



*A Strategic Plan  
For The  
New York-New Jersey  
Trail Conference*

*January 2017*

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## I. Introduction

The opening decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century have been a time of unprecedented growth and success for the New York-New Jersey Trail Conference. The miles of trails maintained by the Trail Conference have grown from 1,300 to over 2,100. The volunteer capacity managed by the organization has expanded from 30,000 hours to 100,000. Its staff has grown from five to more than twenty permanent and forty seasonal. In order to respond to its expanded role in outdoor recreation, the Trail Conference moved to a new, larger headquarters in 2015 and completed an internal reorganization.

This strategic plan is intended to enable the Trail Conference to consolidate the gains it has made as it has expanded and solidified its leadership role in “connecting people to nature” in greater metropolitan New York. However, this plan is drafted in a time of significant changes affecting the Trail Conference’s traditional role.

**Growing population and trail use:** As discussed below, the greater metropolitan New York has seen significant increases in population growth and density over the past few decades. This growth has been accompanied by a concomitant increase in the use of regional parks and trails. National data suggests that trail-related activities have increased by 18 percent over the last 10 years.

**Stagnant or shrinking budgets for trail development and maintenance:** In the aftermath of the Great Recession, all levels of government have experienced times of austerity. This has been particularly true of state and local parks departments. Even in those cases where capital spending on parks has been increased, funding for maintenance and operations has remained flat, increasing the need for trail volunteers.<sup>1</sup>

**Changes in the demographics and behaviors of trail users and volunteers:** As discussed below, trail use in the United States has changed over the years. Once the province of long-distance hikers, trail users are now more likely to be involved in shorter treks, trail running, and even bicycling. The aging of baby boomers and the rise of the millennials have important implications for the Trail Conference volunteer efforts. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics report, *Volunteering in the United States--2015*:

35- to 44-year-olds and 45- to 54-year-olds [older millennials and genXers] were the most likely to volunteer (28.9 percent and 28.0 percent, respectively). Volunteer rates were lowest among 20- to 24-year-olds (18.4 percent). Teenagers (16- to 19-year-olds) continued to have a relatively high volunteer rate, at 26.4 percent. Over the year, the volunteer rates for 35- to 44-year-olds and 55- to 64-year-olds declined.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, as the “boomers” age, they appear to be volunteering less, while the millennials are coming into their own as volunteers. This is important in that the younger generation is more likely to engage in short-

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<sup>1</sup> Lisa W. Foderaro, “New York State Parks, After Years of Decline, Receive Infusion of Cash and Care,” New York Times, November 2, 2015. ([http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/03/nyregion/new-york-state-parks-after-years-of-decline-receive-a-face-lift.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/03/nyregion/new-york-state-parks-after-years-of-decline-receive-a-face-lift.html?_r=0))

<sup>2</sup> United State Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Volunteering in the United States—2015*, Press Release, February 25, 2016. (<http://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/volun.pdf>)

term, even one-time volunteer engagements than is the older boomer generation.<sup>3</sup> This differs from the Trail Conference's reliance upon long-term volunteer commitments.

## II. The context

### A. History

What began as a fellowship of hiking enthusiasts has grown to become an important linchpin in the system of parks and open space that serve the recreation and public health needs of greater metropolitan New York. This is succinctly summarized in the history of the Trail Conference as described on the organization's website:

New York-New Jersey Trail Conference volunteers have helped to build and maintain what we think is the finest network of foot trails in a major metropolitan area in our nation. . . .

By 1922, the Trail Conference enthusiastically got behind Benton MacKaye's proposal to build a trail along the Appalachian mountain chain as a refuge from "the shackles of commercial civilization." By early 1924, Trail Conference volunteers had built the first 20 miles of Appalachian Trail across Harriman and Bear Mountain parks. By 1930, they had completed all 160 miles from the Delaware Water Gap to Connecticut.

Those early Trail Conference volunteers were ambitious, hard-working people, and they left us a rich legacy that we proudly build on...:

- an extensive trail network that we maintain, add to, and promote each year;
- an ethic of trail volunteerism and civic engagement in conservation issues;
- a model of partnering with public agencies to get trail work done and lands opened up for public enjoyment.<sup>4</sup>

This legacy becomes more important as the centennial of the Trail Conference approaches. Studies have repeatedly shown that time spent in nature improves physical health, emotional health, and cognitive abilities.<sup>5</sup> In much of greater metropolitan New York 100 years ago, access to the outdoors was relatively plentiful, since the region still consisted mostly of small towns and rural areas. By 2010, counties surrounding the five boroughs featured far higher population densities (see Figure 1). Access to nature has become both more difficult and more necessary in the face of rising population density and an ever more complex society. Thus, the work of the Trail Conference has increasing importance in this ever more urbanized region.

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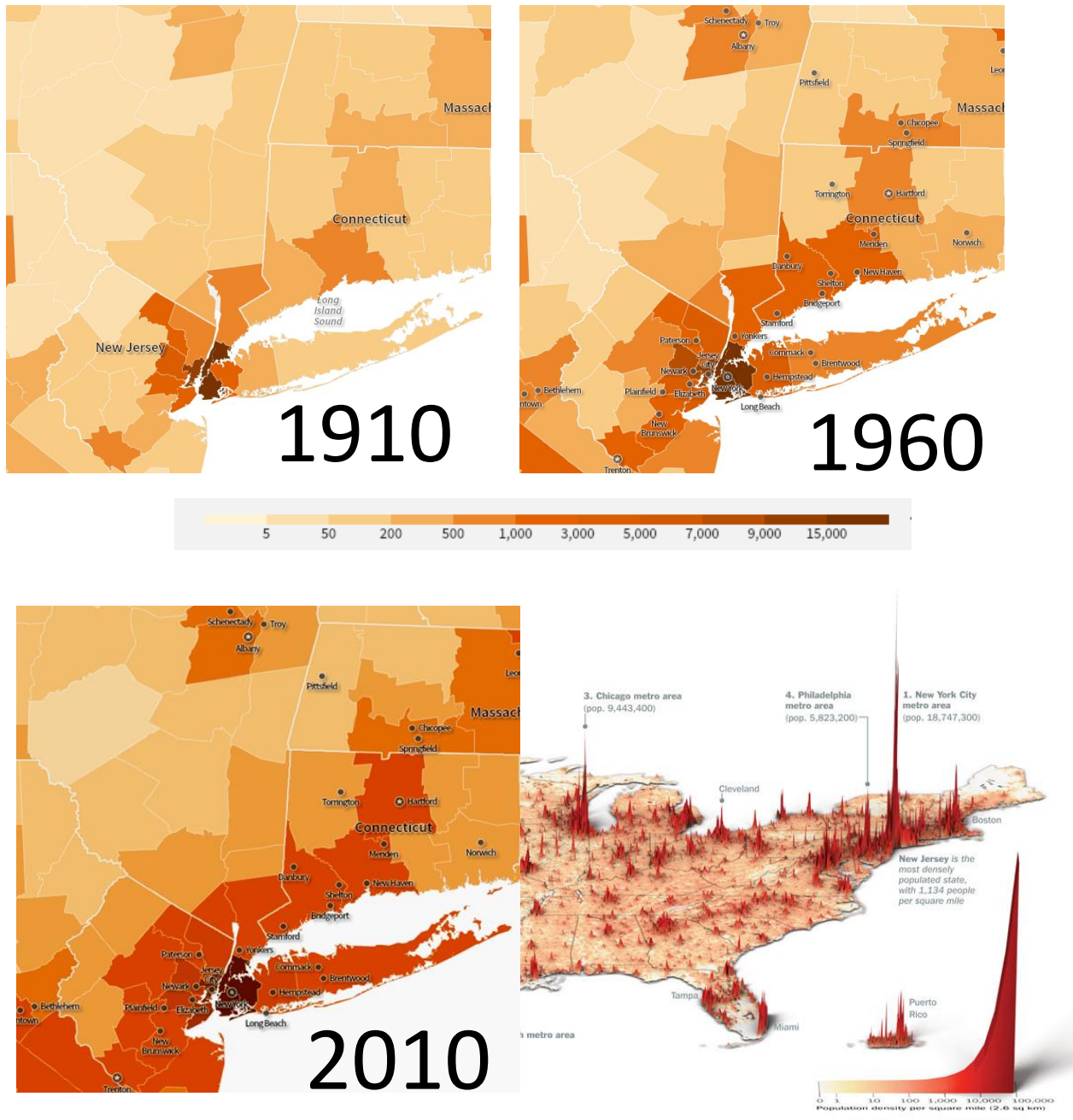
<sup>3</sup> Mark Hrywna, "Millennial Giving & Volunteering Influenced By Peers," *The NonProfit Times*, June 24, 2015, (<http://www.thenonproffitimes.com/news-articles/millennial-giving-volunteering-influenced-by-peers/>)

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.nynjtc.org/content/trail-conference-marks-90-years-building-maintaining-and-mapping-trails>

<sup>5</sup> Atchley RA, Strayer DL, Atchley P (2012) Creativity in the Wild: Improving Creative Reasoning through Immersion in Natural Settings. *PLoS ONE* 7(12): e51474. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0051474

Figure 1.

