



Essex Region  
Conservation Foundation  
*enriching the place for life*

# Strategic Plan

## 2021-2024

# Background

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The Essex Region Conservation Foundation (ERCF) was established in 1977 as a registered, charitable public foundation with a vital goal to receive and maintain funds for charitable, educational, conservation and heritage purposes related directly or indirectly to the conservation, restoration, development and management of natural and heritage resources in the Essex region.

In 2016, significant efforts were undertaken to enhance our brand identity and position the Essex Region Conservation Foundation as the environmental foundation of choice in the Windsor-Essex-Pelee Island region. Through broad research and consultation over a 12-month period, it was determined that strengthening the relationship between the Essex Region Conservation Authority and the Essex Region Conservation Foundation was the best path forward. ERCA implements the conservation projects and programs, while ERCF raises the funds to support this important work.

Like ERCA, the ERCF recognizes that the land on which we undertake conservation projects and initiatives is the traditional territory of the Three Fires Confederacy of First Nations, comprised of the Ojibway, the Odawa, and the Potawatomie Peoples. We value the significant historical and contemporary contributions of local and regional First Nations and all of the Original Peoples of Turtle Island.

Over the past four decades, thanks to the generous contributions of many organizations and individuals, numerous conservation initiatives have been achieved in the Windsor/Essex Region, including:

- Protected important tracts of environmentally significant land, including LaSalle Woods, areas of Cedar Creek, the Spring Garden Complex, Zuliani Woods, the Dobrich/Dragecivic Woods and others.
- Created several hundred acres of Carolinian forest habitat at the Jamieson Forest, Rotary Legacy Woods, Solcz Family Foundation Forest and others.
- Created the Hillman Shorebird Habitat, which is unique in North America.
- Developed of the regional Greenway system, including the Chrysler Canada Greenway, Cypher Systems Group Greenway, and the Rotary (1918) Centennial Hub.
- Inspired more than 300,000 students to protect our environment and preserve our heritage through outdoor education.
- Protected the John R. Park Homestead Conservation Area, contributed to the restoration of several outbuildings, preserved artefacts, and raised the funds to create an accessible Heritage & Conservation Centre.
- Restored the historically and architecturally significant Kingsville Train Station.



These are just a sampling of successes achieved by the Essex Region Conservation Foundation, together with the Essex Region Conservation Authority, and with thanks to thousands of generous partners, sponsors and volunteers.



# Vision, Mission, Goal:

## Our Shared Vision

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

## Our Shared Mission

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Improving our environment to enrich our lives.

## Our Goal

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The Essex Region Conservation Foundation will raise awareness and funds to improve the environment of the Windsor-Essex region through a variety of projects and programs that enrich our region as the Place for Life, and become the environmental foundation of choice in the Windsor-Essex-Peel Island region.

The Place for Life reinforces that 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, 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.

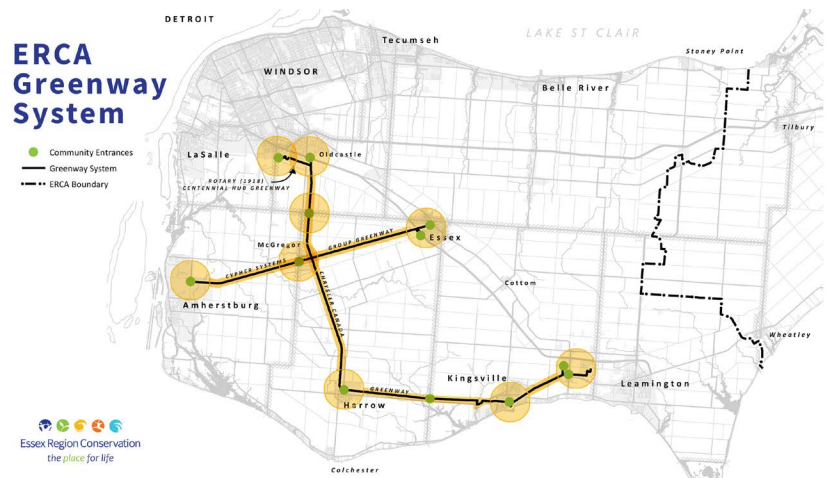


# SWOT Analysis



## Strengths

The Essex Region Conservation Foundation has strong history of successes to build upon, just some of which are listed above. ERCF is the only foundation supporting conservation efforts in the Essex region. The Conservation Foundation has demonstrated its ability to set and meet fundraising goals to support impactful conservation projects within the region. Initiatives that have protected natural areas, restored new environmental habitats and created the regional trail system are among the Foundation's strengths.



