



The Watch Hill Conservancy
Strategic Plan
2020 to 2025

Adopted

October 15, 2020

Introduction

This report provides a strategic road map for The Watch Hill Conservancy (WHC) for 2020 to 2025. The updated strategic plan clearly communicates shared programmatic priorities and intended outcomes and provides a framework that will guide decisions on how to align personnel and financial resources with the program's mission in ways that maximize the organization's impact. This plan is aspirational—focusing on board goals—while also being operational by detailing specific actions the WHC should consider for implementation in coming years. This plan is not meant to be static and should be reviewed as part of the annual work planning process. This is especially true as the organization, community and state navigate the COVID-19 pandemic.

Process

A Strategic Planning Committee comprised of directors from the Conservancy's board facilitated the strategic planning process. Working in close collaboration with the Executive Committee, this group worked with the consultant to amend the process as necessary, reviewed documents and outputs and made recommendations to the final report. This report is based on interviews conducted with the Conservancy board members and members from the community, including representatives from local, regional, and state partner organizations. The process included conducting over 40 interviews. Although confidential, the interviews revealed common themes and messages, which appear throughout this report.

On the first weekend in August, the full board met in person with several joining virtually to review the plan. The interactive workshop provided valuable feedback to the plan and the comments collected are reflected therein. At the conclusion of the workshop, the Executive Committee reviewed the revised document, made decisions where necessary and brought back the plan to the full board for their approval.

Major Observations

Overall, there was uniform approval of the work the WHC is doing, especially over the last two years. Several interviewees suggested that prior to this period, the Conservancy was in a "fallow" period and credited the current board and its leadership for creating new momentum. Interviewees noted that in addition to its very successful Napatree Point initiative, the WHC has facilitated an important conversation on other issues important to the community—issues such as sea level rise and resilience. The Conservancy is also seen as an organization that can mobilize key groups in the community on these critical issues and as an important and productive.

Mission and Goals of The Watch Hill Conservancy

There was no disagreement that the mission statement accurately reflects the purpose of the organization, and there was no significant pressure to re-write it. However, it was noted that the statement is long (the website presents a shorter version), is hard to remember, and is difficult to explain. Consider creating a shorter version of the mission statement, supported by a set of goals that describes in detail the focus areas of the Conservancy. For comparative purposes, below is a summary of the organization's purpose as stated in its Articles of Incorporation (June 2008), current mission, mission statement as presented on the Conservancy's website and, finally, a proposed new mission statement.

From the Articles of Incorporation

“The purpose or purposes for which the corporation is organized are: Said corporation is organized and shall be operated exclusively for charitable, educational and scientific purposes within the meaning of Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code of 1986, as amended, or the corresponding provision of any future United States revenue law (the “Code”). Said purposes shall include but shall not be limited to:

- (a) Promoting the preservation of the natural and built environments of Watch Hill, Rhode Island;
- (b) Conserving, maintaining, and enhancing the scenic, open space and historical values and the character of Watch Hill, Rhode Island and supporting the continued vitality and sustainability of the community;
- (c) Educating the public concerning the same;
- (d) Acquiring interests in real property;
- (e) And any other purposes incidental to the aforesaid purposes, whether accomplished within the Watch Hill Fire District or in nearby areas of the Towns of Westerly, Rhode Island or Stonington, Connecticut.”

Current Mission Statement:

The mission of The Watch Hill Conservancy is to promote the preservation of the natural and built environments of Watch Hill; to conserve, maintain and enhance the scenic, open space and historical values and the character of Watch Hill and support the continued vitality and sustainability of the community; to educate the public concerning the same and to acquire and preserve interests in real property.

Mission Statement on Website:

The Watch Hill Conservancy is dedicated to the conservation of Napatree Point, the preservation of the community’s historic character, and the support of a vibrant Bay Street commercial district.

Proposed Mission Statement:

Conserve, enhance, and maintain the natural, scenic, and historic value of Watch Hill and Little Narragansett Bay.

Goals

To do this, the Conservancy is working toward four goals either independently or in partnership with like-minded organizations:

Goal 1: Conserve, preserve, and expand the scientific understanding of the natural environment of Watch Hill and Little Narragansett Bay.

Goal 2: Educate the public about the importance of the natural environment and historic and cultural values of Watch Hill.

Goal 3: Maintain and enhance the historic and community character of Watch Hill, with an emphasis on the Village.

