

ParkLands Foundation

Five Year

Strategic Plan

2011

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Introduction and History of ParkLands

ParkLands Foundation protects and restores natural lands in the Mackinaw River valley located in Central Illinois. Since its founding, the organization has protected and restored more than 3,200 acres of prairie, oak savanna, floodplain forest, and river habitat in McLean, Tazewell and Woodford counties, and in the Sangamon River watershed within McLean County.

Significant portions of the Mackinaw River and some of its tributaries are considered outstanding aquatic resources in Illinois. The Mackinaw River is characterized by a series of pools and fast riffles flowing over predominantly sand and gravel substrate and by banks which are largely forested. Water quality is high and mussel populations are diverse. For example, the state-threatened slipper shell mussel (*Alasmidonta viridis*), is found here as well as the heartleaf plantain (*Plantago cordata*), an endangered plant in Illinois.

The banks are generally forested and the surrounding area is agricultural. The Mackinaw varies in depth from one to six feet and has an average width of 70 feet. As one of the most valuable rivers in the state in terms of the quality of water it carries, the Mackinaw floods during the wet season and is nearly dry during periods of drought. Two segments of the Mackinaw are recognized as Biologically Significant Streams due to the fish and mussel diversity. The majority of land in the Mackinaw River Basin lies in the Grand Prairie Division of Illinois as having rich and productive soils with a silt-loam texture.

ParkLands Foundation was founded by Loring Merwin on June 28, 1967. Along with William Rutherford, the organization succeeded in procuring a challenge grant of \$25,000 from the nearby Peoria-based Forrest Park Foundation by raising \$75,000. This financial start allowed ParkLands to acquire its first property in McLean County--five acres in Funks Grove owned and donated by Louise and Elisabeth Stubblefield.

The founders originally envisioned ParkLands Foundation as being a conduit for land from willing owners and sellers to convey to the county or state for ownership and management. Lack of consistent funding by the state made it necessary for the organization to internally fund and manage stewardship of the lands under protection.

In 1969 with the acquisition of the Emile Rediger 107-acre tract near the Keller blacktop in the Lexington area started the creation of the most well-known preserve of ParkLands, the Merwin Preserve. In the following years, additional parcels of rugged non-tillable land were purchased to create a total preserve of 718 acres.

In 1988, The Nature Conservancy purchased and transferred ownership of the Ridgetop Hill Prairie in Woodford County to ParkLands Foundation. Ridgetop Hill Prairie is a high quality glacial drift hill prairie. The prairie supports over 40 species of plants and is dominated by little bluestem and side oats grama. It is one of the best remaining examples of prairie in Central Illinois.

In 2008, the Illinois chapter of the Nature Conservancy transferred ownership of the Chiquapin Bluffs Natural Area (720 acres) in southeastern Woodford County to ParkLands Foundation. This, along with the Henline Creek Natural Area southeast of Lexington, was an important addition to the Mackinaw River Corridor Project in McLean and Woodford counties. Additional parcels recently added to the Mackinaw River Corridor in Woodford County include the 141-acre Letcher Basin Nature Preserve and a 52-acre donation of a conservation easement contiguous to it.

Mission Statement

The mission of the ParkLands Foundation is to preserve, protect and ecologically restore historic natural lands in the middle and upper Mackinaw River watershed. These lands are dedicated primarily for preserving the biological diversity of native plants and wildlife, and secondarily for passive public recreation, environmental education and scientific research.”

Vision Statement

ParkLands Foundation is a financially secure and professionally managed land trust that is well known in its mission area. We identify, protect and restore significant remnants of diverse native ecosystems within the middle and upper Mackinaw River watershed in McLean and Woodford counties. We create relationships with landowners, community leaders, educational institutions, youth organizations and other conservation groups to

protect our native ecosystems and educate them on the importance of natural areas to the quality of life. We will attain Land Trust Alliance (LTA) accreditation to ensure use of best practices and to maximize access to grants and other funding resources.

ParkLands Foundation Strategic Planning Process

The purpose of this process is to draft a five- year comprehensive and robust operational strategic plan that establishes goals and objectives for the organization in various areas critical to the successful achievement of its mission. These include programmatic, administrative, financial, and developmental issues. The plan will develop measurable, specific time bound strategies. ParkLands will then measure strategies against goals, evaluate, and revise as needed.

Many believe that ParkLands Foundation needs a strategic plan to gain LTA accreditation and to maximize its effectiveness. A current strategic plan will allow the organization to be more competitive in procuring grants and funding. It will validate the mission statement, the vision, and core values as a community resource and more fully describe present organization. A strategic plan will focus the organization on achieving results and accomplishing goals.

