



Groundswell Conservancy

Strategic Plan 2020 – 2024

January 1, 2020 – December 31, 2024

Our Purpose and Vision

We protect special places forever. We want everyone to live in a world filled with green places where communities thrive. We believe that land is essential for people’s physical, emotional, and spiritual wellness. If we don’t protect undeveloped land now, it may be lost forever.

Our Strengths

Since Groundswell’s founding in 1983, we have permanently protected more than 12,000 acres of important land and water that provide for a high quality of life in southern Wisconsin. Our record of success includes protecting cherished landscapes like Cherokee Marsh and the Black Earth Creek valley, valuable agricultural areas like the Town of Dunn, vital wetlands that help maintain water quality in the Yahara Chain of Lakes, and nearby places where kids can fall in love with nature and where food is grown for local markets.

Our nature preserves are community centers with vibrant outdoor volunteering programs and exciting community engagement initiatives like the bird-inspired wildlife overlook at Patrick Marsh and our partnership with Waunakee High School students at Westport Prairie. Our robust conservation easement program helps many landowners and communities provide public benefits from private lands. We are a valued partner of the DNR, Dane County, local governments, and conservation-minded landowners. Our staff, board, and supporters have built strong relationships with partners and communities, and we are a trusted conservation resource for many.

Every year more people contribute more time and money to our cause and more people have included us in their estate plans. Landowners and supporters tell wonderful stories about our work, and our events and field trips are popular ways to build community.

Our Plans

Over the next five years, we will provide lasting and significant benefits to our communities and to the environment. We aspire to achieve the promise of permanence in our work. We will continue to innovate because we work in a rapidly growing region where people are spending less time outside and forging fewer connections to nature, and because land is in high demand and not accessible to many people in the communities Groundswell serves. Further, in our increasingly diverse communities people have new and different needs for land and nature.

Community Benefits

Protecting Land. We will permanently protect at least 3,000 acres of land in Dane County and the surrounding areas with an equitable approach to saving open spaces for nature and public enjoyment, meeting the diverse needs of all of our communities, and protecting high-quality farmland from development.

Community Preserves. We will make our preserves more welcoming to all people (and make more people aware of our properties) so that they will be more valued by all of our communities thanks to the recreation, conservation, mental, physical, and emotional health benefits they provide. Groundswell will provide more opportunities for young people to engage, learn, explore, and have fun in nature.

Equitable Access to Land and Nature. We will provide more places for people to grow food for local consumption, including by people who may benefit from the therapeutic value of growing food. We will improve land tenure and success for the immigrant and minority farmers at our Westport and Pasley's Swan Creek Farms. Working with teams of parents and teachers, we will create more "green school yards" at community schools in Madison where all children can explore and have fun in nature right at their own schools. We will improve access at our nature preserves for people of different abilities.

Environmental Benefits

Climate Crisis. We will create community resiliency against flooding by protecting and managing wetlands around the Yahara chain of lakes and other important watersheds. We will explore reducing our carbon footprint by installing solar panels on our buildings at Westport Prairie. We will consider other climate crisis mitigation strategies as appropriate.

Wildlife. We will manage our preserves to improve wildlife habitat, reduce soil erosion, and improve soil health. Groundswell will plant an additional 25 acres of native prairie habitat at Patrick Marsh and 20 acres at Westport Prairie. We will reduce the amount of herbicide we use to restore and manage our prairies and savannas.

Water Quality. We will permanently protect and manage land to improve water quality in lakes and streams, focusing on wetland protection to reduce flooding and create clean water.

Permanence

Funding for Perpetuity. Our Easement Enforcement Endowment will increase to cover 100% of the stewardship and defense needs of our conservation easements (from the current level of ~90%).

Approved by Board of Directors November 20, 2019

Leadership. We will have a seamless transition to a new executive director in 2022. We will renew our accreditation with the Land Trust Alliance in 2020 and we will be well-prepared to apply for renewal in 2024.

Broad Base of Support. Our board, staff, volunteers, and event participants will be more representative of the communities we serve. More people will join us to protect special places forever.

