

Friends of the Green Bay Trail



2021-2025 Strategic Plan

A Message from the President of the Board

Friends and Fellow Trustees:

I'm truly excited to present you with the Friends of the Green Bay Trail's **2021-2025 Strategic Plan**. Like many of our projects over the last 10 years, we accomplished this strategic planning exercise through strong engagement of enthusiastic volunteers. This Plan sets out how we will continue to engage the communities around us—people who have provided a tremendous outpouring of both volunteer time and financial support—to help us be even more successful in our important mission.

Equally important have been the strong partnerships with the Village of Glencoe and the Glencoe Park District that provide the much-needed heavy lifting when we need it. Through this Plan, we hope to capture the enthusiasm of our Board, our volunteers, and our supporters as together we chart an exciting path forward.

Please let us know what you think, and how you might help in setting this path. I look forward to seeing you on the Trail soon!

Ann Reilly

Executive Summary

During its first decade (2010-2020), the Friends of the Green Bay Trail established a track record of successful restoration along prominent sections of the Green Bay Trail in the Village of Glencoe, Illinois. These restored sections, resurrected from a jungle-like infestation of the invasive buckthorn shrub, provide valuable habitat for wildlife and an enhanced recreational treasure for people using the Green Bay Trail (“Trail”). Trail users witness the beauty of a healthier ecosystem, and interpretive signage explains the importance of native plants for pollinators. A butterfly hatchery beside the Trail launches over 30 monarchs each year, enchanting and educating visitors of all ages.



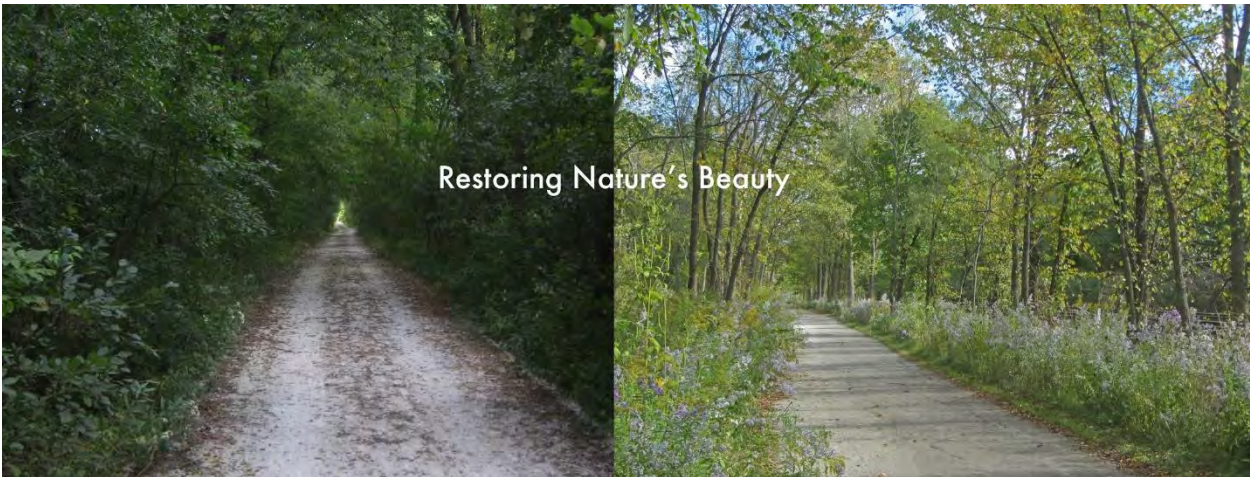
With each restored Trail section, however, Friends of the Green Bay Trail (“Friends”) creates another area that must be continuously and perpetually maintained against an ever-increasing onslaught of aggressive invasive species. The retirement of Friends’ founder and driving force, Betsy Leibson, in late 2020 has highlighted weaknesses in our current organizational model to maintain already-restored areas—as well as to sustain the scientific and volunteer infrastructure that will be needed for any new restoration work. As a result, for the first time in our history, Friends is at an organizational crossroads.

To address these challenges and position the organization for continued operational success, Friends’ Board of Trustees established a Strategic Planning Committee in fall 2020. Their charge was to assess our strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats—and then to develop a series of recommendations for moving the organization forward over the next five years (2021 through 2025). Thanks to Committee chair Steve Huels as well as Committee members Jessica Bollhoefer, Lynn Donaldson, Hall Healy, Bob Kirschner, John Martin, Ann Reilly, and Craig Witty for all their hard work. The following recommendations were developed by the Committee, and the Plan subsequently was adopted by Friends’ Board of Trustees.

Summary of Primary Recommendations for the 2021-2025 Strategic Plan

1. Transition from a board-oriented volunteer structure to a new ***Trail Stewardship Model*** that introduces the important role of volunteer “site stewards;” assign initial development of the new model to the Trail Committee for completion during Year 1 of the Strategic Plan (2021).
2. Develop a ***Trail Restoration Area Expansion Process*** to serve as a standardized approach for prioritizing, evaluating, and approving “new” restoration project areas along the Trail; this process should also identify opportunities to use in attracting funding and volunteers.
3. Create a comprehensive ***Volunteer Engagement Program*** and assign a Volunteer Coordinator who will promote and manage Friends’ myriad volunteer opportunities.
4. Create and implement a ***Volunteer Training Program*** that defines and reinforces key responsibilities and skills for each of the volunteer categories within the organization (particularly those skills relating to the Trail’s ecological stewardship).

