

ATHENS CONSERVANCY

Strategic Plan 2025-2030



Athens County, Ohio



STRATEGIC PLAN GOALS

1. Expand Organizational Capacity to Achieve our Mission
2. Position Athens Conservancy as a Financially Sustainable Organization
3. Re-focus Land Protection Priorities
4. Prioritize Compliance and Stewardship Activities
5. Enhance Communications and Expand Relationships with our Community
6. Update Recordkeeping Systems to meet Growing Needs



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Photos in booklet by Athens Conservancy board and staff, along with Phil Cantino, Joe Brehm, Mary Reed, Steve Koch, and Anna Rose.
Cover photo: Dawn Handley (board member)

MISSION, VISION, STRATEGIC DIRECTION

MISSION

Athens Conservancy works locally to preserve wild and scenic places and promote healthy, resilient ecosystems. These efforts safeguard water quality, support native biodiversity, and protect mature forests, which are critical to counteract the cause of climate change.

VISION

We envision a future in which southeast Ohio's protected lands and diverse habitats connect people with nature for recreation, inspiration, education, and research. We strive to engage and enrich our community of explorers, supporters, volunteers, and allies.

STRATEGIC DIRECTION

Athens Conservancy's nature preserves and conservation easements encompass about 3,200 acres of land, with more than 2,100 acres – and almost 12 miles of foot trails – open to the public. We own and manage 17 nature preserves, 13 conservation easements, and a portion of the Athens-Belpre Rail Trail.

Since our founding in 2002, we have grown from a handful of dedicated volunteers to a professional organization that is respected and supported in our community. We have a positive vision for Athens County and the surrounding region.

The significance of our work has grown as climate consciousness has soared in recent years, but we are now in unprecedented times. Locally and all across America, we are grappling not only with a changing climate but also with extraordinary political, societal, and environmental crises.

For Athens Conservancy, this only strengthens and clarifies our vision. We are empowered by our commitment to prioritize our planet and protect the natural lands around us. Every acre we preserve, every tree we protect, every bit of wildlife habitat we nurture locally has a broader impact on our environment and on our precious planet.



GOAL 1: EXPAND ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY TO ACHIEVE OUR MISSION

► **STRATEGY 1: EXPAND OUR CAPACITY AND DECREASE BOARD MEMBER WORKLOAD BY TRANSITIONING FROM A NEARLY ALL-VOLUNTEER ORGANIZATION TO AN ADEQUATELY STAFFED ORGANIZATION.**

- **Task 1:** Hire conservation director (CD) and other staff as needs are identified and funds become available. Staff could include those in financial management, fundraising, stewardship, operations, outreach, IT, volunteer management, and record keeping.
- **Task 2:** Develop standard operating procedures and policies to clarify board, committee, and advisor roles and assign responsibilities more equitably among the board, executive team, and staff. Invite interested board members to participate in Executive Committee meetings to encourage participation in future officer positions.
- **Task 3:** Review and clarify board and executive committee recruitment procedures and develop a succession plan. Consider refilling board member positions with advisory council members. Identify advisory council members with potential and interest. Make better use of advisory council members.



GOAL 2: POSITION ATHENS CONSERVANCY AS A FINANCIALLY SUSTAINABLE ORGANIZATION

► **STRATEGY 1: ESTABLISH AND GROW A SUSTAINABILITY ENDOWMENT** This will position the organization as mission-aligned and sustainable, and will be a driver for all activities moving forward.

- **Task 1:** Funnel a portion of all unrestricted revenue per year to the Sustainability Endowment.
- **Task 2:** Enlist a fundraising consultant to perform a capital campaign readiness assessment.

► **STRATEGY 2: TRACK AND EVALUATE OUR ONGOING DETAILED FUNDRAISING PLAN**

- **Task 1:** Include specific goals and objectives, board responsibilities, metrics, and evaluation.

► **STRATEGY 3: DIVERSIFY AND EXPAND REVENUE SOURCES THAT SUPPORT OUR MISSION**

- **Task 1:** Identify all current revenue sources and develop goals for each, including financial gifts and memberships, royalties, grants (public/private), and business sponsorships.
 - Increase revenue from individual donations, increase the percentage of unrestricted funds, and expand business / corporate sponsorships.
- **Task 2:** Research and expand grants as revenue source
 - Develop mission-aligned partnerships for grants, and consider partnering with a lead applicant
 - Apply for larger / government grants; ensure processes in place for compliance and make sure any grant supports our mission.
- **Task 3:** Research and develop new revenue sources / business enterprises
 - Social enterprise revenue endeavor; hunting program; conservation easement fee-for-service revenue; forest carbon credits; merchandise.

