

## Heartland Conservation Alliance Strategic Plan 2023-2027

**Mission:** The Heartland Conservation Alliance works with partners to protect, connect, and restore the Blue River watershed and its urban greenspaces for the benefit and enjoyment of all.

**Vision:** A sustainable environment that supports the health of all human and natural communities in the Kansas City region.

### Values:

- *Inclusive Collaboration:* As an alliance first and foremost, we prioritize collaboration with both regional and national organizations that share our vision for healthy natural resources. The Heartland Conservation Alliance recognizes that the environment suffers when decision-making fails to include everyone. By engaging historically excluded stakeholders, we help improve the health of humans and nature. We promote inclusive collaboration, justice, equity, diversity, accessibility, and inclusion in all our internal operations and external relations.
- *Sustainable Stewardship:* The Heartland Conservation Alliance is passionate about being a good steward of lands entrusted to our care, and we are dedicated to creating a sustainable natural environment that will enhance Kansas City communities for generations to come. We exemplify these values in our conservation work and community outreach, as well as our internal business practices and approach to partnership development.
- *Engaging Education:* At the Heartland Conservation Alliance, we believe the best way to protect our current and future environment is by passing on conservation knowledge, behavior, and skills. We also know that our impact is only as strong as the Kansas City communities who believe and participate in our work. We strive to continuously find innovative and productive ways of equitably engaging diverse communities in cutting-edge conservation education, outreach, and workforce training.
- *Trust and Teamwork:* As a land trust as well as an alliance, we know the importance of being *trustworthy*. HCA is committed to transparency. We invite our partners, stakeholders, and the general public to openly engage with us in genuine conversations about our organization, conservation work, and advocacy. When we can trust each other, openly working together becomes both easier and more fun.

### GOALS, STRATEGIES, & OBJECTIVES:

**Overall Objective:** Objectively improve grades within the science-based Blue River Report Card with every update.

### Goal #1—CONSERVATION & POLICY:

The Heartland Conservation Alliance conserves native landscapes and restores damaged ecosystems in the Blue River watershed through advocacy and collaboration.

- Collectively with partners, increase protected open space as defined by the Blue River Report Card by 1% annually, using a 2021 baseline of 12,190 acres.

1.1) Continue to publish and widely publicize bi-annual updates of the Blue River Report Card and Action Plan with a plan for equitable engagement and targeting key stakeholders.

- Increase website views of the Blue River Report Card and Action Plan by 10% annually.

1.2) Improve public awareness, access to the Blue River Greenway, and climate resilience and justice by working strategically with partners throughout the corridor to complete remaining trail segments from the Overland Park Arboretum to Corrington Park by identifying multi-modal trail alignments, securing funding, acquiring rights-of-way and associated floodplains, and completing trail design.

- Complete trail design by the end of 2026.
- Complete ROW and associated floodplain acquisition and trail construction by the end of 2028.

1.3) Increase restoration efforts in HCA Action Areas owned by local government entities.

- For example, work with Jackson County Parks + Rec, and local elected officials to finalize a restoration plan and timeline for Alex George Wetland (HCA Action Area), and other priority zones of the Blue River Parkway, by end of 2024 and finalize conservation easement of Municipal Farm to HCA by end of 2023.

1.4) Demonstrate good land stewardship by collaborating with partners, utilizing staff expertise, and hiring qualified contractors to restore native landscapes and reduce the pressure of invasive plants in the Blue River watershed, with a focus on the Heartland Overlook Preserve (HOP) and any other land or easements obtained.

- Develop a written Land Management Plan for each HCA Conservation Property by the end of 2024 or within 12 months of acquisition.
- Prioritize HCA stewardship action by the end of 2023 according to two criteria:
  - 1) Geographically: a) owned or monitored (easements) by HCA; b) HCA Action Areas; c) throughout the Blue River Watershed; and d) in the greater Kansas City region.
  - 2) Natural resource quality: a) Manage where natural resource investments have already been made, such as trails or in areas restored by professionals; b) Early invasions of non-native vegetation in the highest quality natural areas; c) Invasives management of moderate quality natural areas; d) Remaining natural areas.
- Establish, refine, and grow stewardship capacity within the organization:
  - a) Evaluate current stewardship training program (Nature Action Crew) based on HCA's and key partner's needs by the end of 2023;
  - b) Determine future direction of a stewardship program and develop programmatic infrastructure in collaboration with key partners and funders by the end of 2023;
  - c) Secure funding to support future program direction;
  - d) Hire new staff to implement the stewardship program.

1.5) Collaborate with all manner of educational partners to coordinate a comprehensive, diverse, and accessible regional green collar workforce development and training system.

- Work with K-12, higher education, and not-for-profit organizations by the end of 2024 to coordinate efforts and opportunities for education, workforce training, degrees, and applied research, making Blue River Action Areas available as outdoor classrooms and field sites.

1.6) Coordinate with partners to organize volunteers for hands-on conservation work – e.g., Blue River cleanups, invasive plant removal, indigenous landscape restoration, etc.

