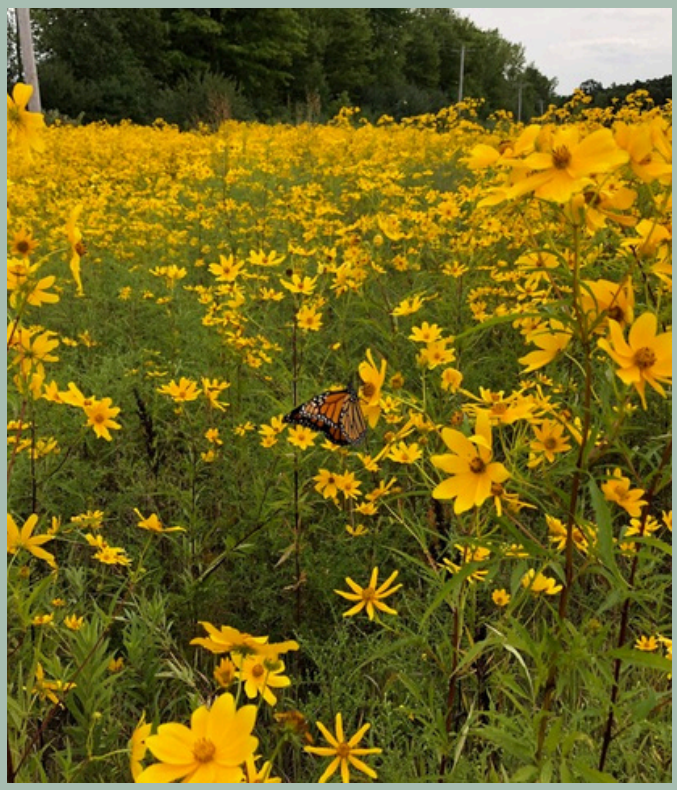
Western Reserve Land Conservancy

2026 Strategic Plan: Impact Now & Forever









Executive Summary

Western Reserve Land Conservancy enters its fourth decade as the most impactful land conservation organization in Northeast Ohio — and, increasingly, a recognized national force. More than 80,000 acres protected. 248 parks and preserves. Billions in conservation investment catalyzed. Honored with the Land Trust Alliance's National Excellence Award at Rally, a distinction that underscores its leadership and national prominence in land conservation.



This plan is not incremental. It sets three ambitious mission goals and a foundational goal that is a commitment to building an organization designed to last well beyond any single leader, grant, or market cycle:

- Expand conservation work across all of Ohio — multiplying mission impact, filling market gaps, growing program revenue, and deploying the organization's expertise where it is most needed.
- Take the urban agenda to scale — powered by a $10 million national grant to transform 600 publicly owned vacant Cleveland parcels into green space, plant 2,400+ trees, and create a replicable national model.
- Formalize a national consulting and education platform — sharing the organization's expertise with peer organizations across the country.
- Invest unapologetically in organizational excellence — people, systems, revenue, and leadership depth — to build an institution built to last.

The Land Conservancy enters this plan from a position of strength. The window to operate at a fundamentally higher level of scale is open now.

Strategic Context

A Strong Foundation

Thirty years of disciplined execution have produced an organization with rare depth: conservation expertise, philanthropic infrastructure, government relationships, and a culture that has consistently ranked among the best workplaces in Northeast Ohio. The 2022 Strategic Plan delivered an expanded service area, a sharper urban agenda, diversified revenue, and a more mature management structure. Landmark results define what this organization accomplished during the prior plan.



Euclid Beach Mobile Home Community

At the request of local leaders, the organization undertook one of its most complex projects: acquiring a mobile home community on Cleveland's North Collinwood lakeshore, relocating residents through nonprofit and public partners, and transferring 28.5 acres to Cleveland Metroparks — creating a unified, publicly accessible green space along Lake Erie. Partners were direct: without the Land Conservancy's expertise and relationships, it could not have been done.



E.J. Mackenbach Preserve — Statewide Expansion Model

A partnership acquisition outside the traditional service area doubled the land holdings of the Heritage Trails Park District in St. Marys, Ohio — triggering the District's first-ever park levy. A proof point for disciplined geographic expansion that builds local capacity.



