

Strategic Plan

2019 | 2021

GRAND RIVER CONSERVATION AUTHORITY



OUR PATH FORWARD

The roots of our organization go back to the 1930s, when the leaders of the day recognized the importance of working together to manage the Grand River and the land it drains. They knew that the vitality, health and prosperity of their communities was reflected in the health of the river, and they joined together to take an active role in managing it.

Today, the watershed population is growing at a rapid pace. Coupled with climate change, this growth will put stress on the Grand River and its natural features.

More than ever, the role of the Grand River Conservation Authority — and the relationships with our partners — will be critical to the health and vitality of our communities.

We invite you to read our Strategic Plan, a guiding document that will enhance and build on our programs over the next three years. Over our history, we have fostered a culture of collaboration, cooperation, innovation and respect, guided by our municipal leaders. Our priorities lie in preserving this culture, and in recognizing that by protecting the land and waters where we live, we secure our own future.



Helen Jowett

Chair, Board of Directors



Joe Farwell

Chief Administrative Officer



Cover photo: Grand River near Belwood, Ontario, by Sara Hannaford.

This page: Recreational river users, Grand River in Brantford, Ontario, by Doug Hall.

OUR VISION

A healthy watershed where we live, work, play and prosper in balance with the natural environment.

OUR MISSION

We will work with local communities to reduce flood damage, provide access to outdoor spaces, share information about the natural environment, and make the watershed more resilient to climate change.

OUR VALUES

Resilience

We provide effective leadership, and respond to change.

Collaboration

We listen and learn from others. We value a wide range of perspectives and recognize that progress requires flexibility, and a commitment to sharing ideas and working together.

Innovation

We encourage and leverage advancements in technology, scientific methodologies and trends in education and communications, because these are integral to success.

Courage

We carry out our obligation with conviction, and commitment to our beliefs and values.

Respect

We strive for clear and respectful communication within our organization, with our partners, and with members of the public.



OUR COMMITMENT

We focus on teamwork, development, engagement and positive change:

The Grand River Conservation Authority (GRCA) operates a wide range of programs in engineering, planning, land management, recreation and education. Our staff teams are well-trained, and committed to serving public needs. We maintain an innovative and positive work culture at the GRCA, where knowledge is freely shared.

OUR STRATEGIC PRIORITIES 2019 | 2021

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THAT is our destination.

THIS is the plan to take us there.



STRATEGIC PRIORITY 1:

Protecting life and minimizing property damage from flooding and erosion

As a source of power, transportation and water supply, the Grand River attracted settlers who developed communities along its banks. Homes and businesses are still located in the floodplain today.

With settlement, land was cleared for agriculture, wetlands were drained, forests cut down, and later, vast areas were paved. This changed how the rivers respond to rain. Built infrastructure like dams and reservoirs are operated to mimic the natural river flows, but the risk of flooding remains.

WHAT WE DO

The GRCA operates a flow-monitoring network, and operates dams and dikes to manage high flows. We operate a flood forecasting and warning system. New development in the floodplain, and other hazard areas like steep slopes, are regulated to minimize future risks. We plant trees and restore natural areas to minimize the impacts of large rainstorms.

FUTURE TRENDS

With climate change, there is increasing risk of extreme storms. As well, longer and hotter summers put strain on reservoir operations to ensure there is an adequate supply of water to the river.

KEY ACTIONS

- Update mapping to further identify flood risk and other natural hazard areas.
- Manage and update infrastructure to deal with expected changes in rainfall patterns.
- Upgrade the monitoring, flood forecasting and warning systems.
- Update GRCA permit policies.



STRATEGIC PRIORITY 2:

Improving the health of the Grand River watershed

The Grand River watershed is home to almost 1 million people. Municipalities work to update and improve wastewater treatment plants, and farmers continue to apply best management practices.

Even so, nutrients continue to flow into our rivers and streams and fuel aquatic weed growth. This problem impacts Lake Erie, with the Grand being a significant nutrient source for the lake. Municipalities and landowners rely on a mix of groundwater and surface water.

