

# **WeConservePA**

## **Strategic Plan**

### **2022-2028**

Adopted by the Board of Directors on June 14, 2022

#### Mission

WeConservePA helps people care for, wisely use, and enjoy what nature offers. We help organizations and individuals to effectively and efficiently conserve land, protect and restore waterways, implement sustainable practices, and connect people to the outdoors. We foster understanding of conservation and advocate for pro-conservation governmental policy to promote a high quality of life for all.



## WeConservePA's Distinct Role

---

### Who WeConservePA Is

Seventy dues-paying, voting conservation organizations elect the WeConservePA board of directors and set WeConservePA's purposes. Hundreds of individuals associated with these organizations and other supporters contribute their time, energy, and money to WeConservePA. Coming together around common interests and joined by WeConservePA staff, these professionals, volunteers, and supporters constitute the WeConservePA community.

WeConservePA is a Pennsylvania nonprofit corporation registered with the Pennsylvania Bureau of Charitable Organizations and holding 501(c)3 tax status with the IRS.

### What WeConservePA Does

WeConservePA brings leadership to a diverse array of organizations and individuals at work in communities across Pennsylvania. It builds communities of shared interests for land trusts, environmental advisory councils, trail groups, municipal open space programs, and others with conservation goals. It helps volunteers and professionals connect with and learn from one another, and provides them with resources, equipping them to make Pennsylvania a better place. And by uniting people who conserve land, protect and restore waterways, and foster healthy communities, WeConservePA creates a powerful advocacy voice for conservation.

### Background

WeConservePA started in 1991 as an informal gathering of land trust leaders seeking to advance common interests. These leaders incorporated the "Pennsylvania Land Trust Association (PALTA)" in 1995 to address and focus on the broad needs of land trusts—to take on initiatives and activities that no single organization could effectively handle or wish to handle on its own.

Over time, the organization expanded its scope of activities to serve local governments, including their open space programs and environmental advisory councils; trail groups; and other organizations. In recognition of this evolution, its member organizations voted to adopt the organization's present name in 2020.

WeConservePA's member organizations count more than 100,000 Pennsylvanians as members and contributors.

## WeConservePA's Vision

---

All Pennsylvanians will benefit from well-stewarded, thriving open spaces: the forests, farms, parks, urban gardens, greenways, and other open lands that safeguard our drinking water and reduce flooding; provide food and timber; offer hunting, fishing, nature watching, and other recreational opportunities; preserve scenic beauty; and deliver myriad other benefits. All will have the opportunity to be a part of prosperous communities that are economically, socially, and environmentally sustainable.

## WeConservePA's Philosophy

---

Our lands are our lifeline. They clean the water we drink and the air that we breathe; they are the fields that grow our food and the forests that provide our wood; they are the homes of wildlife and places of beauty; they are the heart of our hunting, fishing, and nature-watching traditions.

The aims of conservation are as diverse as the lands being conserved, the communities in which the lands are located, and the people leading the efforts. Different circumstances lead to different concerns, priorities, and strategies.

Whether one feels that we should conserve nature for its own sake or for its utility to people, conservation is essential for human prosperity and healthy ecosystems for all life.

Redeveloping land, reinvesting in urbanized areas, using smart growth principles to guide development, and using natural infrastructure to manage water all contribute to creating prosperous communities that are economically, socially, and environmentally sustainable.

An effective conservation movement needs conservation organizations and the individuals comprising them to act ethically and strive for excellence; it prioritizes collaboration over conflict; it focuses on shared interests and respects the rights of all.

Organizations have a responsibility to be equitable and inclusionary in their operations and in their service to the public. This necessitates organization leaders, staff, and volunteers investing time in understanding what is involved in being equitable and inclusionary; it requires revisiting assumptions, long-held beliefs, and practices.

Whether living in urban, suburban, or rural environments, people benefit from getting outdoors and connecting with the land, feeling the sun, seeing the veins of a leaf, listening to the burble of a stream.

## What Is Conservation?

---

The word *conservation* appears frequently in this plan (and, of course, *conserve* is fundamental to WeConservePA's name). So, what does conservation mean?

[Merriam Webster](#) defines it as “a careful preservation and protection of something, *especially* planned management of a natural resource to prevent exploitation, destruction, or neglect.”

[Wikipedia](#) defines it as “the preservation or efficient use of resources...”

[Wiktionary](#)'s first definition is: “The act of preserving, guarding, or protecting; the keeping (of a thing) in a safe or entire state; preservation.” Its second definition is: “Wise use of natural resources.”