5. Expand and enhance Friends' ***Funding Model***, with a particular emphasis on attracting more foundation and corporate funding partners.
6. Broaden our ***community education programs*** to inform the public about critical environmental issues that affect the Trail both directly and indirectly.
7. ***Strengthen existing partnerships***—and forge new ones—with organizations critical to the success of Friends' mission and programs.
8. ***Advocate for effective public policies*** that enhance and protect important ecological resources.
9. Implement a ***Board Development Program*** that enhances the Board's leadership skills and effectiveness, so as to accommodate the organization's anticipated growth in size and complexity.



Introduction and Background

The Green Bay Trail (“Trail”) is a pedestrian and biking path running parallel to the Metra Union Pacific North commuter railway. It passes through Chicago’s North Shore communities (from south to north) of Wilmette, Kenilworth, Winnetka, Glencoe, and Highland Park. The Trail was created in 1965 on the abandoned right-of-way of the former North Shore Electric Railway.

By the early 2000s, it had become a dark tunnel of buckthorn and other scraggly trees, weeds, and invasive plants causing stagnant pools of water and collapsing bluffs—and crowding out native prairie plants, insects, and animals.

The Friends of Green Bay Trail (“Friends”) was founded in 2010 by Glencoe resident Betsy Leibson and several of her enthusiastic neighbors seeking to restore ecological health to a portion of the Trail. Over the next few years, Betsy’s engaging personality and infectious passion for the natural world garnered support from other like-minded environmental advocates in the area.



In 2015, Friends incorporated as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization in the state of Illinois. Friends operates as a non-membership, volunteer-governed organization that contracts with ecological restoration and stewardship contractors; Friends currently has no paid staff.

The first portion of the Trail to be restored was a section in Glencoe extending from Harbor Street south to Scott Avenue. Invasive buckthorn shrubs and other weedy vegetation were removed, followed by the planting of native shrubs, trees, and understory plants on approximately five acres along the Trail.

Building on that successful effort, Friends initiated planning in 2017 to restore the Trail portion in Glencoe between South Avenue and Shelton Park (this area is often referred to as South Of South Avenue, or “SOSA”). Drawing upon lessons learned from our earlier restoration efforts, Friends engaged a volunteer ecologist and hired a restoration contractor to design and implement the SOSA plan. Property owners near the site were actively engaged to improve communication and acceptance of the SOSA plan.



Each fall since 2011, Friends has hosted its annual “Buckthorn BBQ.” This tremendously popular dinner event has brought together Friends’ volunteers and supporters to celebrate the past year’s accomplishments and to raise funds for the coming year’s activities. A highly successful “Green Bay Trail Day” was held in August 2019. Charles Schwab Corporation served breakfast from the Girl and the Goat restaurant to 500 people. Vendors offered advice and expertise on bike repair, exercise warm ups, photography, native plants, and more.

After a decade of tireless leadership and service to the organization, Betsy Leibson stepped down as Friends' president in October 2019, with Ann Reilly subsequently elected as the new president. Betsy Leibson resigned as Board Trustee as of December 31, 2020, and she subsequently was appointed as a life trustee. Particularly significant is that she also stepped down from leadership of the Trail Committee, passing that responsibility on to Jo Ann Kimzey. In 2020, of the 1,473 hours of stewardship work on the Trail provided by the entire Board, Betsy had provided more than 637. Since Friends' inception, she had been our primary contact with the Village of Glencoe, the Glencoe Park District, and Friends' ecological contractors.

As the 2021-2025 Strategic Planning Committee began its work, it carefully examined the Friends' previous planning efforts. In 2016, Friends embarked on a five-year strategic planning process for the period 2016-2020. By all accounts, we made significant progress towards achieving that plan's recommendations and goals, and taken together they have contributed to a successful track record for our organization. Restoration enhancements were accomplished along the Trail between Harbor Street and South Avenue in Glencoe, and the ambitious "SOSA" project (described earlier) was designed and implemented. As called for in the 2016-2020 Strategic Plan, membership on our Board of Trustees was expanded from 10 to 15. An endowment fund was created and significant funds were raised over that plan's timeframe to fund both the endowment and annual operations.



Mission and Vision Statements *(adopted March 29, 2019)*

To help ensure that Friends is able to successfully execute on its mission, this Strategic Plan strives to identify not only our goals for the next five years, but also the beliefs that unite us, the vision that inspires us, and the mission that energizes us.

Mission Statement: We are environmental stewards of the Green Bay Trail. Our mission is to promote a healthy natural corridor for the well-being of individuals and surrounding communities.