**Population Density, 1910, 1960 & 2010 (US. Census Bureau)**



Source: [http://urbandemographics.blogspot.com/2011\\_09\\_01\\_archive.html](http://urbandemographics.blogspot.com/2011_09_01_archive.html)

National data on trail-related outdoor recreation supports the idea that access to nature matters more to the U.S. population. According to the Outdoor Foundation’s 2016 Participation Topline Report, from 2006 to 2015, the number of trail-related activities engaged in by Americans six years of age or older increased by 23.3 percent, while total outdoor recreation activities in the United State increased by 18.7 percent.

Trail-Related Activities	2006	2015	% Change, 2006- 2015
Backpacking Overnight - More Than 1/4 Mile from Vehicle/ Home	7,067	10,100	42.9%
Bicycling (Mountain/Non-Paved Surface)	6,751	8,316	23.2%
Hiking (Day)	29,863	37,232	24.7%
Trail Running	4,558	8,139	78.6%
Wildlife Viewing More Than 1/4 Mile From Home/Vehicle	20,294	20,718	2.1%
Total Trail-related Activities:	68,533	84,505	23.3%
All Outdoor Recreation (including non-trail related activity):	356,959	423,787	18.7%

Source: Compiled by Fairweather Consulting from Outdoor Foundation, *Participation Topline Report*, 2016, pp. 8-9.

The conclusion is clear: for almost 100 years, the work of the Trail Conference has been instrumental in creating opportunities for those in greater metropolitan New York to access nature through trails. This work has become even more important in the opening decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

## B. The Evolving Mission of the Trail Conference

As the needs of the recreating public have grown and changed, the Trail Conference has evolved. For years, the organization focused exclusively on the needs of hikers, particularly day-hikers and backpackers. This legacy is still reflected in the organization’s by-laws under the heading “Overview”:

The Trail Conference is a volunteer-directed, not-for-profit service organization committed to:

- Developing, building, and maintaining hiking trails.
- Protecting hiking trail lands through support and advocacy.
- Educating the public in the responsible use of trails and the natural environment.

But by 2010, the organization decided that its interest in trails extended beyond hiking. The Board of Directors adopted a “strategic framework” to guide its work:

**Purpose:** The purpose of the New York-New Jersey Trail Conference is to create, maintain, and protect sustainable, high-quality public trails in greater metropolitan New York.

**Vision:** Our vision is that easily accessible trails enable more people of all ages and ethnicities to experience natural areas and live healthier, more satisfying lives.

**Niche:** The Trail Conference serves those people who enjoy trails by effectively bringing volunteers and land managers together for the creation and stewardship of a superior trail system.

**Guiding Principles:** In serving the public, the Trail Conference board, staff, and volunteers:

- Recognize that volunteers are integral to the organization

- Welcome anyone who advances the mission
- Seek to have a positive impact on the environment
- Operate with fiscal prudence and responsibility
- Are honest and courteous in all relationships
- Are ethical and operate within the law

Broadening its focus to all trail users in addition to hikers was advantageous to the organization in two ways. First, it reflected the fact that trails were being used for a variety of non-motorized activities in addition to hiking. This included biking, riding horses, casual walking, and trail running. In working with the organizations that own and operate the region's parks, it is important that the Trail Conference can help parks respond to all trail users. Second, by embracing the broader interests of trail users, the Trail Conference is better able to assist parks to achieve a balance that protects the trail experience of all users: runners, bikers, horseback riders, casual walkers, as well as hikers.

### C. The "Ecosystem" of Trail Use

Figure 2, below, summarizes the "ecosystem" through which the Trail Conference provides its services. The Trail Conference delivers a variety of services either to trail users or to partner agencies. The bulk of on-the-ground services - trail design, construction and maintenance - as well as budget advocacy is delivered directly to partners who, in turn, are able to make it available to trail users. The bulk of the informational services - volunteer experiences, website, trail maps and books, newsletters, alerts, presentations and workshops, advocacy, etc. - is targeted primarily at trail users, members and supporters. As shown in Figure 2 (below) these include:

#### Services to Partner Agencies

- Trail maintenance by volunteers
- Expertise in trail development, design and construction
- Advocacy and conservation trails and trail lands

#### Services to Trail Users & Supporters

- Outreach directly to trail users with programs like the website, *Trail Walker*, social media, maps and books, advocacy, summit stewards, etc.

As it has evolved over the decades, all of these activities are essential for “connecting people with Nature.” But note that only a limited number of services go directly to trail users and none to the supporters.

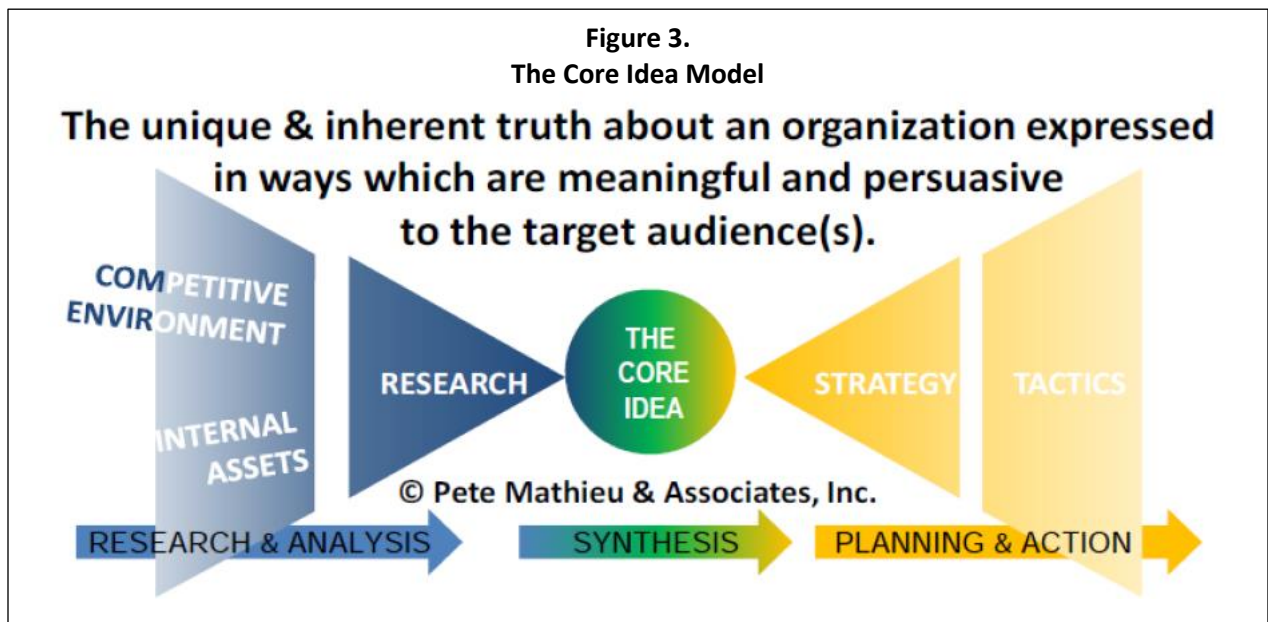
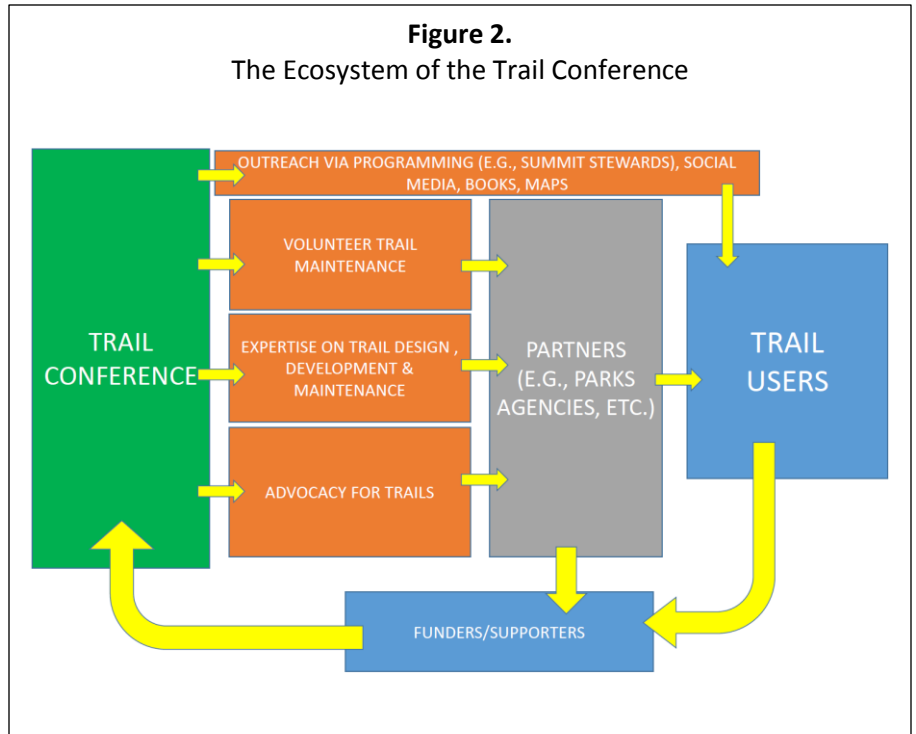
Thus, at a time when the demand for the Trail Conference’s services are in higher demand, the role of the Trail Conference in accomplishing this work is not readily visible to the actual trail users and supporters.

