

Conservation Areas Strategy

2024, Draft

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Introduction

The Grand River Conservation Authority (GRCA) manages water and other natural resources on behalf of 38 municipalities and approximately one million residents of the Grand River watershed. The GRCA is a partnership of watershed municipalities and provides an avenue to work together, addressing environmental issues and opportunities that serve to benefit the entire Grand River watershed. Through programs that balance human, environmental and economic needs, the GRCA works collaboratively with all levels of government, various organizations, and members of the community to ensure the conservation, restoration and responsible management of water, land, and natural habitats in the watershed.

Vision

A healthy watershed where we live, work, play and prosper in balance with the natural environment.

Mission

To work with local communities to reduce flood damage, provide access to outdoor spaces, share information about the natural environment, and make the watershed more resilient to climate change.

Strategic Priorities

1. Protect life and minimize property damage from flooding and erosion.
2. Improve the health of the Grand River watershed.
3. Connect people to the environment through outdoor experiences.
4. Manage landholdings in a responsible and sustainable way.
5. Compliance and implementation of the amendments to the Conservation Authorities Act and new regulations.
6. Enhance Indigenous awareness, understanding and relationships.

Purpose of the Conservation Areas Strategy

Under the Conservation Authorities Act, *Ontario Regulation 686/21: Mandatory Programs and Services*, each Conservation Authority in Ontario is required to prepare a Conservation Areas Strategy (Strategy) and Land Inventory (Inventory). The purpose of the Conservation Areas Strategy is to satisfy provincial regulatory requirements and provide an integrated, high-level framework that helps guide and inform future decision-making on all GRCA-owned and controlled lands. For the purposes of this Strategy, this includes lands categorized as conservation areas, conservation lands, controlled/limited access lands and lands used for water management. The Land Inventory provides information on each GRCA property and will support implementation of the Strategy and management of GRCA lands.

This Strategy will provide steps for the continued sustainable management of landholdings while promoting meaningful community connections with the outdoors. It identifies current challenges and key actions to implement over the next five years. While developing the Strategy, the GRCA considered current land uses, program effectiveness, regulatory requirements, and drew upon existing GRCA plans and strategies.

This Strategy was developed in collaboration with staff across multiple departments, Conservation Ontario, staff from adjacent conservation authorities, and in consultation with watershed residents, external interest holders, Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation and Six Nations of the Grand River band councils.

The Grand River Watershed

The Grand River watershed is the largest watershed in southern Ontario, comprising of approximately 6,800 km² of land and water. The heart of the watershed, the Grand River, begins as a small stream in the highlands of Dufferin County and travels approximately 310 km south until it drains into Lake Erie at Port Maitland. There are 11 geographically distinct sub-watersheds, and four major tributaries including the Conestogo, Nith, Speed and Eramosa Rivers.

The Grand River has a rich cultural history and deep ties to Indigenous traditions. Prior to settlement, Indigenous people relied on the river for subsistence including transportation, water, and food sources. European settlement began in the 1700s, with communities congregating along the river as it provided a source of water and power for mills. This led to the development of local industries and economic prosperity. Agricultural intensification, population growth, and industrial expansion altered the landscape and resulted in deforestation, draining of wetlands, and habitat loss and fragmentation.

Today, the watershed consists of 38 municipalities, two First Nations reserves, and is home to approximately one million residents, mostly residing in urban cities, towns, and villages. A majority of the watershed remains a rural landscape with intensive agricultural practices. The watershed remains a highly diverse and interconnected system and continues to be heavily influenced by population growth, changes to land cover and resource use, climate change and other stressors that affect the landscape.

Additional information on Grand River watershed conditions and issues can be found in the Water Management Plan (2014), the State of Water Resources (2020), the Watershed-based Resource Management Strategy (2024), and additional resources are located on the GRCA's website: www.grandriver.ca.