$130 Million Capital Campaign

The organization closed the largest campaign in its history — $62 million in private support, $69 million in public funding — over five years. The result reflects deep funder confidence and a track record of executing at the highest level.

A Transformational Moment

In May 2026, the Land Conservancy secured a $10 million grant from the Bezos Earth Fund for the Cleveland Green Transformation Initiative — originating from a direct referral by the City of Cleveland.

Over three years, 600 publicly owned vacant parcels will be converted into nature-based landscapes: ecological restoration, side-yard transfers supporting homeownership, sidewalk repairs, and strategic land disposition for future infill development. At least 2,400 trees will be planted. A paid Community Resilience Corps will engage residents in stewardship. Formal evaluations — conducted in partnership with the Cleveland Clinic, Case Western Reserve University, and MetroHealth — will measure outcomes in tree canopy, environmental conditions, and public health.

These partnerships are building upon our Groundwork and Reforest Our City programs. The Land Conservancy is recognized nationally as the first major land trust to shift its focus from land conserved alone to land and people — quantifying the direct impact of conservation on human lives. This initiative takes that commitment to a new level and positions the organization as an important national model.

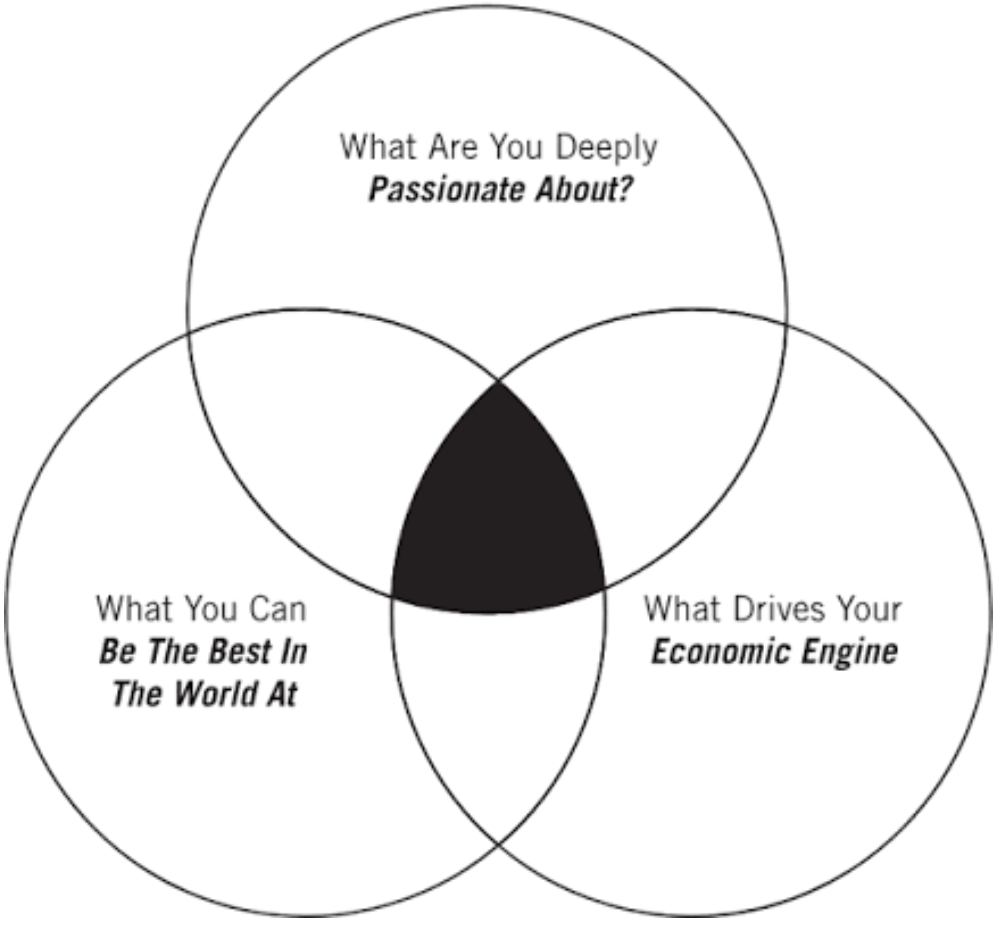
This grant is not just funding. It is a mandate — and a platform for operating at a scale the organization has not yet realized.