► **STRATEGY 4: CONTINUE TO EMBRACE A CULTURE OF PHILANTHROPY WITHIN THE ORGANIZATION**

- **Task 1:** Ensure board members have clear and regularly updated messaging tools; provide opportunities for board involvement in personal engagements with donors, etc.
- **Task 2:** Schedule regular Fundraising Committee planning meetings.

GOAL 3: RE-FOCUS LAND PROTECTION PRIORITIES

► STRATEGY 1: PURSUE PROJECTS AS OUR CAPACITY ALLOWS

- **Task 1:** Continue to emphasize land protection priorities and use best available tools to most effectively focus on projects with the highest conservation value.
- **Task 2:** Identify potential land management issues and resulting stewardship activities that would be required for all proposed land acquisitions.
- **Task 3:** Use GIS and aerial photos to identify old growth and other significant conservation lands, then proactively approach landowners.

► STRATEGY 2: INCREASE OUR ABILITY TO FUND LAND PROTECTION PROJECTS

- **Task 1:** Diversify our acquisition and conservation easement (CE) funding sources (less reliance on Clean Ohio).
- **Task 2:** Support local efforts to establish a county park district (which may facilitate Clean Ohio grants).

► STRATEGY 3: CONSIDER INNOVATIVE METHODS OF LAND PROTECTION



GOAL 4: PRIORITIZE COMPLIANCE AND STEWARDSHIP ACTIVITIES

► **STRATEGY 1: DEVELOP AND IMPLEMENT A STRONG ANNUAL COMPLIANCE MONITORING AND ENFORCEMENT PROGRAM FOR ALL CONSERVATION EASEMENTS AS LEGALLY REQUIRED AND PER LTA (LAND TRUST ALLIANCE) GUIDELINES.** This effort need not be solely dependent upon volunteers and should build upon our base of knowledge about each CE.

•**Task 1:** Assign conservation director to oversee annual monitoring in accordance with CE restrictions; includes relationship development with CE holders, contacting to arrange monitoring visits, recording results, reporting violations, posting signage, and creating digital CE boundary maps and other CE records, as needed.

•**Task 2:** Develop and implement a policy and action plan to address compliance, legal, and enforcement issues and violations.

► **STRATEGY 2: DEVELOP AND IMPLEMENT A STEWARDSHIP PLAN FOR OWNED PRESERVES**

•**Task 1:** Review each preserve's ecological, cultural, and recreational assets, and restrictions to identify its best purpose(s).

•**Task 2:** Develop and follow a flexible annual schedule of stewardship activities, consistent with time and funding availability and each preserve's purpose(s) and needs.

•**Task 3:** Provide appropriate recreational access to selected preserves.

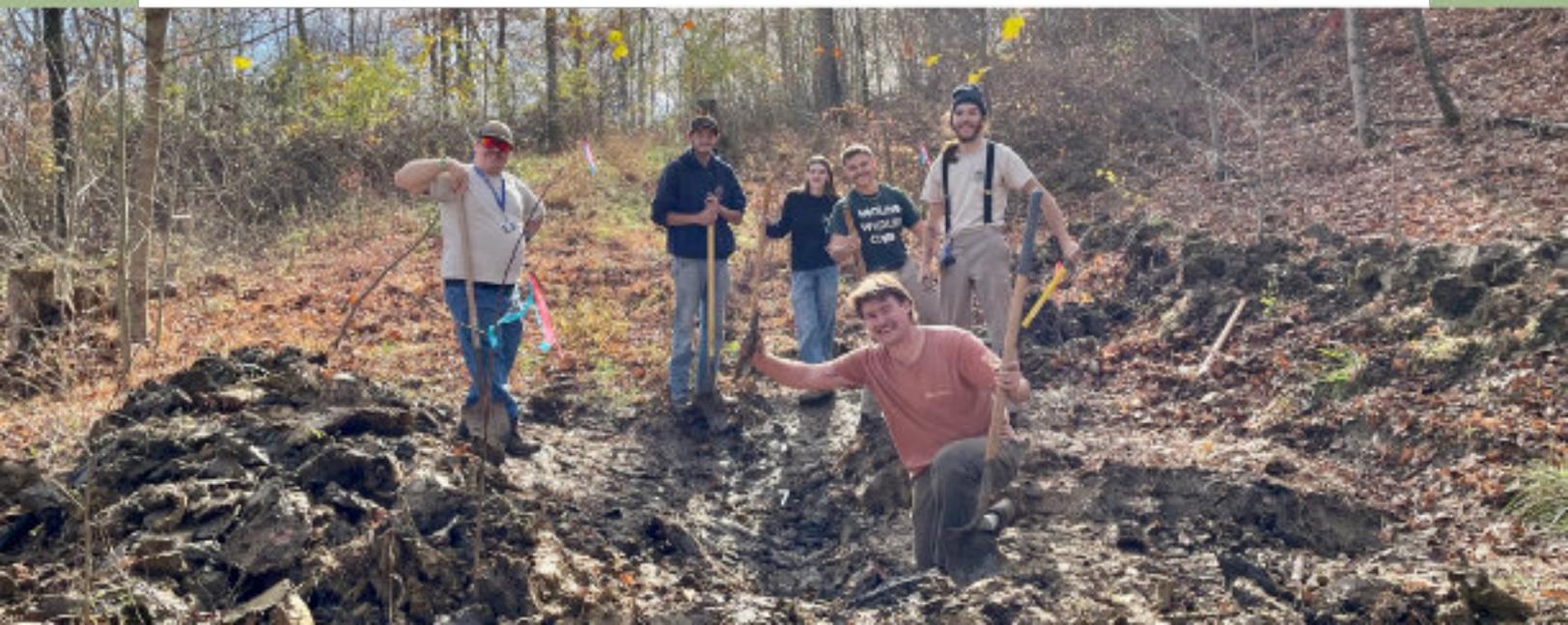
- Develop a recreational opportunity checklist for each preserve, including both current and potential new activities, with consideration of their impact on the preserve's purpose(s). Designate trails as public use or limited use, and establish trail management standards. Develop new trails as time and resources permit.

