



Strategic Plan

Approved 2025.08.11

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I. Introduction

In November of 2024, ParkLands Foundation embarked on a strategic planning process to refine and define its mission, goals, and aspirations for the forthcoming five-year period, 2026-2030.

Over a ten-month period, the process to create the plan included:

- A review of current operations;
- An online self-assessment completed by Staff and Board members;
- An online survey of members, donors, landowners, and conservation partners;
- Interviews with 35 key stakeholders (some were interviewed in small groups);
- Development of a Findings Report, including an analysis of the organization's Strengths, Weakness, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) based on all of the qualitative and quantitative data generated;
- A retreat of the Board and Staff to build consensus around a set of goals and strategies for achieving them;
- A series of small group discussions to further refine the Goals, Strategies, 5-Year Outcomes, and Implementation Requirements; and
- The creation of this Strategic Plan, reflective of consensus decisions.

This Strategic Plan defines a renewed commitment to land conservation and stewardship in McLean, Woodford, and Tazewell counties, engaging community citizens as volunteers, ambassadors, advocates, members, and donors.

We are grateful for the time and energy everyone devoted to the planning process. We are especially grateful for the guidance and wisdom of the Strategic Planning Steering Committee:

Jim Franks	Shannon Fulton	Erin Herbez	Mike McKinley
Jason Shoemaker			

and for the work of the Goal Champions:

Mary Jo Adams	Chuck Croxton	Dan Deneen	Shannon Fulton
Vasudha Gadhiraaju	Erin Herbez	Jeff Howard	Mike McKinley
Frank Sanders	Jason Shoemaker	Herb Wiser	

II. History

Founded in 1967, the ParkLands Foundation is the 4th oldest conservation land trust in Illinois. Over the years, we have protected and ecologically restored more than 3,600 acres of prairie, savanna, floodplain forest, and river habitat, predominantly in the Mackinaw River Basin. ParkLands currently owns 20+ preserves and holds eight conservation easements, with the acreage split roughly in half between McLean and Woodford counties.

The preserve properties include two Illinois Nature Preserve Commission (INPC) designated Illinois Nature Preserves that ParkLands owns (Ridgetop and Merwin) and one that we manage (Weston Cemetery). Three more preserves are INPC-designated Illinois Land and Water Reserves (Chinquapin Bluffs, Letcher Basin, and Lexington), with efforts underway to secure such protective status for more properties.

Over the years, ParkLands also established preserves in other parts of the region that have since been transferred to other conservation organizations—most notably the ParkLands Nature Preserve in Tazewell County which is now owned and managed by IDNR. A testament to our regional leadership and competence in land conservation was the 2008 transfer of 763 acres of

natural land (e.g., Chinquapin Bluffs) by the Nature Conservancy to ParkLands based on their confidence in our stewardship abilities.

Much of the Mackinaw River is listed in the Illinois Natural Areas Inventory due to its high quality and ecological value, and Parklands preserves protect state-threatened species along with other IDNR Species in Greatest Need of Conservation. For restoration projects, ParkLands uses native seed of local ecotypes (to the extent possible) for high diversity native plantings. It has an active prescribed fire program following rigorous standards. Biologists guide restoration plans that follow pre-settlement vegetation history to the extent possible and conduct biotic surveys so that our management practices are compatible with, and help, sensitive plants and animals.

Managed by a volunteer Board of Directors and a small professional staff, with the preserves largely being maintained by a cadre of volunteer land stewards, Parklands preserves and hiking trails are utilized and valued by the local community and academic institutions for appropriate outdoor recreation, research, and environmental programs.

III. Mission

ParkLands Foundation, through its members, volunteers, and staff, protects, restores, and manages the natural habitat in the Mackinaw River Basin for current and future generations.

IV. Vision

The ParkLands Foundation is a leading voice in conservation in Central Illinois. We envision a future where our cherished preserves, nestled within the Mackinaw River basin, are vibrant sanctuaries, teeming with diverse native plants and wildlife and actively enhancing the river's health. We will continue to expand a permanent corridor of protected and restored natural lands that foster ecological resilience and strengthen our community's enduring connection to the wild. Our managerial excellence, science-based stewardship, and passionate public engagement and support, ensure these vital havens continue to flourish, securing a living and accessible legacy for future generations.