- Increase volunteer participation in hands-on conservation by 10% annually.

1.7) Develop and strengthen relationships with the Mid-America Regional Council and government leaders within the Blue River Watershed.

- Present each update of the Blue River Greenway case statement, Report Card, and Action Plan to select elected officials and government administrators, thereby promoting synergy between conservation actions, environmental justice and local leaders' goals.
- With partners, convene annual meetings with key governmental officials and leaders from Kansas City (MO), Jackson County (MO), Overland Park (KS), and Johnson County (KS) to a) discuss environmental sustainability in the Blue River Watershed and b) share methodological goals outlined under the Governance category in the Blue River Report Card.

1.8) Develop, publish, and update an online toolkit based on the methodology for the Governance category in the Blue River Report Card to empower individuals to modify or block environmentally damaging developments within their communities.

- Publish toolkit on the HCA website in 2024, register 100 clicks or downloads in 2025, and grow annually thereafter.

1.9) Create, publish, and update a “policy matrix” on the HCA website based upon the methodology for the Governance category in the Blue River Report Card that identifies recommended conservation policies to empower community members to advocate for their adoption.

- Track which policies have been adopted by which major (KC metro) counties and cities.
- Publish policy matrix on the HCA website in 2023, register 100 clicks in 2024, and grow annually thereafter.

## **Goal #2–ALLIANCE SERVICES & ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE:**

The Heartland Conservation Alliance convenes a diverse coalition of community organizations, nonprofits, government agencies, private businesses, and neighborhood leaders to promote equitable access to nature, mitigate the effects of climate change, and create meaningful connections between diverse neighborhoods and political jurisdictions for the benefit of humans and nature in the Blue River watershed.

- Annually increase by 10% the amount of funds sub-awarded or passed through to Alliance Members and Environmental Justice leaders and/or neighborhood organizations from funds awarded to or coordinated by HCA.

2.1) Merge the Partnership Work Group and Blue River Urban Waters Steering Committee to more effectively and collaboratively implement the Blue River Action Plan and optimize conservation outcomes.

- Implement the new organizational structure for Alliance Services by the end of 2023. Explore rotational chairs, perhaps a co-chair from Kansas and a co-chair from Missouri, from partners of this committee with HCA serving as staff support.

2.2) Revitalize Renew the Blue by clearly defining and communicating Alliance partner benefits and responsibilities.

- By end of 2024, draft and distribute a one-page list of Alliance partner benefits and responsibilities to all current partners. After 2024, review the list annually and update partners of any changes.

2.3) Identify community leaders and organizations in the watershed's most vulnerable communities, work to develop meaningful relationships with them, and share information with them about how Blue River advocacy helps solve community challenges.

- Create and update a list of said community leaders and organizations by the end of 2023 and meet with the leaders and organizations annually starting in 2024.

2.4) Collaborate with partners to identify local business owners adjacent to HCA's Action Areas, work to develop meaningful relationships with them, and share information with them about how Blue River advocacy is essential to business success.

- Create a list of local business owners adjacent to the HCA's action areas by the end of 2024 and meet with them or their representatives annually starting in 2025.

2.5) Invite public health experts and organizations to join the Alliance to promote holistic education within the environmental and community health interface.

- Invite one or more local public health organizations to each educational outreach event by the end of 2025.

2.6) Convene HCA's annual fall Partnership Summit to promote collaboration and honor the many Alliance members working to protect, conserve, and restore rivers and land in the Kansas City area.

- Plan and execute a Partnership Summit in Fall 2023 and annually thereafter.

2.7) Advance capacity building, leadership development, and connectedness by coordinating subawards to emerging grassroots conservation and environmental justice leaders and organizations that undertake, or seek to undertake, urban forestry, urban waters revitalization, or environmental justice activities as well as assist them with their grant applications and strategic planning.

- By the end of 2024, deliver a minimum of five subawards and assist partners with a minimum of five grant applications.

2.8) Enhance community-initiated conservation engagement, particularly related to coordination of HCA's existing Restoring Vacant Lots programming.

- Demonstrate engagement with or participation of at least 100 Blue River watershed community members in conservation-related activities such as community meetings, surveys, or events. At

least 50 community members will be from neighborhoods that have been highly impacted by environmental justice challenges within target zip codes by the end of 2024.

2.9) Advance participation in democracy by helping underinvested neighborhoods advocate for and secure resources to improve their environment, health, and access to natural recreation.

- Coordinate at least two meetings with a total of at least 20 community members and associated government official(s) from target zip codes for a conservation-related initiative by the end of 2024.

### **Goal #3—EDUCATION & OUTREACH:**

The Heartland Conservation Alliance provides experiential education and outreach opportunities designed to encourage all community members to engage in nature appreciation and conservation activities.

- Annually increase by 10% the number of people educated and engaged by HCA about the Blue River at on-site events and programs.

3.1) Develop a Blue River Nature Guide program to establish regular public and private group hikes, bikes, or kayak tours on or near the Blue River, particularly for Environmental Justice communities, older adults with the greatest social and economic needs, and people with mobility challenges.

