STRATEGIC PLAN
FY 2021–2023
Introduction

The founding of the McHenry County Conservation District began almost 50 years ago in July 1971, when the residents of McHenry County voted by public referendum to establish the Conservation District under the Illinois Conservation District Act of 1963 (70 ILCS 410/). The founders envisioned a public agency that would preserve and protect the land and water they loved and lived on, promote a way of life they cherished, and of a place that could be shared with the wildlife around them; healthy and vibrant.

The distinctiveness of McHenry County’s natural land was a driving force in the creation of the Conservation District. That desire for preservation inspired land purchases. The first land purchase occurred in 1973 when 50 acres that make up a portion of Beck’s Woods Conservation Area in Chemung were acquired. Since that time, thousands of acres have been added to the land holdings of the District. Today, the Conservation District protects over 25,600 acres of open land diverse with woodlands, prairies, wetlands, ponds, creeks, and rivers throughout McHenry County.

The Conservation District is a separate and political subdivision of the State of Illinois, has independent taxing powers, and its boundaries are the same as those of McHenry County. It is governed by a seven-member volunteer Board of Trustees appointed by the County Board Chairman and confirmed by the McHenry County Board. Board members serve five-year staggered terms. The Conservation District is administered by an Executive Director and Directors from four divisions: Administration & Finance; Operations & Public Safety; Land Preservation & Natural Resources; and Marketing & Education.

The Conservation District is supported by the McHenry County Conservation Foundation. The Foundation was established in December 1999 as a 501(c)3 non-profit organization classified by the Internal Revenue Service as a 509(a)3, Type I supporting organization. The execution of a Memorandum of Understanding has the sole purpose of The Foundation promotes the goals and objectives of the Conservation District and its partners. The Board of Directors are appointed by the McHenry County Conservation District’s Board of Trustees.

Each year the Conservation District hosts more than one million visitors each year and offers opportunities for people of all ages to explore, discover, learn, relax and renew in the wide-open spaces found throughout McHenry County.
McHenry County Conservation District protects approximately 25,600 acres of open land diverse with woodlands, prairies, wetlands, ponds, creeks, and rivers. Thirty-five sites are currently open to the public year-round featuring 107 miles of hiking trails, 45 miles of biking trails, 24 fishing areas, six campgrounds, four canoe launches, 37 miles of horse trails, 18 sites with picnic areas and shelters, two education facilities, and a multitude of opportunities for wildlife viewing. In addition, within District sites there are 17 Illinois State Nature Preserves.
Our Mission

McHenry County Conservation District exists to preserve, restore and manage natural areas and open spaces for their intrinsic value and for the benefits to present and future generations.

Our Vision

To fulfill our promise that McHenry County’s public lands, water, wildlife and way of life will thrive in a rapidly changing world. Where people of all ages, cultures and abilities are engaged and empowered to learn about and contribute to conservation in diverse and impactful ways. Where wild and scenic places support thriving native plants and wildlife populations and public lands support diverse outdoor recreation, educational and immersive experiences.

Our Values

At McHenry County Conservation District, we work as a team, act with integrity, lead with compassion, operate safely, maintain a sense of humor, innovate continuously, deliver quality, ensure fiscal responsibility, and strive for excellence in all we do.

In every walk in with nature one receives far more than he seeks. —John Muir
Our Pledge

**WE PLEDGE:**
To manage public lands through science and in a manner that is responsive and resilient to a changing climate.

**Build Resilient Woodlands, Prairies & Wetlands**

**WE PLEDGE:**
To provide outdoor places to reflect, play and interact with family, friends and community.

**Provide Outdoor Places to Reflect, Play & Interact**

**WE PLEDGE:**
To create opportunities for meaningful outdoor recreational experiences for people of all ages, cultures and abilities.

**Create Outdoor Recreational Experiences**

**WE PLEDGE:**
To help build a sustainable and vibrant local economy by providing a destination for outdoor recreation.

**Provide a Destination for Outdoor Recreation**

**WE PLEDGE:**
To empower you to conserve our water, wildlife and way of life in McHenry County by actively seeking input and support.