WHAT WE DO

The focus of GRCA programs is to improve watershed health. We encourage and support landowners and residents to take actions that protect and enhance it. We work with farmers to keep soil and nutrients on their fields. We support landowners to create and enhance natural areas, forests and stream-side buffers. Major reservoirs on the Speed, Conestogo and Grand rivers supply the majority of flow in summer, helping reduce harmful impacts on aquatic ecosystems. We work with partners and First Nations through the Grand River Notification Agreement. We coordinate the Water Management Plan that highlights actions of municipal partners, landowners, government partners and the GRCA to improve watershed health. We carry out subwatershed plans and identify opportunities to enhance natural features.

FUTURE TRENDS

Changing climate and growing population continue to impact water quality and quantity in our rivers and streams. Continued monitoring of watershed conditions will inform decisions. As land values and competition for space increase, restoring and preserving natural spaces will become more important.

KEY ACTIONS

- Support municipalities in optimizing wastewater treatment plants.
- Engage the provincial and federal governments to develop programs to reduce nutrient loads in rivers and streams, and ultimately Lake Erie.
- Continue to work with municipalities on drinking water source protection.
- Continue to work with landowners to reforest and restore natural spaces.



STRATEGIC PRIORITY 3:

Connecting people to the environment through outdoor experiences

Evidence suggests that engaging in outdoor recreation is important to human health and well-being. The GRCA creates connections with the natural environment by providing outdoor spaces and environmental education. The demand for outdoor recreation is growing. As a Canadian Heritage River, the Grand and its major tributaries are recognized for their human heritage and recreational values. There is increasing interest in spending time on, or next to, the river.

WHAT WE DO

The GRCA operates 11 active Conservation Areas on a user-fee basis. Many of these areas have important natural heritage features. We also operate five Nature Centres, providing curriculum-based environmental education programs in partnership with school boards, as well as nature-based day camps, and evening and weekend programs for the public. The Grand River Conservation Foundation is instrumental in supporting the environmental education program.

FUTURE TRENDS

With a growing population, public attendance in the active Conservation Areas is expected to continue to grow. Capital upgrades will be required in both the Conservation Areas and Nature Centres in order to meet user needs. Some assets are nearing the end of their useful life.

KEY ACTIONS

- Implement infrastructure upgrades for the Conservation Areas.
- Prepare operational plans that balance revenue generation with protecting natural features in the Conservation Areas.
- Prepare capital forecasts for the Nature Centres and develop a long-term funding plan.
- Construct a new Nature Centre at Guelph Lake.
- Work with member municipalities to encourage river-related links and trails between communities.



STRATEGIC PRIORITY 4:

Managing land holdings in a responsible and sustainable way

WHAT WE DO

Over time, the GRCA has acquired significant land holdings, totaling about 20,000 hectares. In addition to our conservation areas and lands for dam infrastructure, we own protected natural areas with limited public access, urban parkland maintained by municipalities, and several rural properties.

FUTURE TRENDS

Passive areas, especially those near urban centres, are expected to see a significant increase in public use. With increased use there is potential for conflict among user groups and impacts on sensitive natural areas. Passive areas and rail-trails are managed with limited resources. Invasive species like emerald ash borer and phragmites, and weather-related events like ice and wind storms, will continue to cause damage to GRCA properties and natural areas.

KEY ACTIONS

- Prepare management plans for our passive lands where there is a high level of conflicting uses, and establish a long-term funding plan for these areas.
- Prepare lands for sale where appropriate.
- Continue to actively manage hazard trees in accordance with the Tree Risk Management Plan.
- Manage and enhance GRCA natural areas with funding support from partners.

The GRAND RIVER Watershed



POPULATION
About 1,000,000

50 MUNICIPAL
DRINKING WATER
SYSTEMS

70%
AGRICULTURAL LAND

30 SEWAGE
TREATMENT
PLANTS

Most live in the cities of Kitchener, Waterloo, Guelph, Cambridge and Brantford.

About 28% of the water comes from the Grand and Eramosa rivers.

Agriculture is the dominant land use. Urban areas make up less than 5%.

These discharge into the Grand River and its tributaries.



Grand River Conservation Authority

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*Canoeing the Grand River
near Brantford, Ontario*