Our Results for 2020-2024

Community Benefits Results

- Protecting Land
 - protect tracts of land in project boundaries identified in the Dane County Parks and Open Space Plan, DNR project boundaries, local farmland preservation plans, and other community plans, including:
 - Lower Mud Lake Natural Resource Area
 - Black Earth Creek Fishery Area
 - Hook Lake Wildlife Area
 - Evansville Wildlife Area
 - Town of Dunn Rural Preservation Area
 - Herro cultural/natural landscape
 - Patrick Marsh Natural Resource Area
 - complete an assessment of grower needs for land for local food consumption
 - update our project selection guidelines to better reflect our values and address more community needs
 - work with partners on the creation of public recreation trails that engage more people in nature-based activities
 - secure the corridor for a trail between Salmo Pond and Village of Cross Plains
 - transfer fee-owned lands to DNR or Dane County at Lodi Marsh, French Creek, Cherokee Marsh, etc. as anticipated during project approval process
 - uphold the conservation values of all land under conservation easements
 - adopt an updated conservation easement template
 - improve tracking of easement issues, including approvals, interpretations, and resolution of violations
 - resolve problems with the Watts Conservation Easement and take over the holder's interest from American Farmland Trust
 - create "current condition" reports for all conservation easements at least fifteen years old
 - maintain and expand strong land protection partnerships with DNR, Dane County, Ice Age Trail Alliance, and Town of Dunn

- Community Preserves
 - update and implement master plans (encompassing goals for land management, community engagement, signage, boundaries, accessibility, etc.) for Westport Prairie, Patrick Marsh, Pasley’s Swan Creek Farm, and Westport Farm
 - continue to seek community ideas and feedback on land management, land preservation goals, and preserve uses
 - at Patrick Marsh develop universal access trail and parking area, create a loop trail around the marsh, and implement way-finding signage
 - at Westport Prairie develop the gateway to the preserve (through habitat restoration, signage, way finding, trails, and parking) to balance preservation and use of the drumlin prairie and other natural features
 - continue to work with the Prairie Partners to manage our preserves
 - ensure that preserve facilities (parking lots, signage, etc.) are maintained and support our community engagement goals
 - develop outdoor volunteer leadership to help meet goals of the master plans for Patrick Marsh and Westport Prairie
- Equitable Access to Land and Nature
 - create infrastructure at Pasley’s Swan Creek Farm in support of the PEAT and FAIR programs of Neighborhood Food Solutions
 - create infrastructure and governance structures at Westport Farm for the Hmong growers
 - in cooperation with partners, develop a farm manager model to make more land available for local food consumption
 - maintain habitat and the nature-exploration infrastructure at Lake View Elementary School
 - complete green school yard visioning and implement projects at Mendota Elementary School
 - engage at other schools as “green team” partnerships solidify
 - continue our partnership with Operation Fresh Start to expose “at risk” youth to conservation and nature

Environmental Benefits Results

- Climate Crisis
 - preserve and manage wetlands and floodways in the Yahara and other major watersheds, in collaboration with partners including Dane County, Capital Area Regional Planning Commission, Friends of Waubesa Wetlands, BECWA, Trout Unlimited, etc.
 - review opportunities and impediments in our conservation easement provisions relating to climate change (such as alternative energy production)
 - explore installation of solar panels on the tobacco shed and garage at Westport Prairie
 - protect more farm land because our region may prove to be a more resilient food production area than other parts of the world

- collaborate with local initiatives to meet local climate crisis goals and other sustainability projects as they arise
- **Wildlife**
 - plant 25 acres of native prairie at Patrick Marsh and 20 acres at Westport Prairie.
 - complete restoration of the savanna understory at our Stern tract and the Kettle Pond and east-side Savanna on DNR land at Patrick Marsh
 - maintain prairie restorations at Patrick Marsh
 - maintain prairie remnants and restorations at Westport Prairie
 - complete understory restoration of oak woods at Westport Prairie
 - Adopt management strategies to reduce the amount of herbicide used to control invasive plant species
- **Water Quality**
 - take 20 acres of land out of agricultural production at Westport Prairie and 25 acres at Patrick Marsh to reduce soil erosion and runoff
 - complete an assessment of priority wetlands in Black Earth Creek and Waubesa Wetlands watersheds and begin protection and management partnerships
 - implement a “treatment wetland” at Pasley’s Swan Creek Farm to improve water quality entering the Pasley wetlands and Swan Creek