**Manage Public Lands**

**WE PLEDGE:**
To promote actions that contribute to clean air.

**Promote Actions for Clean Air**

**WE PLEDGE:**
To work vigilantly to influence the health and well being of our county.

**Health & Well Being**

**WE PLEDGE:**
To protect and restore wetlands, streams and rivers; which help to reduce flooding.

**Protect Wetlands**

**WE PLEDGE:**
To protect land which filters and removes pollutants from water while enhancing groundwater recharge.

**Protect Land**

**WE PLEDGE:**
To protect and restore wetlands, streams and rivers; which help to reduce flooding.

**Protect Natural Areas**

**WE PLEDGE:**
To work vigilantly to influence the health and well being of our county.

**Health & Well Being**

**WE PLEDGE:**
To spark hope for a future more closely intertwined with the natural world.

**Spark Hope for the Future**

**WE PLEDGE:**
To remain steadfast in our commitment to protect distinct natural areas.

**Protect Natural Areas**

**WE PLEDGE:**
To provide outdoor places to reflect, play and interact with family, friends and community.

**Provide Outdoor Places to Reflect, Play & Interact**

**WE PLEDGE:**
To protect land which filters and removes pollutants from water while enhancing groundwater recharge.

**Protect Land**
Community Engagement

In developing the FY 2021-2023 Strategic Plan, the District engaged the community in several ways.

From February 7, 2020 to March 10, 2020, a County-Wide Resident Survey for the McHenry County Conservation District was facilitated by aQity Research of Evanston, IL. The survey generated a much higher response rate than expected with 666 households, 67% higher than the target quota. The demographic profile of the respondents was compared to the 2017 US Census Data or McHenry County and was weighted slightly by region, gender, age, presence of children under age 18, homeowner vs. renter status, and race/ethnicity to ensure the results were representative of all residents county wide.

In addition, a biannual McHenry County Conservation Congress was held on February 7, 2020 to engage delegates and members of the community in advocacy for actions that should be considered by the Conservation District. This assemblage of thoughtful leaders and influencers offered insight and opinions which helped shape the Strategic Plan and the associated work plan being developed.

Lastly, the Vision Engagement Influencers identified Community Stakeholders to participate in an online survey in November/December 2019 to obtain their feedback on the Conservation District’s envisioned areas of focus, strategic direction, and priorities for the near future.
Since 1971, the McHenry County Conservation District has been preserving natural land, restoring wildlife habitats, and investing in projects and programs that protect our water, wildlife, and way of life in McHenry County. The Conservation District fulfills a statutory mandate to steward these public lands which represent McHenry County’s natural and cultural heritage. These are irreplaceable resources which are critical for protecting the quality of our air, land and water, providing ecosystem services, wildlife habitat, and recreational spaces on which all living things depend.

The cost of restoring, managing, and maintaining high-quality natural lands and facilities is a primary component of the Conservation District’s annual budget and appropriations ordinance and includes experienced and knowledgeable personnel and dedicated volunteers to carry out the day-to-day stewardship of these community assets.

For almost 50 years, the Conservation District has worked collaboratively with conservation advocates, volunteers, and other partners to implement plans to preserve and protect McHenry County’s treasured natural landscapes. Maintaining healthy and resilient lands, expanding communication and outreach, and ensuring quality service and visitor safety remains a priority.

Preserving wildlife habitats, protecting threatened and endangered plants and animals, mitigating impacts of climate change, providing education and outdoor recreation programs, and operating/maintaining sites and facilities comes at a price and requires adequate funding. Smart and sustainable approaches are necessary, securing additional resources to carry out our statutory mission is inevitable and conservation stewardship needs to be realized as a shared endeavor.

The path to successfully restore McHenry County’s natural areas to optimal health and resiliency and to provide safe access to these areas for the general public to enjoy is outlined in this three-year strategic plan.

The four pillars focus on water, land, community and stewardship, and will launch strategic initiatives and conservation efforts that will set the course for a better tomorrow.

