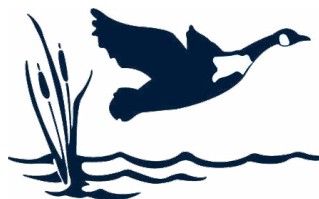


Sustaining The Place for Life

Strategic Plan
2016-2025



**Essex Region
Conservation
Authority**

“A place is not a place
until people
have been born in it,

have grown up in it,

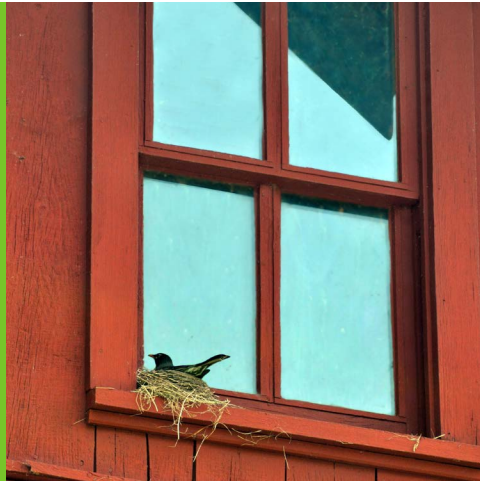
lived in it, died in it ...
have experienced
and shaped it,

as individuals, families,
neighbourhoods and
communities, over more
than one generation.

Some are born
in their place,
some find it,

some realize after long
searching that the place
they left is the one
they have been searching for.”

Wallace Stegner





Message from the General Manager



Richard J.H. Wyma CSLA
General Manager/
Secretary-Treasurer

On behalf of the Essex Region Conservation Authority, I am pleased to present our 10-Year Strategic Plan, which identifies our strategic directions for 2016-2025. The Essex region is a special place, unlike anywhere else in Canada. The people who live here are dedicated to this community and take pride in all that it offers. We have a responsibility to safeguard this place, for our residents and for the future.

Throughout our consultation process, there were themes that resonated and repeated time and again: that ERCA must continue to focus on protecting and enhancing our environment, building sustainable communities, making sound land use planning decisions and connecting our residents through, and with, nature. All of these priorities must be set in the context of a changing climate and the recognition of the critical importance of our Great Lakes.

While this strategic plan identifies some new and exciting challenges and directions, we have also remained loyal to our roots and the fundamental principles upon which Conservation Authorities were founded in the last century: Protecting and restoring water quality and natural places; protecting people and property from natural hazards, education of and engagement with our citizens and connecting people with nature.

By following the strategic directions in this plan, ERCA will continue to strive to improve the quality of life for our residents. We urge you to find what matters to you in our Strategic Plan and join us in creating a sustainable future.

Together, we have an unprecedented opportunity to make our region **The Place For Life.**



Everywhere is some place.

Our region, not unlike any other area, is made up of places – where we live, where we work, where we gather and where we play. We give meaning to these places based on how we use them and appreciate them. We become attached to places that are important to us, and as a result, we have an obligation to protect and preserve those places.

ERCA has a responsibility to help our region and our communities, by ensuring the places we live in provide clean water and landscapes, are protected from flooding and erosion and support healthy living through recreation and conservation.

To do so, we have to consider how changes in our urban and rural landscapes impact our communities and region ecologically, by understanding the places we live in and the impacts of change in our region.

The more we know about our region, the greater our attachment will be to it; the better we'll be able to care for it and ultimately the greater our experiences will be of the Essex region as a place.



The Place for Life

All elements of a place are interconnected - our community, its environmental health, healthy lifestyles for our citizens and our economy.

‘Life’ recognizes our living, thriving and sustainable natural systems.

‘Life’ refers to the people of our community; their health and protection and our shared heritage.

We embrace this place and make it our home – for life.



Our Vision

The Essex Region is a sustainable, resilient and vibrant place with healthy and thriving watersheds, Great Lakes and a green culture.

Our Mission

Improving our environment to enrich our lives.



Where We're Going

Significant consultation was undertaken in the development of this 10 year strategic plan.

We sought input from regional leaders, organizations with a vested interest in the environment, volunteers and stakeholders. We also consulted with our Board of Directors, elected officials and ERCA and municipal staff. Much of the feedback was focused on creating a future of sustainability – for both our organization and our region.

There was agreement at all levels that the Essex region is a special place; and that ERCA must continue to protect and enhance our environment, encourage sound and sustainable land use planning and connect our residents through and with nature. All of these priorities must be set in the context of a changing climate and the recognition of the critical importance of our Great Lakes.