Permanence Results

- **Funding for Perpetuity**
 - the amount of our annual operations that comes from contributions from individuals, foundation, events, major gifts, and disbursements from our Easement Enforcement Endowment increases from 90% to 100%.
 - total monthly contributions from sustainers (monthly givers) increases from \$540/month to \$1,000/month.
 - Legacy Circle membership increases from 40 households to 100 using a campaign around the departure of executive director
 - close the gap in our Easement Enforcement Endowment and recalculate the endowment funding formula to address escalating costs over next ten years
 - allocate portions of bequest gifts to fill gap
 - determine feasibility of using green burials to finance land management and acquisition
 - migrate our website to a new platform to improve ease of making donations, access content on a variety of devices, and improve content management
- **Leadership**
 - transition to new Executive Director completed
 - staff cross-training eases transition to new executive director
 - maintain accreditation by Land Trust Alliance Accreditation Commission
 - Accreditation is renewed in 2020 and preparation is completed to apply for renewal in 2024

- all staff members take advantage of annual training to enhance careers and add value to mission success
- all staff members have active civic engagements to broaden the reach of Groundswell
- board completes a self-evaluation and identifies training or other needs
- review compensation and benefits packages to ensure just treatment of employees
- **Broad Base of Support**
 - donors, volunteers, staff, board, partners, contractors, and event attendees reflect the diversity of the community
 - develop broader range of partnerships, projects, ways to communicate, the pictures we use and the stories we tell to, so that we connect with more parts of our community
 - continue to hire Operation Fresh Start construction and conservation crews to complete important work at our preserves, farms, and school yard projects
 - a communications plan for existing and prospective supporters is completed and implemented, with an outreach strategy that ensures that community members can find us when we can be relevant to their land protection needs

This five-year plan guides our annual and development plans.

History of Recent Planning

- 2014 five year plan created

Our last round of five-year planning was in 2014 when we completed a plan focusing on outcomes relating to protecting more land and deepening our engagement with the community. We developed three themes for land protection and community engagement projects in the upcoming five years: projects that involve education and connecting young people with the land; projects that involve local food and local growers, including growers that represent demographic groups that we have yet to serve; and “classic” land protection projects. We used a “core and explore” model to test the waters on new projects while maintaining a focus on our traditional areas of work. We also committed to making our preserves into income centers through community engagement.

- 2015 audit of development program

Under the guidance of an external audit of our development program, we realigned development staff, created a comprehensive development plan, and adjusted fundraising tactics from a focus on membership to a focus on major, annual, and planned giving.

- 2016 rebranding

Our 2016 rebranding exercise identified that we are known for preservation and are differentiated by our local focus but that we need to more visible and bold and better storytellers. With the guidance that “emotion drives behavior”, we adopted new purpose, vision, and values statements, and introduced a new name and logo.

- February 2019 values clarification

Board and staff held a special planning session to develop a shared understanding of the organizational values that drive our work. Using Simon Sinek’s TED Talk “Start with Why”, we identified our “why”: *We do what we do because we want everyone to live in a world filled with green places where communities thrive. We believe that land is essential for people’s physical, emotional, and spiritual wellness. If we don’t protect land now, it may be lost forever.*

And we answered several important questions about the why, how, and what of our work:

- *What do we mean by “special places”?* A special place is not easily replaced, connects people to nature and land, has one or more community values (wildlife habitat, scenic, cultural, recreational, or farming), and is inspirational.
- *What do we mean by “we envision a world filled with green places where communities thrive”?* Everyone (individuals and communities) has opportunities to connect with nature and land to help them lead healthy lives (physically, emotionally, spiritually). All voices are heard.
- *Who is “the community”?* Everyone here today and tomorrow.
- *What does it look like when “people are connected to land and water”?* People are aware of, value, enjoy, celebrate, feel safe in, care for, and/or respect natural places and land.
- *What new ways will we need to act to meet our commitments with tenacity?* Listening and engaging more broadly and with intention.
- *If we are respectful and collaborative, what will landowners, individuals, and organizations experience and feel as a result of their interactions with us?* We hope that they will feel valued, heard, trusted, engaged, hopeful, empowered, heroic, and fulfilled.