

# STRATEGIC DIRECTION

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2021-2026

PHOTO BY GREG SEMAN

## The Challenge

The Grand Traverse region has long held a special spot in the hearts of those who live and visit here. Generations of year-round and seasonal residents have savored the breathtaking beauty of its Lake Michigan bluffs and beaches, its forests and farmlands, its inland lakes and rivers. This spectacular combination of land and water has provided the backdrop for countless hours of recreation and relaxation for people of all ages and walks of life.

The Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy has protected and stewarded these vital assets since 1991. Despite our many accomplishments, our mission is more important today than ever. The beauty of the region's natural features continues to attract new residents and visitors, creating development pressure on the very properties that are most important to protect. The region's population growth and sprawl place additional stress on its lifeblood of clean lakes and streams. In addition to challenges that have arisen from local conditions, we are affected and, indeed, squarely confronted by global problems. The COVID-19 pandemic is prompting record numbers of people to visit our existing nature preserves, permanently expanding our user base and highlighting the need for additional protected open spaces. Further, as a leader in environmental engagement, we pursue nature-based solutions to climate change on our lands and in our forests. At a place and time that cry out for strategic conservation, the Conservancy—bolstered by the support of its countless partners, donors and volunteers—stands ready to work with willing landowners to meet that urgent need.

## Our Mission

*The Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy protects significant natural, scenic and farm lands, and advances stewardship — now and for future generations.*

## Our Vision

By continuing to protect the region's finest natural, scenic and farm lands over the next five years, the Conservancy of 2026 will have reinforced the foundation of a priceless legacy that all of us will pass on to future generations.

The region's water will be clean, its forests resilient, its vistas unparalleled.

Protected lands will be embraced as an essential element of the region's long-term prosperity.

The health and well-being of the region's residents and visitors will be enhanced by their use of our protected properties to hike, bike, ski, swim, relax and otherwise escape into nature.

A diverse employment base and talented workforce will be attracted by the region's natural beauty and quality of life.

The region's unique agricultural heritage will be manifest in viable farms supplying world-class products, burnishing its image as a travel destination, satisfying local desires for fresh foods, and enhancing food security.

### IN ORDER TO ACHIEVE OUR VISION

The Conservancy is led by diverse and knowledgeable staff and board members who are invested in and passionately committed to its mission.

We rely on the generosity of partners, donors, volunteers and other supporters who share our deep concern for this region and joyfully contribute in myriad ways to our success.

## Our Values

### EXCELLENCE

We are committed to excellence in everything we do. We employ best practices, strive to enhance our skills and knowledge, and measure our performance against exacting standards. We work hard and carefully manage our resources in order to deliver outstanding results timely and efficiently.

### LEADERSHIP

For those to whom much is given, much is required. As the recipient of incredibly generous support, we feel a deep responsibility to aggressively pursue our mission, not only by protecting and stewarding outstanding properties, but by engaging and educating political representatives, partners, donors, volunteers and others regarding the critical environmental issues affecting the region. We intend to reinforce and expand our leadership role by operating the proposed Conservation Center as a hub of such activity.

### INCLUSIVENESS

We welcome everyone to experience the natural wonder of the Grand Traverse region by visiting our protected properties free of charge. Our universally accessible trails are an especially inviting manifestation of our commitment to serve all residents and visitors, regardless of age or physical ability.

### GENEROSITY

Reflecting the generosity of our own supporters, we freely provide our time, expertise and other resources to communities, like-minded organizations and individuals throughout our service area in pursuit of their needs and our mission.

### TEAMWORK

We are a team. We work together—inside and outside the organization—in the spirit of cooperation, collaboration and creativity. The result is deep, trusting, long-term relationships that contribute to the successful development and management of protected properties.

### RESPECT

Our internal and external relationships are founded on mutual respect. We welcome open dialogue and debate, confident that it will enable us to sharpen our best thinking, avoid pitfalls, and seize opportunities that may not be immediately apparent.

### COMMUNICATION

We listen carefully and communicate clearly and openly in order to avoid misunderstandings and generate goodwill among everyone with whom we interact.

### INTEGRITY

We conduct our work with integrity in words and actions. We follow through on our commitments. Our mission is timeless, and to meet that challenge in perpetuity we must earn the trust of others by being trustworthy.