Since 1973, the **Essex Region Conservation Authority** has been dedicated to protecting, restoring and managing the natural resources of the Essex Region. We work in partnership with the Province of Ontario, Government of Canada, our nine member municipalities and the people who make up our community to increase natural areas coverage, improve water quality, protect people and property from flooding and erosion and to enhance the lives of our residents by providing outdoor education and recreation.

Our Strategic Directions

Our actions will continue to be guided by four overarching Strategic Directions:



Connect - Connect people to our landscapes, natural areas, trails, waterfronts and our Great Lakes. Connect and expand natural areas through acquisition, management, land use planning and habitat restoration.



Engage - Engage our community to increase awareness about the critical importance of a healthy and sustainable community through outreach and education.



Collaborate - To work collaboratively to strengthen and facilitate partnerships with all levels of government, our municipal partners, stakeholders and the public to create a future of sustainability through innovative land use planning and watershed management services.



Discover - To develop greater scientific knowledge to proactively address and respond to environmental challenges such as climate change, water quality and other threats to our sustainability.

Our Commitment:

Regardless of the issues of the day or community priorities, there are timeless principles that unify the way we provide service. We are committed to:

- Excellent customer service and a solution-oriented approach
- Open communication and responsiveness
- Accountability, transparency and responsible use of resources
- Collaboration with all levels of government and across municipal boundaries
- Adapting to best serve the emerging needs of the community

Strategic Actions: 2016-2025

This Strategic Plan will provide the basis for our decision making and priority setting over the next decade. There were five recurring themes and ideas that we heard through our broad consultation and from these, our strategy has been informed.

- 1. The climate will continue to change:** While efforts to slow climate change must continue, we also need to help our partner communities prepare to adapt to its impacts.
- 2. The Great Lakes are our most significant natural resource:** Our 2012 Watershed Report Card identified failing grades for surface water quality in virtually every watershed. More must be done to protect and improve water quality.
- 3. Our landscapes and habitats are among the most significant in Canada:** We have planted more than 6 million trees and achieved 8.5% natural areas coverage, but more action is needed to reach our 12% target.
- 4. Our urban areas will continue to grow and expand:** ERCA will need to continue to work with all partners to plan sustainable communities that reduce urban sprawl, are walkable, have a healthy food supply and incorporate green infrastructure.
- 5. ERCA is a sustainable, resilient and valued agency:** Since 1973, ERCA has been striving to achieve a state of sustainability for the Essex Region. It is also important to consider the sustainability of ERCA as an organization.

The identified actions will guide us as we set our annual work plans and we will track our progress on each strategic direction and action. Locally based decision making has been key to the Conservation Authority success model since the establishment of the first Authority in 1946 and we remain true to our roots. As always, we will continue to engage and collaborate with partners from all levels to ensure we provide the best value to the communities we serve.

There's no question that a healthy environment, healthy economy and the human health of the people who live in our community are inextricably linked. We will continue to support these three pillars of sustainability and ensure that the Windsor/Essex/Pelee Island region remain **The Place for Life**.



The climate will continue to change.

Climate change is one of the primary drivers of Lake Erie eutrophication. There are years whereby 1:100 year floods are happening on multiple occasions. In some cases, municipal infrastructure cannot withstand the pressures of this changing climate. Adaptation will be necessary to build a resilient community and sustainable planning plays a vital role in creating resiliency.

While efforts to slow climate change must continue, we also need to help our partner communities prepare to adapt to its impacts.

GOAL 1: Climate Adaptation

We understand more about the impacts of changing climate conditions in our region.

ACTIONS



1.1

Lead regional climate change adaptation strategies to ensure resilience to climate variability. Assist individuals in residential and agricultural climate change preparedness.

1.2

Investigate and implement innovative cap and trade solutions such as carbon offset, water quality trading or habitat restoration compensation.

1.3

Research and promote more sophisticated water conservation initiatives.

GOAL 2: Climate Action

People and property, especially in hazard lands, are protected from extreme storms, high winds, flooding and erosion.

ACTIONS



2.1

Undertake modelling and assessment to update ERCA's Floodline Mapping.

2.2

Complete Stormwater Management Guidelines to ensure efficiency and consistency amongst regional municipalities.

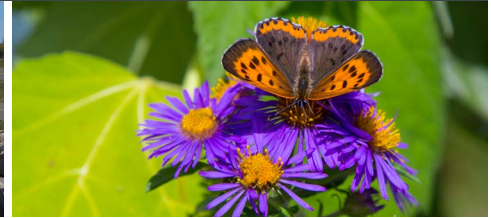
2.3

Build capacity and expertise in Low Impact Design to become a better resource to our municipal and business partners.

