

# FIVE-YEAR [2016 – 2021] STRATEGIC PLAN





AN INTRODUCTION FROM  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, LAURA RUBIN

This five-year Strategic Plan for the Huron River Watershed Council (HRWC) clarifies the key assumptions that drive us to our mission and frame how we work to fulfill it. We anticipate that implementation of this plan will bring the organization closer to realizing our Vision 2025 included as an appendix to this plan.

I look forward to working with our Staff, Board of Directors, Volunteers, and Partners as we continue a 50-year tradition of science-based work and actionable solutions for the watershed.



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### WHERE WE COME FROM

The Huron River Watershed Council is Michigan's oldest regional river protection organization, dedicated to protecting and restoring the River for healthy and vibrant communities since 1965. We are a respected voice in the 76 communities in the Watershed and have a history of working creatively and cooperatively to tackle a variety of issues facing it.

For over 50 years, HRWC has served as a common ground for stakeholders to come together to discuss collaboration and coordination between local units of government on water management policies and programs. Even though HRWC has no enforcement powers, it has accomplished its goals through the use of technical data, fact-based information, and citizen stewardship, all of which have influenced decisions made by various local and state agencies. HRWC has created an environment that fosters innovative projects at the community level, and across the Watershed. Because of their success, many of these projects have been replicated in other watersheds domestically and globally.



The HRWC has built its reputation by authoring sound scientific reports used by individuals, agencies, and governments to guide their decision-making. Our studies have covered a broad range of topics including bacteria monitoring, fisheries improvement, septic system influences on lakes, groundwater vulnerability, flood control, benthic macroinvertebrate populations, land use impact on water quality, and existing and lost native ecosystem types.

### SUMMARY OF WORK AND ACHIEVEMENTS

Over the course of its history, HRWC has played a vital role in the development and passage of statewide legislation seeking to protect water resources, including the Inland Lakes and Streams Act, the Natural Rivers Act, the Clean Water Act and its reauthorization, the Goermare-Anderson Wetland Protection Act, the Soil Erosion and Sedimentation Control Act, the Michigan Natural Rivers Act, the River Basin Management Act, the Septage Waste Haulers Act, and many others. HRWC also has played a significant role in having portions of the Huron designated as a Natural River by the State of Michigan in the 1970s.

HRWC currently leads multiple diverse partnerships to achieve compliance with Federal Clean Water Act; collects and manages a database of water quality information; and provides hands-on technical assistance to local governments seeking to implement water quality protection tools and programs.



Successes include: a) implementing best practices to reduce excessive flows in urban tributaries to the Huron; b) initiating and shaping statewide phosphorus legislation to reduce nuisance algal blooms; and c) advancing science and policy on issues such as transfer of development rights, carrying capacity of creeks, and climate change resiliency for utilities; and d) spearheading public-private partnerships to orient communities towards the River, helping to transform the River corridor in to a premier destination.

HRWC especially focuses on educating citizen scientists and motivating them to become active in their respective communities. HRWC has helped these citizen scientists form local creek groups and advocate for natural resource protection policies, including improved review of proposed building developments and funding for stream restoration. HRWC has also trained citizen scientists to inventory the Watershed's vital undeveloped regions, a key component in protecting them.

To further protect the River and its undeveloped regions, HRWC has created partnerships with local and regional parks systems, land conservancies, and local governments to provide technical information to prioritize critical lands for acquisition and develop strategies ensuring the long-term protection of these regions. The result has been the protection of over 6,000 acres in the Watershed.

HRWC coordinates an on-going effort with 19 partners in the Middle Huron Initiative. Through this Initiative, the partners invested more than \$10 million dollars over 11 years to reduce pollution entering the River, so as to meet the Clean Water Act regulations. The partners also worked with HRWC to develop stronger soil erosion controls for construction projects, enact ordinances to protect shoreline plant buffers, and build Green Infrastructure techniques to hold and infiltrate polluted runoff. 4,700 water samples taken have demonstrated that more than six tons of total phosphorus was kept out of target waterbodies annually.