### PROACTIVITY

In addition to responding to today's obvious threats, we anticipate and address tomorrow's emerging problems. We plan for change.

Outcomes describe the results of the Conservancy's work over time. They fall into two broad categories: identity and impact. Identity outcomes reflect our goal to maintain and enhance the organization's strength and effectiveness. Impact outcomes describe the future character and condition of the region as a result of our work in several key areas. Our annual work plans support these long-term outcomes.

## Identity Outcomes

### **HIGHLY EFFECTIVE GOVERNANCE**

The Conservancy maintains highly effective leadership. The board is composed of a diverse membership with the skills, connections and background necessary to provide exceptional governance. Former board members remain in the fold: they continue to be ambassadors in their communities and networks, they are solicited for advice and volunteer service, and they are encouraged to seek other community leadership roles. Board and staff succession practices support a highly effective governance model.

### **LONG - TERM FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY**

The Conservancy will deliver on its promise of perpetuity by raising and growing endowment funds that will cover all stewardship costs and provide for the long-term financial stability of the organization. The funds will cover preserve and sanctuary management, trail maintenance, infrastructure replacement, easement monitoring and defense, and the related organizational overhead to administer and carry out the stewardship program. The funds will also provide for facility repair and maintenance as well as ongoing general operations and land protection needs.

### **TRUSTED BRAND**

The Conservancy is the go-to organization for land preservation throughout our region. People know us and our brand at the neighborhood level. We are seen as leaders with expertise in land protection, environmental resources, outdoor recreation, and community conservation. The Conservancy maintains productive partnerships with local governments and like-minded organizations. We are supported by a cadre of dedicated partners, donors, volunteers and other supporters.

### **ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE**

We have a defined set of values that serve as anchors for our behavior, our decision-making, and our relationships with others. We conduct annual audits to hold ourselves accountable and look for areas of improvement.



## Impact Outcomes

### **SIGNATURE LANDSCAPES**

The most important properties to the region, the best of the best, are identified and protected forever.

### **WATER QUALITY**

The region has clean water for future generations. We have identified and protected properties that serve to enhance water quality. The Conservancy and like-minded organizations have protected and restored important aquatic and riparian habitats.

### **HEALTHY HABITATS AND BIODIVERSITY**

The region and our protected properties are plagued by fewer invasive species. We have larger protected migratory corridors, more resilient forests, and healthier habitats as well as improved species diversity and health. There are fewer species suffering mass death and disease.

### **FARMLAND PROTECTION**

The region maintains a large land base of protected farmland that preserves opportunities for viable farms and the next generation of farmers. The fruitbelt is intact, and farms remain in production. Fragmentation does not threaten the viability of farming in our region. The farming industry is economically resilient, and the region enjoys considerable food security.

### **ECONOMIC PROSPERITY**

The region's diverse and growing economy—which includes robust Eco-tourism, agri-tourism, and outdoor recreation industries—generates good jobs and attracts top talent. The fact that our conservation work is fundamental to the success of these industries is clearly understood by governmental officials, industry leaders, and other individuals responsible for charting the region's economic future.

### **SOUND PUBLIC POLICIES**

We strive to inform public policies that support land protection, water quality, and sustainable agriculture. The Conservancy has strong influence with local, regional and statewide leaders. Those who hold key leadership roles are Conservancy supporters. We are a resource to federal and state policy in areas that impact our work.

### **QUALITY OF LIFE AND COMMUNITY CHARACTER**

The region maintains its rural and scenic character. Our protected properties delight the senses and contribute significantly to the quality of life for all. Communities throughout the region extend these beneficial effects by forming alliances with public and private entities, including the Conservancy, to protect local natural features for the enjoyment of residents and visitors alike.

### **INDIVIDUAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING**

The physical and mental health of our residents and visitors is enhanced by their use of our protected properties to recreate, relax, observe nature, and escape from the demands of everyday life.

### **ECOLOGICALLY ENGAGED AND INFORMED COMMUNITIES**

An ever-growing number of the region's residents and visitors participate in our educational activities and work with us to steward our properties. In addition to appreciating and supporting our mission, these ecologically sophisticated individuals serve as ambassadors on regional land-use and water quality issues. The region's support for ecologically informed decision-making will broaden and deepen as the Conservancy expands its educational activities at the proposed Conservation Center.