V. Guiding Principles

Our unified mission, vision, objectives, and metrics are crucial to ParkLands' success. Equally important are our distinctive values which shape our actions and help us achieve long lasting results. These values are deeply held beliefs that are embodied by everyone who is part of ParkLands Foundation.

- **Conserve Before It Is Lost**

We believe that conservation is urgent, essential, and non-negotiable.

- **Protect Local Ecology, Native Lands, and Species**

We believe that the Mackinaw River, native species, and ecosystems of Central Illinois are more than landscapes – they are rich, complex, living systems that define who we are. Their protection is essential to biodiversity, cultural heritage, clean water, and the long-term health of our region.

- **Restoration and Stewardship for Future Generations**

We believe that restoration and stewardship today ensure that future generations can inherit clean air, water, and thriving natural landscapes. The choices we make now will shape the natural legacy we leave behind for future generations.

- **Nature is Essential for Human Health and Well-Being**

We believe that nature nurtures us mentally, physically, and spiritually. Access to wild spaces and natural beauty is vital to our individual and collective well-being.

- **Connect People to Nature Through Learning and Belonging**

We believe that everyone should have the opportunity to build a meaningful relationship with nature. Through education, inspiration, and inclusive outreach, we invite people of all ages and abilities to engage as learners, leaders, and lifelong advocates of conservation.

- **Build Community Through Shared Conservation Values**

We believe that conservation brings people together. By connecting those who care deeply about nature, we create space for collaboration, belonging, and collective impact.

We adhere to these values and work tirelessly to conserve the natural beauty of the Mackinaw River basin, ensuring a sustainable future for all.

VI. Goals & Strategies

This Plan defines our leadership role, goals for river and land conservation, and community engagement. We intend to be present, relevant, and effective, with a professional staff, a strong and diverse Board of Directors, and trained volunteers. We will continue to lead in habitat and river protection, forge strong new partnerships, support and leverage the work of other groups, and consistently bring a larger conservation vision to each task.

1. Land acquisitions, the development of habitat critical to wildlife, and water quality in the Mackinaw River basin are each advanced by utilizing appropriate land analysis and protection tools, as well as funding opportunities.

Five Year Outcomes:

- Strategic Conservation Plan
- Ten land acquisition projects (fee or easement) of high ecological value completed
- \$2 million land acquisition, restoration, and protection fund
- Engaged Tier 1 property landowners in McLean and Woodford Co.

Strategies:

- Develop a science-based Strategic Conservation Plan (SCP) to ensure acquisitions that reflect ParkLands' priorities and value propositions
- Review and revise ParkLands' acquisition decision matrix and land-owner outreach/cultivation/donation tools to fully integrate SCP priorities as articulated
- Expand land acquisition/protection mechanisms employed
- Diversify and increase funding available for land protection

2. ParkLands Foundation's properties are managed to standards established by Land Trust Alliance for monitoring, maintenance, restoration, and public access.

Five Year Outcomes:

- Documented baseline inventory, assessment, and ranking for all ParkLands-owned properties
- Management and restoration plans for each ParkLands property
- Storage facilities completed with a system for equipment maintenance
- Stewardship Director and support staff hired
- Fifty volunteer land stewards deployed to help steward the preserves
- Formalized at least five new partnerships and documented existing partnerships to facilitate annual management of preserves
 - A standardized written partnership agreement template is developed and utilized that is mutually beneficial for ParkLands and for Partners'
 - Successful pilot partnerships are launched and serve as models for others (with a business, compatible nonprofit, school, and a nonprofit representing an underserved population)

Strategies:

- Create a formal preserve management policy and procedures protocol for developing Preserve Management Plans that guide short- and long-term management actions; create or review and revise property management plans to be consistent with it for all parcels owned by ParkLands
- Enhance, increase, and diversify the volunteer steward program to expand the capacity of ParkLands staff and hired crews
- Establish a plan/timeline for building out facilities at other preserves, including well water and electricity at S. Chinquapin red shed, to efficiently and safely store and maintain all stewardship equipment and develop a system to ensure the equipment is properly cared for

- Pursue and establish formal agreements with partners¹ to access ParkLands lands for monitoring, public enjoyment, habitat restoration, education, research, water quality improvement, and so on; Develop a system for identifying and reaching out to potential partners
- Improve property infrastructure to facilitate public access as designated

3. ParkLands Foundation's operational infrastructure increases organizational visibility, efficiency, and mission fulfillment.

