



# CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

## Long Range Planning

### 2010-2030

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# Introduction

## Setting Direction

The Board of Trustees is pleased to present the McHenry County Conservation District's Conceptual Framework for Long Range Planning for 2010 through 2030. The Conceptual Framework for Long Range Planning is intended to serve as a support document to guide the District in setting priorities for the next twenty years in the areas of Preservation, Education, Recreation and Organizational Effectiveness.

Looking forward to 2030, the District must continue to make decisions that ensure the long-term sustainability of the county's natural and cultural resources. Historically, the District has been recognized as a pioneer in the region for numerous innovative conservation initiatives. These have included land preservation, habitat restoration, natural resources management, development of sites for public access and outdoor recreation, compatible land use, energy conservation, and interpretive educational programming. The Conceptual Framework for Long Range Planning will continue to help guide those decisions and ensure both the continued viability and furthering of the District's mission.

Central to the foundation of the District is fostering a stronger conservation ethic among McHenry County citizens, helping all of us, regardless of the basis for our interest in nature, to develop a greater awareness of our role in, and responsibility for, the total community of life. A conservation ethic asks us to assume a moral duty to become educated about conservation issues and to act on that information. A conservation ethic is an attitude that recognizes the importance of preserving the natural heritage of the county's open space.

To attain this future long range vision the McHenry County Conservation District must focus its priorities on the policies and investments that are most critical to achieving that vision.

As Aldo Leopold stated in his Foreword to A Sand County Almanac, "That land is a community is the basic concept of ecology, but that land is to be loved and respected is an extension of ethics." Fundamental to developing an ethical perspective that embraces wise land stewardship as part of its purview is an understanding of the role that a healthy environment plays in the daily lives of the citizens of the county – the land community. These include readily measurable attributes such as ample groundwater, clean air, abundant wildlife, flood storage capacity and other tangible ecosystem services. Diverse and healthy land also provides more intangible but nonetheless essential benefits to human cul-

ture. These include recreational opportunities, solitude, beauty and a sense of greater connection to the natural world.

Together, attributes such as these compose the metrics by which we may measure the quality of life within our county and our vision of a true land ethic.

## Background

Created by the grassroots efforts of ecologically conscientious citizens in 1971 and supported by the Illinois Conservation District Act of 1963, the McHenry County Conservation District began with the mission to preserve open space, and to provide environmental education programs and resources for recreational opportunities to the public.

The McHenry County Conservation District is a special district governed by a seven-member Board of Trustees appointed by the McHenry County Board. Trustees serve a five-year term without compensation and at least one new trustee is appointed each year.

The District has its own taxing authority to accomplish its mission of preservation, education and recreation. The majority of the funding for the District is generated through a tax levy not to exceed 1/10<sup>th</sup> of one percent of the assessed value of all properties in McHenry County. The District may also pursue bonds for the purpose of land acquisition, site improvements, habitat restoration, capital projects and operations. The funding requirements of the levy and budget are guided by District goals and objectives. These goals and objectives are approved by the McHenry County Conservation District Board of Trustees.

As of January of 2010, more than 23,500 acres are maintained by the McHenry County Conservation District. Twenty nine (29) sites are open year round for public use. Numerous activities are permitted on these conservation sites including hiking, nature study, camping, picnicking, bicycling, dog walking, horseback riding, fishing, cross country skiing, snowshoeing, snowmobiling, hunting and canoeing. Site features include visitor centers, education centers, trails, boardwalks, shelters, picnic tables, campgrounds, restrooms, drinking water hand pumps, parking and trailer lots.

Some preserved lands will always be limited in terms of public access due to the sensitive nature of the resources found there, pursuant to ILCS Chapter 70 – Conservation District Act 410/11. *Every district shall consider the preservation of natural conditions and protection of the flora and fauna as part of its principal purpose and to that end shall set aside a substantial portion of its land to remain in an essentially undisturbed condition.*

# Preservation

## **Goal:**

The McHenry County Conservation District will acquire, restore, preserve, protect or otherwise promote elements identified as key county natural resources.

## **Focus:**

The McHenry County Conservation District will acquire, restore, preserve, protect or otherwise promote elements identified as key county natural resources.

The total land area of McHenry County, Illinois is 386,247 acres or 603.51 sq. miles (640 acres equals 1 sq. mile) as of the 2007 US Census. As of January 2010, the District has preserved 23,500+ acres representing approximately 6% of the total land area in the county.