## Natural Land Protection

The Conservancy works with landowners and governmental entities to permanently protect significant natural land through the acquisition of land and conservation easements. We own land that we manage as nature preserves, sanctuaries and ecologically managed forests, and we hold conservation easements on private lands. We assist governmental entities with the creation of public parks and natural areas as well as the preservation of land of high resource and public recreational value. Our approach is proactive, cultivating relationships with landowners and partners to plan for and respond to natural land protection opportunities. In pursuit of our goals of protecting scenic vistas, ecologically significant sites, and water quality, we look for opportunities to mitigate ecosystem fragmentation by protecting contiguous properties, thereby preserving migratory corridors that support animal and plant movement, species diversity, and resilience to climate change. While a small percentage of land projects are donated, the vast majority involve an outright purchase and thus the pursuit and procurement of public and private funds.

### OUTCOMES SUPPORTED

Trusted Brand, Healthy Habitats and Biodiversity, Signature Landscapes, Water Quality, Economic Prosperity, Quality of Life and Community Character, Farming and Farmland Protection

## Farmland Protection

Since its inception, the Conservancy has had a deep commitment to the preservation of our region's globally unique farmland resources. Our farmland protection efforts focus on preserving farmland through the acquisition of conservation easements, both independently and pursuant to governmental programs created to facilitate such purchases. We cultivate relationships with interested priority farmland owners so that when they are ready to permanently preserve their land, we are ready to respond. Our farmland protection activities improve the region's water quality, preserve some of its most stunning vistas, and support the eventual transfer of farmland to new generations of farmers. Additionally, the Conservancy owns and operates farms at Maple Bay and Misty Acres, where we explore creative land management, promote best practices, conduct research and educational activities, practice nature-based solutions to climate change, and contribute to food access for underserved communities. Our farms provide excellent opportunities for volunteer engagement as well as communications and outreach.

### OUTCOMES SUPPORTED

Trusted Brand, Healthy Habitats and Biodiversity, Farmland Protection, Water Quality, Economic Prosperity, Quality of Life and Community Character



## Forest Protection

The region's forests contribute to the cleanliness of our air and water. They also provide wildlife habitat, recreational opportunities, and direct economic benefits in the form of timber harvests. The Conservancy's new Regional Forest Protection Program seeks to protect the most significant forest resources at the landscape level, enhancing their resilience, preserving migratory corridors for the movement of animal and plant species, and blunting the effects of climate change. The Conservancy will work with like-minded organizations and individuals to manage these properties in an ecologically sensitive and financially sustainable manner. We intend to promote our efforts and results—including by means of demonstration sites—in order to educate other landowners regarding the benefits of such responsible stewardship.

### OUTCOMES SUPPORTED

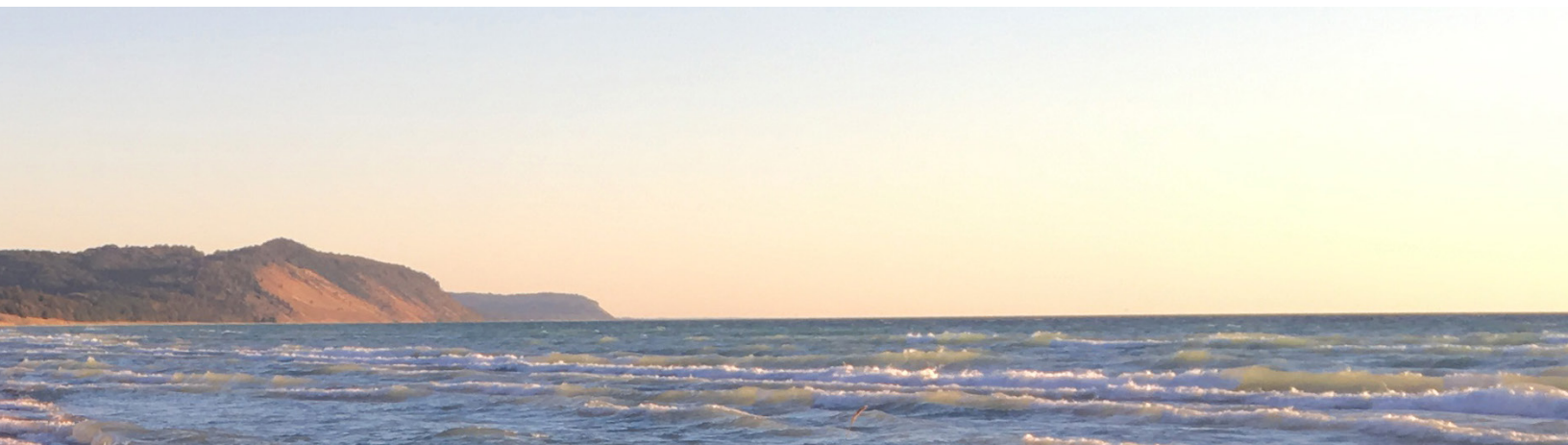
Trusted Brand, healthy Habitats and Biodiversity, Forest Protection, Water Quality, Economic Prosperity, Quality of Life and Community Character, Ecologically Engaged and Informed Communities

