

# MEADOWLANDS CONSERVATION TRUST



STRATEGIC PLAN  
2013 • 2016

## Overview

The Meadowlands Conservation Trust (MCT) was established by an act of the New Jersey state legislature in 1999 and empowered to obtain land through fee simple acquisitions and conservation easements for the purpose of permanently preserving wetlands, waterways, and environmentally sensitive open space in the Hackensack River watershed. Land acquired by the MCT is preserved in perpetuity so that New Jersey residents may benefit from flood storage capacity, clean water, wildlife habitat, and passive recreation that such ecologically valuable tracts offer.

The Trust's focus area is located within New Jersey's portion of the Hackensack River watershed, whose headwaters are in the state of New York and flow south to Newark Bay. New Jersey's portion of the river is 31 miles long. The Hackensack River watershed encompasses approximately 85 square miles. In the southern section of the watershed, the Hackensack



Meadowlands District contains over 8,400 acres of urban wetlands, waterways and open space less than 10 miles from New York City. Many species of flora and fauna are located in or visit the watershed including 25 of New Jersey threatened and endangered bird species.

Preserving land to enhance the quality of the property for the health and enjoyment of the people who live there

now and in the future is of utmost importance. Support from all levels of government has been crucial in making the trust and its assets a reality. To fund land preservation in the watershed, the MCT may apply for grants, receive donations (money and land), and generate other forms of revenue, particularly from the sales and renewals of Meadowlands license plates sold by the New Jersey Department of Motor Vehicles.

This Strategic Plan will be the first for the MCT. It should be viewed as a guide for staff and board members to help meet stated goals, established in advance, and to fulfill tasks that are in alignment with the mission and vision of the Trust. This Strategic Plan is created in a manner that identifies specific actions, or strategies that will help the MCT achieve the goals of the plan over a three year period of time. The plan should be considered flexible; in the event that a roadblock occurs, it should be easily modified.



## Mission

To protect and preserve environmentally sensitive land in the Hackensack River watershed and Meadowlands region.

## Vision

Preserve land in perpetuity for purposes of natural resource conservation and enhancement including wetlands mitigation sites and banks, open space and scenic vistas that are safe and accessible to the general public, and passive outdoor recreation in close proximity to where people live and work.

## Core Values

While there are many important principles that guide the work of the Meadowlands Conservation Trust, the following are the core values that the Trust aims to proactively promote in order to carry out its statutory responsibilities:

- Natural areas are essential to a healthy ecosystem and enhanced quality of life. Environmentally sensitive areas and critical habitats should be protected, and enhanced if necessary, to the greatest extent possible;
- We are all stewards of the environment. Land preservation and environmental conservation are important tasks of the Trust;
- Safe and appropriate public access to open space and scenic vistas is imperative in urban and suburban New Jersey; and
- Effective collaboration with community and corporate leaders, as well as other government entities, environmental groups and stakeholders, is essential in order to achieve the goals of the Trust.



## **Goal #1:** ***Preserve and Enhance Environmentally Sensitive Land***

By the end of 2010, the MCT acquired over 800 acres of land through eight fee simple acquisitions and conservation easements. Emerson Woods and Skeetkill Marsh have been enhanced with signage and allow for public access along minimally maintained walking trails. The Richard P. Kane Natural Area is leased to a private entity for a wetlands enhancement project and wetlands mitigation bank. One property in Demarest contains a historic house that is currently occupied. We also hold conservation easements on two large wooded tracts of land in the town of Norwood, New Jersey.

### ***Strategies:***

- Define minimal criteria for reviewing properties for potential acquisition, conservation easement, and/or donation that are offered to the MCT by an outside source;
- Establish a list of potentially eligible sites for acquisition and/or conservation easements within the focus area based on criteria developed by the MCT Land Acquisition Committee and staff;
- Prepare a property maintenance program for each MCT holding. This should include a list of what needs to be done at the site, budget, and schedule. Moving forward, this should be done as part of the acquisition criteria prior to the MCT assuming the property from its owners;
- Identify local volunteer groups that may help maintain preserved sites;
- Determine which properties should allow passive public recreation in accordance with MCT's mission and develop a plan for use of the property; and
- Hold public awareness event(s) at a preserved or enhanced site.

