

FRIENDS OF THE RIVERFRONT



STRATEGIC PLAN
2022-2025



CONTEXT

Friends of the Riverfront (Friends) has a 30-year history of protecting and restoring the Allegheny, Ohio, and Monongahela riverfronts through trail development and stewardship.

The organization's vision statement is:

We envision trails that engage and accommodate all trail users and celebrate our region.

The mission is to:

Build safe, clean, and accessible riverfront trails as part of the Three Rivers Heritage & Water Trail systems to create and maintain an outstanding experience for trail users while providing economic, environmental, and health benefits to the Pittsburgh region.

Friends approaches this work with organizational values, identified and agreed on by staff and the board in 2021. These are to:

- **Include:** Support and promote a diverse and inclusive trail community
- **Lead:** Proactively seek out and collaborate with diverse partners and communities
- **Be Kind:** Foster a culture of appreciation and service
- **Have integrity:** Be accountable to trail users and partners
- **Make a Difference:** Passionately advocate for publicly accessible riverfronts and trails

STRATEGIC PLANNING

Despite the disruptions of 2020, 2021 found Friends in a position of strength. The organization not only had stable finances and a dedicated board and staff, it was reaching greater alignment - internally on mission, vision, and goals, and externally with related organizations.

While the organizational foundation was firm, there were changes in the external context. The pandemic had brought new users and new types of vehicles to the trail system, creating opportunities and challenges. The political landscape was shifting at the city level, and many organizations were analyzing their operations in light of increasing calls for attention to equity and justice. Increasing effects of climate change contributed an element of unpredictability in maintenance and future development.

Staff and board leadership entered into strategic planning with a desire for greater shared understanding on areas of focus and leverage. By answering questions around Friends unique value and positioning the organization could determine how to channel its resources with maximum impact.

METHODOLOGY

Strategic planning began with a Project Launch meeting (May 3, 2021) to build shared ownership and understanding of the process and goals. The consultant and leadership then collected and summarized information on the current state of the organization and its external context. The data included:

Internal (Organizational) data

- Financial trends analysis
- Board e-survey and interviews
- E-survey for staff
- Scenario planning (projecting future states based on strategic variables)
- Equity assessment for internal operations

External data

- Telephone interviews with 10 priority stakeholders
- E-survey for volunteers and trail users
- E-survey for municipal representatives

Documentation of and summaries from this assessment is captured in the Assessment Report, compiled separately. This information was synthesized into a series of goals during 2 meetings on September 28 and November 3, 2021. This document lays out the resulting strategic direction.

GOALS

After reviewing assessment data, board and staff participants in the goal-setting meeting identified 5 strategic areas of focus for the next 3 years.

Embedded Goal: Justice, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion

Participants in the strategic planning meetings identified efforts for justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion as a critical element to reaching our vision for the trail network. The group recognizes that this intentionality needs to be deliberately named for internal accountability, and that this focus needs to be part of all strategic goals and implementation. Friends is embedding this goal within each of the other goals and implementation plan, as well as other aspects of the organization's operations.

EXPANSION AND CONNECTIVITY

Selecting expansion and connectivity as a strategic goal reflects direct feedback from the community. Survey respondents who don't use the trails were asked what one thing would make the most difference in encouraging them to do so, and connectivity led the list. Those who do use the trails listed connectivity as an area of major improvement – out of 15 satisfaction indicators, connections to regional trails ranked third from the bottom. On the converse side, those who are well-connected to trails shared their delight in open-ended comments.

Municipal attitudes have been shifting and few now need convincing that trails (or access to them) would convey valuable benefits, but many lack the capacity and expertise to implement multi-modal trail projects. Friends' Trail Development Program serves as a critical function in providing additional capacity and the expertise needed to implement multi-year and sometimes multi-decade trail projects. Municipalities increasing desire to implement trail projects in their community means that Friends' is taking on an increasing number of projects and must prioritize trail development projects to ensure an effective amount of capacity for each project.

In addition, connectivity and expansion aid in improving equity in communities. Connecting to a wide variety of neighborhoods and communities will facilitate more types of users feeling they belong on the trail, and the trail belongs to them. During discussion of the equity audit, staff reflected that "Connect to something greater" can be a connection not only to different neighborhoods but can include each community's relationship to the outdoors, water, and waterfronts.

A trail exists between my home and work, so I spend minimal time on the streets (I bike to work). The new ramp down from the Smithfield Bridge makes it so I spend even less travel time sharing space with cars. Fantastic, thanks!!!