In 2014, through the Climate Resilient Communities project, HRWC and project participants promoted use of revised storm definitions published by National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, which led to stronger county-level stormwater management regulations.

On the personnel side, Executive Director Laura Rubin received the highly regarded River Hero Award from River Network in 2014; while in 2013, HRWC became the inaugural organization inducted into the Michigan Environmental Hall of Fame.

In August, 2012, RiverUp! launched as a result of a challenge by the "Dean" of the United States House of Representatives, Congressman John Dingell. Dingell challenged the business and environmental communities on the Huron River to formulate a strategy to realize a vibrant, robust and fully restored River. The long-term plan encompasses three broad objectives: invest in recreation infrastructure; improve the ecological health of the River; and turn the face of our communities toward the River and transform the Huron River corridor into a premiere



destination for people throughout Michigan and the Great Lakes. Over 2 dozen RiverUp! projects have been completed to date.

In 2012, in part because of HRWC's leadership and advocacy, the State of Michigan implemented a statewide policy restricting phosphorus use, including increased education and information to the public about the impacts of fertilizers with phosphorus on water quality. The legislation has been effective and has resulted in reduced levels of the nutrient in local waters.

In 2011, HRWC began a non-point source pollution education effort that included multi-media ads, articles, brochures, and a Watershed Community Calendar. HRWC conducted a 2011 survey of Watershed residents, which showed remarkable improvements in attitudes over a similar 2004 study, and demonstrated that Watershed residents recognize behaviors that will improve the R and revealed that most are willing to engage in practices to help the River.

In 2008, with HRWC leadership, the first dam was removed from the Huron River system in the Village of Dexter, stimulating a Main Street renaissance in that community. Dexter has re-imagined itself as a waterfront community on free-flowing Mill Creek, the Huron's largest tributary, connecting downtown to the water through walking trails, public green spaces, and new canoe and kayak access. Dexter's waterfront revival serves as a successful case study in how to leverage freshwater assets for local economic development and community enhancement.

The Huron River is one of the most studied rivers in Michigan through the long-term, coordinated monitoring programs by HRWC, University of Michigan, and municipal partners for a multitude of indicators. HRWC has developed the premier citizen river monitoring network with strong quality assurance and quality control mechanisms that allow state and federal agencies to confidently use these data to direct water protection programs. In 2005, HRWC helped Governor Jennifer Granholm launch the Michigan Clean Water Corps by working alongside the Great Lakes Commission to provide statewide trainings, mentorship, and funding for lake and stream volunteer monitoring programs.

More recently, in 2015, HRWC lead the process to gain National Water Trail designation for the Huron River Water Trail, making it the 18<sup>th</sup> designated trail in the country.



## WHERE WE ARE GOING

HRWC Staff and Board of Directors spent 16 months engaging in conversations about the organization's role, history, and future direction. A focus group of staff and Board members met in January 2015 to begin the strategic planning process. At the session, the group reviewed and provided input into the organization's mission, vision, and core values. A proposed mission, vision, and core values were drafted and approved by the Board at the April 2015 board meeting.



### Mission

**The Huron River Watershed Council protects and restores the River for healthy and vibrant communities.**

### Our Vision Statement

We envision a future of clean and plentiful water for people and nature where citizens and government are effective and courageous champions for the Huron River and its Watershed.

### Core Values

- We work with a collaborative and inclusive spirit to give all partners the opportunity to become stewards
- We generate science-based, trustworthy information for decision makers, to ensure reliable supplies of clean water and resilient natural systems
- We passionately advocate for the health of the River and the lands around it

### Vision 2025

To follow up on its earlier planning efforts, HRWC conducted an intensive half-day visioning session under the direction of ZingTrain in August 2015. Subsequently, staff developed Vision 2025, attached as Appendix A. The document presents a clear and inspiring 10-year vision for HRWC.