Strategic Framework

The Hedgehog Concept



Drawn from Jim Collins's Good to Great, the Hedgehog Concept identifies the intersection of three questions: What are you deeply passionate about? What can you be the best in the world at? What drives your resource engine? Great organizations build strategy from this sweet spot — not from ambition alone.





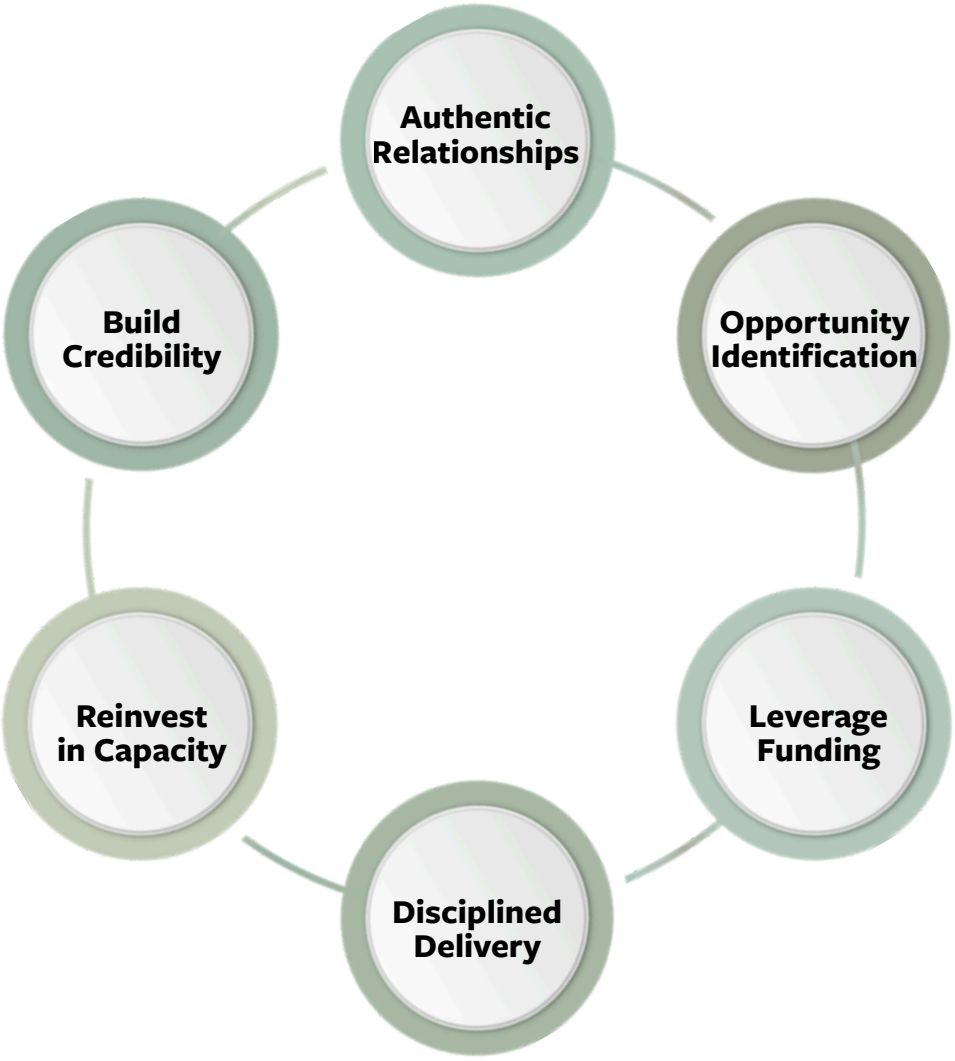
We foster healthy and prosperous communities through authentic relationships with land and people — entrepreneurial discipline maximizes the impact of every dollar invested.