GOAL: We continue to add new high-value trail, and continually show our readiness for effective action at moments of opportunity. Communities near the trails, and especially communities with low-use rates, have easily available information and signage to guide access and use.

STRATEGIC MAINTENANCE

Friends plays a unique and critical role in orchestrating the Three Rivers Heritage Trail and Three Rivers Water Trail maintenance. No other local organization has capacity for this work. Board, staff, and external interviewees all recognized the importance of maintenance work and its centrality to mission. In the user survey, maintenance and cleanliness were in respondents' top three priorities. Happily, trail users also indicate high satisfaction with the current state of both categories.

At the same time, board and staff recognized in survey responses that the "running to stay in place" that often accompanies maintenance can exhaust the energy of both staff and volunteers. There are opportunities to move from a reactive to a proactive stance – where immediate needs are met, but there are also plans for what comes next as well as contingencies for severe weather events and other effects of the changing climate.

This will require changes in approach, resource allocation, and partnerships. It may also involve changes in volunteer management – potentially exploring volunteering for higher-impact or more skilled tasks. During the scenario planning exercise, the group determined that if City attention to maintenance improved, Friends should be ready to increase efforts in areas surrounding the city and communities where there has historically been disinvestment.

"Sometimes [the trail] just becomes another piece of infrastructure...in the story going forward what counts will be not who finishes up the [trail system] but it will be how do you keep the pieces that are built sustained and maintained...we've got to keep it at this level and have people embrace it and want to keep it. That's the success- to link past efforts to current efforts to keep it around."

GOAL: Trails across the system are safe and clean.

GOVERNMENT RELATIONS

Effective working relationships with County, State, and Federal elected officials and agencies is critical to trail development and maintenance projects. Consistent communication with these partners is necessary to maintain these important relationships and to ensure project support. Friends' role is to work with these stakeholders to develop and improve the trail with significant community engagement and input. While all parties recognize the importance of these relationships, this has not always translated into predictable and consistent collaboration.

The Three Rivers Heritage & Water Trail Systems cover a large geographic area which means the number of elected officials and government agencies with whom Friends must maintain relationships can be challenging for a small organization. Additionally, communities suffering from economic distress and historical underinvestment are facing a range of challenges. This means that while the community may support trails they may not be as high of a priority as other issues.

Stakeholder interviews showed a desire to improve government relationships, and in particular for Friends to leverage greater influence with the City of Pittsburgh. Accomplishing this will depend on building robust relationships within the administration and with City Councilmembers, as well as finding ways to work in tandem with partners to create meaningful progress on key issues. Friends has already been defining roles and creating memorandums of understanding within the nonprofit landscape. This work can build from those efforts and extend it into another sphere.

"[Currently Friends is] not coming in to individual council people on a regular basis with list of priorities, clearly articulated for a capital budget that fits within a 10-year strategy. [Multiple organization's leadership] don't come with locked arms and unified State of the Riverfront messaging around why these things are important. There has not been that elevated conversation around policy and funding."

GOAL: Our processes for building relationships and defining roles at the municipal level are clear and satisfying to both parties. Strong relationships with City government allow easy two-way communication and problem-solving.

COMMUNICATION

Friends entered the strategic planning process with questions about communication – how does the organization differentiate itself and raise awareness about its mission and work? While tactics have yet to be defined, the organization determined that increased visibility is a priority goal for the next period. The increased communication should manifest in such ways as to promote the Trails as a welcoming space for all people, including people of color, people with disabilities, people identifying as LGBTQIA+, and people with low incomes.

Both staff and board recognized the need for expanded communication capacity in surveys. Users identified places where increased communication would improve their experience such as increased signage with organization branding and increased trail monitoring and assistance. Interviewees commented on opportunities where Friends has to be a middleman of information between communities and decision-makers.

"Staying in touch can help [our organization] achieve its goals and the more it knows of Friends, the more it can help Friends; the opportunity is more consistent communication. There are a lot of organizations with different visions for trail development and often that vision is not well known (particularly the city). Friends is uniquely positioned to understand the various visions and coordinate to connect the dots for a more comprehensive system."

GOAL: Increase Friends' profile, including in populations with little prior engagement.

IMPLEMENTATION PLANNING

This strategic plan is the launching point for an implementation plan – a critical part of the process. Board and staff members will translate these strategic goals into a first-year workplan including responsibilities and timelines.