HRWC GOALS 2016-2021

ENGAGEMENT AND RELATIONSHIPS

- Engage a diverse and inclusive group of partners and establish relationships to advance programs and policies

SCIENCE

- Collect and use scientific information to gauge the health of the Watershed, direct programmatic priorities, and advance protection and restoration efforts

ADVOCACY AND IMPLEMENTATION

- Set our Watershed agenda and advance policies and projects at all levels of government and with a range of partners

COMMUNICATIONS

- Raise awareness of the River and Watershed, and advance our program goals

FUNDRAISING AND ORGANIZATIONAL FOUNDATION

- Develop strong relationships and systems to secure resources that accomplish the mission





### Implementation

This strategic plan, developed after internal and external review with the Board and Staff, will be implemented through the OGSP (Objectives-Goals-Strategies-Plans) process that guides quarterly, semi-annual, and annual planning. Individual work plans will be developed and evaluated off of the OGSP plans. This process will increase HRWC's ability to deliver high quality programs through evaluating and aligning programs and staffing to attain the organizational mission. Through this process, staff will articulate and implement clear objectives over a three-year period, including activities, outcomes, timetables, resource requirements, and a process for monitoring progress. HRWC will strive to attain at least 75 percent of the measurable outcomes for each program.

### Adaptive Management

HRWC strives for effective actions leading to desired conservation results for the watershed. In order to achieve this, we must prioritize actions and commit to strategies, but we must also closely monitor the outcomes of those actions in order to optimize impact. That's where adaptive management comes in. Adaptive management is an iterative process that leads to stronger strategies and actions based on measured outcomes.

Adaptive management is a framework that enables learning from what you do and then using that information to improve the efficacy of your actions and reduce the uncertainty inherent in your decisions. Adaptive management requires the regular tracking of conservation and management measures to tell us how we are doing and inform how we can improve. While this strategic plan lays out strategies for the next 5 years, staff and board will continue to review the strategies, the outcomes, and the monitoring results to regularly adjust and refine the plan to meet our overall mission.

**ENGAGEMENT AND RELATIONSHIPS: ENGAGE A DIVERSE AND INCLUSIVE GROUP OF PARTNERS AND ESTABLISH RELATIONSHIPS TO ADVANCE PROGRAMS AND POLICIES.**



Reach new priority audiences organization-wide.

- Identify new priority audiences, and review for refinement at agreed upon intervals
- Identify underserved or environmental justice issues or projects that includes identification of problems, and mutual goals
- Advance programming that reaches the “future majority” with focus on diversity and inclusiveness (e.g., age, ability, socioeconomic, culture)
- Continue to create new volunteer programming and positions that support organizational goals and increases community involvement in HRWC work
- At introductory points of contact, capture names, emails, and interests. Enter in to WaterGrass, communicate interest to related staff, and follow-up on initial requests and inquiries to meet expectations.

Deepen relationships to support and advance our mission.

- Review existing relationships periodically, and adjust focus and resources accordingly
- Engage key member groups and policymakers as allies for the Huron River
- Increase our number of partners by 50 percent
- Develop opportunities to establish and share our expertise and leadership, and engage in dialogue with our partners
- Identify and implement strategies to retain volunteers
- Improve conversion of new members to volunteers and vice versa
- Support highly-engaged volunteers who take a leadership role HRWC programs

**SCIENCE: COLLECT AND USE SCIENTIFIC INFORMATION TO GAUGE THE HEALTH OF THE WATERSHED, DIRECT PROGRAMMATIC PRIORITIES, AND ADVANCE PROTECTION AND RESTORATION EFFORTS.**



Collect natural and social science information representative of the watershed and its constituents that allows for quantifying the magnitude and rate of change of target indicators.

- Facilitate meetings annually to determine data needs, monitoring priorities, and to coordinate efforts among HRWC staff
- Collect and gather scientific information from multiple sources including HRWC research and field work as well as external sources
- Develop method for identifying potential new indicators or parameters for monitoring based on emerging threats and current research – may include literature review, outreach to colleagues
- Evaluate each monitoring program at the end of the calendar year to improve the quality of the scientific data and the volunteer experience

Analyze and interpret scientific information from multiple sources to evaluate and guide HRWC programs and projects.