### III. The Strategic Planning Process

Using the context described in the previous section, the strategic planning process was organized using the “core idea” model of A. H. Pete Mathieu. (See Figure 3.) This section summarizes the components of that process.

#### A. The “core idea” model

The model indicates that a strategic plan is created by conducting research on the organization and its environment, then synthesizing that research to arrive at a “core idea” for the organization.





**The core idea** represents unique and inherent truth about the Trail Conference expressed in ways that are meaningful and persuasive to its stakeholders. It is intended to be a succinct statement of the current distinguishing capacities and competitive advantage of the organization.

**The statement of strategic position** recasts the core idea as an aspiration. The first step in defining a strategy is to describe how the organization will mobilize the core idea to its advantage.

**The strategy** describes the overall approach the Trail Conference will take to all of its work as a logical outgrowth of the strengths defined in the core idea and mobilized in the statement of strategic position.

**Tactics** are specific initiatives or activities that Trail Conference will undertake to implement its strategy.

**Metrics** are the tools by which the Trail Conference monitors its progress in carrying out the tactics used to implement the strategy.

## B. Research/Analysis

Strategic planning begins with research and analysis. In this case, it involved research on changes in the Trail Conference's operating environment, surveys of trail users and Trail Conference volunteers, interviews with a variety of stakeholders, including representatives from partner agencies (i.e., landowners and parks agencies) and board members themselves.

### 1. Key environmental trends

In the context section above, there is a description of the important trends affecting the Trail Conference's operating environment (i.e., increasing in population density and outdoor recreation activities, funding shortages for the maintenance and operation of trail systems, change in volunteer culture and the preferences of trail users).

### 2. The Trail User Survey

A survey of trail users was conducted online via Survey Monkey in June and July of 2016. The user survey data were extracted from the Survey Monkey at 7 a.m. on July 18.<sup>6</sup> Altogether, 475 people, 37.5% of which were trail conference members, completed the survey. The survey results are included in the appendices to this report.

**Overall, 87.6% of respondents rated their experience as good or excellent. This did not differ widely by subpopulation, region of use, or Trail Conference membership affiliation.**

77.8% of the population was born before the year 1980, most of which (40% of the entire sample) between 1965-1980. Seventy four percent of the respondents use the trails exclusively for hiking [both casual and backcountry], and 31% of the respondents use the trails for hiking [both casual and backcountry] and biking [both casual and technical mountain biking]. Respondents had the ability to write in other ways they use the trails, of which the most commonly reported activity was horseback riding, where 6.7% of the total sample reported this as their only trail usage.

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<sup>6</sup> The total respondents throughout this report include only those who had completed the survey prior to this time

- The single most important issue for the majority of respondents was the desire to see more miles of trails available for use, and specifically for mixed usage trails approved for biking, hiking, and horseback riding.
- The most commonly reported issue with trail maintenance, either directly within a survey item or noted in additional comments, was the need for more oversight of the trails to prevent misuse (ATVs, littering) and overgrowth. While litter and overgrowth were the most frequently mentioned problems, this seemed to be even more so in New York, and especially west of the Hudson.
- Within subpopulations of the sample, including those that exclusively hike, those that exclusively bike, those that exclusively use the trails for horseback riding, and those who use the trails for more than one of these purposes, there were comments regarding a need for more harmony amongst the various groups differing in usage. To quote one respondent directly, the most important thing the Trail Conference can do is: *“Foster a culture that respects the experience of all trail users, not just a single group.”*
- The majority of biking usage takes place in New Jersey trails, while the majority of horseback riding takes place in New York, most of which West of the Hudson

### 3. The Trail Conference Volunteer Survey

In June and July, the Trail Conference conducted a survey of its volunteers. The volunteer survey data was supplied directly from the Trail Conference on July 22, 2016. The Volunteer survey was completed by 339 respondents.<sup>7</sup> The survey results are included as an appendix to this report.

**Overall, 80.9% of the respondents who supplied an answer on the survey rated their volunteer experience as either very satisfying or completely satisfying with some variation from group to group,**

The volunteers were classified into one of 4 volunteer positions:

- 1) Committee Chair/RTC Chair/ LTC Chair/ Crew Chief,
- 2) Supervisor/ Project Manager/ Crew Leader,
- 3) Crew Member/ Committee Member/ Trail Maintainer, and
- 4) Office Volunteer/ Other Volunteer

Most of the analysis in the Volunteer Survey section shows differences among these positions. Chair level members were the least satisfied group regarding their volunteer experience – 56.5% of respondents were very or completely satisfied overall compared to 68% of the supervisor level volunteers, and the more than 80% in the remaining two categories.

- Satisfaction with communication also saw contrast amongst the volunteer position categories – 21.7% of chair level volunteers reported that they were very or completely satisfied, where 56.3% of the supervisor level volunteers, and 78.3% of all others.
- 107 respondents indicated having attended workshops, 105 of which offered feedback.

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<sup>7</sup> Of the 339 total respondents, some items were skipped by either an entire group, or a few individuals who appeared to voluntarily not provide an answer. All percentages are based on the population of respondents who supplied an answer to the relevant item(s) being summarized, and in some cases this is less than 339.

- Satisfaction with the workshop experience correlated with volunteer position, with chair level volunteers reporting the lowest satisfaction
- Trail maintainer and office volunteers reported being very or completely satisfied with the workshops over 90% of the time within each group.

Thus, the survey indicates that those volunteers “on the front lines” (i.e., either working on the trails or serving in the office), have the highest satisfaction. Those volunteers with more supervisory duties are the least satisfied. This indicates a need to look at the way volunteer work is organized in order to ensure that functions with “higher level” responsibilities (e.g., volunteer supervisors) can continue to be carried out to the satisfaction of volunteer and partners.

#### 4. Interviews with Partners

As part of the strategic planning process, telephone interviews were conducted with the Trail Conference partners (e.g., owners/operators of parks), donors and other stakeholders. These are summarized in the appendices to this report. The partners are a particularly important constituency for the Trail Conference. Maintaining effective partnerships with this group is essential if the Trail Conference is to serve trail users well. The interviews with Land Managers indicated that they look to the Trail Conference for four things:

- A **volunteer cadre** that can do consistent, high-quality work on trail maintenance
- A **source of expertise** on planning, developing and maintaining trails
- An **advocate** in support of trails
- A **resource to educate** trail users

As in the case of the other outreach to stakeholders, this information helped set the context for the strategic plan.

#### 5. Consultation with the Trail Conference Staff

At the meeting on June 16, 2016 at the Darlington Schoolhouse, a meeting was held to discuss the Trail Conference strategic plan. As part of the meeting, the staff was asked to respond to the seven questions of the “core idea” model and to discuss their responses. Several themes emerged, including ideas of the Trail Conference serving as source for volunteer mobilization and serving as a repository of expertise on trails. A discussion on the three biggest issues facing the organization focused on how to respond to the growing demand for outdoor recreation and the opportunities and challenges that presented. The summary of this meeting is included in the appendices.