In 2015, the Essex Region Conservation Foundation achieved accreditation from Imagine Canada's prestigious Standards Program for Charitable and Non-Profit Organizations. This accreditation means the Foundation has demonstrated excellence in board governance; financial accountability and transparency; fundraising; staff management; and volunteer management.



Maintaining these highest standards will continue to inspire confidence among our donors and partners as we raise funds to enrich and sustain our region as the Place for Life, particularly following a period whereby Canadian confidence in some charitable organizations has been called into question.

## Weaknesses

An analysis of weaknesses will help identify areas where improvements are required. Despite progress, the Essex Region Conservation Foundation needs to more effectively engage and excite more support from those that live and do business in the Windsor/Essex region, and further understanding of the connection between economic, social and environmental well-being as the three pillars of sustainability. The Foundation also needs to better engage municipalities around the positive impacts of its fundraising activities to municipalities and the residents we collectively serve. The ERCF need to provide better information about the impact these donations make, and ensure that donors are appropriate engaged and appreciated.

As well, maintenance and service delivery costs of non-mandatory recreational/ heritage assets have not historically been considered within the context of the Foundation's fundraising efforts. Looking ahead, any assets for which the Foundation raises funds that fall within the 'non-mandatory' Provincial category will have to consider future operating costs, in addition to the capital cost of the project.

## Opportunities

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Broadening awareness for the Essex Region Conservation Foundation and its positive impact in the region was identified as its top opportunity. Informing and engaging the public regarding significant environmental issues and long term opportunities associated with environmental action, including efforts to combat climate change, are more important than ever before.

The pandemic has increased awareness about the connection between mental and physical health and the benefits of being in nature to unprecedented levels. The surge in conservation area and trail usage is a key opportunity to build even stronger alliances within the health care sector to help raise further awareness about nature as preventative medicine. As well, calls to action at Conservation Areas and trail to help support these precious resources could be undertaken with appropriate signage and implementing a 'text to donate' effort at the point of use.

By increasing awareness, it is anticipated that there will be correlated opportunities to increase funds raised. Increasing the number of annual and multi-year donors, and expanding the number of overall donors and unrestricted funds will help create a sustainable income for the Foundation. A focus on Bequest Giving, as well as expanding opportunities for families who would like to make a significant impact with donations in the \$10K - \$50K range, and continued fundraising through inspiring campaigns and events will help ensure the Foundation's stability. We need to be more creative now than ever before in ensuring maximum opportunities to capture and retain donor's interest and passion for conservation programs and initiatives.

Consideration may also be given for the Foundation to provide direct programming or services, which may make it eligible for raffle licencing. However, this paradigm shift would require considerable effort.

When asked to report on their top reason for giving, over 55% of Conservation Foundation donors identified the recognition that all elements of a community – environmental health, and healthy lifestyles for our citizens and economy are interconnected; and the desire to leave a legacy of a cleaner and healthier environment.



## Threats

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Recent changes to the Conservation Authorities Act will require the Foundation to become more active in raising dollars for programming for ERCA to continue the broad suite of important conservation programs it has historically delivered. Traditionally, programming dollars are more challenging to raise than those associated with capital projects and naming opportunities.

While in many cases the strength of the relationship between ERCA and the Essex Region Conservation Foundation is regarded positively, there continues to be some image challenges surrounding the negative perception of ERCA's regulatory role.

Resources and staff capacity are also a threat to the ERCF fully realizing its fundraising potential. Currently, the Foundation does not employ any staff and makes a contribution to ERCA to handle Foundation operations. While this model works well for governance, administration and finance, it is possibly not the most cost-effective approach to events management.



## External Drivers

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### Changes to the Conservation

**Authorities Act** put some program areas, including conservation education, greening efforts, watershed & climate change science, and museum operations at risk. While the Conservation Foundation has traditionally focused on capital projects, these changes will require funding for program delivery to ensure that these important programs can continue.

The **Climate Crisis** and the need for rapid and radical change to meet Federal and local targets for Greenhouse Gas reductions remains top of mind for most Canadians. Despite the unprecedented economic and employment turbulence as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, numerous studies identify that climate change is regarded as one of the most serious issues in Canada. The Essex Region Conservation Foundation can position itself to help local municipalities meet climate targets through continuing to raise funds to strategically plant trees and help mitigate the impacts of our changing climate.