► **STRATEGY 3: PROTECT LEGAL AND CONSERVATION INTERESTS IN EACH PRESERVE**

•**Task 1:** Develop and implement a monitoring program based on each preserve's purpose(s) and LTA guidelines.

•**Task 2:** Regularly review current uses and potential safety issues at each preserve.

•**Task 3:** Develop and implement a policy and action plan to address adverse human activities, encroachment, compliance, legal, enforcement, and safety issues.



GOAL 5: ENHANCE COMMUNICATIONS AND EXPAND RELATIONSHIPS WITH OUR COMMUNITY

► STRATEGY 1: ENSURE ALL COMMUNICATION VEHICLES ARE EFFECTIVE, CONSISTENT, AND EFFICIENT; EVALUATE YEARLY

- **Task 1:** Implement a regular, website maintenance plan to ensure that our website stays functional, secure, and up-to-date. Consider contracting with an IT person "on call" to perform maintenance and be available in case of an urgent need.
- **Task 2:** Explore continuing educational opportunities for board and staff.
- **Task 3:** Develop and annually review a crisis communications plan.

► STRATEGY 2: BROADEN OUR REACH WITH CURRENT AND POTENTIAL AUDIENCES

- **Task 1:** Research our audience with focus groups, community organizations, onsite surveys via QR code.
- **Task 2:** Enhance website information on conservation easements.



► STRATEGY 3: RAISE AWARENESS OF ATHENS CONSERVANCY AND BUILD RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER ORGANIZATIONS, LOCAL AND REGIONAL OFFICIALS, KEY STAKEHOLDERS, AND PARTNERS

- **Task 1:** Attend community events and meetings and engage with governmental agencies, as appropriate.
- **Task 2:** Increase community awareness of Athens Conservancy through events and volunteer activities.
- **Task 3:** Broaden relationships with elected officials through regular contact via liaisons; invite officials to events; communicate regularly.
- **Task 4:** Develop strong collaborations and communication with stewardship stakeholders and partners.
 - Foster relevant relationships with volunteer preserve stewards, local organizations, volunteers, lead hunters, and CE landowners, as well as organizations such as Rural Action and Ohio University.

GOAL 6: UPDATE RECORDKEEPING SYSTEMS TO MEET GROWING NEEDS

► **STRATEGY 1: UPGRADE OUR RECORDKEEPING SYSTEM TO MEET LTA STANDARDS, IRS NEEDS, AND EASEMENT CHALLENGES**

•**Task 1:** Create a recordkeeping committee to explore options and make recommendations for recordkeeping. Committee will research peer organizations' systems that maintain all relevant administrative records. Board will choose and implement the new system.

► **STRATEGY 2: IMPLEMENT A DATA MANAGEMENT PROGRAM TO TRACK STEWARDSHIP AND COMPLIANCE ACTIVITIES AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS; GRANT APPLICATIONS/RESULTS; STEWARDSHIP COLLABORATIONS; EDUCATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS; AND MEDIA MENTIONS**

•**Task 1:** Inventory all existing documents, data files, and geo-based information.

•**Task 2:** Review existing software packages to ascertain efficiency and accessibility-related attributes for secure document storage and retrieval.

•**Task 3:** Initiate process to implement an efficient and easily accessible information and data management program.





TESTIMONIAL
"Wandering through Blair Preserve and adjacent lands, I delight in what these wild places share with me. I consider the importance of intact forests, native species, and the ecosystems that support diverse webs of life. This is why I donate to Athens Conservancy. The wild lands they preserve are havens for so many creatures, and are ever more crucial as green spaces are consumed in the name of human development."
— Jane Balbo, Volunteer Preserve Steward



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