- Interpret scientific information to identify priority areas for HRWC and collaborators to restore and protect
- Data is used to determine the strategies and effectiveness of HRWC and appropriate non-HRWC initiatives
- Integrate climate science into data collection and interpretation, as well as program evaluation

Communicate results to priority audiences tailored to their varying levels of knowledge, understanding, and influence.

- Produce a data summary report, presentation, blog, or other appropriate outreach product for every volunteer-based monitoring event or program
- Summarize scientific data for each major creekshed in the watershed and update at least every five years
- Present data and analysis through meetings with appropriate local governments or agencies upon detecting significant degradation or improvement in water quality indicators, including work with appropriate HRWC board members and volunteers
- Communicate methods and results to practitioner and scientific audiences via national or regional conferences, leading topical websites, journals and other publications, etc.

Expand capacity and increase the efficiency of HRWC data collection and interpretation.

- Develop a user-friendly website (“dashboard”) that integrates real-time flow and water quality data, recent biological data, and GIS or mapping capabilities
- Dashboard sends alerts to staff and stakeholders when parameter levels exceed thresholds
- Develop three staging points outside of Ann Arbor (Flat Rock/Belleville, Milford/Oakland County, Chelsea/Stockbridge) that volunteers use for assembling, picking up/dropping off equipment. Use the staging points for the appropriate monitoring programs to lessen time and travel commitments for HRWC volunteers.
- Staff responds to alerts or other water quality emergencies by contacting the responsible agency within 24 hours and following up until closed – communicating with relevant staff and volunteers throughout

**ADVOCACY AND IMPLEMENTATION: SET OUR WATERSHED AGENDA AND ADVANCE POLICIES AND PROJECTS AT ALL LEVELS OF GOVERNMENT AND WITH A RANGE OF PARTNERS.**



Increase by 25 percent the number of municipalities with river-friendly ordinances, rules, and/or plans.

- Define river-friendly ordinances, rules, and plans
- Establish survey and baseline to evaluate the number of municipalities with ordinances, rules, and/or plans
- Establish annual goals and strategies (specific communities and actions)
- Advocate and assist municipalities with education, resources, and constituent support

Increase use of relevant climate information for planning and management among high-priority municipalities.

- Define high-priority municipalities, including high-risk, high-vulnerability municipalities
- Develop annual plans to target municipalities and actions: Identify relevant and compelling climate information, delivery strategies, and desired actions for municipal plans and management
- Fifty percent of target municipalities have utilized climate change information in planning or management activities

Fifty percent of priority restoration projects and management activities have identified leads and funding, and are being implemented, or are completed.

- Identify three-year priority restoration projects and management activities for upper, middle, and lower Huron River watersheds, and for the Huron River corridor (internally)
- Meet with all local partner leads identified to advocate for priority projects, secure funding, and help with logistics
- Take the leads and funding ideas and advance implementation of projects through either direct project management or assistance with 2<sup>nd</sup> party with advocacy, permitting, construction, monitoring, and/or education

Advocate for protections that support and enhance federal and state laws affecting watershed health such as the Clean Water Act and Safe Drinking Water Act.

- Identify annual legislative priorities; and define HRWC's role, strategy, and partners
- Use social media, Vertical Response (web-based direct communication platform), blogs, the press, and letters to the government to advocate on above legislation
- Use strategic partner relationships and HRWC experience, data, and expertise to create compelling arguments on the above legislation

Measurable increase in public participation in river-friendly behaviors and actions.

- Identify and prioritize a suite of river-friendly behaviors and actions
- Define metrics to gauge and measure river-friendly behaviors and actions
- Develop outreach and education strategies to reach the public and engender action

## COMMUNICATIONS: RAISE AWARENESS OF THE RIVER AND WATERSHED, AND ADVANCE OUR PROGRAM GOALS.



Increase HRWC brand recognition throughout the watershed.