We invite you to share in our important conservation work and to monitor our progress as we begin the next phase of our journey.
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<td><strong>OUR WATER</strong></td>
<td>Engage the public, landowners and governmental agencies on water quality issues, restoration efforts of habitats along rivers, creeks and wetlands, and promote water-related activities.</td>
<td>To manage, protect and restore wetlands to improve water quality, quantity and aquatic habitats</td>
<td><strong>Restore Wetlands:</strong> Improve natural flood storage capacity. <strong>Minimize Flooding:</strong> Identify remaining restorable wetlands and share data with strategic partners. <strong>Maximize Quality and Quantity of Surface and Groundwater:</strong> Assess the positive impact of 25,600 acres of public open space on the quality and quantity of groundwater. <strong>Water Activities:</strong> Work in partnerships to plan future opportunities for water-related activities.</td>
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<td><strong>OUR LAND</strong></td>
<td>Restore to ecological health, an interconnected landscape of woodlands, savanna, prairies, and wetlands in a manner that is responsive and resilient to ensure they are preserved into perpetuity.</td>
<td>To preserve and protect wild and scenic places that support thriving native plant and wildlife populations while responsibly managing public lands that support diverse outdoor recreation, educational and immersive experiences.</td>
<td><strong>Restore Natural Habitat:</strong> Restore a minimum of 500 acres of new, natural habitat. <strong>Land Preservation:</strong> Protect parcels as opportunity and funding become available. <strong>Site Use:</strong> Improve opportunities for site use and accessibility. <strong>Trail Connections:</strong> Work in active partnerships to plan and protect future local and regional trail corridors.</td>
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<td><strong>OUR COMMUNITY</strong></td>
<td>Undertake communication, education and outreach initiatives to engage and empower people of all ages, cultures and abilities to learn about and contribute to conservation in diverse and impactful ways</td>
<td>To build broad public awareness and support for conservation while instilling a deeper awareness of conservation issues and encouraging an active and healthy outdoor lifestyle, thus adding to the overall quality of life and economic vitality of the county.</td>
<td><strong>Inspire Conservation:</strong> Energize, educate and empower community citizens and volunteers. <strong>Cultivate Knowledge:</strong> Maintain a professional and knowledgeable team to achieve land, water, community and stewardship goals. <strong>Promote Health &amp; Wellness:</strong> Establish the Conservation District as an important community partner for improving the health and well-being of McHenry County residents. <strong>Influence Advocacy:</strong> Initiate and advocate for legislative and public policy objectives that protect and safeguard public lands/water, wildlife, and way of life in McHenry County.</td>
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<td><strong>OUR STEWARDSHIP</strong></td>
<td>Continue organizational effectiveness, focusing on core activities, allocating funds responsibly, and diversifying revenue sources. Identify core activities that prioritize preserving, restoring and managing our natural and cultural heritage, opportunities for immersive and educational experiences, and maintaining safe, public access.</td>
<td>To ensure financial and organizational capacity to pursue the vision and mission of the Conservation District.</td>
<td><strong>Financial Sustainability:</strong> Balance new and existing resources with core activities to ensure long-term organizational stability. <strong>Expand Philanthropic Support:</strong> Work with the McHenry County Conservation Foundation to grow their donor base to support, sustain and advance conservation, education and recreation programs of the Conservation District. <strong>Effective Governance:</strong> Provide the Board of Trustees and elected officials with continuous, in-depth knowledge about the opportunities and challenges facing the Conservation District to ensure informed, fact-based decision making. <strong>Improved Technology Infrastructure:</strong> Enhance organizational effectiveness through the use of reliable and emerging technologies and information resources that support innovation, increased accessibility, and efficiency.</td>
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Manage, protect and restore wetlands to improve water quality, quantity and aquatic habitats.

Strategic Direction:
McHenry County Conservation District will engage and involve the public, landowners and governmental agencies in McHenry County on issues surrounding water quality, activities, and efforts to restore habitats along rivers, creeks and wetlands, thus reducing flooding, filtering/removing pollutants from water, and enhancing groundwater recharge.