A Canadian Heritage River

The Canadian Heritage River System was established in 1984 by the federal, provincial and territorial governments. The goal is to conserve and protect the best examples of

Canadian river heritage, to give them national recognition and to encourage the public to enjoy and appreciate them.

The Grand River and its major tributaries - the Conestogo, Eramosa, Nith and Speed rivers - were designated Canadian Heritage Rivers in 1994. The designation recognizes the outstanding Indigenous and settler cultural heritage values and excellent recreational opportunities along the rivers. The designation carries no regulatory or legal authority or restrictions.

The GRCA's involvement in celebrating heritage within the Grand River watershed is two-fold:

- As custodian of the Canadian Heritage River designation, the GRCA reports to the Canadian Heritage River Secretariat on the status of the Grand River.
- As a property owner, the GRCA provides extensive recreational opportunities on Conservation Areas and Conservation Lands, and some properties are home to cultural heritage features.

Some examples of cultural heritage features on properties owned by the GRCA include:

- The Lake Erie & Northern Railway Line once functioned as an electrical trolley line extending from Cambridge to Lake Erie. It carried passengers from 1917 until 1955, and in 1991 was purchased by the GRCA. In 1994 it opened as the Cambridge to Paris Rail trail and is one of the first abandoned rail lines in Ontario to be converted into recreational trail use.
- The Cambridge Living Levee was constructed for flood control following the large flood event in 1974. It is located on both sides of the banks of the Grand River and is an excellent example of human adaptation to flooding hazards. It has also helped to preserve mills, historic structures and maintain parks, scenery, and recreational opportunities.
- The Bridgeport Dike project commenced following the flood created by Hurricane Hazel in 1954. Throughout 1955-1959, the former Grand Valley Conservation Authority created a 1.5 km long dike to protect surrounding residential, commercial, industrial and recreational lands. This also included channel dredging and placement of gabion groynes.

GRCA Landholdings

History of Land Acquisition

Throughout the mid 1930s the Grand River Conservation Commission was formed to assist in resolving issues from increased industrialization including flooding, drought, water pollution, and other contributing factors to which the Grand River was susceptible. The Commission began identifying and acquiring lands suitable for reservoir development that would serve multiple purposes including flood control, water supply and water quality. The first reservoir constructed was the Shand Dam in 1942, which

created the Belwood Lake reservoir. The construction of additional dams such as Luther Dam and Conestogo Dam followed.

In 1948 a second watershed management agency was formed called the Grand Valley Conservation Authority which aimed to acquire lands to help conserve and restore natural environments and sensitive ecosystems from the impacts of development, urbanization, agricultural intensification and other stressors. Acquisition efforts were focused on priority areas or adjacent to existing properties, often located in the headwaters of the Grand River. Natural hazard lands and recreational lands were also acquired to support resource management and outdoor recreation.

In 1966 the Grand River Conservation Commission and Grand Valley Conservation Authority merged to form the now Grand River Conservation Authority. The new agency continued to build reservoirs, undertake larger-scale water management projects and develop areas for outdoor recreation.

Some of the ways GRCA-owned properties were acquired include through financial support from the provincial government, purchased from private landowners at market-value rates, expropriation, or donated from municipalities, conservation organizations, or watershed residents.

Current Landholdings

A Land Acquisition Policy was approved in 2009 and sets priorities for acquisition candidates. Recent land acquisitions have focused on protecting natural features in priority areas and increasing existing landholdings to expand habitat areas.

The GRCA owns approximately 19,900 hectares of land, which represents approximately three per cent of the total land area within the watershed. These landholdings are used for a variety of purposes that support the GRCA's programs and services, including lands for water control infrastructure, outdoor recreation, environmental education, natural areas, agricultural and commercial leases, rental properties, and lands under maintenance agreements.

