



2025 - 2029

Strategic Plan

GRAND RIVER CONSERVATION AUTHORITY







Message from the Chair & CAO

OUR LEGACY, OUR FUTURE

The history of the Grand River Conservation Authority dates back to the 1930s, when community leaders at the time recognized the importance of collaborating to manage the Grand River and the land it drains. They recognized that the economic resilience and long-term prosperity of their communities depended on a healthy river system and that by working together to manage the watershed, they could better manage shared resources, reduce risks and create sustainable growth opportunities for all.

Today, the Grand River watershed continues to grow and evolve. We face rapid population growth, the escalating impacts of climate change and increasing pressure on natural systems. At the same time, the GRCA has undergone significant organizational change, driven by legislative and regulatory reforms, as well as by the retirement of several key staff members who were instrumental in shaping our direction.

Despite these challenges, we've emerged strong, resilient and focused. We are ready to meet the emerging issues of the watershed with clarity, purpose and commitment. Our ability to adapt and respond is rooted in the same spirit of collaboration and leadership that has guided the GRCA for nearly a century.

The relationships we have with our municipal, First Nations, community and government partners remain central to our success. More urgently than ever, the role of the GRCA is critical to sustaining the health and vitality of our watershed, now and for future generations.

We invite you to read our refreshed strategic plan, a forward-looking, living document that builds on our legacy and establishes a solid foundation for the organization over the next five years. It reflects our priorities, values, and our ongoing commitment to innovation, collaboration and stewardship. By thoughtful management of the water and lands where we live, we are investing in a healthy, resilient future.

John Challinor II
Chair, Board of Directors

Samantha Lawson
Chief Administrative Officer



OUR VISION

A healthy watershed that connects, strengthens and sustains resilient communities.

OUR MISSION

We work with watershed communities to reduce flood risk, maintain and support a healthy watershed, and connect people to nature.

OUR VALUES

Resilience

We lead with strength and adaptability, embracing change and navigating challenges with confidence and purpose.

Collaboration

We listen to 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 embrace forward-thinking solutions in technology and scientific approaches because these are integral to advancement.

Courage

We embrace the challenges that drive progress with integrity, dedication and commitment to our core values.

Respect

We are committed to clear, thoughtful and respectful communication — with each other, our partners and the communities we serve.





OUR COMMITMENT

We focus on teamwork, engagement, customer service and positive change.

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

OUR STRATEGIC PILLARS 2025 - 2029

1

Protecting life and minimizing property damage from flooding and erosion

3

Connecting people with the environment through outdoor experiences

2

Improving the health of the Grand River watershed

4

Building a future-oriented organization



PILLAR 1

PROTECTING LIFE AND MINIMIZING PROPERTY DAMAGE FROM FLOODING AND EROSION

As a source of power, transportation and water supply, the Grand River attracted early 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 watershed responds 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 monitors watershed conditions through a comprehensive network of streamflow gauges, rain gauges and reservoir control systems. This monitoring network supports the operation of the GRCA's water management infrastructure such as dams and dikes, as well as our flood forecasting and warning program. To reduce future risks, new development is regulated in floodplains and other hazardous areas, such as steep slopes. We plant trees and restore natural areas on our own lands, and we encourage landowners to do the same. These efforts help manage natural hazards and reduce the impacts of large rainstorms.



Opportunities To Build Resilience And Strength

Climate change is shifting precipitation patterns, resulting in more frequent, extreme storms. Summers are becoming hotter, and winters milder, with earlier and recurring snowmelt posing challenges for reservoir operations and maintaining summer river flows. Much of the GRCA's water management infrastructure was built 50 to 80 years ago, making regular inspections and major maintenance critical to ensuring continued safety and reliable operations.

Key Goals

- Maintain mapping of natural hazard areas.
- Manage and update infrastructure to help address the impacts of climate change and growth.
- Increase internal capacity to forecast flooding events and execute warning systems, while working with partners on warning communications.
- Identify and implement strategies to effectively communicate the GRCA's roles and responsibilities in natural hazard management to partners and, through them, to watershed residents.
- Implement emergency preparedness measures for all major GRCA dams and engage municipal partners in emergency management efforts.
- Develop and/or update policies, guidelines and procedures for the administration of the natural hazard regulation to enhance consistency, clarity and efficiency throughout the permitting process.



PILLAR 2

IMPROVING THE HEALTH OF THE GRAND RIVER WATERSHED

The Grand River watershed is home to about one million people living in thriving cities and is part of the traditional territories and treaty lands of the Six Nations of the Grand River and the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation. Natural areas and the quality and quantity of the water that flows in the rivers and aquifers are vitally important to the people, plants and animals of the watershed.

Nutrients coming from farmlands, urban lands and wastewater treatment plants affect water quality in the river and ultimately in Lake Erie. Groundwater in some areas is vulnerable to contamination and overuse.

Collective action by those reliant on water resources for drinking water and other uses will continue to be needed to improve watershed health while accommodating growing populations, supporting a dynamic agricultural sector, and adapting to climate change.

What We Do

The GRCA works with municipalities, landowners, user group partners, government agencies and First Nations to improve watershed health. By coordinating the collaborative Water Management Plan, we highlight our joint actions that help ensure sustainable water supplies, reduce flood damages, improve water quality and enhance climate resilience.



We help rural landowners and residents to undertake projects that help improve soil health and water quality. We support municipalities in optimizing the operation of wastewater treatment plants to improve the quality of treated effluents. We assist in the protection of municipal and First Nations drinking water sources by incorporating updated science and policies in plans. Alongside community partners, we help facilitate tree planting on private and municipal land, and protect sensitive natural hazard lands.