Priorities —

RESTORE WETLANDS. Improve flood storage capacity by restoring former wetlands.

MINIMIZE FLOODING. Identify the largest remaining restorable wetlands in the county and share data with strategic partners.

MAXIMIZE QUALITY & QUANTITY OF SURFACE AND GROUNDWATER. Assess the positive impact of 25,000 acres of public open space on the quality/quantity of surface and groundwater.

WATER ACTIVITIES. Work in partnership to plan future opportunities for water-related activities.

Conservation Initiatives —
Identify, plan, permit and fund three wetland restoration projects.

Identify strategic partners to assist in restoring remaining wetlands.

Evaluate the Conservation District’s agricultural lands on water quality and degree of water infiltration.

Share how the Conservation District impacts the quantity and quality of groundwater in the area.

Participate as an active stakeholder in the McHenry County Water Resources Action Plan (WRAP) Task Force and assist in drafting, communicating and implementing the plan.

Envisioned Impact:
Reduced flooding, cleaner waterways, and enhanced groundwater recharge.
Our Land

Preserve and protect wild and scenic places in McHenry County that support thriving native plant and wildlife populations, while responsibly managing and developing public lands that support diverse outdoor recreation, educational and immersive experiences.

Strategic Direction:
McHenry County Conservation District and its partners will protect and restore to ecological health, an interconnected landscape of woodlands/savanna, grasslands, and wetlands in a manner that is responsive and resilient to a changing climate ensuring they are preserved into perpetuity.

Envisioned Impact:
Diverse Landscapes that are resilient to a changing climate.
Recreational amenities that allow for additional public access and are funded for long-term maintenance.

Priorities —

RESTORE NATURAL HABITAT. Restore a minimum of 500 acres of new natural habitat.

LAND PRESERVATION. Preserve and protect parcels as opportunity and funding is available.

SITE USE. Improve opportunities for site use and accessibility.

TRAIL CONNECTIONS. Work in active partnerships to plan and protect future local and regional trail corridors.

Conservation Initiatives —

Adopt a 5-Year Natural Capital Improvement Plan.

Promote the benefits of the ecological restoration activities to new audiences.

Identify up to 500 additional acres of habitat most suited for implementation of ecological restoration activities and secure funding.

Identify and secure funding for the annual maintenance projects listed in the Capital Asset Management Plan.

Seek funding and implement plans for accessible launch at The Hollows Conservation Area; new way finding signs; HUM Trail conditions and repair, modify or abandon sections of trail.
Priorities —

**INSPIRE CONSERVATION AMBASSADORS.** Energize, educate and empower community citizens and active volunteers.

**CULTIVATE KNOWLEDGE.** Provide a professional and knowledgeable team to achieve land, water, community and stewardship goals.

**PROMOTE HEALTH & WELLNESS.** Establish the Conservation District as an important community partner for improving the health and wellbeing of McHenry County residents.

**INFLUENCE ADVOCACY.** Initiate and advocate for legislative/public policy objectives by working with other conservation agencies that protect and safeguard public lands, water, wildlife and way of life in McHenry County.

Conservation Initiatives —

Establish criteria for Conservation Ambassadors program to grow and strengthen an active volunteer base.

Identify advanced leadership development and provide the technology to assist team members to achieve goals.

Incorporate Diversity, Equity and Inclusion principles to attract and retain a diverse and talented team of employees representative of the community.

Identify community partners to assist in improving the health and wellbeing of McHenry County residents through to wellness programs, activities, and self-guided opportunities.

Establish a Conservation Alliance with environmental agencies to increase communication and collaboration.

Our Community

Build public awareness and support for conservation while encouraging an active and healthy outdoor lifestyle and deeper awareness of conservation issues, adding to the overall quality of life and economic vitality of the county.

**Strategic Direction:**

McHenry County Conservation District will undertake communication, education and outreach initiatives designed to engage and empower people of all ages, cultures and abilities to learn about and contribute to conservation in diverse and impactful ways.