The GRCA manages a diverse land portfolio throughout the Grand River watershed. Most of these lands are located in the northern regions of the watershed, or in remote rural areas. Approximately 9.5% of the GRCA's lands are within urban boundaries, including large cities such as Waterloo, Cambridge, and Brantford, as well as smaller towns like Elora, Dunville and Woolwich. Additionally, about 500 hectares of urban parkland is owned by the GRCA but maintained by municipalities through maintenance agreements.

To better understand the multifaceted purposes of the GRCA's properties and to support implementation of the Strategy, the GRCA has established a system of land use categories. These categories classify landholdings based on permitted activities, uses, designations, and the programs and services offered at each location. Four categories have been identified, however in many instances, some parcels may overlap and fall

into more than one category. The Land Inventory identifies the primary and, where applicable, secondary categories for all GRCA properties.

Water Management

Many GRCA properties house important flood management infrastructure including multi-purpose reservoirs, floodwalls, and dikes. They are essential to the GRCA's water management program and support flood control, modelling and forecasting. Approximately 19% of GRCA's landholdings are currently used for water infrastructure and flood control.

The GRCA operates seven multi-purpose dams and reservoirs, which are vital to protecting the health and safety of watershed communities within the watershed. These dams provide both flood control and low flow augmentation. Among them, the Shand, Conestogo, and Guelph Lake dams are considered the workhorses of flood control operation and are also used for hydroelectric production. The GRCA also owns 21 small dams, many of which were built in the 1800s and early 1900s. Initially constructed for transportation, waterpower and water supply, these smaller dams now hold recreational, aesthetic or historical value.

In addition to dams and reservoirs, the GRCA owns and manages land with other flood protection systems such as floodwalls and dikes. These systems play a crucial role in safeguarding low-lying areas and communities from significant floods. The GRCA owns lands that contain the Brantford, Bridgeport, Cambridge, Drayton, and New Hamburg dike systems.

Conservation Areas

The GRCA owns and operates 11 fee-for-use conservation areas and the Luther Marsh Wildlife Management Area, collectively called Grand River Conservation Areas. Many of these areas have been established around the multi-purpose reservoirs and their primary purpose is to support GRCA's flood management program. Others are located directly along the Grand River for recreational purposes only.

Grand River Conservation Areas have on-site facilities and infrastructure for public use, including washrooms, gatehouse, pavilions, picnic areas, and camping services such as water, hydro and sewage. These spaces are maintained and supported by full-time and seasonal GRCA personnel.

Grand River Conservation Areas offer both aesthetic appeal and access to water-based recreation. Visitors can experience the outdoors through a variety of recreation-based activities such as camping, biking, birding, hunting, boating, paddling, swimming, hiking, fishing, and picnicking. The GRCA's conservation areas offer Ontario's oldest and second-largest camping program. Additionally, they operate two of the Province's largest outdoor pools, located at Brant and Byng Island Conservation Areas. Six conservation areas are open year-round and offer additional winter programs such as hiking, skiing, and snowshoeing.

The Luther Marsh Wildlife Management Area offers a different, and more limited, range of activities and facilities. Situated in the headwaters of the Grand River watershed, Luther Marsh spans 5,900 hectares and centers around the 1,400-hectare Luther Lake, which was formed by the construction of Luther Dam in 1954. Comprising of a mix of wetlands, fields and forests, Luther Marsh provides essential habitat for a diverse range of birds, animals, plants and trees. Visitors can explore Luther Marsh through activities including hiking, birding, hunting and paddling.

The GRCA's Conservation Areas are vital parts of the recreational infrastructure in their communities, providing locations for a wide range of activities and the opportunity to connect with nature and appreciate the beauty of the Grand River watershed.

Conservation Lands

The GRCA's Conservation Lands are open to the public with no user fees and limited services. They have minimal facilities such as parking lots, trails, garbage receptacles and trailhead kiosks. There are no full-time GRCA personnel onsite, however, these areas do require staff support to manage. Conservation Lands help foster an appreciation for nature by immersing visitors in a more naturalized, unstructured outdoor experience on managed trails. Visitors can enjoy passive recreational experiences such as hiking, birding, and photography. These lands also provide habitat for a wide range of plant and animal species. Conservation Lands contribute to 20% of the GRCA's overall landholdings. Popular Conservation Lands properties include Damascus, Snyder's Flats and F.W.R Dickson Wilderness Area.