- Passion: Fostering healthy and prosperous communities through authentic relationships with land and people.
- Best in the World: Disciplined entrepreneurial execution that strategically leverages public and private investment.
- Resource Engine: Mission impact and revenue, weighed against time and capital deployed.

Strategic Framework (cont.)

The Flywheel

The Flywheel — also from Good to Great — describes the self-reinforcing cycle that builds compounding momentum. No single dramatic push creates the flywheel effect. It is the accumulation of consistent, disciplined turns over time that separates great organizations from merely good ones.





The Land Conservancy's flywheel moves through six stages, each feeding the next:

- Authentic Relationships — Build trust with landowners, donors, government, and communities through genuine, long-term engagement.
- Opportunity Identification — Match high-impact projects with community needs and mission priorities.
- Leverage Public & Private Funding — Combine grants, tax benefits, fees for service, and philanthropy to maximize capital efficiency on every transaction.
- Disciplined Delivery with Community Impact — Execute with rigor, producing measurable outcomes for land, water, and people.
- Reinvestment in Capacity & Mission — Direct resources into people and programs that expand reach.
- Build Credibility & Confidence — Deepen the reputation as the most trusted and effective conservation organization in the region and nation.

Each completed turn builds the next. The organization's track record — particularly the $130 million campaign and the Bezos Earth Fund grant — is evidence that the flywheel is already turning at high speed.

The Plan: Four Goals

Three mission goals and one foundational goal that makes all others possible.

Goal 1

Expand conservation work throughout Ohio — Multiplying mission impact, filling market gaps, and generating diversified net program revenue.

Goal 2

Take the urban agenda to scale — Transformational projects that improve environmental conditions and quality of life for people.

Goal 3

Elevate conservation nationally — A formal consulting and education platform that raises the practice of conservation sector-wide.

Goal 4

FOUNDATIONAL

Organizational Excellence — Invest unapologetically in people, operations, revenue, and systems to build an institution built to last.

Goals: Impact, Now & Forever

Goal 1: Expand Conservation throughout Ohio

The Land Conservancy's expertise is a portable asset. Geographies across Ohio lack the conservation capacity, planning expertise, and funding relationships the organization has built over three decades. This goal deploys that asset deliberately and profitably.

Statewide Service Area Expansion

Expansion will prioritize geographies that lack conservation capacity, have available Clean Ohio funds and matching revenue sources, and include partners willing to engage. The organization will lead with acquisition and assist with projects, building relationships before broadening scope. Organizational mergers with willing partner organizations represent another lever. Staffing will scale with demonstrated revenue, not ahead of it.

Stewardship Program Investment

Long-term stewardship obligations will be fully reflected in program reserves with ongoing financial forecasting. The Natural Habitat Restoration (NHR) LLC will be developed as a business capable of generating both mission impact and program revenue in urban and rural settings. Fee-owned land will be evaluated for new engagement programs — including initiatives like the Sporting Circle and Women in Outdoors — to deepen community connection and drive earned revenue.

Goal 2: Take the Urban Agenda to Scale

The Bezos Earth Fund grant is the platform. The organization's job is to execute flawlessly, establish a replicable model, and use demonstrated impact to attract the next wave of investment. This partnership is building upon our Groundwork and Reforest Our City programs.

Cleveland Green Transformation

The Earth Fund initiative will anchor the urban agenda, attract future funding, and create the feedback systems — from partners, funders, and community members — that drive continuous improvement. A replicable framework for prioritizing future urban projects will be developed in parallel, ensuring the pipeline of signature initiatives does not depend on any single grant.

Reforest Our City
As the primary tree planting partner of the Cleveland Tree Coalition, the Reforest Our City program will scale to meet Earth Fund grant requirements while building a multi-year revenue model to sustain the expanded pace beyond the grant period. The Tree Steward program will grow in partnership with the Cleveland Tree Coalition. Fee-based expansion outside Cleveland is in scope.