Vision Statement: The Green Bay Trail will become a national example of the healthy intersection of nature and culture that inspires community and individual wellbeing.

The Green Bay Trail is an extraordinary community asset available for all to experience and enjoy. We believe:

- in creating, restoring, and protecting the health of the natural habitat to mitigate threats of climate change;
- in the importance of connecting individuals and communities with nature and its beauty to enrich their mental and physical well-being; and
- that excellence will come from developing public and private partnerships that value green space and fresh air.



Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) Analysis

As an early step in developing Friends' 2021-2025 Strategic Plan, a so-called "SWOT" analysis was undertaken by the Strategic Planning Committee to assess Friends' Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats/challenges. This in-depth look at our internal assets and shortcomings, along with our external opportunities and threats, gave us a strong foundation on which to build a set of realistic goals, objectives, and programs for the next five years. This type of analysis is commonly utilized by businesses and non-profit organizations when developing a strategic plan.

Strengths

Divided into four categories (people-related, financially related, awareness-building, and tangible and intangible assets), it is clear that the Friends has significant strengths in terms of a committed and cohesive Board, ongoing advice and assistance from the Chicago Botanic Garden, and effective partnerships with the Village of Glencoe and the Glencoe Park District. Through the generosity of many local residents over the years as well as a significant recent bequest, there is adequate funding on hand to support the organization's current activities and long-term stewardship for restoration projects that have been already undertaken. By focusing our work on a specific set of parcels, a successful and well-publicized track record has been achieved that provides a positive example to others. A good indication of this success is that the Trail has become an increasingly popular destination during the COVID-19 pandemic.



Weaknesses

An issue that appears to be holding us back from even greater achievements is the difficulty in attracting and maintaining an adequate number of volunteers and contractors that are adequately trained in the complexities of urban restoration ecology. This issue is compounded by the recent resignation of our founder, Betsy Leibson, who not only possessed significant restoration expertise, but who also volunteered many hundreds of hours per year for Trail maintenance, contractor supervision, and organizational administration. Her loss is sorely felt and replacements for all her contributions are still being finalized. In addition, some Board members and contractors are not well trained in these disciplines, and due in particular to the ongoing threats posed by invasive plants, some may not fully appreciate the need for maintaining the Trail (and funding that maintenance) into perpetuity. And finally, future restoration efforts may be complicated by multiple municipal organizations owning and having responsibility for the various parts of the Trail.

Opportunities

Opportunities fall into two broad categories: 1) to utilize the Trail itself to educate and inform users, while promoting their health and wellness; and 2) for Friends to leverage its strengths and assets to accomplish even more. Together with its rich and interesting history, the Trail's recreational, educational, and ecological assets can be used to expand its use. Friends' strengths can be channeled to further involve youth audiences and additional volunteers, as well as to assist in fundraising efforts for ongoing maintenance and plans for restoring new parcels. There is an opportunity to engage other municipalities and like-minded non-profits; for example, the Winnetka Park District has expressed interest in improving its portion of the Trail. With the nearby Chicago Botanic Garden's excellent educational programs, we can train current and new volunteers to improve their effectiveness and efficiency.

Threats/Challenges

Threats and challenges fall within similar categories of people-, financial- and ecological-related issues. Due to the highly specialized nature of urban restoration ecology, it takes a significant amount of time and effort for volunteers and contractors to acquire enough knowledge to be highly effective. This has been made more difficult, up until now, by not having enough volunteers and skilled contractors to do all the work. There also is a formidable challenge posed by the ever-increasing number and variety of invasive plants, and the fact that many native plants need more sunlight than some portions of the Trail can provide. Poor-quality and excessively compacted soils, poor drainage, and the narrow strips of land and steep slopes create challenging growing conditions along much of the Trail. Climate change will likely exacerbate the situation with "drier droughts," "wetter wet" periods, and warmer temperatures overall. And finally, fiscal constraints among our municipal partners are expected to endure for some years beyond the current pandemic.



Assumptions Made During Development of the Strategic Plan

In developing the 2021-2025 Strategic Plan, a series of assumptions were developed to inform the Plan's recommendations. The assumptions fell into five overarching categories, as follows:

1. COVID-19 Pandemic Impacts

- Because of the recently developed vaccines, it is hoped that the COVID-19 pandemic health crisis will be substantially under control by the end of 2021, such that moving forward, volunteer interactions and fundraising events will be able to proceed more closely to pre-pandemic conditions.
- Economic recovery from COVID-19 will last at least several years beyond 2021, potentially impacting Friends' ability to raise funds from governmental and institutional entities as well as foundations and private donors. Existing and future partnerships with municipalities may be affected by their own COVID-related budget constraints.
- The early years of the 2021-2025 Strategic Plan will reflect the high degree of uncertainty created by the pandemic.
- With Friends' enhanced promotion of the Trail's benefits for users' health and well-being, the Trail will be increasingly viewed by the community as a destination for recreation (both active and passive) as well as education.



2. Expansion of Restoration Project Areas

- Friends aspires to provide leadership guidance and the promotion of ecological restoration and stewardship for the entire length of the Green Bay Trail (i.e., from Lake Cook Road in Glencoe south to the Village of Kenilworth).

