing things, and positively impacting the people of our region.



Scan this QR Code with your smart phone camera to view the full Strategic Plan or go to www.wrlandconservancy.org/2022StrategicPlan



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3850 Chagrin River Rd. • Moreland Hills, OH 44022
440.528.4150 • www.wrlandconservancy.org