The National Recreation and Park Association and the United States Department of the Interior have developed open space standards that attempt to quantify the amount of land required to satisfy the needs for outdoor recreation. It is generally recommended that a minimum of 10 acres of local park land and 20 acres of regional open space be set aside for every 1,000 people. While these standards are designed to provide a framework to meet minimum public recreation needs, they do not reflect the habitat requirements of native wildlife populations, including endangered or threatened species, or the space needed for native ecosystems to maintain their long-term viability.

Since 1990, the County population has grown by approximately 75% to reach an estimated current population of nearly 318,000, representing an annual average increase of 2.3%. This growth rate will likely increase to 2.5% moving forward and according to the McHenry County 2030 Plan, the Regional Planning Commission (RPC) estimates the county will reach a population of approximately 495,000 by the year 2030.

The District established a standard of 51 acres of open space for each 1,000 people in the county in its 2002 Strategic Land Acquisition Plan. Using this standard, the District would need to have preserved a total of 25,245 acres by the year 2030.

The vision of a cultural land ethic calls on us to understand that land acquisition goals should not be

based solely on human population metrics, thus the District desires to establish a new standard of protecting approximately 10% (39,000 acres) of McHenry County land by the year 2030, through fee simple purchase, easements, donations, and lease-hold interests.

The following section communicates the basic philosophical principles that provide the underpinning for the District's current land acquisition strategy. The strategy remains solidly rooted in good science, sound environmental reasoning, and fiscally responsible approaches that are more relevant today than when they were initiated a decade ago.

## **Land Acquisition Planning Model**

### Preserve Design

As the knowledge of natural ecosystems complexity has grown more detailed, the District's philosophy of open space preservation has evolved accordingly. In response to a globally unprecedented loss of biological diversity, the McHenry County Conservation District's efforts have progressed from protecting small, isolated sites in multiple locations to creating large preserves connected by greenway corridors. Research shows that this landscape scale approach of connected sites provides increased genetic diversity; fosters greater ecological stability; and retains viable populations of plants and animals longer than smaller, fragmented sites. These principles are among the fundamental tenets of a successful natural resource protection program – one that has been practiced by the McHenry County Conservation District for decades. In addition, these lands provide opportunities to link parks and open spaces with enhanced recreational opportunities.

### Elements of Ecologically Viable Preserves

In heavily fragmented landscapes such as those that exist in McHenry County, ecologically viable preserves are built utilizing four basic features: Core Preserves, Nodes, Corridors and Buffers.

- Core Preserves form the main building block of biologically viable preserves. These are large blocks of habitat often containing remnant natural communities or populations of key plants and animals, usually within a matrix of degraded but restorable land. Core preserves are capable of sustaining plants and animals that require large home ranges or habitat blocks to survive (bobcats, northern harriers). They allow species that are sensitive to genetic isolation (Blanding's turtle) or require large blocks of continuous habitat (grassland birds) to maintain their populations.
- Nodes are smaller blocks of habitat (approximately 100 to 600 acres) that can support populations of plants and animals that do not require large home ranges. Nodes act as transfer stations along corridors, funneling individuals and genetic material from one core preserve to another.

- Corridors are blocks of land that connect one preserve to another permitting genetic flow to occur between populations of plants and animals that would otherwise be isolated. Typical corridors include railroad right-of-ways or riparian systems.
- Buffers are strips or blocks of land surrounding core preserves, nodes and corridors that provide a necessary transition zone to protect sensitive natural resources within the preserve system from higher intensity land uses. Buffers typically accommodate a wider range of potential land uses than preserved lands as long as those activities do not negatively impact the biological integrity of the site. Potential buffer uses may include non-productive lands with natural features (i.e., riparian corridors and floodplains, poorly drained hydric soils, oak groves and ground water recharge areas), agricultural and alternative agricultural lands, and recreational lands.

A. Inner Buffer Lands: Inner Buffer lands are located directly adjacent to sensitive natural resource features and native habitat blocks. Only lower intensity land uses are acceptable in Inner Buffer Land areas and only when such activities will not impact the biological integrity of the site.

B. Outer Buffer Lands: Outer Buffer Lands are located directly adjacent to Inner Buffer lands. Higher intensity land uses may be acceptable in Outer Buffer Lands when such activities will not impact the biological integrity of the site or degrade the quality of Inner Buffer Lands.