3. Covering Friends' Founder's Previous Contributions

- Friends' founder Betsy Leibson stepped down from the Board and most of her day-to-day coordination of Friends' Trail activities in late fall 2020. Each of the principal activities previously performed by Ms. Leibson (including on-site trail maintenance; contractor selection, coordination and oversight; trail volunteer coordination; etc.) has been itemized and thoroughly examined—and each has become the accepted responsibility of Board members, volunteers, and/or contracted assistance. It has been encouraging to see the passion and commitments of so many volunteers to these extensive assignments. However, the longer-term sustainability of these commitments is not yet known.



4. Environmental Policy and Political Leadership

- The Biden Administration will be supportive of environmental issues in general and specifically, climate change mitigation. This focus at the national level will assist environmental restoration and advocacy groups like Friends in conducting their work and in raising funds.

5. Trail Stewardship

- Invasive plant management along restored portions of the Trail will continue into perpetuity, with introductions of new invasive species and even tougher management challenges expected moving forward.
- Stewardship of restoration projects already initiated will continue, and they will serve to inform future restoration projects.
- Friends will continue to engage highly skilled restoration ecologists to advise and guide our work.
- Friends will endeavor to receive steady and predictable support from volunteers to help with Trail stewardship.
- The Village of Glencoe and the Glencoe Park District will continue to support Trail maintenance including plant watering, tree cutting/removal and leaf/refuse pick-up. The Village and Park District will complete their five-year commitment (ending in 2024) to fund Friends' stewardship activities in the SOSA portion of the Trail.
- Friends will contract annually for Trail stewardship with a reputable, qualified, and affordable restoration contractor(s). This contractor assistance will focus on stewardship activities that require expertise, equipment, and/or a level-of-effort not readily provided by Friends' volunteers or restoration ecologists.
- Friends will continue to raise adequate funding to support the priority activities required to achieve its mission, particularly those related to Trail stewardship.



Recommendations on Objectives, Goals, Strategies, and Actions

The recommendations within this 2021-2025 Strategic Plan reflect that the organization is at an inflection point. Friends has many strengths, and we are excited about the opportunities for fulfilling our vision and mission. The recommendations in this plan focus on creating processes and structures that will help facilitate that progress.

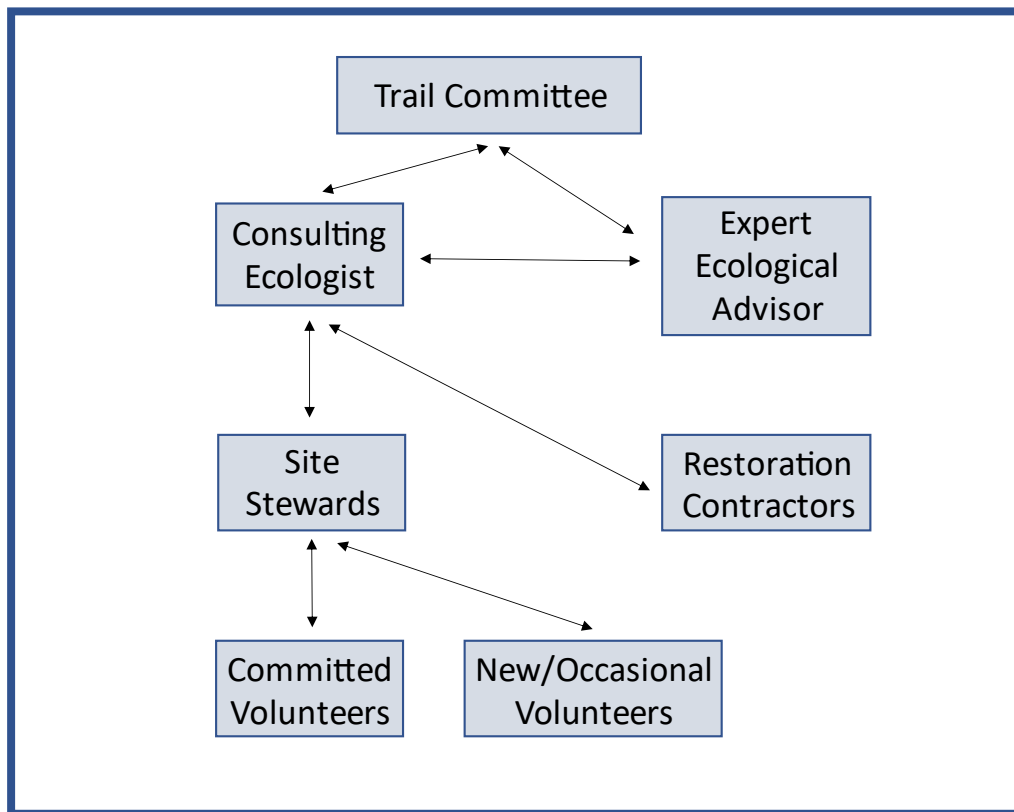
Recommendation #1: Transition from a board-oriented volunteer structure to a new Trail Stewardship Model that introduces the important role of volunteer “site stewards.”