#### 6. Consultation with Trail Conference Delegates

The Trail Conference Strategic Plan was discussed at a meeting of the Trail Conference Delegates at the Darlington School Headquarters on July 14, 2016. The delegates were asked to identify their hopes and fears for the strategic plan and a discussion followed. Among the delegates, there was hope that the Trail Conference would continue its leadership role in developing and maintaining the regional trail system and diversify its membership, particularly to include younger members. Among the fears that were expressed were the loss of the Conference’s volunteer tradition, and a stagnation in the organization’s membership. A summary of this meeting is included in the appendices.

## 7. Consultation with the Board

During this strategic planning process, the board was consulted in two ways: individual interviews and two board retreats. The interviews served to inform the historic, operational and cultural context in which the plan was developed. During the retreats, the board was presented with the findings of our research and participated in several exercises to shape the direction of the strategy and tactics included in this plan. The results of the retreat deliberations are included in the next section of this report.

### C. Synthesis of the “Core Idea” and Planning the Strategy, Tactics and Metrics

The primary vehicles for developing the core idea, strategy and tactics and metric were two Board retreats held in October and November.

#### 1. First Board Retreat

The Board discussed a proposed core idea and statement of strategic position. The Board then discussed programmatic priorities to align with this focus. The board considered six broad program areas when weighing where priorities should be set: Trail Maintenance; Trail Design & Construction; Advocacy; Conservation; Stewardship and Education & Communications including Brand Management.

During the exercise and subsequent discussion, the Board members indicated that all programs were important and worthy of continuation. Two were identified as worth greater emphasis in the next 3 to 5 years. These were Trail Maintenance and Education & Communications including Brand management. If the Trail Conference is to improve its ability to maintain trails and continue to meet the needs of its partners (and ultimately, of the trail users), it is vital that it maintains and strengthens its visibility and its brand image.

It was widely agreed that the continuance and improvement of this important work must become more visible to trail users and funders if the trail conference is to grow its membership, volunteer base and funding support. Consequently, all activities of the organization should be considered in terms of how that can be aligned to help improve the visibility of the Trail Conference and more effectively communicate the value of its work to trail users and current and potential supporters.

#### 2. Second Board Retreat

The second board retreat reviewed results of first and discussed tactics and metrics associated with the strategy, providing guidance on how these should be addressed and developed.

Results of both retreats are incorporated into the discussion of strategy below.

## IV. Creating the Strategic Plan

During the course of the board retreats several analyses and exercises were presented. These are described below.

A. SWOT Analysis

During the first retreat, the Board was presented with an analysis of the Trail Conferences internal strengths and weaknesses and the external opportunities and threats it faces. The results of this SWOT analysis were slightly modified during the discussion and are summarized in the table below. This should be considered a draft SWOT analysis, subject to continual updating throughout the process of implementing the strategic plan.

<b>Table 2.</b> <b>DRAFT SWOT Analysis Results</b>	
<p><b><u>Strengths</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Reputation/Brand Equity/Track Record among Land Managers &amp; Serious Hikers</i></li> <li>● <i>Volunteer cadre</i></li> <li>● <i>A skilled Staff committed to the cause</i></li> <li>● <i>Active &amp; committed Board</i></li> <li>● <i>Finances/fundraising</i></li> <li>● <i>Subject matter expertise</i></li> <li>● <i>Use of technology</i></li> <li>● <i>Market share: &gt;2,100 miles of trails maintained in 22 counties in cooperation with ~75 agency partners</i></li> <li>● <i>99 member organizations</i></li> </ul>	<p><b><u>Weaknesses</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Organizational culture (improving)</i></li> <li>● <i>Volunteer management</i></li> <li>● <i>Limited visibility among trail users and potential supporters</i></li> <li>● <i>Stagnant membership</i></li> <li>● <i>Lack of diversity among Trail Conference staff and board</i></li> <li>● <i>Aging volunteer cadre</i></li> <li>● <i>Unwieldy Business Model &amp; Governance</i></li> </ul>
<p><b><u>Opportunities</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Growing population with interest in outdoor recreation</i></li> <li>● <i>Growing population diversity</i></li> <li>● <i>Under-funded parks agencies</i></li> <li>● <i>Advocacy for trail stewardship &amp; land acquisition</i></li> <li>● <i>Connecting as a key role for the Trail Conference (connecting trail segments; connecting people to trails)</i></li> <li>● <i>New technologies to connect people to trails</i></li> <li>● <i>New “meet up” culture of volunteerism</i></li> </ul>	<p><b><u>Threats</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Underfunded parks agencies</i></li> <li>● <i>Increasing number of organizations competing for trail users</i></li> <li>● <i>Increased regulation of trail work</i></li> <li>● <i>New “meet up” culture of volunteerism</i></li> <li>● <i>Little growth in “back-country” hiking versus other types of trail use</i></li> <li>● <i>Diversity unrecognized can lead to “culture clashes” on the trails</i></li> <li>● <i>Trail degradation from deferred maintenance, overuse/under-design and climate change</i></li> </ul>

The draft SWOT developed at the retreat contains some paradoxical findings.

*Increasing demand amid fiscal austerity:* It indicates that the increased need for the Trail Conference services are driven, in part, by a shortage of resources devoted to parks. Thus, the demand for services is increasing in the context of funding shortages.

*Positive brand equity among a limited constituency:* our research indicates that the Trail Conference enjoys very positive brand equity among those who know the organization, but it the organization has limited visibility.

*Stagnant membership amid a changing culture of volunteerism:* As noted elsewhere in this report, young people seek volunteer opportunities that are often one-time or short-term activities organized through social media. This is very different from how the Trail Conference has recruited and organized its volunteers in the past. This change represents both a profound threat and unprecedented opportunity for the Trail Conference.

## B. The Core Idea & Statement of Strategic Position

During the first retreat the board was presented with a “core idea” and statement of strategic position for the Trail Conference.

### 1. The Core Idea

This model is intended to express the unique and inherent truth about the Trail Conference as an organizing principle for creating a strategic plan. Based upon discussion at the retreat, the draft Core Idea arrived at for the Trail Conference is summarized as:

“Connecting people with Nature by creating compelling, sustainable trail experiences in greater metropolitan New York via:

- Volunteer Opportunities
- Trail Maintenance, Design, & Construction
- Trail Information & Education
- Trail Advocacy and Conservation”

Thus, creating compelling trail experiences in greater metropolitan New York is the distinguishing characteristic of the Trail Conference. (The trail experience can be considered as the ability of the user to traverse the trail with no unforeseen obstructions and for the trail itself to provide direct contact with natural surroundings with minimal intrusions by motorized conveyances, artificial light, noise, and/or visible human-built structures.)

### 2. Statement of Strategic Position

This leads directly to a Statement of Strategic Position that describes how the Trail Conference could use its truth to distinguish itself among the many groups involved in outdoor recreation in the greater metropolitan New York. This is summarized below.

**FOR** Trail Users, Land Managers and Funders,

**The Trail Conference is** the only organization focused solely on maintaining and improving the trail experience throughout greater metropolitan New York

**THAT CAN** promote and protect opportunities to connect people with nature via trails

**BECAUSE** it has the expertise, volunteer base, partnerships and supporters needed to address the scope and scale of the work.

### 3. Pressures for Strategic Changes amid Continuity

Both the Core Idea and the Statement of Strategic Position are intended to help shape priorities for the Trail Conference. Unsurprisingly, the strategic focus for the Trail Conference is enhancing the trail

experience through its “expertise, volunteer base, and partnerships with land managers.” While this is squarely in line with the long traditions of the Trail Conference, three factors suggest that, if the Trail Conference is to build upon these traditions, it must make important strategic changes in its approach to its work.