Also included in these lands are approximately 75 km of GRCA-owned rail trails such as the Elora Cataract Trailway, Cambridge to Paris Trail, and Brantford to Hamilton Rail Trail which were formed on old railway corridors. These trails often integrate with a larger connected system of trailways maintained by municipalities, associations, and other organizations that link regions and communities.

Controlled or Limited Access Area

Additional GRCA properties are considered controlled or limited access use. These areas are closed to the public due to sensitive ecosystems, natural hazards, or program restrictions. However, access may be authorized through special permissions such as licenses, leases, exclusive-use maintenance agreements, and access permits. These properties do not have GRCA personnel onsite and require limited resources to maintain. Additionally, the GRCA leases property at Belwood Lake and Conestogo Lake for use as seasonal cottage lots.

Hunting is permitted on 21 GRCA properties including lands around Belwood and Conestogo Lake Conservation Areas, Luther Marsh Wildlife Management Area, and 18 other miscellaneous properties. Hunters must have a GRCA hunting permit and proof of provincial and/or federal requirements to hunt on these properties.

Some GRCA properties have natural areas that contain rare, sensitive, or otherwise significant species, communities, and ecosystem functions, all of which contribute to the

biological diversity within the watershed. Key natural areas include forests, wetlands, grasslands, river and creek valleys, and other areas. These ecological connections make broader scale linkages of natural features that contribute to the overall watershed ecology. The GRCA undertakes multi-scale projects to conserve, maintain, and enhance natural areas for biodiversity; to improve ecological connectivity and resiliency; to protect drinking water sources; and to mitigate the impacts of flooding and erosion. Approximately 20% of GRCA's landholdings are not accessible or open to the public.

Land Dispositions

GRCA lands are privately owned and the GRCA is subject to the same legal obligations and restrictions as other private landowners. Periodic reviews of landholdings are completed to ensure that they meet the current needs of the GRCA and as a result, in some instances, some landholdings may be considered surplus. Staff then recommend to the GRCA Board of Directors that the lands be declared surplus and follow established procedures for disposition.

The disposition of land requires approval from the GRCA Board of Directors and may also require additional notification to other agencies. Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry (MNR) guidelines govern how some conservation authority land dispositions must take place and how the public is consulted on dispositions.

The Land Disposition Policy outlines the framework and process for disposition of GRCA lands.



Figure 1 Map of Grand River Conservation Areas, rail trails and some Conservation Lands within the Grand River watershed.

GRCA Land Contribution to Watershed Health

The GRCA's land acquisition policies and priorities, along with significant ecological restoration activities, have resulted in landholdings with a high concentration of natural areas and natural hazards lands.

Conservation authorities develop watershed-based programs to protect people and property from risks associated with natural hazards, including flooding, drought, erosion, dynamic beaches and hazardous lands and sites. Hazardous lands and sites consist of wetlands, river stream valleys, shoreline areas, and unstable soils or bedrocks.

The GRCA's major dams, Shand, Luther, Conestogo and Guelph, are operated as a system to reduce flood damages and augment river flows to support municipal water supply withdrawals and improve the capacity of the Grand River to receive treated wastewater.

Flood protection systems, such as floodwalls and dikes, are located along riverbanks, such as those in Bridgeport, Brantford, Caledonia, and Cambridge, serve to reduce the impact of significant floods of similar magnitudes to Hurricane Hazel in 1954. Portions of these dikes are owned by the GRCA while others are owned by the municipalities. Additionally, smaller dikes or berms have been built on GRCA lands in communities like Drayton and New Hamburg.