One of the Strategic Plan’s key structural recommendations is for a new, multi-disciplined approach to Trail renovation and maintenance, referred to as the Trail Stewardship Model. The approach incorporates the role of “site stewards” into our volunteer engagement and organizational structure. Widely used throughout the ecological restoration community, this structure is intended to create a framework that facilitates responsible, sustainable growth for the organization as well as long-term resilience for our completed restoration projects. Successful applications of this approach include the Forest Preserves of Cook County, the Lake County Forest Preserves, the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie, and The Nature Conservancy at Nachusa Grasslands.

A Trail Stewardship Model is recommended for initial development by the Trail Committee during the first year of this strategic plan (2021), with subsequent implementation of the Model beginning in 2022. As the Trail Committee develops the Trail Stewardship Model, they are encouraged to consider a multi-disciplined team for stewardship of restored portions of the Trail. A potential team structure as well as a diagram of the proposed formation are presented below.

- **Trail Committee:** Provides overall direction for Trail restoration and stewardship; responsible for contract development and execution with restoration experts and contractors. In consultation with Friends’ ecological advisor and consulting ecologist, develops annual stewardship plans and budgets for each restored portion of the Trail.
- **Expert Ecological Advisor:** Periodically assesses the Trail’s ecological health and status of restoration projects; advises Trail Committee and Consulting Ecologist on options for improved stewardship; conducts training sessions for stewardship volunteers and contractors as appropriate; provides ecological insights to the Board as requested.
- **Consulting Ecologist:** Oversees restoration contractor activities; conducts technical stewardship duties not otherwise performed by contractors or volunteers; conveys stewardship priorities and techniques to the site stewards and their volunteer teams.
- **Site Stewards:** Skilled, empowered, and committed volunteers that supervise and support other volunteers in the ongoing stewardship of a specific, restored portion of the Trail (i.e., a “site”).
- **Committed Volunteers:** Volunteers that have received requisite ecological training and are able to perform reliable, high-quality stewardship work under the direction of a Site Steward.
- **Restoration Contractors:** Highly skilled, private-sector restoration contractors that are able to execute timely, high-quality stewardship tasks under careful on-site supervision of the Consulting Ecologist and/or the Trail Committee.

- **New/Occasional Volunteers:** Volunteers from the community with an interest in providing primarily non-technical assistance (e.g., raking, deadheading targeted invasive plants, etc.) on an occasional or one-time basis.



Recommendation #2: Develop a Trail Restoration Area Expansion Process to serve as a standardized approach for prioritizing, evaluating, and approving “new” restoration project areas along the Trail; this process should also identify opportunities to use in attracting funding and volunteers.

Should we expand our restoration efforts along the Trail? If so, where should we expand, how should we expand, and when should we expand? These are all questions we believe that Friends will confront as we continue to expand our base of supporters, volunteers, and donors over the next five years. To address these questions, it is recommended that a standardized process for prioritizing, evaluating, and approving “new” restoration project areas along the Trail be developed and utilized.

Unlike Friends’ previous strategic plan that identified specific areas for new restoration work over the 2016-2020 period, it is recommended that the 2021-2025 strategic plan focuses on developing and utilizing a process to identify and undertake such “new” restorations. It is envisioned that the process will include review and approval of any new restoration proposals by the Board of Trustees.



The intent of the proposed process is to ensure that the Board has complete knowledge of the short-term design, development, and implementation costs—as well as the long-term maintenance/stewardship costs—for any new restoration project area being considered. Long-term stewardship costs for all existing and any contemplated new restoration projects should be fully funded by existing (or imminent) funding within a Trail stewardship endowment fund(s).

It is recommended that development of this process be assigned to both the Trail and Development Committees during the first year of this strategic plan (2021). The process should consider the following key elements:

1. Fully document the proposed plan, taking care to describe the intended goals and challenges of the project as well as justification for the proposal.
2. Identify municipal and other governmental support for the proposed area of restoration, including long-term engagement from such sources.
3. Ensure that all financial requirements have been assessed and that adequate funding for each task has been secured or is imminently forthcoming. Key tasks for which funding will be needed include design, development, implementation, and maintenance/stewardship.
4. Document and quantify all long-term stewardship costs for each completed and future restoration area, such that a long-term commitment to maintenance of all existing and any new restoration projects is ensured.

Recommendation #3: Create a comprehensive Volunteer Engagement Program and assign a Volunteer Coordinator who will promote and manage Friends’ myriad volunteer opportunities.

Volunteers are the life blood of the Friends’ efforts to restore and maintain the Trail. Attracting, training, and retaining them will be crucial to our continued success. For this recommendation, the primary activities include identifying and quantifying our volunteer needs, identifying and pursuing potential volunteers, determining the best ways to motivate and retain the volunteers, and implementing an efficient process for scheduling volunteers.