- ***The Trail Conference has limited visibility among many important constituents.*** Funders and trail users are often not aware of the role the Trail Conference plays in maintaining the region’s trail system. Consequently, the Trail Conference must develop greater recognition for its work so that it can attract the resources necessary to meet the needs of its partners and ultimately the growing population on the trails in greater metropolitan New York.
- ***The Trail Conference’s land managers are looking for a more diverse, more complex array of services from the organization.*** As the Trail Conference has continued to serve its partners with trail maintenance and construction, the partners rely on the organization for more trail-related services, particularly as the nature of trail use continues to diversify and attract more diverse users. The Summit Stewards program (in which Trail Conference volunteers provide on-site orientation and information for trail users) is but one example.
- ***The culture of volunteerism is changing.*** On a national level, volunteerism seems to be shifting towards shorter-term more spontaneous commitments than typically employed by the Trail Conference. The volunteer survey conducted by the Trail Conference indicates that, within the trail conference itself, 54% of volunteers have served more than 5 years; 30% for more than 10 years. A key question is how the Trail Conference can take advantage of the new climate of volunteerism while maintaining its core competence in trail work.
- ***Financial support for such work is increasingly difficult to obtain.*** As the Trail Conference is being called upon to take on a greater amount of work involving more complex projects, organization must build its administrative capacity to manage this increasing complexity. Most of the funding the Trail Conference receives for projects requires a match and does not allow administrative or indirect costs. Thus, it is imperative for the Trail Conference to find means to finance the requisite match and administrative costs required to fully meet the increasing needs of its Land Manager partners.

Maintaining a geographic focus is also important for the Trail Conference. As indicated in this report, the Trail Conference conducts its work in greater metropolitan New York. While opportunities to undertake projects in other areas may be considered by the Trail Conference, they must be consistent with the organization’s mission and strategic plan and accompanied by sufficient resources to enable the Trail Conference to sustain that effort without compromising its ability to execute its ongoing programs.

The next step in the strategic planning process is to define a strategy for the Trail Conference. The strategy describes an overall approach to the organization’s work based upon the core idea summarizing the essential capabilities of the organization, the statement of strategic position outlining how the Trail Conference can mobilize those capabilities, and the environmental factors affecting the Trail Conference’s work.

## C. The Strategy & Tactics

The next step in the strategic planning process is to define a strategy for the Trail Conference. The strategy describes an overall approach to the organization's work based upon the core idea summarizing the essential capabilities of the organization, the statement of strategic position outlining how the Trail Conference can mobilize those capabilities and the environmental factors affecting the Trail Conference's work. The resulting strategy can be summarized in the following sentence:

### 1. The Strategy: Fine Tuning the Trail Conference's Approach to Its Work

The Trail Conference has a long history of success in "connecting people with nature." Indeed, it is increasingly important for the essential work of the Trail Conference to continue. But as the research for this strategic plan has made clear, the Trail Conference must boost revenues by increasing the awareness of its important role in developing a high-quality regional trail system. The focus on improving the organization's visibility is the new approach or strategy recommended in this plan. The overall goal of this effort can be stated as:

**"The Trail Conference will become widely recognized as the crucial organization focused on keeping high-quality trails available to the public in greater metropolitan New York."**

There are two essential elements to this approach. The Trail Conference must continue to provide valuable services to its partners and it must also be widely recognized for it. Given its current lack of public visibility and the changing needs of its partners and volunteers, the Trail Conference must review the way it organizes its work to ensure that it can continue to meet those needs effectively and in a manner that is economically sustainable. Equally important, the Trail Conference's work must become much more visible to trail users and those organizations (both governmental and private) that provide funding for the work.

The tactics described below are intended to implement this strategy. They are accompanied by suggested metrics for the tactics. The Trail Conference's budget will be developed to reflect the priorities identified in these tactics. In addition, as part of its ongoing planning process, the Trail Conference staff will develop specific metrics for each of the tactics described below.

### 2. Tactics & Metrics

The tactics are the means to carry out the strategy. They can also be considered the goals of the strategy. In any case, they define the actions that will be undertaken to implement the strategy. Over the next one to five years, these activities should be the highest long-term priority for the Trail Conference board and staff. The organization's work plans should be organized around carrying out these tactics, and initiatives and projects that directly further these tactics should be prioritized, while projects that do not directly support the tactics should be given a lower priority. While there will always be short-term issues that require an immediate response, it is vital that the four tactics outlined below are maintained as the most important things the organization does over the next one to five years.

The metrics will measure the progress on achieving the goal of each of the tactics. In this section, each of the four tactics associated with this strategy will be described along with the metrics recommended to track progress on each of them.



***Tactics, Metrics and Monitoring the Implementation of the Strategic Plan***

This section provides a guide to strategy implementation. It describes each of the tactics and then outlines two ways to measure the Trail Conference’s success with implementation.

The executive director as prepared a series of Excel spread sheets that will monitor the progress toward completion of each of the activities undertaken as part of one of the three tactics. The spreadsheet displays the planned schedule for implementing each activity. It can then be updated to indicate the percent completion of each tactic and to indicate whether the completion rate is within the planned timetable for has gone past the planned completion date. As will be discussed below in the section of the role of the board, the Strategic Plan Committee will be presented with this information on a regular basis to track plan implementation. The Committee and executive director will then report this information to the full board on an annual or semi-annual basis. Figures 4 through 7 summarize the contents of the spreadsheets, summarizing the activities associated with each tactic and providing a framework for monitoring their completion.

***Operational & Impact Metrics***

This strategic plan provides two ways of measuring its progress in implementation. The first way to measure the progress of a tactic is “operational metrics.” These indicate the extent to which the activities specified in the tactic are carried out. In most cases, the operation metric for an activity involves a final report to the board on the completion of that activity. The operational metric should be reported as complete for the activity at the end of its scheduled duration in the figures summarizing the tactics. For example, under Tactic 1, “Increase Visibility,” the board is scheduled to receive a report on “Brand-raising” by mid-2018. Through the spreadsheet created for each tactic, the board will be able to monitor the operational progress in implementing the strategy (cf. Figure 4 and Table 3).

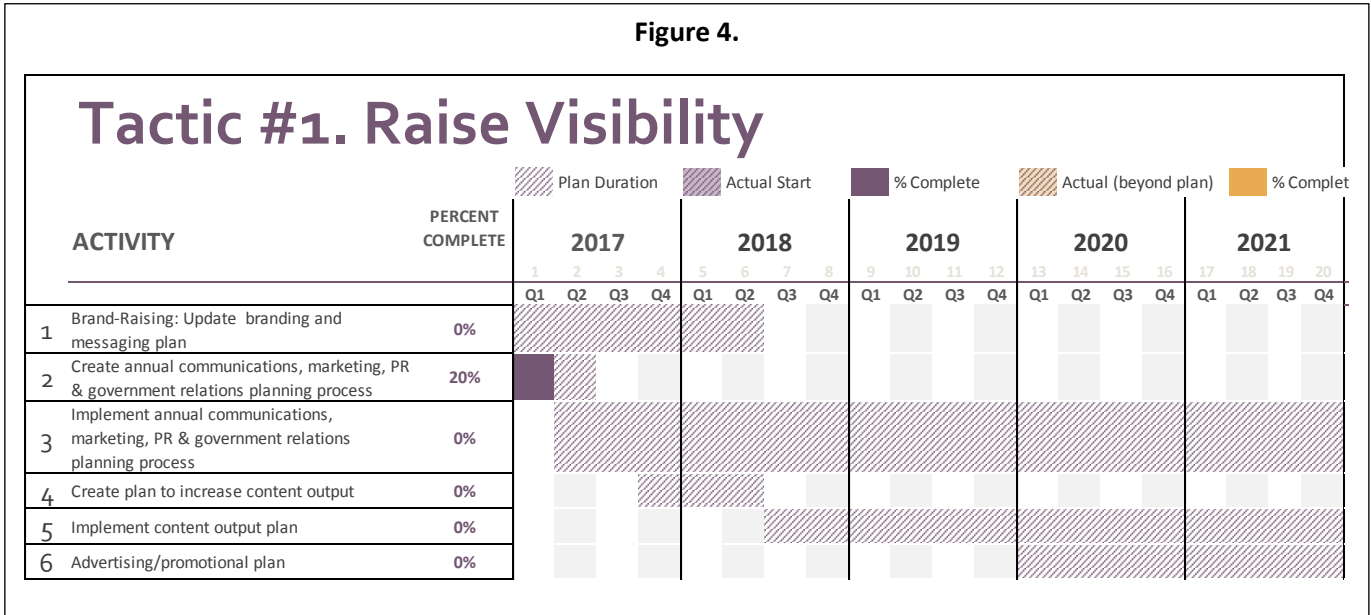
Impact metrics are the second way to measure the progress of a tactic. As the name implies, this type of metric focuses on how the performance of the activities under a tactic has affected the conditions facing the Trail Conference. For example, under Tactic 1, the first impact metric listed is “Regularly conducted trail user survey shows increased recognition of role of Trail Conference.” Thus, one of the operational metrics for Tactic 1 is completing the “brand-raising” project. One of the impact metrics (which should be moved by completing that project) is improved recognition of the role of the Trail Conference as evidenced in the regular trail user surveys (see Table 3).