GOAL 3: Biodiversity

We manage our local biodiversity, Carolinian habitats and conservation lands to include consideration of the impacts of climate change, invasive species and habitat changes.

ACTIONS



3.1

Formalize a monitoring protocol in Conservation Areas to investigate climate change impacts on native and invasive species

3.2

Work with partners to understand and respond to emerging species of concern.

3.3

Develop a regional Invasive Species working group and undertake control pilot projects.



The Great Lakes are our most significant natural resource.

The Great Lakes contain nearly 20% of the world's freshwater supply. Water security is of critical importance to communities worldwide. Today, our Great Lakes are facing greater challenges than ever before. In 2015, the *Great Lakes Protection Act* was signed – the Lakes should be swimmable, fishable and drinkable and this Act identifies a phosphorus reduction target of 40%.

Our 2012 Watershed Report Card identified failing grades for surface water quality in virtually every watershed. More must be done to protect and improve water quality.

GOAL 4: Clean Water

We have increased our focus on Great Lakes water quality and land use practices to support the MOECC's target of reducing phosphorus loadings by 40%.

ACTIONS



4.1

Work collaboratively across all levels of government to effectively concentrate efforts and implement actions in priority watersheds to address challenges building on past successes

4.2

Advocate for changes to industry and agricultural practices in order to reduce impact on our Great Lakes.

4.3

Advocate to policy makers to ensure tools are practical and available and appropriate to address challenges.

GOAL 5: Science and Monitoring

We have enhanced our science and monitoring to more effectively target sources of nutrients.

ACTIONS



5.1

Undertake science and research with partners to effectively target sources of nutrients in order to achieve healthy rivers, shorelines and beaches.

5.2

Identify and target challenges and pressures and implement changes.

5.3

Report on the health and quality of our watersheds on a regular basis (e.g. Watershed Report Cards).

GOAL 6: Stewardship

We have renewed our focus on stewardship and engagement to achieve measureable water quality improvements.

ACTIONS



6.1

Investigate the 'best' Best Management Practices (BMPs). Accelerate the pace of BMP implementation and strengthen relationships with stewardship partners.

6.2

Advocate to municipal partners and senior levels of government the benefits of introducing septic re-inspection tools.

6.3

Review and refocus the Essex County Demonstration Farm activities with agricultural partners. Consider urban farming practices and micro-farming. Better promote the research and results.



Our landscapes and habitats are among the most significant in Canada.

ERCA developed its first strategic plan in 1995, with a vision of achieving 12% natural areas coverage. While progress has been made, there is still much to do to reach this state of environmental sustainability. Science and research have provided advances in refining these goals, and the Essex Region Natural Heritage Systems Study provides a community-specific snapshot of strategic restoration that can take place to achieve this goal. At a time when natural areas restoration can help manage stormwater and improve water quality, the importance of these efforts cannot be overstated.

We have planted more than 6 million trees and achieved 8.5% natural areas coverage, but more action is needed to reach our 12% target.

GOAL 7: Protected Habitats

We have continued to protect the natural areas and biodiversity that remain in the Essex region.

ACTIONS



7.1

Expand and connect core habitat parcels to ensure species resiliency.

7.2

Improve communication of protection and restoration targets, utilizing the Essex Region Natural Heritage System Strategy (ERNHSS) 'evidence based decision-making model'. Work with municipal planning authorities to create and implement Natural Heritage Systems.

7.3

Restore Clean Water~Green Spaces acquisition funding and secure partnership funding to implement the Land Securement Strategy.

GOAL 8: Connected Communities

Our region is further connected through the addition of green spaces and trails to achieve a healthy environment with healthy residents.

ACTIONS



8.1

Create Business Plans as required for largest Conservation Areas to identify infrastructure needs and investment in visitor services. Within these plans, incorporate Climate Change resiliency and leadership in green technology into Conservation Areas, facilities and operations.

8.2

Build the Cypher Systems Group Greenway and other connecting Greenways and trail extensions to bring our goal of a regional trail system one step closer to reality.

8.3

Enhance education and outreach – connect people across our broad range of program activities to their landscape and habitats.

GOAL 9: Restored Landscapes

We have enhanced regional biodiversity by continuing to partner with public and private landowners to strategically restore habitats through reforestation, prairie planting and wetland creation.

ACTIONS



9.1

Undertake research to define benefits and barriers to landowner participation in ERCA's Clean Water~Green Spaces stewardship program and redefine the program based on research results. Develop a 'best practices' guide to help inform landowners.