- Use the HRWC brand identity consistently
- Develop an on-going consultative relationship with a public relations firm and an annual budget for using their media relations services both for strategically planned initiatives and on-call for emerging issues or crisis
- Increase our strategic and efficient use of communications tools by providing structured coordination of content (high level planning/strategy, using editorial calendar, multiple staff/volunteers/interns engaged in executing).
- Increase brand awareness through campaigns that promote the organization using outreach tools such as website, emails, social networking, events, videos, and schwag

Increase the number and quality of passive and active recreational uses of the river.

- Provide public information on opportunities to engage in active and passive recreational uses
- Encourage and promote others with capacity and expertise to develop recreational programming

Increase HRWC's total followers by 10 percent annually and deepen the level of engagement among new followers by converting 10 percent to contributors annually.

- Define and establish a baseline measure of HRWC followers
- Regularly collect, analyze and interpret geographic, demographic, and psychographic data on existing audiences and use results to identify and prioritize new audiences, to craft compelling and persuasive messages, and to strategize communications investments
- Grow our use of selective social media channels to expand our reach to new audiences. Increase staff capacity and provide training to existing staff
- Improve use of digital communications (website and email) to increase audience engagement and interaction with HRWC. Ensure each tool's continued conformity to best practices and current trends, developing internal and investing in external expertise.
- Decide metrics for tracking conversions through communications channels and regularly review and evaluate efforts. Communicate with all staff. Use results for HRWC and project communication.

Enhance communications with cooperative partners and project stakeholders that results in greater participation and support.

- Prioritize the communication of HRWC data results and amplify their link to project and policy work in accessible and meaningful ways to an array of audiences using a variety of communications techniques
- Use best practices and unify how we communicate our brand and project work to cooperative partners and stakeholders in written reports, presentations and digitally (web and email)
- Ensure that all programs have a communications/marketing strategy that meets program and organizational goals

## FUNDRAISING AND ORGANIZATIONAL FOUNDATION: DEVELOP STRONG RELATIONSHIPS AND SYSTEMS TO SECURE RESOURCES THAT ACCOMPLISH THE MISSION.



Enhance internal systems to be increasingly transparent, efficient, and effective.

- Engage staff in the review of internal systems for improvement
- Identify gaps and efficiencies in systems
- Create new systems when needed and improve or condense existing systems

Foster an open, collaborative, and supportive culture for staff, board, and supporters.

- Events, meetings, and outings encourage shared learning, partnerships, and participation in HRWC
- Productive and regular feedback is encouraged and integral to processes and encouraged
- Regular planning (updates, mid-range and strategic planning, metric tracking) allow staff, board, and volunteers to see how their work fits into the organizational vision and strategic plan and feel that they contribute in ways that are effective, measured, and valued
- Foster communication among board members, staff, and volunteers through interactive meetings and outings

Create a Fundraising Plan each fiscal year.

- Create quantifiable goals, strategies to achieve goals, tactics to support strategies, person(s) responsible, and time frames
- Establish metrics and benchmarks to evaluate progress, schedule evaluation, and reporting and opportunity for mid-course corrections
- Outline roles and responsibilities for staff, board, and volunteers

Secure funds from a diversity of sources that support both restricted and unrestricted work and ensure a dependable revenue stream.

- Develop a secure base of diversified funds from individuals, foundations, corporations, planned gifts, grants, and fee-for-service work.
- Standardize tracking and coding of contributed funds QuickBooks and WaterGrass to improve reconciliation, reporting, and analyzing
- Increase unrestricted funds to support our response to new or emerging threats with innovative and effective solutions
- Increase our use of metrics to track annual giving, renewal rates, acquisition rates, average gift sizes, and percentage of gifts coming through various fundraising channels

Increase income from a broad base of individual donors.

- Identify the constituencies to reach and communicate HRWC message.
- Identify new prospects based on the donor profile.
- Engage constituents through a data focus related to capacity, ability, and inclination.
- Increase participation in volunteer leadership for fundraising.
- Build legacy giving program and increase awareness with constituents.