Using this information, it is very important that a formal evaluation of the strategy, tactics and metrics is conducted annually, at least, with appropriate adjustments made to the tactics and strategy as needed. In that sense, the impact metrics included here are intended to be incorporated into a strategic plan dashboard that can be regularly updated and monitored by the board.

The remainder of this section reviews each of the four tactics for the strategic plan and summarizes the operational and impact metrics to be created and monitored for each.

**Tactic 1. Increasing Visibility**

**Figure 4.**



As shown in Figure 4, the actions involved in this tactic include strengthening the Trail Conference’s branding to maximize the public relations value of the organization’s assets, from its headquarters building to the new website to its increasingly important trail work.

The work will begin with a review and update of the Trail Conference’s brand in light of the Strategic Plan. Then, two planning processes will be implemented simultaneously. The first will be an annual planning process for communications, marketing and public relations. At the beginning of every year, the organization will create a plan for how it will handle communications, marketing and public relations (e.g., identify major messages to be communicated and incorporated into various media, responsible parties, etc.) Importantly, these plans will be synchronized in detail with a parallel plan for fundraising. Similarly, in the first two years, an annual government relations planning process will be implemented, enabling the organization to create each year a comprehensive approach to how it will manage its government relations.

Then, a plan will be created to increase the content and reach of the Trail Conference’s media (e.g., website, social media, newsletters, etc.)

Once these measures are in place, a formal advertising promotional campaign will be considered. This will assemble the previously mentioned actions into a single effort and also provide guidance to the organization on how to best utilize paid media to enhance its visibility.

Tactic 1 Metrics:

Progress in implementing Tactic 1 will be monitored through the metrics outlined in Table 3.

<b>Table 3.</b>	
<b>Metrics for Tactic #1. Raise Visibility</b>	
<b>Operational Metrics (with deadlines as indicated in the Tactic #1 spreadsheet)</b>	<b>Impact Metrics</b>
Brand-raising engagement report	Regularly conducted trail user survey shows increased recognition of role of Trail Conference
Updated brand guidelines	Interaction with key elected officials, including visits by Executive Director and/or Board Members
Staff and key volunteers trained	Website and social media analytics
	Media mentions
Annual report & update of communications, content and advertising plan	Volunteer applicants
	New donors
	Partner support for projects (contracts, grants, (letters of support, acknowledgment in press and signage)
	Requests from new land managers for Trail Conference services

There are eight major impact metrics for Tactic 1. These include:

*Monitoring of Trail Users knowledge of Trail Conference.* The Trail Conference staff will develop and regularly administer trail user surveys. The survey will be conducted at least annually and will be modeled on the trail user survey conducted for this strategic plan.

*Increased interaction with/recognition by government partners.* This metric will involve tracking the extent to which the Trail Conference is recognized and supported by its partners. This will include monitoring the number of Memoranda of Understanding signed with partners compared with previous years as well as monitoring contacts with officials.

*Monitoring the number of website visitors and social media followers and the level of engagement of each.* Increases in website visitors and social media followers will be benchmarked by staff against our Google Analytics records from the last seven years. For example, it may be expected that increases in website visitation and social media engagement should at least match the increases in a mature social media application such as Facebook which showed a 17- to 20-percent increase in visits and log-ins in the most recent year for which data are available.<sup>8</sup>

*Increased media mentions.* This will be monitored by systematically tracking the mention of the Trail Conference, its programs and key personnel in Google Alerts. Benchmarks will be established for this metric by reviewing previous years’ performances and comparing its performance to similar organizations.

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<sup>8</sup>Zephoria Marketing. *Top 20 Most Valuable Facebook Statistics, Updated November 2016.* (<https://zephoria.com/top-15-valuable-facebook-statistics/>)

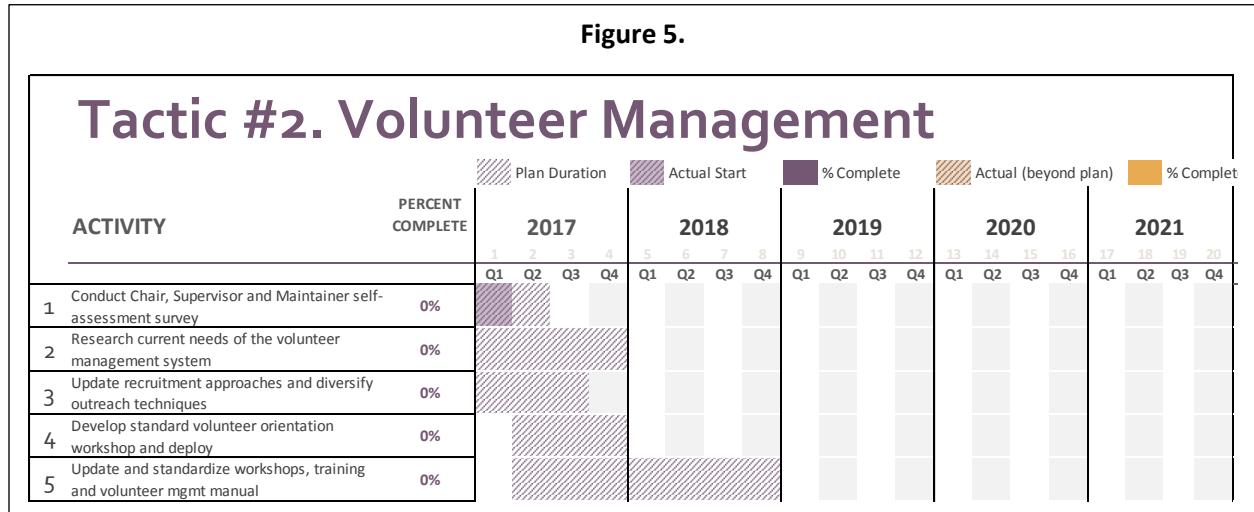
*Number of expression of volunteer interest.* Under Tactic 1, the Trail Conference will monitor formal expressions of interest in volunteering as defined in the Volunteer Management Plan to be developed under Tactic 2. The extent to which the organization can meet its volunteer metrics will provide an indication of its attempts to improve visibility.

*New donors.* As the Trail Conference becomes better known, the number of new donors attracted each year should be expected to increase.

*Partner support for Trail Conference initiatives.* It should be expected that this effort will produce greater support for the Trail Conference from the partners or—for example—the number of times partners provide letters of support and other documentation to assist the Trail Conference in securing funding.

*New demand for Trail Conference Services.* One of the ultimate measures of the visibility of the Trail Conference will be the extent to which it sees increased demand for its services. Thus, the metrics for Tactic 1 will include requests for trail design services and maps and other publications. These requests will be from new land managers or for new services from existing land managers.

**Tactic 2. Strengthen existing Volunteer management capabilities**



Volunteers maintaining and building trails are the traditional activities of the Trail Conference, the heart of its brand, a social validation, and monetization of the value<sup>9</sup> the organization provides to land managers. Land managers are looking for the Trail Conference to continue to improve volunteer management so that the work is consistent and high quality. Consequently, it is extremely important that the organization update its volunteer management systems to ensure that the Trail Conference continues to meet the expectations of its key partners. Figure 5 outlines the actions and timing to support this tactic.

<sup>9</sup> See Independent Sector state values of volunteer time (<http://www.independentsector.org/resource/the-value-of-volunteer-time/>)

This tactic will involve the revamping of the Trail Conference’s volunteer management system to improve its ability to recruit and train volunteers, including diversification of the volunteer base itself. An entirely new volunteer management procedures manual will improve the Trail Conference’s approach to recruiting, orienting, training and supervising volunteers.

Tactic 2 Metrics:

<b>Table 4. Metrics for Tactic #2. Volunteer Management</b>	
<b>Operational Metrics (with deadlines as indicated in the Tactic #2 spreadsheet)</b>	<b>Impact Metrics</b>
Report on Chair & Supervisor self-assessment	Increasing volunteer hours
Annual volunteer satisfaction report and analysis	Increasing volunteer satisfaction
Recruitment, outreach, orientation, training and Volunteer Manual updated	Decreasing volunteer position vacancies, especially in leadership positions
	Trail University Course Attendance & Conversion
	Signed MOUs

As shown in Table 4, there are five major impact metrics for Tactic 2. These include:

*Volunteer Hours.* The volunteer management procedures manual will identify target rates for growth in volunteer hours as the system is put in place. While the precise benchmarks will be included in the manual, it is expected that they will at least equal recent national experience, which saw volunteer hours increase by five percent in the most recent year for which data are available.<sup>10</sup>

*Volunteer satisfaction.* There will be an annual survey of volunteer satisfaction, continuing the effort reflected in the survey conducted in conjunction with this strategic plan. Satisfaction by volunteer role (including volunteer supervisors) will be monitored and compared from year to year.