National Geographic's [encyclopedic entry](#) defines it as “the act of protecting Earth's natural resources for current and future generations.” The entry continues:

Earth's natural resources include air, minerals, plants, soil, water, and wildlife. Conservation is the care and protection of these resources so that they can persist for future generations. It includes maintaining diversity of species, genes, and ecosystems, as well as functions of the environment, such as nutrient cycling...

WeConservePA uses *conservation* to mean taking action to ensure for present and future generations some or all of the following outcomes:

- The land will serve as natural infrastructure: absorbing rainwater to prevent erosion and flooding and recharge groundwater; filtering stormwater runoff of pollutants before they can enter waterways; and sequestering carbon in plants and soil.
- The land will be available and productive for logging, farming, hunting, and other activities that sustainably draw from nature.
- The land will provide habitat and support for the diverse species with which we share the planet.
- The land will provide other open space benefits such as scenic views and opportunities for outdoor recreation, reflection, and inspiration.

WeConservePA also looks at conservation as encompassing the active stewardship of land (for example, fencing forest to prevent deer overbrowse or redesigning trails to prevent stormwater runoff) and the active restoration of natural functions to degraded lands and waters (for example, reforesting riparian areas or establishing meadow on strip mined land). Even more broadly, conservation describes actions to live sustainably to ensure that future generations may enjoy nature, undiminished.

## WeConservePA'S Goals

---

WeConservePA seeks to:

- Increase the pace and improve the quality and efficiency of land conservation work.
- Ensure that land conservation is lasting (including parks and other public lands).
- Boost the knowledge and skill sets of conservation professionals and volunteers, and foster stronger, more equitable and inclusive organizations.
- Improve land use planning and advance sustainable practices at the local level.
- Raise understanding and support for conservation.
- Achieve conservation-friendly public policy.

*WeConservePA pursues four strategies—described below—in support of these goals. (Note that each strategy supports multiple goals.)*

## WeConservePA's Strategies

---

### **Create resources**

Create resources that facilitate excellence, effectiveness, and efficiency in conservation acquisitions, stewardship, land use planning, and other activities.

### **Train, connect, inspire, and assist**

Train, connect, inspire, and assist people to empower them to achieve more in their conservation-related work.

### **Advocate for conservation**

Advocate for pro-conservation governmental policy, foster understanding of conservation, and promote conservation-serving land trust standards.

### **Build WeConservePA**

Build WeConservePA into a more effective organization.

*The remaining pages of this plan describe these four strategies in detail.*

## CREATE RESOURCES

---

Create resources that facilitate excellence, effectiveness, and efficiency in conservation acquisitions, stewardship, land use planning, and other activities.

### Strategy Elements

1. Create, maintain, and refresh model documents and accompanying commentaries.
2. Create, maintain, and refresh technical guides.
3. Create, maintain, and refresh WeConservePA geodatabases and applications.
4. Create, maintain, and refresh other resources.
5. Make resources and information broadly accessible.

#### **1. Create, maintain, and refresh model documents and accompanying commentaries.**

- Maintain, improve, and otherwise refresh WeConservePA's 20 model documents and commentaries used for conservation and public access easements, other real estate transactions, organizational policies, and land use ordinances, as well as other model documents that advance the effectiveness and efficiency of conservation-related efforts.
- Create new model legal documents, policies, ordinances, and other resources, together with commentaries to the documents.

#### **2. Create, maintain, and refresh guides.**

- Update, expand, or otherwise improve the 150 guides previously developed and currently published by WeConservePA or retire them if appropriate; keep guidance relevant and reflective of changes in the law and new findings and understandings, as well as address information gaps identified by users.
- Create new guides to fill gaps in desirable instruction.

#### **3. Create, maintain, and refresh WeConservePA geodatabases and applications.**

- Update, refine, and help people tap the value of WeConservePA's geodatabase of publicly and privately conserved lands.
- Update, refine, and help people tap the value of WeConservePA's geodatabase of land trust and other organization service areas.
- Develop mapping, conduct research and analysis, and develop useful applications using conservation-related geographic information.

#### **4. Create, maintain, and refresh other resources.**

- Collect useful content from other sources and curate it at WeConservePA.org as appropriate.
- Maintain and expand web apps as appropriate (e.g., Find a Group and jobs board).
- Explore producing short and graphically oriented educational pieces to complement WeConservePA's body of written guidance and implement as appropriate.
- Explore producing short educational videos to complement WeConservePA's body of written guidance and implement as appropriate.
- Develop other resources (studies of particular issues, web applications, etc.).
- Identify needs, research the potential to meet them, and sketch possible responses.