Overseeing all aspects of this Friends program will be a new (volunteer) position appointed by the Board and entitled Volunteer Coordinator. The coordinator will work with each of Friends’ committees to help them identify and define volunteer opportunities.



To identify and quantify our volunteer needs, all of Friends’ activities will be examined including Trail maintenance, education and communication, and organizational development and finance.

Since the volunteer workload typically varies through the year, we will assess the timing and sequencing of volunteers as well as the types and skill levels required. Our current volunteer base can serve as a model for some future requirements, but it will be important to ensure we do everything we can to retain current and future volunteers. Once volunteer needs and associated requisite skillsets have been defined, we will develop detailed position descriptions and post them on Friends' website.

With knowledge of those needs, we will identify and pursue a variety of sources to find new volunteers including current Trail users/visitors, residents in nearby communities, acquaintances of current volunteers, local faith communities, Scouts, schools/school "green" groups, local garden clubs and Master Gardeners, and other local groups such as the Village of Glencoe Sustainability Task Force. We also will pursue more socially diverse volunteer audiences such as those that interface with the Chicago Botanic Garden.

Motivating and retaining volunteers is vital to achieving our goals. Interfacing with current and new recruits, we will identify what factors motivate volunteers. We will work in particular with the Trail Committee to ensure training programs reinforce the requisite skillsets. Our efforts will identify and reinforce effective ways to motivate including special awards, commendation letters, news articles, and social media posts.

Recommendation #4: Create and implement a Volunteer Training Program that defines and reinforces key responsibilities and skills for each of the volunteer categories within the organization (particularly those skills relating to the Trail's ecological stewardship).

Skilled volunteers are essential to many aspects of Friends' activities including our outreach and education programs, volunteer recruitment and retention, fundraising, and in particular, maintenance and stewardship of the Trail itself. The Volunteer Coordinator position described above in Recommendation #3 will identify and promote appropriate training opportunities in the region.

A collaborative partnership with the Chicago Botanic Garden would assist in creating specific training curricula for volunteers involved with Trail stewardship and maintenance, including the "site stewards" and "committed volunteers" described above in Recommendation #1. It is recommended that development of these curricula be assigned to the Trail Committee for initial implementation during the second year of this strategic plan (2022). Friends could consider underwriting tuition expenses for volunteers that complete classes or training programs for certain roles.



To increase volunteer knowledge of and appreciation for Trail restoration efforts, it is recommended that the Trail Committee divide and map trail segments into discrete “sites.” For each of these sites, participating volunteers can be presented with an overview of the stewardship activities including goals and evolving problems. This material also can be added to Friends’ website as well as distributed to volunteers on workdays.



Enhancement of Trail documentation, overall trail knowledge, and information-sharing through databases, online manuals, and/or how-to videos will benefit all volunteers. It is recommended that these enhancements be assigned to specific volunteers or interns (under supervision of the Trail Committee). To expand its use and effectiveness, some of this digital content can be made available for convenient, on-trail access via tablets and smart phones for training, stewardship work, and contractor access. An example is creating links to existing plant identification websites and/or apps. In some circumstances, specific Trail information with the most frequently encountered native and invasive species can be presented on Friends’ website.

Finally, it is recommended that additional training opportunities be publicized on Friends’ website for volunteers looking to enhance their ecological stewardship skills. Volunteers can be directed to training opportunities within the region provided by such organizations as Chicago Wilderness, Forest Preserves of Cook County and other conservation districts, Chicago Botanic Garden, Morton Arboretum, etc. Appropriate subject matter would include native and invasive plant identification, first aid/CPR, group leadership, and plant health assessment.

Recommendation #5: Expand and enhance Friends’ Funding Model, with a particular emphasis on attracting more foundation and corporate funding partners.

An important recommendation of this Strategic Plan is to expand and enhance Friends’ funding model, with a particular emphasis on attracting more foundation and corporate funding partners. Each December, the Trail Committee will present to the Board its annual work plan and anticipated financial resource needs for the coming year. In January, the Governance & Finance Committee will create a proposed budget for the year, subject to Board approval.

The Development Committee should, in particular, identify budget items that might be funded by foundations or corporate partners, and they are encouraged to explore sources for such support (e.g., scholarships for Trail stewardship training). Given the importance of major donors (\$1,000+ annually), the Development Committee should develop unique and specific engagement strategies for these donors. The Committee will create its annual fundraising plan based on the budget, including goals for large and small donors, foundations, and corporate partners. In doing so, it will create compelling language for its appeals.

Friends’ annual large fundraising event, the Buckthorn Barbecue, was cancelled in 2020 due to COVID-19 restrictions. While this event historically has provided our organization with important financial support, the Development Committee is encouraged to continue examining alternatives to having a single, large annual fundraising event.

Recommendation #6: Broaden our community education programs to inform the public about critical environmental issues that affect the Trail both directly and indirectly.

In an effort to connect more broadly with members of our various communities, Friends has a unique advantage to the extent that we can “reach them when they’re smiling”—as they walk, run, or bike along the Trail and enjoy its natural amenities. We also believe the Trail itself can be an effective classroom in which to describe our stewardship activities, explain the reasons such actions are needed, and solicit new volunteers who may help achieve our goals.