9.2

Continue to develop and implement Management Plans for Conservation Areas. Invest necessary resources to ensure they are maintained properly for biodiversity.

9.3

Advocate for broader landowner eligibility in tax relief programs at provincial and municipal levels (e.g. MFTIP, CLTIP) and investigate other restoration-based incentives to ensure landowners are appropriately recognized for their role in creating a more sustainable environment.



Our urban areas will continue to grow and expand.

Regional sustainability requires that we understand the connections between the natural environment, the built environment, the economy and human health and well-being. These connections support and facilitate regional growth and development.

Our municipal and corporate partners and regional agencies recognize these connections and the importance of ensuring this growth is sustainable.

ERCA's watershed perspective and ongoing partnerships with stakeholders at all levels enables us to coordinate these efforts for the benefit of all.

ERCA will need to continue to work with all partners to plan sustainable communities that reduce urban sprawl, are walkable, have a healthy food supply and incorporate green infrastructure.

GOAL 10: Sustainable Cities and Communities

We have fostered the creation of healthy, sustainable communities by better integrating natural systems with human activities. Human health, economic health and environmental health are all pivotally intertwined.

ACTIONS



10.1

Complete Integrated Watershed Management frameworks and apply to priority watersheds to help inform Official Plans.

10.2

Work with municipalities to ensure Official Plans are consistent with Natural Heritage Policies, Sustainable Growth, Agricultural lands, etc. as found within the Provincial Policy Statements.

10.3

Better engage developers, realtors, stakeholders and the broader public around responsible, sustainable planning.

GOAL 11: Regional Coordination

We have continued to provide regional coordination of common environmental interests to ensure consistency, highest standards and economies of scale.

ACTIONS



11.1

Continue to bring regional planners/engineers together on matters of sustainability and finding innovative, regional solutions.

11.2

Complete ERCA's Planning and Development Guidelines and work with municipal partners to ensure implementation success.

11.3

Continue to coordinate projects of regional interest with all municipal partners. (e.g. Intensity Duration Frequency (IDF) curve study and stormwater management guidelines).

GOAL 12: Policy Innovation

Our policies and procedures must be positioned to respond to and support development opportunities to accommodate growth, while ensuring environmental sustainability.

ACTIONS



12.1

Re-establish and strengthen and one window approvals to improve efficiency for clients while ensuring that all development is undertaken in sustainable manner.

12.2

Advocate for adaptations to regulatory frameworks to reflect climate change realities.

12.3

Enhance communication of ERCA's Watershed Management Services roles and responsibilities. Improve customer communication to help clarify expectations, timelines and processes.



ERCA is a sustainable, resilient and valued agency.

In 2013, ERCA adopted and began implementing The Way Forward: 5-Year Sustainability Plan that included the creation of capital and operational reserves, the elimination of the operating deficit and the restructuring and stabilization of core ERCA programs and staff. It is important to continue building on the success of this plan and ensure long-term sustainability for this organization.

Since 1973, ERCA has been striving to achieve a state of sustainability for the Essex Region. It is also important to consider the sustainability of ERCA as an organization.

GOAL 13: Capacity to Act

We have the capacity/expertise to respond to environmental challenges that cannot be found elsewhere. Human health, economic health and environmental health are all pivotally intertwined.

ACTIONS



13.1

Develop the next phase of ERCA's Sustainability Plan, including consideration for adequate reserves and funding for required capacity.

13.2

Digitize records. Transfer intellectual and paper records into searchable, electronic records. Review data collection and management protocols.

13.3

Continue to update and streamline operational policies.

GOAL 14: Customer Service

We are a customer-focused agency.

ACTIONS



14.1

Expand our Customer Service Initiative. Undertake a collaborative approach to develop and publicize new service standards.

14.2

Strengthen ERCA's image as a customer-service based, valued and knowledgeable organization. Enhance integration of extension programs such as the Detroit River Canadian Cleanup, Drinking Water Source Protection and the Essex Region Conservation Foundation.

14.3

Re-energize corporate culture.

GOAL 15: Partnerships for Action

We have strengthened partnerships across all program areas and this will continue to be of utmost importance.

ACTIONS



15.1

Strengthen partnerships broadly. Communicate effectively and share expertise to ensure adequate opportunities for interactive dialogue, relationship building across all levels of government and with internal and external audiences.

15.2

Keep pace with the need for open data and the technology to support same.