#### **5. Make resources and information broadly accessible.**

- Maintain and continually refresh WeConservePA.org (including its "Conservation Tools," "Conserve Land," "Greenways and Trails", and "Environmental Advisory Council" pages) as the repository of WeConservePA resources and digital hub of information for professionals and volunteers.
- Use e-newsletters, focused emails, and social media to call attention to resources and information.
- Produce and distribute print materials to reach those who are not web-oriented and supplement and reinforce web-based communications.

## **TRAIN, CONNECT, INSPIRE, AND ASSIST**

---

**Train, connect, inspire, and assist people to empower them to achieve more in their work consistent with WeConservePA's mission.**

### **Strategy Elements**

1. Deliver training, networking, and inspirational opportunities.
2. Provide technical assistance.
3. Facilitate the creation and functioning of peer networks.
4. Encourage equity and inclusion in organizational internal affairs and service delivery.
5. Promote policies, standards, and systems that advance conservation excellence in the land trust movement.

#### **1. Deliver training, networking, and inspirational opportunities.**

- Manage the annual Pennsylvania Land Conservation Conference as Pennsylvania's premier training, networking, and inspirational event for the advancement of land conservation.
- Manage the annual Environmental Advisory Council Network Conference as Pennsylvania's premier annual training, networking, and inspirational event for EAC volunteers and supporters.
- Manage the biennial Pennsylvania Greenways & Trails Summit as the premier statewide event for trail volunteers and professionals.
- Organize roundtables, workshops, seminars, lectures, and other events—on digital platforms or in person as appropriate—to supplement conference programming.
- Promote, facilitate, and present at other organizations' offerings.
- Identify training and networking needs supportive of WeConservePA's mission; if it appears that WeConservePA can provide value, explore providing programming.

#### **2. Provide technical assistance.**

- Deliver direct technical assistance to the staff, volunteers, and advisors of organizations and local governments via phone, email, and in-person—helping bring projects to fruition, build organizational capacity and improve operations, foster partnerships, advance equity, and more.



- Manage the Conservation Easement Assistance Program (to provide small grants in support of quality conservation and public access easement transactions, easement amendments and restatements, baseline documentation and signage).
- Offer other grants and scholarships to address identified needs.
- Facilitate peer and consultant based technical assistance to organizations.
- Facilitate collaboration and merger where such actions present substantial potential to achieve significant operational efficiencies and better conservation outcomes.

### **3. Facilitate the creation and functioning of peer networks.**

- Manage the EAC (Environmental Advisory Council) Network.
- Foster the creation and functioning of networks of other peer groups if and when interest and need arise (recognizing that participants must be substantially engaged in communicating with and helping one another if a network is to be effective and viable in the long-term).
- Facilitate the connection of more and less experienced professionals in mentoring relationships as interest arises from time to time.

### **4. Encourage equity and inclusion in organizational internal affairs and service delivery.**

- Interweave instruction on equity and inclusion into WeConservePA training, networking, and inspirational events, as well as other services.
- Stay connected and consult with the DEIJ Community and people working in spaces adjacent to WeConservePA to identify issues and opportunities for WeConservePA to promote equity and inclusion.
- Support initiatives that encourage a greater diversity of people to connect with the land (through trails, nature play, or other pathways) and join in the work of conservation.

### **5. Promote policies, standards, and systems that advance conservation excellence in the land trust movement.**

- Assist land trusts in achieving conformity with Land Trust Standards and Practices (and, as appropriate to the organization, preparing for accreditation or renewal).
- Facilitate sharing of experiences and discussion of issues amongst accredited land trusts and organizations pursuing Land Trust Accreditation.

## ADVOCATE FOR CONSERVATION

---

**Advocate for pro-conservation governmental policy, foster understanding of conservation, and promote effective land trust standards.**

### Strategy Elements

1. Communicate to the public and key subsets to build understanding of conservation.
2. Maintain a policy agenda and infrastructure to advance it.
3. Advocate to government officials.
4. Encourage and engage with a broad array of organizations and individuals to join in advocating for the advancement of pro-conservation policy.
5. Maximize the utility of policies, standards, and systems used by the land trust movement.

#### **1. Communicate to the public and key subsets to build understanding of conservation.**

- Use electronic communication tools (e.g., WeConservePA.org, e-newsletters, and social media) to provide conservation news and information.
- Frame land conservation communications to resonate with target audiences and facilitate outreach to those who do not hold conservation as a core value.
- Make presentations to key audiences and display WeConservePA materials at key locations and events.
- Promote land conservation, sustainable land use practices, and land trusts to the general public and opinion leaders through a variety of channels.