*Volunteer vacancy.* As the new online volunteer reporting is implemented, it can be expected vacancies in volunteer positions may increase due to prior under-reporting of vacancies. But from that true baseline, we should expect decreases.

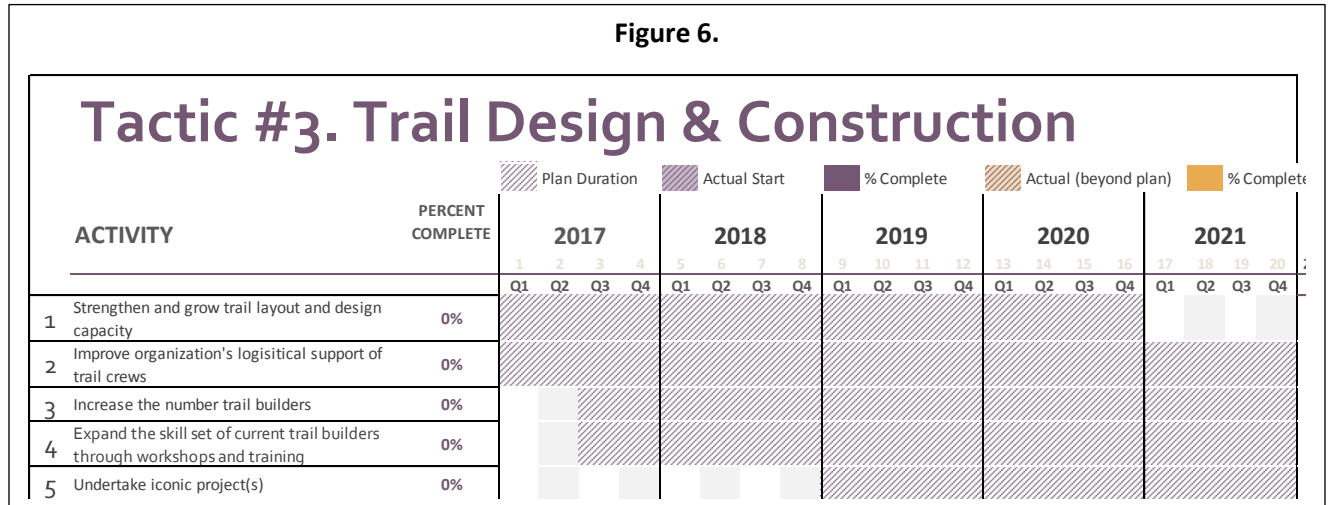
*Trail University Course Attendance & Conversion to Membership.* With a new system in place, it can be expected that attendance at Trail University sessions will increase as volunteer recruitment improves and the sessions are modified to better meet the needs of volunteers. This will be monitored annually. Benchmarks for the rate of increase in attendance may be tied to past trends or tied to such proxy benchmarks such as the national annual increase in volunteer hours referenced above. In addition, the conversion of Trail University attendees into Trail Conference members will also be monitored.

*Signed MOUs.* As indicated in the metrics for Tactic 1, this will include monitoring the number of Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) signed with partners compared with previous years as an indication of the increasing value partners place upon the work of Trail Conference volunteers.

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<sup>10</sup> Brice S. McKeever. *The Not-for-Profit Sector in Brief, 2015: Public Charities, Giving, and Volunteering*, The Urban Institute, October 2015.

**Tactic 3. Develop trail design & construction services**



The increasing needs of its partners are an opportunity for the Trail Conference to build its visibility and brand. During the interview process, partners praised the astounding work in Bear Mountain State Park as a bellwether of the kind of role they hope the Trail Conference can continue to play. The organization’s ability to continue to rise to this challenge can significantly improve the recognition among partners as the “critical ingredient that keeps trails accessible to people.” It can also lead to other high profile projects that can raise the visibility of the Trail Conference among both users and funders.

As shown in Figure 6, actions to be taken in support of this tactic include: strengthening and growing the organization’s ability to layout and design sustainable trails, coordinate and manage trail construction projects, improve logistical support for crew transportation and housing, tool inventories, and building materials management for trail construction projects.

The organization should look to expand its capacity of skilled trail builders. The organization currently utilizes two trail construction models, other solutions should be considered and explored to enhance the organization’s capacity.

Iconic projects involve high-profile trails likely to attract the attention of the media, funders and partners. A major long-term project to develop and/or restore an iconic project that can be the basis for highlighting the important work that the Trail Conference does in the region. This could include a long-term commitment to restore and rehabilitate the trails at Breakneck Ridge, improve the Ramapo Reservation trails, complete the Long Path, or another high visibility project. Such a project will only be undertaken if funding is available.

Tactic 3 Metrics:

<b>Table 5. Metrics for Tactic #3. Trail Design &amp; Construction</b>	
<b>Operational Metrics (with deadlines as indicated in the Tactic #3 spreadsheet)</b>	<b>Impact Metrics</b>
Annual report on trail development opportunities and capacity	Percentage of trail problems reported & resolved
	Agency approved design plans/projects
	Construction hours and building metrics
	Trail workshop participant conversion to work trips
	Increased attribution of Trail Conference role in iconic projects

As shown in Table 5 there are five major impact metrics for Tactic 3. These include:

*Percentage of trail problems reported and resolved.* The Trail Conference should experience an increase in both the number of requests by land managers to address trail problems along with an increasing rate of successful resolution of those problems.

*Increases in agency approved design/plans/projects.* Utilizing current and new trail assessment tools, collect and prioritize construction projects by with LTC’s for improved annual planning and budgeting and expanded numbers of projects undertaken for land manager agencies.

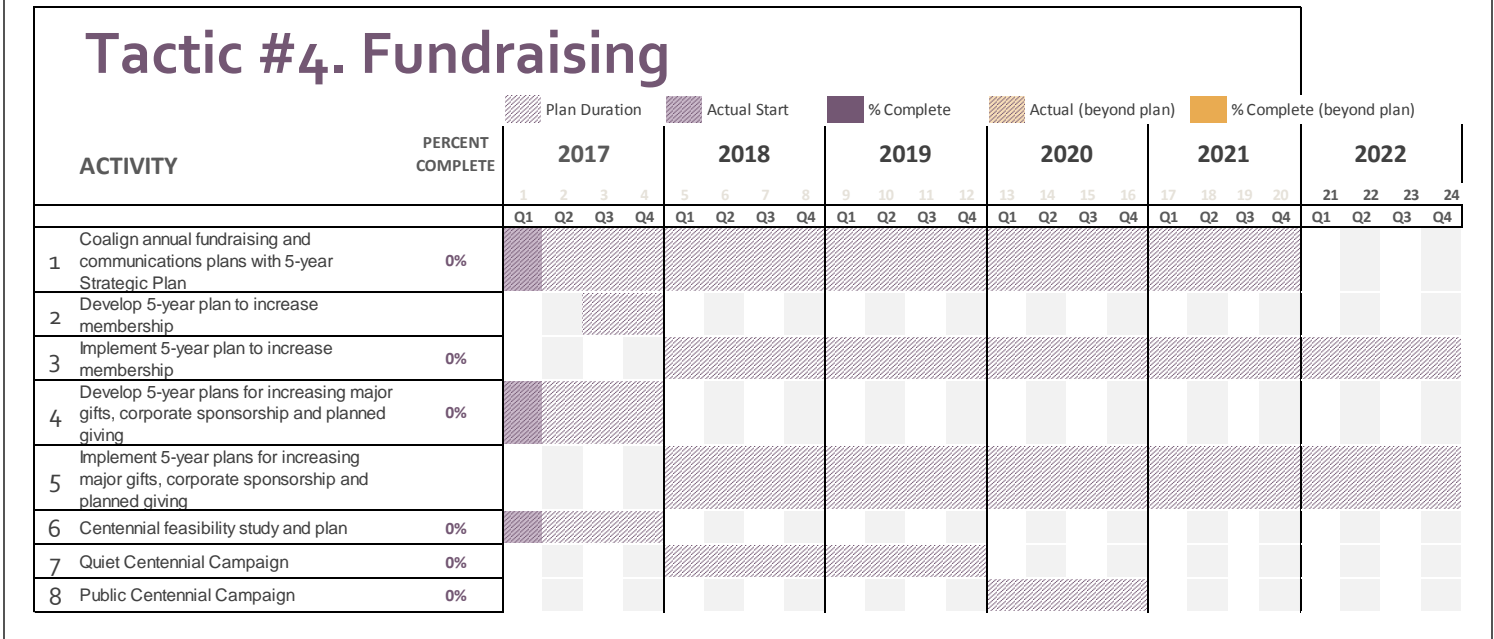
*Volunteer construction hours and trail-building metrics.* As in the case of Tactic 2, the volunteer management procedures manual will identify target rates for growth in hours as the system is put in place. The hours devoted to trail design and construction will be monitored separately, with increases benchmarked against the appropriate criteria.