At one level, the sort of community education we envision will be immediate and topical, and include plant identification labels, trail markers, and information about how conditions on the Trail change with the seasons.



But to effectively communicate the deeper reasons for our on-going stewardship efforts, we also need to tell the historical/biological story of the Trail. This includes a plan, executed in the first half of the past century, to dig a broad trench down the middle of the railroad right-of-way as a means to eliminate on-grade rail crossings. As a result, not only were the native plants removed, but the sides of the trench were left open to erosion, the flattened bottom was allowed to

collect stagnant rainwater, and the removal of the topsoil meant conditions were no longer conducive to the growth of native plants. This story clarifies not only the need for our stewardship efforts, but also the responsibility of the local human residents for altering the landscape in the first place. As Trail users come to better understand this real-world environmental history, more of them may be inclined to lend us a hand.

It is recommended that the Communications and Program Committee create and deliver these educational materials, ideally in cooperation with local libraries and other civic organizations that share our interests in highlighting environmental issues that directly and indirectly impact the Trail. As appropriate, some of the on-Trail materials can be mirrored on our website with more in-depth coverage, while both the Trail signage and the website may, in turn, identify outside resources that provide a deeper dive into a particular subject (thereby avoiding the need for us to “reinvent the wheel”). Indeed, recent technologies such as the use of QR codes could give Trail users access to a significantly greater volume of Friends-curated information on their cell phones, without the need to interrupt the trail’s natural aesthetics with excessive use of large-scale physical signage.

Recommendation #7: Strengthen existing partnerships—and forge new partnerships—with organizations critical to the success of Friends’ mission and programs.

Friends will endeavor to forge relationships with other environmental- and sustainability-focused organizations (e.g., the North Shore “Go Green” groups in Winnetka, Wilmette and statewide Illinois). These organizations could co-develop and co-sponsor public educational opportunities and encourage advocacy. These organizations can also serve to direct volunteers and supporters of Trail restoration to Friends resources and programs.

In an effort to build partnerships with other municipalities along the Trail (i.e., beyond our current municipal partnerships within Glencoe), it is recommended that Friends establish relationships with the other municipal organizations within Winnetka, Wilmette, and Kenilworth through which the Trail runs. These relationships will have the potential to garner support for Trail restoration that mirrors support currently provided by the Village of Glencoe and the Glencoe Park District. The support from these additional governing bodies could provide exposure, advocacy, and education for community residents, as well as funding and/or labor resources for future Trail restoration and maintenance.



Beyond local relationships, it is highly recommended that Friends establish strong relationships with regional forest preserve districts including those in Cook and Lake Counties. These relationships have the potential to provide access to training and other educational materials for use by Friends’ volunteers as well as the general public. Additionally, there may be initiatives started through these forest preserves that could be synergistic with efforts on the Trail. An example is the eradication of a specific invasive species whereby collaboration, coordination, and cooperation will benefit all parties.

Finally, the relationship with the Chicago Botanic Garden represents a unique strategic connection to the regional community and a source of education, training, and collaboration. Because of its strategic importance, it is recommended that this relationship be a key focus of the Board for ongoing nurturing and enhancement.

Recommendation #8: Advocate for effective public policies that enhance and protect important ecological resources.

Over the years, Friends has built a trusted and respected voice within local communities on behalf of ecological stewardship along the Trail. This standing within the communities could be leveraged on behalf of other ecological restoration initiatives, and in particular, in support of comprehensive environmental policies at the local, regional, and/or national levels that affect the health and resilience of important ecosystems. While admittedly our Trail ecosystem is quite small in size relative to many other ecological preserves, our Trail is visited by many, many people every day of the year. As such, Friends believes we have an outsized capability to educate the public on critical environmental policy issues.

Friends has an opportunity to join with other respected organizations to advocate for responsible public policy that impacts a range of issues affecting ecosystem restoration and protection. These issues can be relatively simple and localized (such as promotion of native plantings on local residents' property to benefit pollinators), to much broader proposals such as preservation or expansion of critical wildlife habitat areas.

In particular, advocacy outreach to elected officials and their staff can have a direct bearing on the fate of proposed governmental priorities and legislation. Our ability to strategically share factual, science-based information with Trail users as they enjoy the restored Trail and

“while they’re already smiling” can greatly enhance our messages’ acceptance and retention. In the final analysis, our ability to advance, as a nation, progressive environmental policy will need broad support from our elected officials—and as is true for any issue being debated in the public arena, that level of support is heavily predicated on voters’ expressed opinions to their elected officials.

As Friends evaluates the important role it can play in advancing ecosystem restoration programs and related environmental policy, we want to be careful to exercise this advocacy within a realm that is not beyond our organization’s demonstrated expertise or other resources. It is recommended that advocacy positions be thoroughly researched and carefully developed so as to not unnecessarily drain our limited volunteer resources, and to prioritize our attention on issues that will have the greatest impact.