Opportunities To Build Resilience And Strength

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

Key Goals

- Collaborate with municipalities, First Nations partners, and provincial and federal agencies to update the 2014 Grand River Water Management Plan.
- Work alongside municipalities, First Nations and the Province to protect drinking water sources from contamination and overuse.
- Work with landowners, municipalities, First Nations, Indigenous communities and others to improve water quality, increase forest cover and enhance climate resilience.
- Strengthen working relationships with First Nations and other Indigenous communities in the Grand River watershed to help ensure their cultural practices and values are recognized in the stewardship of land, water and natural resources.



PILLAR 3

CONNECTING PEOPLE WITH THE ENVIRONMENT THROUGH OUTDOOR EXPERIENCES

Spending time in nature is beneficial 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.

What We Do

The GRCA operates its 11 active Grand River Conservation Areas and the Luther Marsh Wildlife Management Area on a user-fee basis. Many of these areas have important natural heritage features, water control infrastructure, and provide access to outdoor recreation opportunities for over 1.7 million people annually.

The GRCA also provides public access to nature across many of its conservation lands, which are free to use. These areas feature trails, wilderness spots, or rail trails with beautiful views of the watershed, and offer opportunities for hiking, bird watching and other recreational activities.

In addition, we provide curriculum-based environmental education programs to more than 30,000 students annually, as well as to some community groups, helping to foster a deeper understanding of the natural world and our watershed.



Opportunities To Build Resilience And Strength

With a growing population, visitation to Grand River Conservation Areas is expected to continue to rise. We are committed to enhancing accessibility to support the diverse demographics of our communities. Additionally, many built assets are nearing the end of their useful life, necessitating capital upgrades to maintain quality and safety. These improvements will enhance visitor experience and ensure the longevity of our facilities.

Free access to natural areas will remain highly desirable, especially in and around growing urban areas. As the population within the watershed increases, so does the demand for access to open spaces, which can lead to management challenges. We will continue to partner with municipalities, community groups and other interest holders to manage and maintain these properties, fund restoration efforts, and ensure responsible and sustainable stewardship.

Our Outdoor Environmental Education Program is working towards sustainable operations to ensure enduring success. By continuing to nurture and develop relationships with school boards in the watershed, strategically expanding environmental educational offerings, and fostering community partnerships, we will continue to strive to inspire future generations to value and protect our natural environment.

Key Goals

- Invest in and improve the built infrastructure on GRCA lands to support the long-term sustainability of our recreational and outdoor facilities.
- Provide sustainable outdoor recreational and educational opportunities to foster connections with the natural environment and encourage responsible stewardship.
- Identify and evaluate municipal, provincial, federal and First Nations partnership opportunities to support mutual benefits on GRCA-owned lands.



PILLAR 4

BUILDING A FUTURE-ORIENTED ORGANIZATION

To effectively deliver on our mandate and meet the evolving needs of our communities, the GRCA is committed to strengthening its internal capacity, operational efficiency, and long-term sustainability. We will focus on investing in people, processes, technology, and infrastructure to foster a high-performing, resilient organization that is positioned to embrace the opportunities of today and tomorrow.

What We Do

The GRCA employs approximately 400 people, including full-time, seasonal, casual, part-time and summer student staff members, and is dedicated to fostering a resilient, high-performing workforce while driving modern, sustainable operations. We invest in innovative digital solutions, cybersecurity and streamlined service delivery to enhance organizational effectiveness.

Responsible for managing over one billion dollars in assets, we are implementing comprehensive asset management strategies to ensure the long-term reliability and sustainability of critical infrastructure. We also own and manage more than 50,000 acres of land (nearly 3% of the Grand River watershed), underscoring our significant role in conservation and land stewardship. At the same time, we are working to reduce our environmental footprint and strengthen conservation practices, ensuring our operations remain responsible, sustainable and future-ready.

Opportunities To Build Resilience And Strength

Changes related to urbanization, evolving regulations, employment trends and digital threats present us with the opportunity to take a proactive, integrated approach to facilitating long-term sustainability and resilience.



With limited financial resources, the GRCA must prioritize investments and ensure that funds are allocated efficiently to maintain and improve critical infrastructure. Urbanization brings with it an increased demand for access to the GRCA's conservation lands, trails and natural areas. This will require the implementation of key land management plans to balance increased demand for public access and environmental sustainability while strengthening partnerships with municipalities and user groups to support effective stewardship.

Increasing cybersecurity risks necessitate investments in security tools and technologies, as well as training programs to increase employee awareness and education. Future trends in human resources are increasingly shaped by the integration of technology, as well as a growing emphasis on diversity and inclusion, and the need for adaptive leadership. Aligning people-focused initiatives with long-term organizational goals is a critical component of the GRCA's strategic plan. These initiatives will help ensure organizational resilience and continuity while fostering a culture of collaboration, connection, growth and innovation.

Key Goals

- Develop and implement a comprehensive Human Resources Strategy that prioritizes employee well-being, staff training and development, succession planning and talent attraction.
- Foster sustainable and efficient operations by implementing continuous improvement measures.
- Develop and implement a comprehensive Asset Management Plan for all critical assets.
- Explore digital solutions to improve service delivery, making processes more efficient and accessible for both staff and the public.
- Develop a plan to measure, evaluate and reduce our environmental impact.
- Manage GRCA landholdings by balancing conservation, sustainable use, safety and financial responsibility.

THE GRAND RIVER WATERSHED



IMPORTANT FACTS ABOUT THE GRAND RIVER WATERSHED



Population

~1,000,000

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



55 Municipal & First Nations drinking water systems

About 68% of municipal water comes from groundwater sources.



61% Agricultural Land

Agriculture is the dominant land use.
Urban areas make up less than 15%.



30 Wastewater Treatment Plants

These plants discharge treated effluent into the Grand River and its tributaries.



Grand River Conservation Authority

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