A period of **economic recovery** following the world-wide impacts of COVID-19 could mean donors have reduced disposable income to allocate to giving. In fact, projections of total giving in 2020 show that the COVID-19 pandemic and economic recession have hurt the charitable sector in similar ways to the 2008 Great Recession, with an estimated drop in total giving of \$1.2 billion in 2020. In other words, the estimated total donations for 2020 is expected to drop by 10% year-over-year, to 2016 levels, and the economic damage caused by this pandemic will likely continue well into 2021<sup>1</sup>. On a more positive note, online donations to environmental charities continued growing. In spite of greater attention to COVID-related crises, online donations to charities working on environmental issues saw the fastest growth in that category in four years.

Increased **local competition for fundraising dollars**, particularly fundraising for the new hospital, is another external factor to consider.

<sup>1</sup> THE GIVING REPORT 2021 – CanadaHelps.org



# Strategic Objectives

Since its inception, the Essex Region Conservation Foundation has focused on five strategic pillars. Priority outcomes related to each Strategic Objective are identified. Secondary objectives are also included, although it is recognized that these may not be achievable within the three year planning window. The Foundation's Annual Report, presented publicly each March, will provide a status update on progress.

## 1. Greening our Region & Taking Climate Action

Environmental sustainability in the Windsor-Essex Region is critically important to our collective human and economic wellbeing. These natural areas provide numerous benefits that have economic value: clean water, natural filtration of contaminants, water flow stabilization, greenhouse gas mitigation, erosion control, nutrient cycling, habitat, recreation and health benefits. This natural capital also helps to combat the impacts of flooding.

Trees have also been identified as one of the key tools to help take action to control our changing climate, and aligns with the Government of Canada's initiative to plant 50 million trees.

While tree planting has an important economic rationale, there is an unquestionable connection between human and environmental health, and the overall sustainability of the Windsor-Essex region.



### Value Proposition

The Essex Region Conservation Foundation is the only local foundation in the Windsor-Essex region which raises funds to protect the important natural areas that remain, while creating and connecting new habitats through planting trees, which have been identified as the number one weapon in the fight against climate change.



## Primary Outcomes

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- Grow the Partners in Sustainability program to provide a stable source of funding for greening and restoration activities, while concurrently providing a local option for residents to offset their carbon footprints through tree planting. Operational supports for Watershed Science (water quality research, landowner grant programs (for soil erosion/surface water runoff) & the Demonstration Farm) may also be required.
- Create 60 acre of forest within the Cedar Creek Watershed.

## Secondary Outcomes

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- Explore and develop increased named, tribute, and memorial opportunities within created forests, including pet memorials.

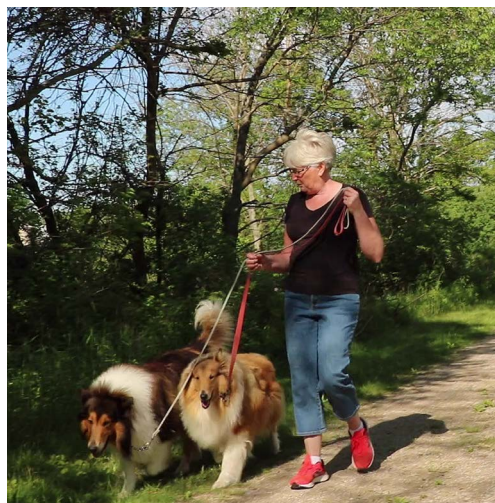
## 2. Connecting Our Region by Trails

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Connecting the **Place for Life** ensures that people have safe opportunities to connect with nature and each other, improve their mental and physical health, and support sustainable economies. Over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, visitors flocked to Conservation Areas and trails in numbers like never before. It is clear that while there is much we can live without, our collective need to connect with nature is paramount.

Trails support active lifestyles which help prevent coronary heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, osteoporosis, obesity, colon cancer, depression and premature death. Research shows that a walk in the woods can strengthen immunity, lower blood pressure, improve the ability to focus and relieve stress. The proactive nature of these activities also saves important health care resources. The Canadian Medical Association reports that even a 10% increase in physical activity could reduce direct health-care expenditures by \$150 million a year.

At the same time, improving active transportation opportunities through trail networks make communities more livable and desirable. Trails attract tourists to Ontario communities and create jobs. The Ontario Trails Council estimates that trails contribute at least \$2 billion a year to the Ontario economy.





## Value Proposition

The Essex Region Conservation Foundation raises funds to create and maintain the Greenway System – the backbone of the regional trail system

Improving active transportation opportunities through trail networks make communities more livable, improves local economies and benefits the health of local citizens. ERCF has a unique opportunity to raise funds to create trails that connect communities across municipal boundaries to create a more vibrant Windsor-Essex region.