*Trail Construction Workshops.* Identify target number of workshops and attendees. A secondary metric will be to track conversion rates of volunteers attending a workshop to participating on a trail crew work trip. *Agency-approved design plans/projects.* Establish and record baseline metric to monitor the number of projects whose design is ultimately approved by the partner agency.

*Increased attribution of Trail Conference role in iconic projects.* As the Trail Conference has the opportunity to take on iconic projects in the region, it is important that this work be accompanied by public recognition of the Trail Conference’s contribution. One metric for this will be the presence of signage at the iconic project describing the Trail Conference contribution

**Tactic 4. Increase annual income**

**Figure 7.**



Increasing financial support will enable the Trail Conference to continue to meet the needs of its partners and thereby better serve trail users. It also can serve as a validation of the value that the Trail Conference brings to the outdoor recreation experience in greater metropolitan New York. Figure 7 outlines the activities and timing involved in this tactic.

The actions include aligning the annual fund plan to reflect the priorities and opportunities associated with this strategic plan and aligning the annual funding plan with the communications plans developed under Tactic 1, Raising Visibility. Actions also include increasing the membership pool available for volunteering and fundraising and cultivating under-developed resources such as corporate giving and planned giving. Finally, one of the most crucial actions is the development and implementation of a successful centennial campaign plan for the Trail Conference.

Tactic 4 Metrics:

<b>Operational Metrics (with deadlines as indicated in the Tactic #4 spreadsheet)</b>	<b>Impact Metrics</b>
Annual development report and plan update	The amount and proportion of unrestricted, restricted and earned income
Centennial Campaign feasibility report & plan	Membership numbers and revenues
Centennial Campaign launch	Centennial Campaign raises \$5-10 million in capital and endowment funds \$3 million annual revenue by 2021



As shown in Table 6, there are four major metrics for Tactic 4. These include:

*Increasing the amount and proportion of unrestricted, restricted and earned income.* The Trail Conference needs additional resources of all kinds to meet the needs of its partners and the public. Growth in unrestricted income is particularly important in order for the Trail Conference to maintain and expand the administrative capacity required for complex projects. The rate of increase for these sources of giving could be benchmarked to the long-term national trends found in such publications as *Giving USA, 2016*.<sup>11</sup>

*Increased membership numbers and revenue.* Again, the target rate of increase for this source of support could be benchmarked to the long-term trends from *Giving USA*.

*Successful Centennial Fundraising.* The metric for success will be derived from the goal developed in the Centennial Plan which is anticipated to be in the \$5 to \$10 million range.

*Increased annual revenue.* Based upon this strategic plan, the Trail Conference expects to generate \$3 million in annual revenue by 2021.

## V. The Mission & the Role of the Board

This final section reviews the mission of the Trail Conference in light of the direction set by this strategic plan. It also recommends a role for the Board in implementing the plan.

### A. The Mission Revisited

This plan has essentially ratified the value of the Trail Conference's role in connecting people with nature in the greater metropolitan New York via trails. The major strategic recommendations given here are intended to enable the Trail Conference to better fulfill that role in the light of changing conditions. Therefore, with minor modifications, the strategic framework officially adopted by the Board in 2010 could serve as a statement of "mission, vision, and values" for the Trail Conference:

#### ***Strategic Framework Adopted by the Board, 2010 modified as a statement of mission, vision, and values:***

##### **Mission:**

The mission of the New York-New Jersey Trail Conference is to create, maintain, and protect sustainable, high-quality public trails in greater metropolitan New York by effectively recruiting and managing skilled volunteers and working in partnership with parks agencies and others toward that end.

##### **Vision:**

Our vision is that easily accessible trails enable everyone to experience natural areas and live healthier, more satisfying lives.

##### **Values:**

In serving the public, the Trail Conference board, staff, and volunteers:

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<sup>11</sup> Giving USA, 2016, Giving USA Foundation, 2016. (<https://givingusa.org/product/2016-digital-package/>)

- Recognize that volunteers are integral to the organization
- Welcome anyone who advances the mission
- Seek to have a positive impact on the environment
- Operate with fiscal prudence and responsibility
- Are ethical, honest, and courteous in all relationships

## B. Role of the Board

The Board has a major role to play in overseeing the implementation of this strategic plan, involving both oversight of the plan and assistance in plan implementation.

### ***Plan Oversight***

The Board should regularly review the activities of the Trail Conference organization against the metrics included in this document. This review should take place at least annually. The Board should also charge the Strategic Plan Committee to provide leadership in monitoring the plan. The Committee could be given responsibility for the following tasks:

- *Regularly review and update the Strategic Plan:* the Committee and Executive Director should institute a regular process for formally evaluating the Strategic Plan and recommending updates for the Board's consideration. This might occur early in the calendar year when the results of the prior year are available and in advance of developing the next year's plan and budget.
- *Regularly review progress of plan implementation:* the Committee should undertake detailed semi-annually or quarterly review of the plan implementation, reviewing both the operational and impact metrics and track the extent to which results to date track with the schedule included in this plan and as updated annually.
- *Assess major projects and programs for consistency with the Strategic Plan:* The Committee should serve as the "gatekeeper" for the strategy. The Board and/or the Executive Director should be able to refer major project opportunities to the Committee to evaluate and recommend if the opportunity is consistent with the strategic plan.
- *Ongoing assessment of the organization's Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats:* The SWOT analysis provides a concise overview of the Trail Conference's strategic position. The Committee should be charged with reviewing the organization's SWOT analysis at least annually to assist the Board and Staff in identifying major issues and opportunities that may emerge during the course of implementing this strategic plan.
- *Reconcile the mission statements:* Currently, the Trail Conference has several versions of a mission statement included in various publications in print and online. The Committee should be charged with reviewing and reconciling these into a single mission statement consistent with this strategic plan and designed to be incorporated in public relations and fundraising efforts.

### ***Plan Implementation***

One of the most important elements of this strategic plan is raising the visibility of the organization to trail users and public and private funders. The board can provide considerable assistance in this regard through two roles:

1. Providing increased connections to funders and partners. By carefully recruiting new members, the Board can strengthen its connections to important funders and partners. Board members drawn from the foundation community (particularly those serving on foundations with interests aligned with the Trail Conference) could help in this regard. In addition, recruiting Board members with close ties to partner agencies (e.g., parks commissioners, members of friends' groups, etc.) can also help improve the visibility of the Trail Conference's work to these important members of the "trails ecosystem."
2. Continuing to play an active (and increased) role in representing the Trail Conference to audiences of trail users, partners and potential funders. As part of the Trail Conference's communications plan, board members should be queried about the groups and organizations with which they have existing relationships while also being provided with talking points and other tools to enable Board members to be readily available to advocate on behalf of the Trail Conference before any of these important constituencies.

As part of its preparation for these roles, the Board should systematically identify and recruit potential members who are best positioned by background and experience to take on such roles. One tool to assist with this is to create a board recruitment matrix. An example of such a matrix is included in the appendices. It enables the board (or its nominating committee) to assess its current membership in terms of desired backgrounds and experiences, while identifying those characteristics it should seek in new board members to enhance the capabilities of the existing Board. *As part of this effort, it is critical that the Board improve its diversity to better reflect and understand the diverse trail user constituencies in greater metropolitan New York City.*

## Appendices

Summary of the Trail Users Survey

Summary of the Volunteers Survey

Summary of the Board Interviews

Summary of the Meeting with Staff, June 16, 2016

Summary of the Delegates Meeting, July 14, 2016

List of Stakeholder Interviews

Sample Board Recruitment Matrix