15.3

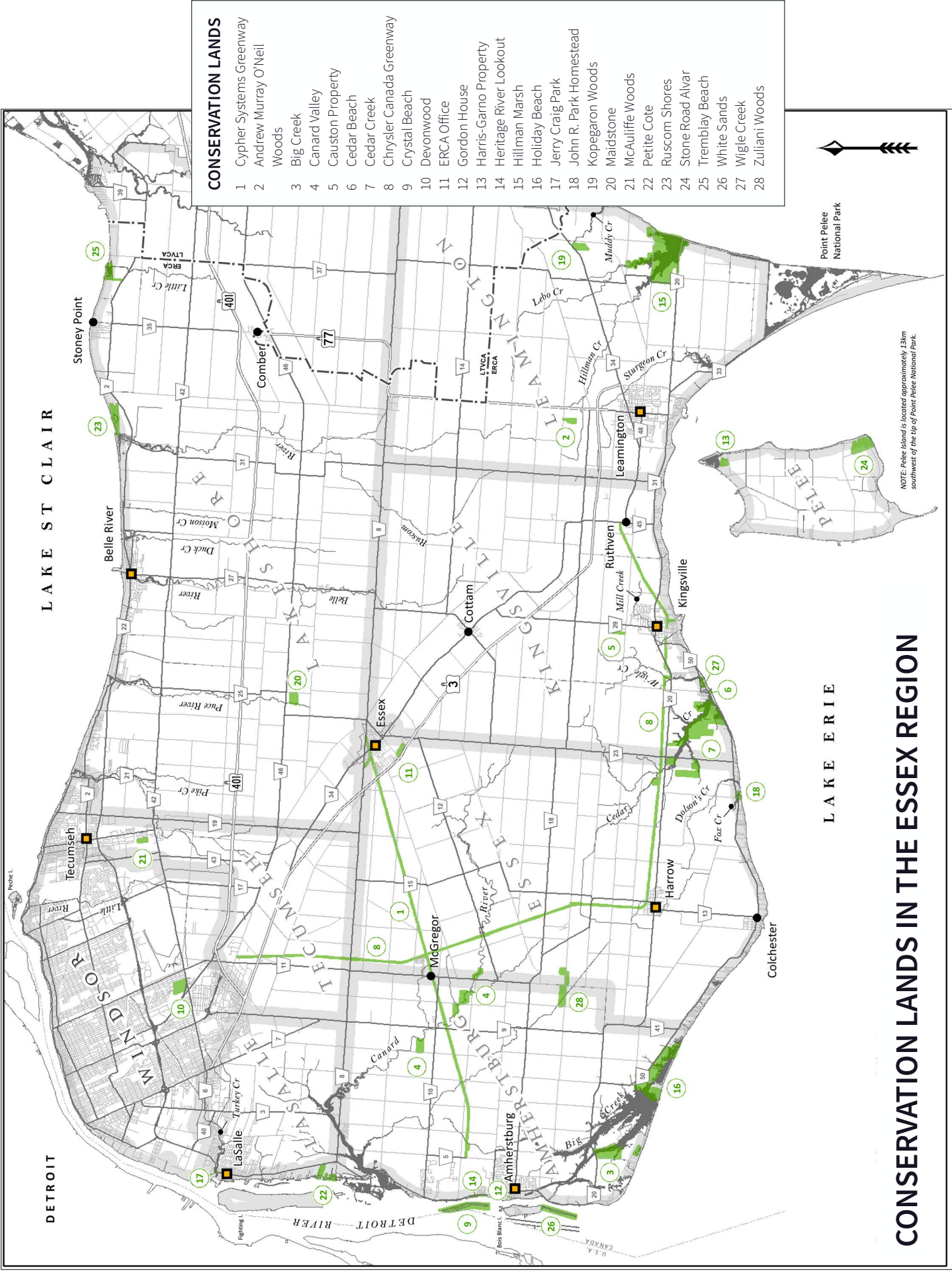
Formalize and lead the Regional Roundtable model to ensure cross collaboration with regional agencies and mutual interests.



Looking ahead

This Strategic Plan will guide our annual priorities and resource allocations. Each year, progress can be measured through our Annual and Accountability reports. Successes will be celebrated as we increase natural areas coverage, improve water quality, engage more people in outdoor recreation, build more trails, collaborate successfully with our partners and build our research and science capacity.

Together, we will achieve our community vision and make the Essex region **The Place For Life.**



CONSERVATION LANDS IN THE ESSEX REGION

LAKE ST CLAIR

LAKE ERIE

DETROIT

Point Pelee National Park



**Essex Region
Conservation
Authority**



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