Quantifying Human Health Impact
The organization's investment in measuring the human health impact of conservation — conducted in formal partnership with the Cleveland Clinic, Case Western Reserve University, and MetroHealth — continues. Findings will be elevated aggressively in the marketplace. This is not just good science; it is a competitive fundraising advantage and a differentiator in the national conversation about how land conservation delivers massive positive impact.

Goal 3: Elevate Conservation Nationally

Peers across the country regularly seek the Land Conservancy's expertise on leadership, mergers, complex acquisitions, and urban programming. This goal formalizes that expertise as a revenue-generating, sector-elevating asset.

Formal Consulting & Education Platform
A phased program will be built around the expertise peers already request. Initial modules will address leadership development, mergers, complex acquisitions, and signature project case studies. The platform may include an executive-in-residence program, an annual institute or series of forums, a leadership cohort for intensive training, virtual training modules, and fee-based consulting. A partnership with the Land Trust Alliance to develop and market curricula will be tested.

Goal 4 (Foundational): Organizational Excellence

Jim Collins's most important observation about great organizations is this: sustained greatness requires building the organization itself — the people, structure, and systems — with the same rigor applied to any external goal. This goal makes possible all of the mission impact.

Leadership Succession & Development

Develop and implement personalized professional development plans for all Management Team members. Standardize and maintain updated job descriptions, annual work plans, and documented key relationships for every leader. Evolve the organizational structure to support continued growth. Establish a Board working group actively engaged in succession planning — not as a contingency, but as ongoing practice.

Internal Training & Institutional Memory

A formal internal training program will embed values, culture, processes, and department-specific knowledge. A library of case studies will document how the organization works — used for onboarding, the external education platform, and institutional continuity. This is how an organization outlasts and transcends its founders.

Technology Strategy

A baseline assessment of current technology use will be conducted by an outside consultant. Governance policies — including privacy guardrails and AI use standards — will be established. High-value use cases that meaningfully improve efficiency and effectiveness will be prioritized. The standard: technology maximizes mission impact. It does not displace people.

Operational Core

The Management Team composition and leadership framework will be codified. Long-range financial forecasting will be sophisticated and rigorous — programs, expenses, resources, and revenue analyzed together. Benefits will be reviewed annually, with creative approaches to staff engagement, reward, and empowerment explored.

Goal 4 (cont.)

Development & Revenue
We will add capacity to the Development staff to grow the donor base through a reimagined annual giving program. A membership program with a clear value proposition — built on experiences unique to the Land Conservancy — will be developed and tested. Revolving Funds for time-sensitive conservation acquisitions will be expanded. The Earth Fund grant will be leveraged as a case study to attract new funders and cement existing relationships.

Government Relations
An intentional system for tracking Board members' engagement with elected officials, delivering consistent organizational messaging, and creating firsthand experiences at Land Conservancy projects. New geographies get targeted outreach plans that educate officials on the organization's capacity and track record before asking for anything.

Board Capacity
An ad hoc committee will review and enhance the Board orientation process. Annual reviews of Board member effectiveness, engagement, and capacity will be conducted. Ten new members were onboarded in the prior plan period; the focus now is depth of engagement, not just breadth of membership.

Conclusion: Impact, Now & Forever… Built to Last

The Land Conservancy earned its enviable position through three decades of disciplined execution, entrepreneurial problem-solving, and an uncompromising commitment to people — staff, partners, donors, and the communities it serves. It does not simply conserve land. It transforms communities, restores ecosystems, measures and improves human health, and builds the civic infrastructure that makes lasting change possible.

The plan asks the organization to operate at an even higher level. To expand across an entire state. To take a pioneering urban program to scale. To formalize its expertise as a resource for the broader sector. And to build organizational depth that ensures enduring greatness.

The $10 million Bezos Earth Fund grant is not just funding — it is a mandate. The $130 million campaign is not just a milestone — it is a proof point. The National Land Trust Excellence Award is not just recognition — it is a responsibility.

The Land Conservancy's mission is perpetual. So is its obligation to the people and places it serves. This plan charts the course — and the work begins now.

Western Reserve Land Conservancy

land - people - community