To start this process, Jim Franks, (BS, University of Illinois; MBA, Illinois State University) was approached to observe the organizational history, board dynamics, and success in achieving the mission statement to date. An environmental scan and analysis was conducted both internally and externally.

SWOT Analysis

The acronym SWOT is a strategic planning analysis that evaluates strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats to the organization. Strengths and weaknesses are internal environmental factors. Opportunities and threats are external factors. The SWOT framework is an excellent tool for auditing an organization and its environment to develop a strategic plan. To develop this plan, Franks interviewed various stakeholders and board members to gather their impressions on ParkLands strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. From this analysis, different initiatives for a five- year strategic plan were developed.

The following issues were identified:

Strengths

- Highly committed leadership and board members
- Productive history since 1967
- Ownership good quality land for nature conservation
- Strong cash position on balance sheet
- Financially divided into administrative, real property, investment, and stewardship entities.
- Active diverse and knowledgeable board of directors with strong personal investment
- Successful community engagement
- Strong academic and professional board composition
- Several highly qualified naturalists serving on board
- Restoration and long-term management in place
- Full time land steward (Jason Shoemaker)
- Physical location of office in downtown Bloomington
- Ability to work with Ecology Action Center, Illinois Natural History Survey, Illinois Natural Areas Inventory, Prairie State Conservation Coalition, Prairie Lands Conservancy, (PSCC), Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation, Grand Victoria Foundation, etc.
- Active Facebook presence

Weaknesses

- Lack of an active committed outreach committee
- Ethnic diversity
- Lack of LTA accreditation
- Sustainability of board leadership who are too active in day-to-day operations (i.e. lack of an executive director as the volunteer board is overworked)

- Too much discussion at meetings that should take place at committee level
- Board needs more procedures and needs to follow by-laws and existing written procedures
- Acquisitions should be proactive as opposed to reactive
- Need focused and disciplined step-by-step process when acquiring properties
- Stewardship expense is greater than investment income
- Membership decreased over ten years (down to 144 from 403)
- No focused membership recruitment efforts in 6 years
- Consolidated record keeping at office needs to be completed
- Insufficient formal record keeping and documentation
- Newsletter needs upgrading to e-mail distribution
- Acquisition fund not keeping up with increasing land values
- Lack of detailed maps for each property

Opportunities

- LTA accreditation
- Property tax reduction of conservation easements
- Timely filing of paperwork for fee simple title to properties
- Potential grants available for purchase of appropriate properties
- Large amount of ecologically significant property especially in Woodford County
- Increased citizen and corporate desire to participate in a green economy
- Current lack of extreme development pressure
- Enrollment in Illinois Land and Water Reserve and Illinois Nature Preserve programs
- Other local conservation and ecological organizations for collaboration
- Increased public interest in canoeing, hiking, and bird-watching

Threats

- Increased growth in McLean and Woodford Counties creating fewer and more costly prime and significant natural areas (especially McLean Country)
- Encroachment and interference on properties owned and managed by ParkLands
- All property boundaries are not marked and are unknown at certain locations.
- Actual or potential development of wind farms, microwave towers, pipelines, hydraulic fracturing, gravel mines, water extraction facilities (e.g. Mackinaw pumping pool, municipal well fields, dams), adjacent rural developments
- Lack of a leadership succession plan

Strategies Identified

From these strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats the following strategic goals and strategies have been developed.

OBJECTIVE	RESPONSIBLE ENTITY	PROPOSED COMPLETION DATE
Job descriptions	LTA Committee	2011
Consolidate records	LTA/ Executive committee	2011
Finalize and approve written personnel policies	Executive committee	2011
Create title of “Emeritus Board Members” to allow continued but lower activity of our senior members	Executive committee	2011
Formally approve written selection criteria and matrix scoring system for properties	Real Property and Stewardship committees	2011
Develop land quality guidelines	Stewardship committee	2011
Undertake conservation gap analysis to provide recommendations for improving the representativeness of properties to conserve biological diversity	Stewardship committee	2011
Develop fundraising plans and obtain board approval	Outreach committee	2011
Improve Web page by adding graphics and keeping pictures current	Outreach committee	2011
Improve strategic alliances’ with Grand Victoria Foundation’s Vital Lands Illinois	LTA/ Executive committee	2012