Goal 4: Conserve and maintain open space and habitat in Watch Hill.

These goals provide an aspirational direction for the organization and define a desired state in the future. Although these goals represent the full suite of work the Conservancy has focused on over the years, the organization has seen a rebalancing of priorities. While acquiring interests in real property will continue as an opportunistic action, in recent years, and moving forward, there has been a shift towards conserving the natural environment and public education as the organization's focus.

For each goal, the plan describes actions that define how that goal will be accomplished. These are outlined below.

Actions

For each goal, this section describes specific actions the Conservancy has identified as a priority. This defines the specific work the WHC agrees to pursue over the next five years as operational priorities and should provide the basis for the annual work planning and budgeting process.

Goal 1: Conserve, preserve, and expand the scientific understanding of the natural environment of Watch Hill and Little Narragansett Bay.

Actions:

1. Invest in and expand the Napatree initiative as a cornerstone program for the WHC. This includes current programming focused on community science and preservation of Watch Hill's natural heritage. This work is well known in the community and provides a foundational touchpoint to the organization.
2. Direct issue-based, short- and long-term scientific monitoring focused on the natural environment of Watch Hill and Little Narragansett Bay that creates information for decision makers and material for education programs. Continue to partner with the University of Rhode Island, Eastern Connecticut State University, the Rhode Island Natural History Survey and other organizations with scientific capabilities, talent, and resources.
3. Develop the ability to respond to unforeseen environmental threats, land use issues, and incursions that affect the character of Watch Hill as they arise, including, but not limited to, its surrounding waters. These responsive issues should be in line with the mission of the organization and its strategic plan.

Goal 2: Educate the public about the importance of the natural environment and historic and cultural values of Watch Hill.

Actions:

1. Act as a neutral convener around important and complicated topics that affect the natural, scenic, and historic character of Watch Hill and Little Narragansett Bay. The most recent example was the series delivered on sea level rise and its effect on the community. Develop an internal process for identifying these issues, organizing partners, and developing appropriate programming.
2. Maintain current educational programming aimed at school-aged children on Napatree. Explore options for expanding these educational opportunities to include volunteer programs for high school and college students as a way of providing hands-on experience and engaging the youth in the community. Continue to support formal

internship experiences that are offered by other organizations and, when appropriate, consider offering our own.

3. Continue offering a summer lecture series that focuses on topics identified by the Conservancy and its partners as pertinent and in-line with those topics identified in action one above. Ensure the series is branded clearly as a Conservancy community service. Explore offering this lecture series off-season.
4. Promote these educational programs and their impact on the community when exploring new fundraising opportunities.
5. Explore developing a program that communicates best practices for recycling, lawn care, lighting, natural buffers for habitat and mitigating sea level rise, etc. that uses existing materials that are readily available in an effort to expand the Conservancy's reach and audience.

Goal 3: Maintain and enhance the historic and community character of Watch Hill, with an emphasis on the Village.

Actions:

1. Support and promote infrastructure improvements or public works projects in partnership with other organizations.
2. Provide architectural guidance and information to new and renovation projects, using architectural guidelines.
3. Track permitting year-round; offer technical guidance and input as permits are being reviewed.
4. Provide input on Town plans, processes and activities that affect the historic and cultural assets in the area. Coordinate with other groups to ensure that these groups are working towards common and shared development goals for the area.

Goal 4: Conserve and maintain open space and habitat in Watch Hill.

Actions:

1. Maintain an updated inventory of existing properties owned and managed by the Conservancy, their acquisition history, and requirements. Develop, as necessary, specific management plans for these parcels.
2. Develop a checklist that specifically defines what types of property the Conservancy would be interested in conserving. Identify and track properties that match these criteria.
3. Develop flexible partnerships to pursue the acquisition of property, where the organization's goals align and resources can be shared or the Conservancy can serve as an advisor, providing information, insights, and administrative support.
4. Continue to pursue conservation easements and gifts through the Conservancy's network and fund-raising efforts.

Cross-cutting Functional and Operational Areas and Actions

The strategic planning process identified these functional and operational issues. Successful implementation of the organization's goals, as stated above, will require efficient and effective operations. Following are the key areas of focus:

Communication and Branding

1. Create a tagline. The Watch Hill Conservancy is exiting a 'fallow' period, during which its brand suffered a decrease in respect and community interest. To re-introduce the brand to the community, it will actively use a tagline. The tagline will help WHC promote the essence of its mission. A tagline is a clear, memorable, and succinct phrase closely allied with a company name. It typically appears in a range of media, including websites, stationery, printed marketing collateral, TV advertisements and more. The *proposed* tag line is:

"Conserving and Preserving Watch Hill".