Before provincial policies were implemented to regulate development on lands with natural hazards, the GRCA acquired numerous properties containing natural hazard features including floodplains, wetlands and areas susceptible to erosion and slope failure.

Out of the approximately 19,900 hectares of land owned by the GRCA, around 11,300 hectares (or 57%) are designated as natural hazard features. This includes:

- 7268 hectares (7%) of floodplain;
- 7137 hectares (36%) of wetlands;
- 500 hectares (3%) of lands with erosion hazards;
- 536 hectares (3%) of lands with steep slope hazards; and
- 429 hectares (2%) of lands prone to impacts from Lake Erie flooding.

In addition to natural hazard lands, the GRCA owns land that makes important contributions to the natural areas of the Grand River watershed. Throughout the decades, strategic land acquisition and significant ecological restoration projects have resulted in a land holding that is close to 90% covered by natural areas: 59% forest (including swamps), 17% open water, 7% marsh, and 6% grassland.

GRCA landholdings cover 3% of the watershed, however, the properties contain:

- 11% of the total watershed wetland area, including 13% of the provincially significant wetland area;

- 7% of the total watershed forest cover, including 13% of the interior forest area;
- 24% of the areas designated as Areas of Scientific and Natural Interest (ANSIs); and
- a substantial area of managed grasslands (380 hectares).

Naturalized areas are especially important in the Upper Grand subwatershed, which is the headwater area of the Grand River. In this subwatershed, GRCA-owned land contains approximately 21% of the area's forest cover and 31% of its wetland area.

GRCA-owned forests, wetlands, grasslands, reservoirs, and streams provide habitat for a wide variety of plants and animals. This includes areas of habitat for uncommon and rare species. Thirty-four GRCA properties contain recorded occurrences of rare species tracked by the provincial Natural Heritage Information Centre or listed as species at risk in Ontario. Ninety-five rare and at-risk species have been recorded on the GRCA's lands.

The GRCA's landholdings make an important contribution to the watershed's ecology and natural environment. However, it's important to acknowledge that maintaining and promoting a healthy watershed also depends on natural heritage features found on lands owned by municipalities, the Province, not-for-profit organizations, and especially on agricultural and other privately-owned lands. Many of the natural features on the GRCA's lands extend beyond property boundaries to form a connected system with natural areas owned and managed by others. A significant example of this is found at the Luther Marsh Wildlife Management Area where a portion of the landholdings are owned by the Province. The GRCA and MNRF collaborate in the management of this important natural area. The GRCA also partners with various watershed municipalities for the management of some properties, often through a formal maintenance agreement.

Challenges and Pressures

The GRCA's lands are one of its most significant assets. Management of the GRCA's lands is complicated by competing land use interests and changing social, economic and environmental conditions.

As the watershed's population grows, so does the demand for access to open, natural spaces, nature-based and river-based recreation, and outdoor experiences. The GRCA will need to continue to address increases in visitation and manage incompatible and conflicting uses on its properties (e.g., prohibited activities, encroachments).

The GRCA's properties are affected by regional and broader scale trends that influence environmental health and use of properties (e.g., habitat loss and fragmentation, invasive species, climate change and other disturbances). These trends will influence property maintenance needs and restoration potential.

The GRCA must continue to invest in the built infrastructure on its properties to ensure that infrastructure is maintained and developed at a level to achieve the organization's objectives. Continued investment in capital infrastructure and maintenance needs is essential for the long-term sustainability of programs and to enhance visitors' connections to the outdoor environment.

The water management infrastructure (e.g., dams, dikes) located on the GRCA's lands will continue to play a critical role in protecting life and minimizing property damage from flooding and erosion, and ensuring sustainable water supplies for communities, economies and ecosystems.

These challenges and pressures collectively mean that the GRCA must strategically allocate resources, prioritize program development areas, and evolve land management practices to be adaptive and flexible. By ensuring that appropriate strategies are implemented, the GRCA can effectively mitigate challenges while optimizing the use of resources.