Evaluate strategic plan and revise goals	Executive committee	2012
Compile species lists (terrestrial and aquatic) of all T&E, Species in Greatest Need of Conservation, and other significant species on Parklands' properties.	Stewardship committee	2012
Upgrade newsletter electronically	Outreach committee	2012
Increase membership	Outreach / membership committee	2012
Improve public relations and awareness by working with school groups, Master Naturalists, Ecology Action Center, Wild Things, Girl and Boy Scouts, canoe clubs, and bird watchers.	Outreach committee	2012
Complete property book project and create good maps for each property	Real property committee	2014
Develop written stewardship and conservation plans	LTR/ Administrative committee	2014
Finalize written outreach plan	Stewardship committee	2014
Develop successional leadership plan	Executive committee	2014
Fund new position Executive Director	Finance and outreach committee	2015
Mark boundaries	Stewardship committee/ Land steward	2015
Update property values	Real Property committee	2015
Identify properties that add value to the mission and contact land owners	Real property committee	2015
Increase public awareness with media and community	Stewardship Committee	2015

Executive Summary

The mission statement of ParkLands Foundation accurately accounts for the core values of the organization. It establishes geographical boundaries, the upper and middle Mackinaw River watershed. It explains why the organization exists and potentially serves to motivate stakeholders and donors. It is brief enough to remember and easily communicated, and strong enough to inspire. The mission statement is sufficient in defining Parklands' value and end result to the community. ParkLands is dedicated to preserving the biological diversity of native plants and wildlife. These lands provide for passive nature recreation, education and research. Therefore, one can conclude that no changes need be made in this fundamental starting point in the strategic planning process.

Initial study of the organization indicated that there was no vision statement. This was corrected with board approval of one at the January 2011 meeting of the Board of Directors. While the mission statement serves to describe why an organization exists, the vision statement serves to describe how the organization accomplishes its mission. It is expressed in visionary and sensory terms. The mission statement tells us why, and the vision statement tells us how. The vision statement is “a declaration of where you are headed.” ParkLands Foundation is financially secure and establishing relationships with land owners. It will become accredited. It will more fully develop educational and research opportunities. Both the vision and mission statements accurately capture why and how this organization exists and operates.

ParkLands Foundation is managed by an administrative committee consisting of the President, Vice President, Treasurer, and Secretary. The executive committee is made of these positions as well as a real property chairperson, outreach chairperson, and a stewardship chairperson. This traditional structure has served well. No restructuring is needed.

A recurring theme voiced by many stakeholders is a concern toward declining membership. From a high of 403 to the current low of 144 members, this represents a 64% decrease in ParkLands membership. Most feel this is due to a lack of outreach activity and little or no recruitment. This is a major thrust of the ongoing strategic plan as outlined in the initiatives.

There is no doubt that managing the organization requires great passion, organizational strength, and tremendous time commitment. In order to effectively achieve ParkLands mission, most stakeholders feel an Executive Director position needs to be created, part time at first then full time later. This position would be dedicated to the day-to-day management of the land trust. This would allow the Board of Directors to more fully focus on broad initiatives towards Parkland’s mission while also keeping their lives more balanced. Even more important, this Executive Director position would be totally focused on the implementation of the organization’s strategies.

Opportunities exist as partners with other conservation groups with an emphasis on Parklands ability to provide stewardship. They own the land and contract with ParkLands for stewardship of the property. Possible partnerships may be the JWP Audubon Society, Friends of Kickapoo Creek, or the Ecology Action Center. Not only will this allow for a greater amount of property preserved and cared for, but will also increase Parklands visibility in the community.

Additional initiatives include formalizing and inventorying what properties and species exist. Written stewardship and purchase processes need to be validated and formalized. Stewardship planning needs to be recorded. Property acquisitions need to be more proactive and planned for.

Once adapted, this strategic plan needs to evolve and change overtime. Annually, goals and strategies should be reviewed, updated, and changed to reflect the current situation in the geography that we protect and preserve. Over the course of time, some initiatives may be abandoned, others may be augmented. Nevertheless, undergoing the planning process will keep the organization focused and more productive in achieving its mission.

“Plans are nothing; planning is everything.”