Recommendation #9: Create and implement a Board Development Program that enhances the board's leadership skills and effectiveness, so as to accommodate the organization's anticipated growth in size and complexity.

Members of Friends' board of trustees come from a variety of business, educational, and community backgrounds, and they bring a particularly broad suite of diverse skills to the organization. The Board is uniquely cohesive in its interactions. In order to enhance its skills in leading a not-for-profit organization and venturing into new goals, it seems a reasonable expectation that the Board and its trustees participate in leadership exercises and growth opportunities. The recommendations in this strategic plan will help broaden the trustees' skills and experience in leading for Friends' future success.

Additional perspectives on leadership growth can be obtained by reaching out to other environmentally related 501(c)(3) organizations to learn how they have addressed similar early-stage formation leadership enhancements. This effort would help gain collective know-how on enhancing the effectiveness of our Board and continue to expand our network of conservation organization partners.

There is a multitude of ways to go about enhancing board leadership skills. One possibility is to engage a consulting firm to plan and facilitate a program that would enhance the Board's effectiveness. By contractually engaging a professional consultant specializing in environmental non-profit organization leadership, the Board can obtain valuable new skills beyond those that the current trustees themselves bring to the table. In addition, the consultant would help Friends connect with other similar organizations around the country, thereby expanding our network.



Another possibility is to consider a retreat among Board members for team building and planning purposes. This could take place as an annual event and help Board members to connect, engage, and learn from and about each other, including welcoming new Board trustees as they are onboarded. Strategy and planning logically would be part of the retreat agenda, and guest speakers could be engaged to help construct the days' events. With COVID-19 restrictions currently limiting face-to-face interactions, this may not be possible to implement during 2021. Nevertheless, additional zoom interactions could be considered to at least kick-start the initiative in 2021.

It is recommended that creation and implementation of the Board Development Program be the responsibility of the Governance & Finance Committee.

Strategic Plan Management

Friends will benefit from a management process to oversee and track the Strategic Plan's recommendations, with annual work plans and specific project plans being critical to successful implementation. A template like the following is recommended for use by the Board for monitoring progress, risks, challenges, and the resources needed for each of the Plan's recommendations. Responsible committees would report regularly to the Board using this kind of a template. On an annual basis, the Board should review the Plan to assess progress towards achieving the Plan's goals and make adjustments or refinements as may be needed.

In using the template, responsible committees will create statements of objectives for executing the recommendation. They will highlight the key activities and milestones ("major elements") necessary to accomplish the objectives. For each major element, an anticipated timeline will be established and tracked. In addition, resources required to implement each major element will be identified including the people (Board members and/or volunteers), the costs and investments (including both the total and annual increments), and professional services (identified specifically for each provider, including their cost). Friends' contact person(s) responsible for managing each major element also should be noted. Finally, the reporting cycle (when, how often) will be defined.

Project Plan Template for Tracking Implementation of Strategic Plan Recommendations

1. Objective statement(s) for each Plan recommendation
2. Description of each major element required to implement the recommendation
3. For each major element, describe:
 - a. Timelines for activities and milestones
 - b. Resource requirements
 - i. People
 - ii. Cost and investment
 - iii. Professional services
 - c. Responsible person for each major element and activities
4. Reporting cycle for Board oversight



Implementation Timetable for Recommendations

Implementation of the Strategic Plan's recommendations will be phased in over the Plan's timeframe of 2021-2025. The relative importance and expected difficulty for accomplishing each recommendation should be factored into our planning and implementation expectations. We also need to remain cognizant of the number of recommendations assigned to each of Friends' standing committees so as not to overload any particular subset of our volunteers.

The following high-level outline is suggested for phased implementation of the recommendations.

2021-2025 Strategic Plan Recommendations		Responsible Committee(s)	2021				2022				2023				2024	2025
			1 Q	2 Q	3 Q	4 Q	1 Q	2 Q	3 Q	4 Q	1 Q	2 Q	3 Q	4 Q		
Legend for Stages																
Planning and Development																
Initial Implementation																
Utilization and Refinement																
R1 - Trail Stewardship Model																
	Model Development & Implementation	Trail														
R2 - Expansion Process Development																
	Process Development and Implementation	Trail and Development														
R3 - Volunteer Engagement Program																
	Volunteer Coordinator Appointed	Governance & Finance														
	Volunteer Engagement Process Developed & Implementation	Volunteer Coordinator														
R4 - Volunteer Training Program																
	Trail Stewardship Skills Curricula Development & Implementation	Trail														
	Other Volunteer Training Curricula Developed & Implementation	Volunteer Coordinator														
R5 - Enhanced Funding Model																
	Enhanced Funding Model Development & Implementation	Development														
R6 - Expanded Community Education Programming																
	Community Education Opportunities Identified & Offered	Communications & Programming														
R7 - Expanded Partner Engagement																
	Partner Engagement Expansion Development & Implementation	Board														
R8 - Advocacy Program																
	Advocacy Policy and Process Development & Implementation	Board														
R9 - Board Development																
	Board Development Opportunities Implementation	Governance & Finance														