Conservation Areas Strategy Objectives

The GRCA has established 5 key objectives to serve as a framework for the Strategy. Given the GRCA's diverse land portfolio and wide range of programs, certain lands may contribute to multiple objectives and outcomes, and other lands may only fall under one objective. Some examples of action items are included with each objective to demonstrate pathways towards fulfillment.

The objectives of the Conservation Areas Strategy are to:

1. **Manage GRCA landholdings in compliance with relevant Federal, Provincial and Municipal regulations, policies, and guidelines.**

The Conservation Authorities Act is the main governing legislation that defines the mandatory programs and services of all conservation authorities in Ontario. Additionally, GRCA-owned lands are governed by other municipal, provincial, and federal regulations that affect operational processes and land management practices.

Outcomes

- Alignment with conservation authority mandatory programs and services.
- A framework for the management of program budgets, funding structures, and financial transparency.
- Defined legal responsibilities as a private landowner to manage risk and liability.
- An enforcement framework for addressing unauthorized activities.

Future Direction

The GRCA is committed to compliance with all regulatory requirements as prescribed by governing organizations. As legislation and regulations evolve, the GRCA will work collaboratively to update processes, integrate changes into operational procedures, and

meet identified deliverables within stated timelines. Ongoing reviews of existing procedures and practices will be undertaken to ensure compliance and identify gaps. Where needed, the GRCA will engage with provincial, municipal and federal authorities and other relevant interest holders.

2. Consider watershed health and resilience when making land management decisions.

The GRCA owns many parcels of land with water management infrastructure as well as natural heritage and hazard features that provide valuable ecosystem functions and services. Conserving and managing natural assets (e.g., forests, wetlands, riparian areas) on the GRCA's lands can provide many benefits, including water storage, pollution control, and wildlife habitat and biodiversity. Restoring and enhancing ecosystem functions can help improve resiliency to climate change.

Outcomes

- Reduction of flood and erosion damages as a result of well-maintained and operated water management infrastructure.
- Maintained and improved hydrologic functions, such as infiltration of precipitation and groundwater recharge, groundwater storage and discharge, and capture of runoff of precipitation in landscape depressions.
- Improved natural cover in riparian, forest, wetland and grassland ecosystems on suitable lands.
- Conservation of ecologically sensitive lands and improved biodiversity.
- Increased resiliency to climate change impacts and other disturbances.

Future Direction

As communities continue to grow, climate changes, and competing pressures rise on lands and waters, the GRCA's landholdings and infrastructure will continue to make important contributions to water management and natural heritage. Considering ecosystem health and watershed science in land management decisions will help ensure the GRCA's lands are resilient to changing conditions and contribute to the health of the Grand River watershed. The GRCA will:

- Develop a restoration strategy that identifies priorities for natural heritage projects and resources.
- Consider climate change and other disturbances (e.g., invasive species) when developing future land management strategies.
- Implement the Natural Hazard Infrastructure Asset Management Plan to support the operation, maintenance, repair and decommissioning of water and erosion control infrastructure.
- Review and confirm land ownership for water control structures.

Actions:

- Natural Heritage Restoration Strategy
- Maintenance & Management Plans - Including 5 Year Operating Plans for Existing Grassland, Wetland, Forest Restoration Projects
- Natural Hazard Infrastructure Asset Management Plan

3. Provide sustainable outdoor recreational and educational opportunities and connections with the natural environment.

The GRCA's Conservation Area, Outdoor Environmental Education, and Conservation Land programs offer a variety of outdoor recreational and nature-based activities throughout the Grand River watershed. Visitors are encouraged to connect with the environment and foster an appreciation for nature. Programs managed through conservation areas and outdoor environmental education are fee-for-use, and programs managed through conservation lands, such as passive recreation, are provided at no cost to the user.