General Dwight Eisenhower

Current Areas Protected

To be updated from property book

Merwin Nature Preserve

1. Rediger tract 107 acres 1970
2. Thatcher tract 130 acres 1970
3. Gregory tract 40 acres 1971
4. Vandegraft tract 40 acres 1974
5. Stewart tract 93 acres 1976
6. Kinsella tract 60 acres 1975, 1977
7. Benedict tract 44 acres 1979
8. Henline tract 170 acres 1985
9. Illinois Wesleyan tract 40 acres 1994

Mohr Nature Preserve

1. Chapman tract 80 acres 1991
2. Bigger tract 90 acres 1992
3. Bradford tract 7 acres 1993
4. Tom Mohr tract 20 acres 1994-1995
5. Alyce Mohr tract 63 acres 1995
6. Bunney tract 20 acres 1996

Lexington tracts

1. Soper-Hilitabrand tract 3 acres 1970

2. Sweeney tract 10 acres 1970
3. NiGas tract 23 acres 1970
4. Frey tract 20 acres 1971
5. Shelley tracts 35 acres 1975
6. Turner tract 8 acres 1996

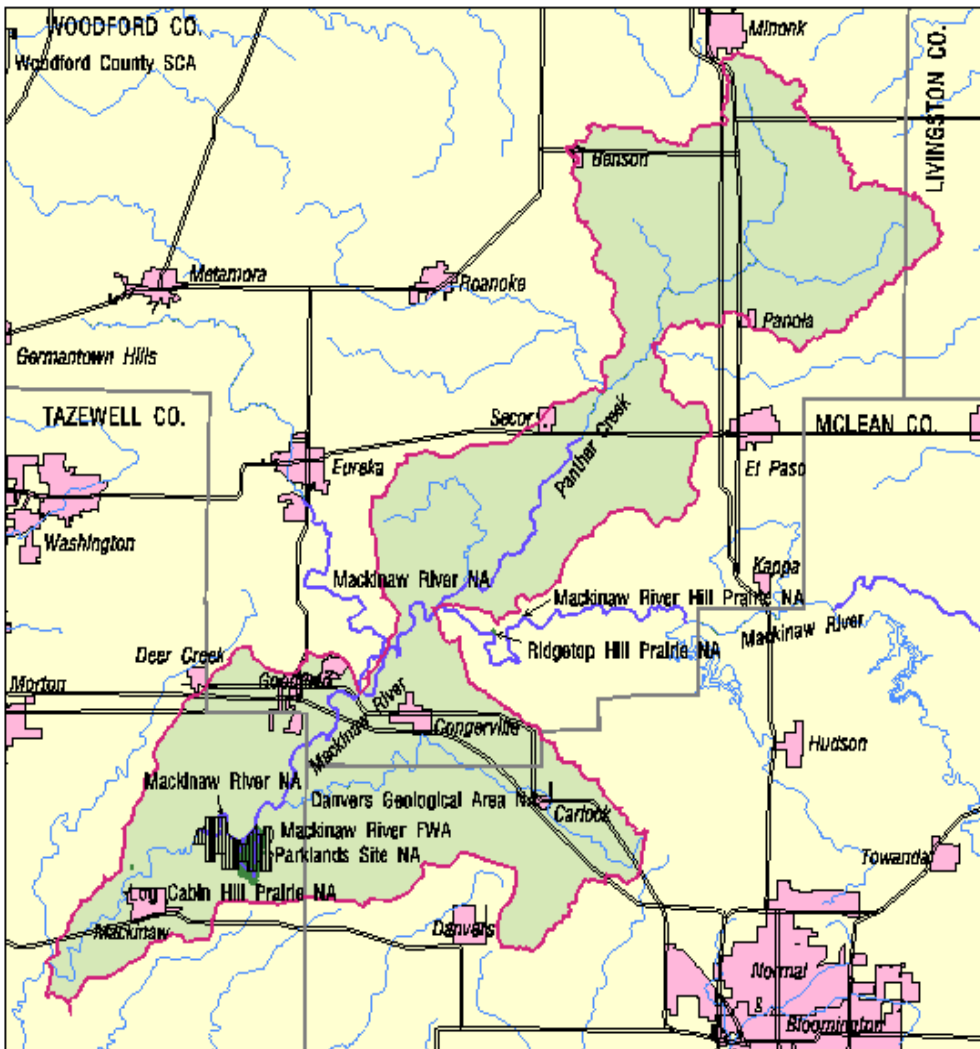
Lake Bloomington tracts

1. Breen tract 32 acres 1979
2. Champion Federal tract 28 acres 1991
3. Moon tract 42 acres 1991

Woodford County tracts

1. Ridge top Hill Prairie 19 acres 1970
2. Wyatt's Ford 64 acres 1979
3. Hazel tract 40 acres 1987
4. Woodrum Hidden Hills 50 acres 1989
5. Franklin Kenyon Preserve 149.5 acres 2001
6. Letcher Basin 150 acres 2007

Map of middle and upper Mackinaw River



Mackinaw River

- | | | | |
|---|--------------|---|--------------------|
|  | Natural Area |  | Stream |
|  | Town |  | Significant Stream |
|  | State Land |  | Highway |
|  | Federal Land |  | County |

4 Miles