## Primary Outcomes

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- Complete the County Road 15 Community Entrance along the Cypher Systems Group Greenway.
- Create a new entrance at Thomas Road for access to the Cypher Systems Group Greenway.
- Raise the funds to complete the Holiday Beach Cycling Trail.
- Develop and promote tribute opportunities to add benches with cement pads along trails to enhance accessibility.
- Develop and promote project opportunities within the \$10K - \$50K range.

## Secondary Outcomes

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- Build a Canoe/Kayak Dock at Hillman Marsh to provide access to the Blueway Trails in the Place for Life.
- Develop a plan to fund improvements to Conservation Area entrances.
- Undertake preliminary designs and costs to develop the waterfront property owned by the ERCF in Amherstburg as the waterfront connection to the Cypher Systems Group Greenway.
- Undertake preliminary designs and costs to create a pedestrian/cyclist bridge connecting Hillman Trail Park to Park (P2P).



### 3. Inspiring Future Generations Through Outdoor Education

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In today's world of computers, tablets and cell phones, one of the greatest challenges of our time is connecting our children with the world around us. A compelling body of evidence exists that trees and natural areas are essential elements of healthy communities for children.

Research also shows that a connection to nature in childhood is positively correlated with long-term knowledge about the environment. Studies further support that nature exposure in childhood can have lasting health benefits by building a foundation where children learn to seek out nature as a lifelong health habit.



#### Value Proposition

As the students of today become the environmental decision makers of our future, the Essex Region Conservation Foundation raises funds to ensure affordable access to outdoor education programs for students across the Windsor-Essex region.

#### Primary Outcomes

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- Raise a stable source of funding through the Partners in Sustainability – Inspiring Future Conservationists and Eco-Stewards to ensure the continuity of outdoor & heritage education programs.
- Support ERCA in resolving ownership of Holiday Beach Conservation Area, and if successful, prioritize areas of opportunity for investment.



#### Secondary Outcomes

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- Undertake preliminary designs and scoping to replace the Hillman Marsh Nature Centre, as the current facilities require investment and will soon be at the end of useful lifespan
- Rebuild the top level of the Hawk Tower.

## 4. Preserving Our Heritage

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Places like the John R. Park Homestead bring together people of all ages. They become focal points for community celebrations and highlight our Canadian story: how our way of life has evolved over the centuries. There are few places where people can experience our history and traditions.

The addition of the spectacular John R. Park Homestead Heritage Centre provides enhanced and accessible educational and events spaces that have additional revenue generation activities. However, as the historic buildings age, legacy funds are required to create sustainable solutions for preservation. As well, changes to the Conservation Authorities Act identify museum operations as ‘non-mandatory’, meaning Foundation-raised funds may be required to help with continued operations. However, if these important elements of our history are not preserved, they will eventually be erased from our community’s memory – and lost forever.

### Value Proposition

The John R. Park Homestead Conservation Area is the only agricultural living history museum west of London. The Essex Region Conservation Foundation raises funds to ensure that this treasure can continue to preserve the important elements of our local history.



### Primary Outcome

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- Develop a stable source of funding to help ensure continuity of museum operations at the John R. Park Homestead Conservation Area.



## 5. Building & maintaining a responsible, sustainable, & ethical Foundation

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Elevating the Essex Region Conservation Foundation's capacity to raise the funds required to achieve both its program and project targets is more important than ever before.

The Foundation's Board of Directors are active, and new community members have been engaged. Over the past decade, more than \$4.5 million dollars has been raised to support conservation programs and initiatives, and in particular, individual giving has grown in the past two years. The Foundation must continue to grow by addressing internal capacity challenges and developing meaningful and creative opportunities for donors to make an impact in creating a future of sustainability for the Windsor-Essex region.

### Value Proposition

The Essex Region Conservation Foundation is the only local foundation in the Windsor-Essex region which raises funds to address conservation, restoration, development and management of natural and heritage resources in the Essex region.



### Primary Outcomes

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- Improve awareness of the impact of the ERCF through enhanced communications and broader stakeholder consultation. This includes a focus on opportunities to leave a legacy through Bequest Giving.
- Develop signs to broaden awareness of the Foundation's connection to on-the-ground projects and encourage point-of-use funding support. For example, signage could be installed at Conservation Areas and along trails.
- Refine procedures to ensure donors are appropriately appreciated and better understand the positive impact of their donations.
- Develop a funding strategy to support acquisition, replacement, maintenance, repairs of non-mandatory assets, primarily associated with recreation, heritage and education.
- Explore a part-time staff or independent contractor position, to undertake events and to develop a comprehensive volunteer program

### Secondary Outcome

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- Develop 'Friends Of' conservation area groups as part of a larger, coordinated volunteer management effort.