#### General Tenets for Insuring Long Term Ecological Viability

- Larger macro sites (2,000 acres or larger in size) retain viable populations of plants and animals longer than smaller preserves.
- A series of connected preserves retain genetic diversity and ecological stability longer than fragmented preserves.
- In the absence of connected preserves, clusters of preserves provide a similar but lesser number of ecological advantages.
- Preserves that include large blocks of continuous interior (same type of habitat) habitat will sustain ecological viability longer than preserves which contain large blocks of edge habitat.
- Preserves that contain remnant natural communities and significant element occurrences (habitat restricted plants and animals) will recover ecologically more rapidly than areas that do not contain these components.

- Preserves that utilize riparian (stream) corridors for connectivity have the potential for preserving the *aquatic* as well as *terrestrial* components of a region's biological diversity.
- Preserves that utilize buffer areas are less likely to lose biological viability over time due to impacts from unrestricted land uses on adjoining lands than preserves that do not utilize buffer areas.
- Preserves that incorporate buffer areas along biological corridors, nodes and core preserves are more likely to provide the biological elasticity necessary for species to adjust to large scale shifts in climatic patterns over time than preserves that do not incorporate buffer areas.
- Preserves that incorporate appropriate permanent land use restrictions as part of buffer areas are less likely to lose biological viability over time than preserves that utilize temporary land use restrictions.

## Recommendations:

- **Land Acquisition**
  - Future land acquisition goals include preserving high-quality natural areas, linking green infrastructure, protecting rivers and streams, purchasing conservation area in-holdings and establishing buffers within the Preserve Design around existing macrosites.
  - Continue to base land protection strategies in good science, sound environmental planning and the most current preserve design research available, thus providing a solid underpinning for making decisions on land acquisition, educational outreach and site development.
  - Continue to prioritize opportunities that ensure core preserves, nodes and corridors remain the principal focus of land protection efforts until these components of the plan are completed.
  - Expand land protection efforts to include the protection of buffer areas around primary protection areas by enlarging and defining the existing references to such areas already within the preserve design elements of the plan.
  - Develop a conceptual framework for greenways and buffer areas that identifies symbiotic land uses with these areas that will insure the long term ecological, recreational, and educational viability of Conservation District sites.
  - Continue to seek voter approved referenda, secure non-referendum debt and develop alternative funding sources as necessary and reasonable to accomplish preservation



goals.

- **Land Use Planning**

- Regularly communicate with other partners in land protection efforts in McHenry County and the region to update existing land preservation strategies with these organizations.
- Refine the District's existing land protection plan, including potential buffer areas, in a manner that will allow its inclusion in any county wide green infrastructure planning efforts that may occur.
- Create integrated land use plans for all properties owned and managed by the District to ensure the wise use of land and resources.
- Assist in developing a Greenway Infrastructure Vision Plan for McHenry County.
- Continue to dedicate portions of Conservation Areas as Illinois Nature Preserves and/or Land and Water Reserves with the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission.
- Provide technical expertise and ecological resource information to stakeholders in a proactive manner providing a framework for land use decision making.

- **Ecological Restoration**

- Support federal, state, and local planning efforts designed to identify, protect and manage regionally significant natural areas, restorable lands, and wildlife populations.
- Expand opportunities for public involvement in the stewardship of McHenry County's natural resources.
- Expand implementation of best management practices that restore and manage District lands to diverse, biologically healthy and sustainable natural communities.
- Continue to seek out alternative funding sources for ecological management and restoration of District lands.
- Support the establishment of the proposed Hackmatack National Wildlife Refuge in NE Illinois and SE Wisconsin.

# Organizational Effectiveness

## Goal:

The McHenry County Conservation District will be an effectively governed, well managed, fiscally sound organization positioned to deliver maximum value to its internal and external stakeholders.

## Focus:

The District seeks to maintain an organization that creates a positive, productive, learning-centered and caring work environment for the Board of Trustees and staff. Organizational effectiveness will be reflected in operational and financial indicators, professional and personal learning, as well as on-going evaluation and improvement to ensure processes are aligned with the District's mission. In order to foster this culture of agility, innovation and decentralized decision making, the focus will be on results more than procedures, tools or structural parameters. Through these efforts, the District's organizational performance and sound stewardship of the natural world will be recognized and highly valued by the residents of the county.