**Envisioned Impact:**

Residents are more mindful of conservation benefits, actively engage in efforts to ensure a secure financial future for the District and reap the rewards of a healthier McHenry County for all.
Ensure financial and organizational capacity to pursue the vision and mission of the Conservation District.

Strategic Direction:
McHenry County Conservation District will continue its organizational effectiveness in a sustainable manner focusing resources on core activities, strengthening decision making and governing abilities of the Board of Trustees by allocating funds responsibly and diversifying revenue sources to support and advance its vision and mission.

Envisioned Impact:
The restoration of natural and cultural resources, public access to maintained, safe outdoor recreational amenities, and the availability of immersive educational experiences will remain priorities.

Priorities —

FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY. Balance new and existing resources with core activities to ensure long-term organizational stability.

EXPAND PHILANTHROPIC SUPPORT. Work collaboratively with the McHenry County Conservation Foundation to grow base of donors to support, sustain and advance the mission of the District.

EFFECTIVE GOVERNANCE. Provide the Board of Trustees and elected officials continuous knowledge about opportunities and challenges facing the District to ensure informed and fact-based decision making.

TECHNOLOGY INFRASTRUCTURE. Enhance organizational effectiveness through the use of reliable and emerging technologies and resources to support innovation, increased accessibility and efficiency.

Conservation Initiatives —
Document deferred maintenance made throughout the District.
Assist McHenry County Conservation Foundation in achieving their adopted 3-Year Strategic Plan.
Identify topic list of what areas need better communication and develop educational materials to better inform Board of Trustees and Elected Officials on the mission, funding and practices of the District.
Our future success is directly tied to our historic past and our ability to inspire current and future generations in achieving our strategic direction as mapped out in our FY 2021–2023 Strategic Plan.

The Conservation District will be celebrating its 50th Anniversary in 2021 and has been recognized locally, regionally and nationally for environmental stewardship and scientific expertise, leadership and regional collaboration and community and business partnerships.
The Strategic Plan is a short-term vision document which is complementary to the Conservation District’s long-term framework plan. The Conservation District’s operational work plan will be developed to meet the strategic direction as outlined in this plan.

All operational work plan items will be completed with existing financial resources and organizational capacity, and aligned with the Conservation District’s annual budget and appropriation ordinance.

The Strategic Plan is intended to guide the Board of Trustees in making often difficult decisions about the allocation of resources. It is also an important management tool that identifies the essential and most critical activities the District intends to focus on over the next few years; and not get sidetracked with other worthy initiatives that are not aligned with this Strategic Plan.
When we tug on a single thing in nature, we find it attached to everything else. —John Muir

Our Team

Board of Trustees
Vernon M. Scacci, President
Dave Brandt, Vice President
John Henning, Treasurer
Carolyn “Lyn” Campbell, Secretary
Patrick Fritz, Trustee
William Cook, Trustee
Linda Thomas, Trustee

Executive Leadership Team
Elizabeth S. Kessler, MBA, CPRE, Executive Director
Ed Collins, Director of Land Preservation & Natural Resources
Andy Dylak, Director of Administration & Finance
John Kremer, CPRP, Director of Operations & Public Safety
Wendy Kummerer, CPRP, Director of Marketing & Education

Leadership Team
Sara Denham, Wildlife Resource Manager
Jenny Heider, MHRM, PHR, SHRM-CP, Human Resource Manager
Laura King, Chief of Police
Becky Lambert, Education Manager
Amy Peters, ASLA, Planning Manager
Val Siler, CPRP, Land Administration & Preservation Manager
Perry Weborg, Sites & Fleet Manager
Brad Woodson, Natural Resource Manager
Chris Zientko, Facilities Manager
Shawna Flavell, Executive Director McHenry County Conservation Foundation

Vision Engagement Influencers
Kim Compton and Beth Gunderson - Co-Chairs
Anne Basten, Josh Crittenden, Jean Gerstbrein, Caitlynn McWhorter, Stephanie Michael, John Peters, Gabriel Powers, Sarah Rummel, Laurie Ryan, Steve Stabenow and Ben Wolfe