The Canadian Heritage River designation recognizes the countless recreational activities that the Grand River watershed offers, many of which occur on or near the GRCA's properties, such as:

- Boating - canoeing, kayaking, motorized boating
- Angling - sport fishing, ice fishing
- Water sports - swimming, water skiing, stand-up paddleboarding
- Water associated activities - hiking, hunting, camping
- Winter activities – cross country skiing, snowshoeing
- Natural heritage appreciation - wildlife viewing, scenic views
- Human heritage appreciation - sporting events, visiting historic sites

Outcomes

- Access to greenspaces for watershed residents to enjoy a wide range of natural landscapes, celebrate the ecological diversity of the watershed, and experience the benefits of being outdoors.
- Comprehensive programs that prioritize both environmental sustainability and financial resilience.
- Access to outdoor programs in a safe, welcoming, and managed setting.
- A variety of outdoor recreational opportunities that resonate with visitors on a personal level (e.g., camping, hiking, hunting, swimming).
- Recognition and celebration of the heritage values of the Grand River and the GRCA's nature-based recreation programs and properties.

Future Direction

Providing memorable outdoor experiences and cultivating visitor relationships is core to the GRCA's outdoor recreational, educational and environmental programs. With an annual rise in visitation rates and an expanding customer base, it is important that program areas adapt to match the current user demands while ensuring sustainable environmental and financial resources. To do this the GRCA will:

- Develop an Asset Management Plan for conservation areas, conservation lands and outdoor environmental education to better document current and future assets needs.
- Identify opportunities to improve accessibility and reduce potential barriers where possible.
- Understand current usership and capacity pressures and refine visitor management strategies.
- Maintain environmental health within conservation areas and lands.
- Continue to evaluate all programs identified as Category 3, per *O. Reg. 686/21*, to ensure they have sustainable funding sources; and explore alternative revenue generation opportunities.
- Maintain a holistic operating approach and encourage departmental synergies.
- Review existing plans and projects related to management plans, operations, capital projects and policies, and ensure they are current and applicable.
- Maintain the designation of the Grand River as a Canadian Heritage River.

Actions:

- Trail Standards Strategy
- Signage Strategy
- Annual and decadal reporting to the Canadian Heritage River Secretariat
- GRCA Property Asset Management Plan
- Conservation Area Standard Operating Procedures

4. Enhance community partnerships on GRCA properties.

The GRCA partners with watershed municipalities, First Nations, and environmental organizations and others to support mutual benefits on GRCA-owned lands. Shared interest among partnerships includes river-related links and trails, conservation of appropriate lands, recreational, educational and economic opportunities, and areas that support municipal and community infrastructure.

Outcomes

- Increased access to outdoor spaces fosters community connections, public knowledge, environmental awareness and stewardship.

- Opportunities for tourism and economic development.
- Synergistic, collaborative and effective relationships with organizations who share aligned goals and priorities.
- Opportunities to share resources and fulfill service gaps.
- Opportunities for environmental conservation, research, and habitat management on ecologically valuable lands.
- Enhanced relationships with First Nations and increased understanding of how to better incorporate Indigenous values in land management decisions, where applicable.

Future Direction

Partnerships are key to the ongoing success of our land management programs, and many projects and services rely on these collaborative relationships. The GRCA will:

- Maintain positive and effective relationships with current partners.
- Where feasible, identify opportunities for new partnerships with organizations that have similar interests and values.
- Identify how properties benefit watershed municipalities and influence the local economic landscape.
- Grow our relationships with Six Nations of the Grand River and Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation through engagement and collaboration.
- Maintain and improve public access to recreational opportunities, where suitable, through maintenance agreements with local municipalities.

Actions:

- Agreement Standards
- Research Permit Process
- Engagement Guidelines

5. Manage GRCA landholdings in a strategic, fiscally responsible, and sustainable way.

The 1930s to 1980s was a rapid period of land acquisition to support a variety of initiatives and projects. Throughout the years, land management priorities and programs have evolved. Depending on the needs of the Authority, acquisitions, dispositions, maintenance agreements, easements, donations, land exchanges, or land transfers may be considered. Priorities for changes to the GRCA's landholdings are outlined in the GRCA's policies for acquisition and dispositions.