## Conservation Easement Stewardship

A conservation easement is a contractual deed restriction in which a landowner voluntarily relinquishes the right to develop a piece of property in order to protect its conservation values in perpetuity. As the easement owner under such contracts, the Conservancy assumes the duty to monitor the property annually and enforce the contractual terms. Effective easement stewardship rests on our development of open, friendly and trusting relationships with conservation easement land owners so that they will contact us without hesitation or reservation whenever they have questions or plans that may require our approval. We develop similar relationships with owners of critical unrestricted parcels who might someday choose to convey an easement to the Conservancy so that they, too, will feel free to contact us if the need arises.

### OUTCOMES SUPPORTED

Trusted Brand, Healthy Habitats and Biodiversity, Signature Landscapes, Water Quality, Economic Prosperity, Quality of Life and Community Character, Farmland Protection, Ecologically Engaged and Informed Communities



## Preserve and Sanctuary Stewardship

Conservancy preserves and sanctuaries are primarily managed for healthy habitats and biodiversity through an ongoing process that includes ecological restoration, reforestation, invasive species control, and fishing, hunting and foraging rules. Public use is encouraged at preserves, and people of all ages, abilities and interests are invited to experience a natural landscape through low-impact, resource-based recreation opportunities. The stewardship of sanctuaries involves very low-impact management activities as those properties have minimal public use infrastructure. We collect data regarding flora and fauna on our preserves and sanctuaries, which we use to guide our management and restoration efforts. Throughout our stewardship activities we seek to exercise consistent and predictable management, work closely with like-minded organizations and our volunteers, and treat our neighbors as we would like to be treated.

### OUTCOMES SUPPORTED

Trusted Brand, Healthy Habitats and Biodiversity, Signature Landscapes, Water Quality, Economic Prosperity, Quality of Life and Community Character, Farmland Protection, Health and Well-being, Ecologically Engaged and Informed Communities

## Research, Restoration and Demonstration

Protecting and stewarding land requires more than acquiring property rights. The Conservancy keeps abreast of the latest research in ecology, land management, and sustainable agriculture.

### Research:

We will allow researchers conducting projects that are compatible with and relevant to our stewardship objectives to use our properties for scientific study and monitoring. We may conduct or sponsor studies that directly support and advance our stewardship objectives.

### Restoration:

Restoration projects may be developed to launch the recovery of an ecosystem that has been significantly degraded, damaged or destroyed.

### Demonstration:

We will seek to advance stewardship in our region by designating appropriate sites to implement demonstration projects in sustainable land management, forestry management, and agricultural practices.

### OUTCOMES SUPPORTED

Trusted Brand, Healthy Habitats and Biodiversity, Water Quality, Quality of Life and Community Character, Farmland Protection, Sound Public Policies



## Engagement and Ecological Education

The Conservancy conducts or sponsors guided hikes, workshops, seminars and similar educational activities to engage individuals and entities regarding the critical ecological issues affecting the region as well as our approaches to addressing those issues. To deepen their relationships with us and our properties, we invite interested parties not only to experience our nature preserves but to work hand-in-hand with us stewarding them—building trails, removing invasive species and planting trees. We intend to lean into and expand these activities with the opening of the proposed Conservation Center, making it the regional hub of information-sharing and action to benefit the region’s ecological health.

