



Essex County Greenbelt Strategic Plan June 2017

Purpose

Essex County Greenbelt continues to grow as a leader in land conservation, having protected 17,000 acres in the region. Looking forward, the Board of Directors is committed to increasing land protection efforts, access and outreach more evenly across the county.

This strategic plan charts the course for years 2017–2020. The plan follows several years of great success for the organization. We are cognizant however of the challenges that lie ahead, including the planning and completion of a successful leadership transition over these same years. As part of the visioning process during the early development of this plan, the board discussed strategies at its annual retreat in the spring of 2016. This plan is informed in part by those discussions, and outlines what we will do to fulfill our mission for land conservation across Essex County.

Mission

As Essex County's Land Trust, Greenbelt works with landowners and the thirty-four cities and towns of Essex County to conserve open space, farmland, wildlife habitat and scenic landscapes. Our work helps protect native plants, animals and natural corridors, ensure a healthy food supply, maintain clean water, and create free and accessible places for outdoor recreation and the enjoyment of nature.

Tag line

Greenbelt: Protecting land and nature for you, our communities and the future.

Core Values

Our core values are the principles which guide and inspire us daily. They drive our accountability to each other and to the individuals, families, organizations and thirty-four communities with whom we work.

Greenbelt values:

- Conservation, in perpetuity, of the distinctive landscapes and the varied natural resources of Essex County.
- Transformative effect of access to nature for the health and wellbeing of future generations.
- Effective conservation leadership through partnership and innovation, dedicated to sharing our knowledge and experience.
- Integrity and excellence, deserving of public trust, expressed in our commitment to the highest standards of honesty, transparency, and professionalism.
- Local engagement that is responsive, that honors the diverse character of Essex County and respects the conservation vision of the individuals, families, communities, municipalities and partners with whom we work.
- A culture of optimism and creativity that is confident and resourceful.

Strategic Goals

In 2016 Greenbelt completed a multi year, successful capital campaign. That exercise made apparent that while the organization is highly regarded in much of the county, we are not well known in other important areas, particularly north of the Merrimack River and in more densely populated regions. Part of the rationale for the capital campaign was to create a revolving fund for an ambitious goal to protect 10,000 acres, much of which will lie in the northern part of the county.

As part of the strategic planning process we reviewed our mission, and agreed that a previously unstated part of what we do is to provide access to nature for residents from all parts of the county, whether urban, rural, or suburban. Though we are very active and visible in many communities, in some areas of the county Greenbelt has a relatively minimal presence and few accessible properties.

From these insights, we identified the following three strategic goals as most important for Greenbelt over the next few years. These goals build on the work that has brought us success in our historically core region, while increasing our impact in the less served areas of the County.

These three goals are not meant to be exhaustive or exclusive of other important initiatives that will continue as a matter of course. For instance, our stewardship department will continue to be a leader in land management, not only in enhanced public access, but also in measures to respond to climate change, invasive species and other management concerns.

The three strategic goals are:

- 1. Complete the goal of conserving 10,000 acres in Essex County over the next ten years**
- 2. Expand our base of support for conservation**
- 3. Expand our methods of engagement to allow substantive connections and service to new communities and partners**

Below, the three strategic goals are restated, with explanations of rationale, as well as tactics that might be used to implement them. These tactical examples illustrate

possible approaches, but are not meant to be prescriptive. The expectation is that Greenbelt's capable staff will be nimble and react to emerging opportunities.

1. Complete the goal of conserving 10,000 acres in Essex County over the next ten years

Rationale:

Approximately 25%, or 80,000 acres, of Essex County is undeveloped and unprotected. Large, easily developable properties, such as farms, are at greatest risk. An ambitious, well-financed and proactive plan was needed to impact the loss of open space in the county, and this was the impetus for The Campaign for 10,000 Acres. This plan acknowledges that land protection will continue to occur in the traditional ways, such as through grants of fee ownership and conservation restrictions on private lands, but the plan also promotes more proactive land conservation efforts and new initiatives, such as purchasing development rights on active farms and permanently protecting municipal properties such as watershed lands.

➤ Expand and strengthen our identity and role in local land conservation

- Amplify our role as a trusted convener and partner organization for communities, farmers, water departments, local food programs, among others

➤ Develop proactive approaches to supporting local conservation efforts

- Seek and invest directly in projects with high conservation value.
- To advance conservation projects, develop innovative financing and leverage Greenbelt resources

➤ **Increase land conservation across the thirty-four cities and towns we serve, by actively seeking out high quality land conservation opportunities**

- Local farmlands: for healthy food production and thriving local economies
- Watershed lands: for healthy, clean water and for expanding opportunities for public access
- Coastal lands: for habitat, protection against sea level rise, and for recreation
- Forests: for habitat, recreation, and carbon capture
- Smaller, but accessible open spaces: for the benefit of those who live in more densely populated areas
- Connected greenbelts and larger parcels: for climate change resilience, wildlife corridors, scenic landscapes, nearness to nature and outdoor recreation

➤ **Enhance properties to encourage broader use, where appropriate.**

- Expand free public access and improve visitor experience to properties across the county for outdoor recreation and exposure to the beauty and inspiring qualities of nature.
- Demonstrate commitment to handicapped access with increased focus on accessible reservations.

2. Expand our base of support for conservation

Rationale:

As Greenbelt plans for a change in leadership and faces probable cutbacks in state and federal funding for land protection, we recognize that to sustain the organization and its ability to achieve its mission, special attention must be paid both to our long time supporters, and to developing a network of new supporters. In addition, support for Greenbelt and for land conservation in general depends on upcoming generations who value the experiences, and improved quality of life, associated with living near protected lands.

- **Achieve a deeper understanding of the interests of current and prospective members. Tailor our messages to these diverse audiences in order to maintain a broader and deeper level of supporter engagement and loyalty**

- **Plan for the long-term sustainability of the organization by marketing a full array of legacy giving options**

- **Emphasize outreach to Millennials and generations to come, as well as to their friends and families**

3. Expand our methods of engagement to allow substantive connections and service to new communities and partners.

Rationale:

We recognize that Greenbelt must take advantage of new opportunities to engage communities, particularly as we reach out to different parts of the County. In communities less familiar to us, we must begin by developing an understanding of how Greenbelt can assist them realize their visions. With social media and other related technologies, there are engagement strategies that can be tailored to specific interest groups, which allow us to connect more effectively with those outside our traditional base.

- **Practice listening and learning with all of our partners and all communities, especially those that are new to us, to help define values and needs**
- **Enhance representation of the northern county on the board of directors, and work toward relevant diversification of the board**
- **Expand agricultural connections and opportunities**
 - Work to protect current farms
 - Consider a Greenbelt community farm using Grow Food Northampton, or similar projects, as a model
 - Continue to pursue funding for a “buy/protect/ sell” program for farmland
 - Continue to make protected farmland available to farmers
- **Provide a local and approachable presence for Greenbelt in the Merrimack Valley**
 - Pilot an off-site office in the Valley

- **Pilot new projects in more densely developed communities**
 - Explore another community garden, small pocket park, and the enhanced use of already protected lands
 - Support an intern to pursue a replicable community garden model

- **Explore outreach opportunities with health focus**
 - Consider partnership with municipal health departments, hospitals, medical practices or community fitness programs, to encourage outdoor physical activity

The committed implementation of this strategic plan will promote our vision for:

An Essex County where individuals, families and communities, now and in the future, benefit from local conserved lands – which provide for healthy food production, clean water, diverse natural habitats, outdoor recreation and the wellbeing and inspiration derived from nearness to nature.