## Recommendations:

- **Staffing Resources**
  - Maintain ongoing assessment of Organizational Priorities in the Operational Areas of the District (i.e., Administration, Communications, Education, Land & Facilities, Land Preservation, Natural Resources Management, Planning & Development, Police and Wildlife Resources) to ensure the organization remains flexible to adapt to changing conditions (e.g., environmental, financial, societal, etc.). Short-term focus will continue to be on land acquisition and the planning and developing of new sites. In the future, this will be augmented with increased emphasis on land preservation, natural resource restoration and protection, maintenance, and increased education and recreational programming.
  - Analyze current staffing against the needs of the District and determine if additional staff is needed to adequately establish, manage, and care for the District's capital assets (e.g., natural resources, built environment, etc.).

- Continue to focus on employee well-being and satisfaction through feedback assessments, providing opportunities for employee growth and development, maintaining programs and benefits for work-life balance and wellness, and acknowledging events that affect employee's lives.
  
- **Infrastructure (Site Improvements and Facilities)**
  - Implement the recommendations identified in the Office Needs Allocation Study and Comprehensive Site Development and Public Access Plan. This includes planning for the purchase or lease of a Police Department Headquarters in and around Woodstock; planning for a new Administrative Headquarters Facility on an existing District site near the population center of the county; and planning for an Education Facility on the west side of the county.
  
  - Establish and maintain a public service facility in each quadrant of the county.
  
  - Commit to updating the Comprehensive Site Development and Public Access Plan every five years to ensure that the priorities are in alignment with current trends, needs and financial resources.
  
  - Discuss and analyze the visioning considerations listed per site in the Comprehensive Site Development and Public Access Plan and develop those that are appropriate into recommendation and implementation strategies.
  
- **Financial Sustainability**
  - Seek voter approved referenda; secure non-referendum debt and alternative funding sources as necessary and reasonable to carry out the District's mission and vision (e.g., land preservation, site improvements, natural resource restoration and operations).
  
  - Assess fees and charges for programs on a case-by-case basis with the majority of the educational programs offered at no cost to McHenry County residents. Fees should be structured equitably between programs and services. Non-residents should be assessed a fee to participate in District programs and activities.
  
  - Develop a corporate sponsorship policy and pursue corporate sponsorship opportunities for special events, programs, and capital projects.

- Continue to work collaboratively with the McHenry County Conservation Foundation (MCCF) to determine philanthropic focus and establish financial goals to support District's sites, programs and services.
- Establish funding for the 10 year Capital Asset Management Plan.
- **Customer Service Performance and Satisfaction**
  - Assess customer satisfaction every three to five years through broad-based public opinion survey.
  - Continue to adapt programs and services to meet the unique needs of an ethnically and culturally diverse population as urban/suburban residents relocate to McHenry County.
  - Continue to build collaborative partnerships with local, regional and national like-minded and non-traditional organizations.

# Education

## **Goal:**

The McHenry County Conservation District will increase public awareness of the county's natural and cultural history, build an understanding of the need for healthy ecosystems and foster a desire to take actions that benefit the natural environment.

## **Focus:**

District education programs and initiatives provide the opportunity to appreciate and understand more about the range of natural habitats that exist throughout McHenry County. By effectively promoting the County's natural and cultural history through innovative and engaging guided programs and self-guided opportunities, our heritage can be both celebrated and protected.

Although not as effective as face-to-face personal instruction and interpretation, self-guided opportunities such as interpretive trails and exhibits can reach visitors who may not otherwise come to programs and are cost effective in regard to the staff time needed to create and maintain them. Additionally, self-guided opportunities can promote and encourage the concept of unstructured exploration and nature play.

A recent book by Richard Louv, entitled *Last Child in the Woods*, asserts that there is a growing trend in the United States associated with our youth and their lack of exposure to the natural world. It seems that children are losing opportunities for intimate touch with nature and the subsequent mental, physical and social health benefits that nature exploration provides.

The District's educational programs have, since inception, focused on helping children and adults explore the natural world around them. These programs cover a wide base of topics for all age groups, but the programming has not until recently required the individual to direct his or her own nature adventures.

To encourage self-directed opportunities, the District will build upon its recent efforts to offer coaching opportunities for families new to nature exploration. This includes offering scheduled programs and events that simply provide exploration materials, encouragement, and modeling of tips and techniques for building confidence in freely exploring nature.