#### **2. Maintain a policy agenda and infrastructure to advance it.**

- Continually revisit priorities, opportunities, and threats to conservation.
- Maintain the policy council and hold regular meetings to help guide and implement WeConservePA's policy priorities and work.
- Engage the policy council, board, membership, and outside parties in looking outside the box for ways to better achieve conservation.
- On an as needed basis, convene attorneys committed to conservation to advise WeConservePA on addressing judicial threats and opportunities.
- Identify and research potential policy issues and initiatives and formulate policy solutions.
- Enhance online outreach and advocacy functions.

- Watch for opportunities to improve the systems in which conservationists operate and keep conservation and land trusts vital in a changing world.

### **3. Advocate to government officials.**

- Meet, educate, and build relationships with state elected officials and their staff; state appointed officials and their staff; candidates and their campaigns; and, of a lesser priority, members of Congress and their staff, as well as key local officials.
- Express and promote interests, concerns, positions and requests to policy makers and their influencers.
- Strategize and, as needed, design and implement campaigns to advance issues.

### **4. Encourage and engage with a broad array of organizations and individuals to join in advocating for the advancement of pro-conservation policy.**

- Continue to facilitate the Growing Greener Coalition.
- Identify and build relationships with other organizations having intersecting agendas and work cooperatively with them to advance shared interests.
- Engage in national advocacy efforts as appropriate. Maintain relationships with LTA and other conservation organizations active at the federal level to ensure that WeConservePA actions are consistent with the interests of the conservation movement and are calibrated to have maximum impact on the conservation issues of importance to Pennsylvania.
- Engage the people of member and other organizations in fostering relationships and communications between legislators and their board members, staff, and supporters.

### **5. Maximize the utility of policies, standards, and systems used by the land trust movement.**

- Advocate for Land Trust Standards and Practices and other movement policies and standards that promote excellence and that don't unduly redirect resources away from direct conservation work or stifle initiative and experimentation in achieving conservation objectives.
- Continue to encourage discussion amongst land trusts of Land Trust Accreditation experiences and develop and communicate suggestions to the Commission and LTA as appropriate for the improvement of the system.
- If and when appropriate, develop Pennsylvania-specific land trust movement policies and standards.

## **BUILD WeConservePA**

---

**Build WeConservePA into a more effective organization.**

### **Strategy Elements**

1. Improve the marketing of WeConservePA.
2. Address matters of equity and inclusion in WeConservePA internal affairs and service delivery.
3. Review operations and adjust practices and policies for effective, efficient, and secure operations.
4. Continue and improve upon WeConservePA fundraising activities.
5. Monitor the needs and views of WeConservePA constituencies.

#### **1. Improve the marketing of WeConservePA.**

- Develop and maintain marketing material that describes WeConservePA and its value to conservation.
- Maintain the WeConservePA brand consistently in communications.
- Promote to member organizations the use of a “WeConservePA member” badge in their communications and the creation of web links to WeConservePA.org.
- Prepare and distribute educational materials to orient board members of land trusts and other major constituencies to WeConservePA and conservation matters extending beyond their own local activities.

#### **2. Address matters of equity and inclusion in WeConservePA internal affairs and service delivery.**

- To the extent that these matters are not already interwoven into major deliberations, periodically set aside time to address them in board, committee, and staff meetings.
- Stay connected and consult with the DEIJ Community.

#### **3. Review operations and adjust practices and policies for effective, efficient, and secure operations.**

- More fully engage board members, advisors, volunteers, and staff, and utilize their resources, skills, talents, and energies.
- Expand the circle of those involved with WeConservePA (including junior staff of member organizations).

- Offer opportunities for staff development.
  - Review risks, practices for reducing risk, and insurance needs.
  - Maintain security and the effectiveness of WeConservePA websites in a constantly changing technological environment.
  - Review, consolidate, and update WeConservePA board and management policies as appropriate.
- 4. Continue and improve upon WeConservePA fundraising activities.**
- Continue and refine appeals to individuals, businesses, event sponsors, and other organizations, as well as grant writing and other fundraising efforts.
  - Continually be on the lookout for new opportunities to increase and diversify WeConservePA revenues.
- 5. Monitor the needs and views of WeConservePA constituencies.**
- Keep WeConservePA focused on delivering high value to the land conservation community by keeping informed of land trust needs, policies, activities, and expectations of WeConservePA via informal and *ad hoc* interactions as well as surveys.
  - Survey and otherwise monitor the needs and views of environmental advisory councils, trail groups, and other WeConservePA constituencies.

## Putting the Plan in Practice

---

Staff are responsible for leading the implementation of the first three strategies (regarding programmatic activities). The board of directors and staff are jointly responsible for implementation of the “Build WeConservePA” strategy. Actual tasks may be carried out by staff, board members acting as program volunteers, consultants, and others as needed.

The board of directors and staff will consider potential WeConservePA activities in the context of the strategic plan. The board will adopt annual budgets consistent with the plan.