- Assist Jackson County Parks + Rec with implementation of the Outdoor Education Engagement Program portion of their Blue River Parkway Master Plan, which includes their first year (by end of 2024) deliverables of:
  - Lead 250 visitors on Blue River hikes, bikes or kayak trips
  - Educate 200 people about the Blue River at on-site events and programs
  - Host five new volunteer project opportunities
  - Develop lines of communication, and strive for partnership, with 25 new community organizations who have not traditionally engaged with the Blue River, with the majority of them from the watershed and its environmental justice neighborhoods.

3.2) Develop Blue River workshops available to classroom educators for experiential learning around conservation issues in their classrooms.

- Deliver a Blue River workshop available to classroom educators by the end of 2023 and present the workshop to at least two organizations per year in 2024 and beyond.
- Develop additional workshops guided by educator feedback in 2024 and beyond.

3.3) Increase the number of public outreach events around the conservation of the Blue River watershed by collaborating with “Renew the Blue” Alliance members.

- Host or work with Alliance members to host or participate in at least 10 educational outreach events for the general public in 2024 and annually thereafter.
- Continue to annually host the MLK Jr. Nature Walk, Heartland Nature Celebration, Exploring Roots Summer Adventure Challenge, Green Guard Stewardship Program, and volunteer workdays.
- Work with Renew the Blue partners and the Urban Waters Steering Committee to develop a plan for the future of the Renew the Blue initiative by the end of 2024.

3.4) Develop Positive Community Perception Index (PCPI) to measure community response to messages and methods utilized to educate, engage, and influence stakeholders to take positive action to protect and restore the Blue River and our region's natural resources. Also, consider developing a Public Policy Mobilization Index (PPMI) to measure the number of people and lawmakers advised about protecting and restoring the Blue River and our region's natural resources, causes of degradation to our natural resources, and public policy actions taken.

- Create PCPI (and consider PPMI) metrics, incorporating the methodology for Community Connections from the Blue River Report Card, by the end of 2024 and strive for annual improvement in the index(es).

#### **Goal #4–FUNDING & ORGANIZATIONAL HEALTH:**

The Heartland Conservation Alliance creates a vibrant and sustainable organization by developing a stable and diversified funding stream, clarifying the roles of staff and board, and encouraging communication between staff, board, and community partners.

- Grow organizational funding by 10% annually over 2022 funding by the end of 2027.
- All staff reporting in an annual anonymous survey that they would recommend HCA as a quality employer to their friends and loved ones.

4.1) Identify, advocate for, and employ other innovative conservation finance strategies, and work strategically with partners to develop regional conservation funding and finance programs.

- Coordinate with partner organizations to develop a regional strategic conservation funding and finance plan by mid-2024, and begin leveraging diverse and innovative funding and financing tools.
- Develop fee-for-service offerings as an additional funding stream, particularly targeted towards serving alliance members, such as contracted natural resources work or recreation programming for local parks departments. Establish at least one fee-for-service revenue stream by 2024.
- Collaborate with Green Layer partners to apply for at least \$1 million in government or foundation grant opportunities and meet with the funding program officers by the end of 2023.
- Work with partner organizations to close at least one carbon credit financing transaction to support Blue River Watershed protection and/or restoration by the end of 2024 and annually thereafter.

4.2) Ensure a sustainable, healthy work environment and culture to best achieve HCA's mission while meeting the needs of our workforce.

- Create an organizational chart and clear job descriptions for all staff by the end of 2023.
- Update bylaws to empower the Executive Director to manage and evaluate staff without board involvement by the end of 2023.
- Organize online files and documents to be readily accessible to staff and board members by the end of 2023.
- Develop a committee to research staff benefits, policies, and trainings (e.g., anti-harassment training) and develop a plan for implementing as prioritized by staff by the end of 2023.

4.3) Develop Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (JEDI) policy and practices while researching how to best acknowledge and promote the indigenous connection to the Blue River watershed. Continue to prioritize the hiring of individuals from underrepresented communities with the goal of creating a diverse green workforce in the Kansas City region.

- Explore possible partnerships with transportation companies for free or low-cost transport to outdoor and environmental opportunities in the Blue River watershed. Pilot one subsidized transportation event by the end of 2024.
- Document a JEDI policy by the end of 2024 and a position on promoting indigenous history in the Blue River Watershed by the end of 2026.

4.4) Seek continuous improvement for HCA Board, committees, and work groups for effectiveness, impact, and membership engagement.

- Improve the new board member selection and orientation process, clarifying roles of staff vs. board members vs. Alliance members, which may include organizational updates, board member meet-and-greet, board bylaws review, fundraising training, and conservation policy and advocacy training by the end of 2024.
- Repurpose the Steering Council as an advisory group on organizational success by the end of 2024.
- Streamline the work groups to better focus staff, board, and partner organization efforts by the end of 2023.

4.5) Become accredited by the Land Trust Alliance, which encompasses many detailed organizational health metrics.

- Adopt detailed objectives and target dates by the end of 2024.