## Recommendations:

- **Self-Guided Opportunities**
  - Expand interpretive trail options available to the public by increasing the number of sites with trails in order to diversify the technologies utilized and improve both physical and cultural accessibility.
  - Complete and implement a comprehensive plan for exhibits at District facilities.
- **Guided Opportunities**
  - Build upon current efforts to offer coaching for families new to nature exploration, providing materials, encouragement and the modeling of techniques for building confidence in freely exploring nature and in nature play.
  - Work with schools and other educational organizations to develop programs and alternative opportunities that help to address the shift (brought about by budget crises) from school field trips on District sites to programs within classrooms and on school grounds.
  - Continue to shift resources from offering a large number of small public programs to mix of both small and mid-sized special events.
- **Infrastructure**
  - Identify, designate, create and enhance nature playscapes where nature play can be promoted and encouraged in a way that aligns with the District's preservation goals.
  - Expand interpretive opportunities of the land and people of McHenry County by supporting the preservation and restoration of historic and cultural sites.
  - Expand the number and geographic availability of teaching spaces that provide for safe programming in diverse weather conditions, including the creation of out-based, sheltered hubs for west side day camps.

# Recreation

## Goal:

The McHenry County Conservation District will provide high quality outdoor recreational programs and activities that develop connections with the natural world while achieving the benefits of healthy, active and sustainable lifestyles.

## Focus:

District conservation areas have a long tradition of including site features that provide quality recreation opportunities to the citizens of McHenry County. The District currently provides approximately 40 identified amenities that support outdoor recreational programs and activities including hiking, biking, camping, fishing, hunting, birding, horseback riding, canoeing/kayaking, snowmobiling, picnicking, etc. Meeting the recreational needs of a growing community requires offering a variety of programs, activities and opportunities that align with the District's mission. In 2008, the District conducted a recreational facilities evaluation with input from the public, staff and Board of Trustees to analyze current conditions of recreational amenities, assess current recreational and public access needs. Through this process, the Comprehensive Site Development and Public Access Plan became a guiding tool that will continue to serve as the foundation for the District's decisions on public access and recreational development.

Conservation districts are very unique entities in Illinois, with only five statutory districts in the state. When evaluating the District's recreational facilities, two National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) benchmarks were used, as recreational standards for Illinois Conservation Districts do not exist. District recreational facilities and sites were found to meet or exceed those NRPA standards. For every 1,000 residents, the District provides 10 acres of open space and geographically those sites are within a five mile radius of one another.

The District continuously seeks to make improvements that meet or exceed the expectations of local residents. Expanding current offerings to include structured wellness type programs and activities such as art and fitness in nature can provide another means to connect children and adults to the natural world further instilling a conservation ethic in our citizens.

Along with 29 conservation areas that provide various natural settings for individual enjoyment, the District offers multi-use trail systems throughout McHenry County. Presently, the pride of the District's trail system is the 25.9 mile Prairie Trail that crosses the county from the Kane County line north to the Wis-

consin border. Additional trails include the Stone Mill Trail, Hebron Trail, Ridgefield Trace and HUM Trail. These along with the Prairie Trail provide more than 50 miles of recreational trails.

## Recommendations:

- **Human Health and Well-Being**
  - Expand the District's offerings of wellness/holistic-based programs and activities (e.g., yoga, tai chi, art in nature, fitness in nature) to foster a land ethic and connect children and adults with the natural world.
  - Continue to offer staff-guided recreational-based educational programs (e.g., interpretive bike rides, canoe trips and clinics, etc.).
  - Develop a strategy to expand recreational-based programs, which will include exploring partnerships.
- **New Initiatives**
  - Explore options to increase the accessibility of recreational pursuits by developing ways to provide the necessary equipment on sites.
  - Designate areas within several conservation sites where off trail exploration and nature play is allowed and encouraged.
  - Consider alternative recreational uses in outer buffer areas where there will be minimal effect on the core preserve and natural resources.
  - Establish recreational standards for Conservation Districts within the State of Illinois.
- **Making Connections**
  - Based on the resource requirements that emerge from continued site planning and evolving needs of District stakeholders, create a more sustainable physical environment that also strengthens McHenry County's economic, social and cultural environments.
  - Implement Comprehensive Site Development and Public Access Plan recommendations.
  - Update Regional Trails Plan, including both greenways and blueways, to identify potential facility and trail connections and coordination opportunities with local and regional



communities' planned trails.

- Pursue additional partnerships to further develop planned trail connections and obtain financial assistance for trail development and maintenance.