

Aquidneck Land Trust Strategic Plan Framework

Executive Summary, 2022-2027

MISSION:

To preserve and steward Aquidneck Island's open spaces for the lasting benefit of the community while connecting people with the land that defines the Island's natural character.

THE CHALLENGES:

The last remaining important open spaces on Aquidneck Island are at immediate risk of being developed in the coming years. At the same time, the cost of land is significant, increasing the need for more and more funding to save these last precious tracts. The island's drinking and coastal waters are already impaired at the source and our farms and prime soils are at risk of being lost to development, as land is too expensive for the next generation of farmers to take over. As an island, we are even more vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, and habitats are threatened by human activities and invasive species. Regional land use planning can be difficult between the local municipalities, and there is a housing affordability crisis across the region.

OUR RESPONSE AND VISION:

Using our strategic position and expertise, we are stepping up our conservation work, protecting more land, engaging islanders more deeply in community stewardship, encouraging smart land use decisions, and making every effort to connect as many islanders as possible with the benefits of our work.

Five years from today, we want to see 24% of the land on Aquidneck Island permanently conserved, protecting the island's rural, agricultural character. We want to see the island's fresh and coastal waters secured – drinkable, fishable, swimmable. We want to see increased access to lands that people across all the island communities and neighborhoods can use – trails, parks, farms, community gardens – so they can feel the value of our work in their own lives. We want to see successful working farms that contribute to our local economy. We want to see deeper and broader island-wide support for land conservation in safeguarding Aquidneck Island's ecosystems and community character and fostering a resilient future for the island. We want to see that support to translate into community voices amplifying the importance of conservation, and into both public and private funding for conservation, as well as good public policy for smart land development.

VALUES:

In our work, we are guided by the following core values: **integrity, professionalism, diligence, community connection, humility, and resourcefulness.**

PRIORITIES:

- **Sound land use.** As we seek to accommodate economic growth and housing without compromising open space preservation, we must encourage innovative, smart growth in appropriate places.
- **Connection to the land.** People protect what they love, and love what they know. And access to the outdoors is vital for people's health and wellbeing. All Aquidneck Islanders need opportunities to connect with the island's natural heritage through their own personal experiences outdoors.
- **Clean drinking water.** We live on top of our freshwater supply. We must do everything we can to safeguard it for everyone who lives here.
- **Sustainable agriculture.** Farming is integral to the character and economy of this island. We must ensure people here have an opportunity to grow and enjoy locally grown food.
- **Climate resiliency.** Living on an island, we're already feeling the impact of sea-level rise, storm surges, and the difficulties of stormwater management. We all need adaptive and proactive responses.

STRATEGIES:

- 1. Rapidly increase the pace and scale of our land conservation.** In addition to managing the lands we currently own and protect via conservation easement, we will continue to grow the amount of land protected with urgency through direct acquisition and the Public Trust Dedication Statue. We will focus on watersheds, farms, public access opportunities, and habitat. We will not just protect land, but also continue to implement best stewardship and management practices on land we own to set an example for the community and other landowners.
- 2. Establish a comprehensive watershed conservation initiative for the island.** In addition to saving land in our drinking and coastal watersheds, we will bring greater focus on the island's freshwater supply and the connection of land use to the health of our waters, both fresh and marine. We will communicate the findings and link the community's increased understanding with a call to action, encouraging islanders to implement best practices on their own land to limit pollutants and run-off.
- 3. Substantially increase funding for land conservation and operational capacity.** Successful execution of our first strategy requires significant new private and public funding – likely north of \$35 million. We will plan, launch, and complete Strike Fund 2 while broadening our base of support and continuing to raise operational funds from donors at all giving levels. We will advocate for passage of municipal and state open space and farmland bonds, and sustainable conservation funding streams at the state house like conveyance taxes or a Community Preservation Act.
- 4. Increase public access to nature, local foods, and places to play.** We will make it possible for more people of all ages and backgrounds across Aquidneck Island to use parks and trails and to feel welcome while visiting them. We also want more people to be able to eat locally grown food from successful farms and community gardens. This connects people to the land and to our work and is essential to fostering an ethic of stewardship on the island. In addition to adding new publicly accessible lands, we will continue to maintain and improve our existing holdings as they see more and more use.
- 5. Communicate, educate, and promote the importance of land conservation and smart development as twin prongs in an approach to protect the island's remaining open spaces.** We will create and implement a comprehensive strategic communications plan with a clear case, goals, messaging, and engagement channels for our most important audiences to help Aquidneck Islanders understand the urgency of what's at stake for the island. Locally, we will advocate for open space interests through the comprehensive planning process for each municipality and share resources to current and prospective zoning and planning board members on the island, to help them envision growth that protects our island's civic character, natural environment, and water supply.
- 6. Align the capacity, skills, and strengths of our team and operations toward the results described in this plan.** We will ensure our staff capabilities and capacity match the ambition of our plan tempered by the reality of constrained resources. We will ensure our compensation package remains competitive. We will continue to build the board strategically. We will continue to strengthen our financial position and to build our operating endowment through allocation of unrestricted bequests.