Outcomes

- Fiscally responsible land ownership that aligns with GRCA’s strategic priorities and mandatory programs and services.
- Land management programs aimed to reduce risk and liability, promote public safety, and ensure appropriate use of land.
- Support for municipal infrastructure through approval of sales, maintenance agreements, easements, and land exchanges.

Future Direction

Strategic and financially responsible management decisions are essential to maintain the GRCA’s land portfolio and programs. As environmental and economic factors change, the GRCA must review program areas and permitted uses on GRCA lands. The GRCA will:

- Maintain the land inventory with up-to-date property ownership information.
- Establish criteria to prioritize updating and developing land management plans.
- Ensure effective strategies are in place for managing trespassing, encroachments, encampments, and prohibited activities including public education and enforcement.
- Consider new opportunities to generate revenue and help offset operating costs and capital needs.

Actions:

- Residential Tenancy Winddown
- Conservation Area Enforcement Manual
- Conservation Lands Strategy

Programs and Services

Table 1. Identification of Category 1 “mandatory”, Category 2 “municipal” and Category 3 “other” programs and services provided on GRCA owned land and respective funding sources.

| Category | Program | Funding source |
|----------|--|---|
| 1 | Conservation Lands Management | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Municipal Apportionment• Reserves• Self-generated program revenue |
| 1 | Watershed Management (Some monitoring stations are located on GRCA-owned lands) | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Municipal Apportionment• Self-generated program revenue• Reserves |

| | | |
|---|--|--|
| 1 | Flood Forecasting & Warning (FFW) (Some dams and stream flow gauges are located on GRCA-owned lands) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Municipal Apportionment • Provincial/ Federal / Other Municipal • Reserves |
| 1 | Water Control Structures-Flood Control, Small Dams & Ice Management (Some flood control structures are located on GRCA-owned lands) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Municipal Apportionment • Provincial/ Federal / Other Municipal • Reserves |
| 2 | Watershed Services (Some continuous water quality stations are located on GRCA owned lands) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Municipal MOU Apportionment • Provincial/ Federal / Other Municipal |
| 3 | Burford Tree Nursery Operations and Planting Operations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-generated program revenue |
| 3 | Environmental Education | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-generated program revenue |
| 3 | Property Rentals | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-generated program revenue |
| 3 | Conservation Areas | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-generated program revenue • Reserves |
| 3 | Hydro Production | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-generated program revenue |

For more information on Category 1, 2, and 3 programs, refer to GRCA's *Inventory of Programs and Services – Final Version*.

Looking Forward

The Grand River Watershed is a dynamic and interconnected network that supports natural environments, local communities, and economic prosperity. As stewards of the land and water, it is important that the GRCA continues to work collaboratively and innovatively with all levels of government, watershed municipalities, and other stakeholders to maintain a healthy, vibrant, and resilient watershed for future generations. Implementation of this Conservation Areas Strategy forges a cohesive pathway to meet objectives, manage landholdings sustainably, conserve the natural environment, and offer programs and services in alignment with the GRCA's mission, values, and strategic priorities.

Updates to the Strategy

The Strategy will be reviewed every five years and updated as needed. Oversight of revisions will be coordinated by the Manager of Conservation Area Operations and the Manager of Conservation Lands. Changes to the Strategy are approved by the GRCA. The most current version of the Strategy will be published on the GRCA website.

Consultation

Consultation will be conducted in a transparent, accessible, inclusive, respectful, and timely manner using consultation best practices. Prior to publication of any updates to the Strategy, the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation and Six Nations of the Grand River band councils, as well as public interest holders, will be consulted in a manner that is appropriate at the time of the update.