NOTE: Conservation is generally associated with the protection of natural resources, while preservation is associated with the protection of buildings, objects, and landscapes.

2. Ensure there is an agreed branding system for promoting the Conservancy and it is used consistently throughout its programming.
3. Continue to promote throughout the Westerly community the good work that the Conservancy is doing in Watch Hill.
4. Build credibility and acceptance through high-quality programming and community engagement.
5. Produce a public-facing summary of the Conservancy's strategic plan that can be used to succinctly present its mission, focus areas and specific initiatives.

Convener and Collaborator

1. The Conservancy should continue as a convener, mobilizer, and a collaborator, with an emphasis on building relationships with other organizations.
 - a. Continue to have different organizations represented on the Conservancy's board (this was viewed very positively, although at times cumbersome).
 - b. Explore deepening ties with other groups in the Watch Hill area.
 - i. Continue discussing and promoting shared agendas and minimize overlapping efforts.
 - ii. Communicate to donors the value of and difference between the different groups.

- iii. Consider sharing back-office/common business support to reduce overhead costs and improve collaboration. These would be fee-for-services and space and would be formalized in written, WHC Board approved agreements. These must have a net neutral impact on existing staff's level of effort.
2. Maintain the strong relationship with the Watch Hill Fire District, recognizing the value each organization/agency brings to the other. Develop a short, one-page collaborative statement that sets priorities and collaborative action needed.
3. Engage town leaders and decision makers on a regular basis throughout the year to build trust and improve information-sharing. Actions could include regular briefings, sharing research material pre-public release, etc.
4. Track statewide and local policies, regulations and permits that impact Watch Hill and the Conservancy's mission. The Conservancy could serve as the central point to monitor state and local activities and share it with its partners represented on the board.
5. Continue to learn from other land trusts in the state by participating in the state's land trust network and sharing information.

Expand and Maintain Sources of Funding

1. Develop a membership value statement and communicate it to the Conservancy's members. This should include what the Conservancy has achieved against its four goal areas, as well as the products and events that are available to the community.
2. Set specific membership and retention rate targets. Track these annually. Segment membership to indicate as current, non-renewal, and potential.
3. Track potential members with greater accuracy. Create a plan for how and when to communicate to potential members (e.g., teasers about member programs or offerings, etc.).
4. Continue to organize an annual fund raiser for the Conservancy that attracts members, non-members, major foundations, and other contributors. Consider targeting proceeds from this fund raiser to a specific project or activity. Differentiate this from the annual membership drive, which aims to support the organizations core operating costs and activities.
5. Expand the list of potential contributors to include the next generation of donors and members, understanding that their communication channels may vary from the organization's traditional messaging outlets.
6. Maintain relationships with major foundations and grantors.

Sustain Leadership and Succession Planning

1. Ensure there is a clear plan for leadership transitions, so these changes do not adversely affect the organization's ability to deliver on its mission.

2. Continue to explore ways to make board meetings more engaging and topically focused (reports versus action agendas).

Continue to expand the demographics of the Conservancy's board in terms of experience skills, and interests.

Business Issues

1. Explore options for purchasing office space as both a real estate investment and to provide a stable and suitable home for the Conservancy.
2. Clarify how the Napatree team functions within the organization, defining individual roles and contributions, reporting functions, financial impact, and overall responsibilities to the organization and what the Conservancy's management responsibilities are with Conservation Easement
3. Develop a three-year forecast (including best, expected, and worst-case scenarios) that looks forward and defines how the organization will react to changing economic scenarios. This is especially important as the community works to mitigate the impact of COVID-19.
4. Agree to a process for writing and approving an annual work plan and budget that implements the actions outlined in this strategic plan. The work plan should be developed by staff and receive approval of the full board. Use the annual plan to confirm the organization's priorities and allocate resources to achieving those priorities. The plan should also allocate "response time" across all focus areas to allow for responsive reaction to unforeseen issues, such as the kelp farm application. This should be used as a tool in deciding which issues and actions might be undertaken outside of those already included in the work plan.