Five Year Outcomes:

- New office space
- New multi-use facility at South Merwin
- Updated Chinquapin shed includes water and electricity
- The structure needs/opportunities at other preserves and a timeline for meeting them have been determined and established

Strategies:

- Relocate the office to accommodate more staff and be more visible in the community
- Research, fundraise for, and construct a multi-use facility at South Merwin that meets current equipment storage needs and serves as a welcome center/pavilion
- Determine structure needs/opportunities at other preserves and establish a timeline for meeting them

4. The number of community members who know ParkLands Foundation, support us, and understand the value of conservation in the Mackinaw River basin is growing.

Five-Year Outcomes:

¹ For example, ISU, Peoria Wild, Master Naturalists, McGIS

- Community Engagement/Membership Coordinator hired
- 75% member renewal rate
- Annual Marketing Plan and budget
- Each board member plans and implements at least one outreach event per term that supports new membership
- Membership of at least 750 members
- Documented annual increase in number of people visiting preserves

Strategies:

- Focus Board and volunteer efforts to improve retention rates through direct contact and follow-up actions
- Consider an organizational name modification
- Regularly update preserve, trail, and vehicle signage to promote ParkLands Foundation brand
- Develop a professional marketing plan for new donor recruitment that also incorporates the objectives in the Development Plan; Budget for and optimize an annual marketing “spend” on recruitment activities
- Establish and maintain a trained speakers bureau/ambassador program
- Invest in short video production

5. ParkLands Foundation leverages and maintains secure, relevant technologies and training that optimize operations, advance conservation stewardship, and broaden community engagement

Five-Year Outcomes:

- Technology Committee created which provides governance and standardization, analyzes needs, and recommends technologies, applications, and vendors as needed

- Standardized file sharing and communications system
- Donor Management System optimized for Parklands Foundation's development and member relations
- Regular use of mapping technologies (GIS) in land stewardship and acquisition projects

Strategies

- Establish a Technology Committee to evaluate and adopt available apps for operations, mapping, member and donor engagement, and communications
- Maintain website and social media sites with accurate and engaging information
- Optimize the use of Neon CRM
- Invest in mapping technology for Asset Mapping, Strategic Acquisition, and Stewardship
- Investigate the use of drones in stewardship and video production

6. ParkLands Foundation is a resilient organization in which the staff is sufficiently sized, skilled, and empowered to fulfill the mission, the Board focuses on governance and donor development, and robust committees provide significant functional and technical expertise.

Five-Year Outcomes:

- Future-state organizational structure adopted with new or revised Job Descriptions and Committee Charters for all positions and committees
- Executive Director hired and in place with an expanded professional staff responsible for the day-to-day operations
- Restructured Board focused on governance and donor development
- Volunteer Advisory group provides professional, scientific, and technical expertise to the Board and staff

Strategies

- Expand ParkLands Foundation’s professional staff and organizational structure to better meet the needs of the mission and vision, staff/Board committees, and working groups
- Create or review and revise organizational bylaws, governance² structure (committees), and Board member responsibilities
- Develop and recruit an Advisory group (Council or other) that includes partner representatives
- Review and adapt the Development Plan to align with the goals, strategies, and priorities of the Strategic Plan and include appropriate fundraising targets
- Prepare ParkLands Foundation for Accreditation

² For example: Strategy, Financial Oversight, Fundraising, and Governance (nominations, on-boarding, leadership development, training) Committees

Addendum: Staffing Considerations

The above goals and strategies are predicated, at least in part, on strategically hiring additional staff. The staff positions envisioned within the context of this 5-year plan are consolidated here to help Board and staff consider relative importance and hiring sequences.

Executive Director

Stewardship Director

Up to two additional preserve management staff and/or Volunteer Coordinator

Membership/Community Engagement Coordinator