### OUTCOMES SUPPORTED

Trusted Brand, Healthy Habitats and Biodiversity, Water Quality, Quality of Life, Health and Well-being, Ecologically Engaged and Informed Communities, Sound Public Policies

## Community Conservation

The Conservancy will use the community conservation approach to address community challenges or opportunities where solutions may be found in land conservation and resource-based placemaking. Community conservation work helps communities become more vibrant, healthy and equitable by extending and enhancing their access to open spaces and water. We begin such work by listening and responding to individual and collective voices in the community. We are open to collaborating with new and unexpected partners. Our inclusive approach strengthens the resultant project and builds respect, trust and support for our shared mission throughout the community. These projects occasionally involve structures as well as land, and we will be alert to the possibility that such assets could be redeployed to help alleviate the region’s housing crisis.

### OUTCOMES SUPPORTED

Trusted Brand, Healthy Habitats and Biodiversity, Signature Landscapes, Water Quality, Economic Prosperity, Quality of Life and Community Character, Farmland Protection, Sound Public Policies, Ecologically Engaged and Informed Communities

## Communication and Engagement

The Conservancy will continue to build its visibility and strength of brand to reflect our values. Employing a multi-channel strategy, we connect people to the land and water and enhance experiences on protected properties so that people see our mission and work as an essential part of the community.

### OUTCOMES SUPPORTED

Trusted Brand, Healthy Habitats and Biodiversity, Signature Landscapes, Water Quality, Farmland Protection, Economic Prosperity, Quality of Life and Community Character, Sound Public Policies, Ecologically Engaged and Informed Communities

## Volunteers

Volunteer engagement is critical to the continued success of our land protection and stewardship efforts. Conservancy volunteers bring cheerful energy and a wide range of skills to their work. Just as importantly, they contribute new ideas and fresh perspectives to our programs and activities. We provide meaningful opportunities for volunteers to develop their personal land ethic and translate that passion for the land into action. Our volunteers champion our mission throughout the region.

### OUTCOMES SUPPORTED

Trusted Brand, Highly Effective Governance, Healthy Habitats and Biodiversity, Health and Well-being, Ecologically Engaged and Informed Communities

## Fund Development

Funding is the foundation that supports the implementation of our mission. We develop and nurture meaningful relationships with partners and donors. Public and private financial support provides organizational stability and sustainability. We continue to pursue a fundraising strategy of building our endowment funds to the point where the earnings on those funds fully support our long-term stewardship obligations as well as facility repair and maintenance, ongoing general operations, and land protection needs.

### OUTCOMES SUPPORTED

Trusted Brand, Healthy Habitats and Biodiversity, Signature Landscapes, Water Quality, Farmland Protection, Economic Prosperity, Quality of Life and Community Character, Sound Public Policies, Long-term Sustainable Revenue

## Sound Financial Development

We manage our public and private funds responsibly to meet our current and long-term commitments. We pursue economically viable projects that maximize conservation and community impacts. We maintain strong organizational and financial systems and management tools.

### OUTCOMES SUPPORTED

Trusted Brand, Healthy Habitats and Biodiversity, Signature Landscapes, Water Quality, Farmland Protection, Economic Prosperity, and Quality of Life and Community Character

## Board and Staff Development

We will continue to fill our workforce and Board of Directors with diverse and talented individuals of the highest character. We are committed to providing opportunities to our staff for professional growth in a challenging and supportive environment. The Conservancy's mission attracts qualified individuals to serve on our Board of Directors. United by their passion for land protection and stewardship, the directors strive to guide the Conservancy toward a sustainable future by adopting sound governance and financial management policies and by faithfully discharging their oversight responsibilities.

### **OUTCOMES SUPPORTED**

Trusted Brand, Highly Effective Governance, Sound Public Policies

## Technology

The Conservancy will research and employ technologies that optimize performance and efficiency.

### **OUTCOMES SUPPORTED**

Trusted Brand, Highly Effective Governance







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