## Goal #2: *Develop a Strong MCT Identity*

Although the Meadowland Conservation Trust was created in 1999, most of the municipalities and property owners within the Hackensack River watershed focus area are not aware of the MCT, the many benefits of preserving land for conservation and how the MCT can assist them in preserving land. The MCT needs to become a recognized land trust entity in northern New Jersey for those seeking to donate land or conservation easements, as well as funds. In New Jersey alone, there are over 35 land trust organizations. The MCT needs to develop a media campaign including a recognizable logo and message. We need to systematically spread the word that we accept donations of land and funds for preservation and enhancement of property within the Hackensack River watershed and creation of new opportunities for passive open space for the public.

### **Strategies:**

- Create a marketing campaign including branding the MCT. Assign a BOT member to oversee development of the marketing campaign, work with staff and report back to the board on progress;
  - Develop a message about who we are, what we do, and the service we provide. The message should include a definition of the

MCT jurisdiction, explaining both the Hackensack River watershed and the Meadowlands District;

- Create a simple, recognizable logo that can be used on all literature, pins, shirts, etc. to establish brand recognition. The logo should be associated with the license plate since that is how the public may currently identify with the MCT;
  - Develop a brochure and postcard/ bookmark that can be distributed at events and programs;
  - Develop a tabletop display; and
  - Advertise and post articles about MCT in Meadowlands USA, New Jersey Municipalities, ANJEC Report, and Sustainable Jersey website to reach municipal government representatives, environmental commissions, and local green teams.
- Reenergize license plate sales by visiting car dealerships to gain their support in promoting the program; and
  - Update MCT website.



## Goal #3: *Build Organizational Capacity*

In order for the MCT to grow as an organization and meet its mission, strong participatory leadership is required. This leadership comes in part from the powers and duties vested in the MCT's Board of Trustees (BOT) comprised of seven voting members. Four of these members are appointed by the Governor from a list of twelve candidates provided from designated environmental organizations. These trustees serve three-year staggered terms and continue to serve until succeeded. The other three trustees, serving ex officio, include: the Commissioner of Community Affairs or the Commissioner's Designee; the Executive Director of the New Jersey Meadowlands Commission, or the Executive Director's Designee; and a mayor, or elected chief executive of a municipality, appointed by, and who shall serve at the pleasure of, the Hackensack Meadowlands Municipal Committee.

As we move forward, further definition of the overall MCT board and creation of additional committees and board member assignments will greatly strengthen the leadership and interaction of board members with each other and staff. The BOT will need assistance with many of the tasks proposed in the Strategic Plan. In addition to the staff shared with the NJMC, a formal volunteer network should be established to be called upon as projects warrant. The MCT may also consider offering an intern position to assist staff with special assignments. The board should consider setting up a separate Board of Advisors whose members are hand-picked to meet a variety of the MCT's needs. The BOT can set guidelines on how a Board of Advisors may be established, and whether or not terms should be considered. Some expertise/backgrounds to consider include: digital design, communications, event planning, outdoor sports retailer, and local companies with foundations and/or green teams.

### **Strategies:**

- Assign BOTs to oversee committees or special assignments and report progress at each meeting;
- Establish an ad hoc committee to review the benefits of establishing a Board of Advisors and assess the needs of the MCT that such a board may meet;
  - Create a "Friends of the MCT" volunteer program;
  - Advertise in local newspapers that MCT is seeking volunteers;
  - Email local corporations asking them to deliver volunteer request to their employees;
  - Reach out to local green teams, garden clubs, high school environmental clubs, and scout troops for assistance;
  - Ask constituent municipalities to post volunteer request on their website;
  - Collect names of participants at clean-up events and other MCT sponsored programs;
  - Ask BOTs to post volunteer request on their websites; and
- Define tasks that may be accomplished by an intern. Seek a qualified applicant.





## Goal #4: Develop a Stable, Diversified Base of Financial Support

The Trust is supported in part by the New Jersey Meadowlands Commission (NJMC) through the use of its staff and facilities. To fund the protection of the watershed, the MCT may apply for grants, seek donations, receive gifts, and other forms of revenue. One specific revenue stream created by the state that is designated to fund the Trust is a portion of monies collected from the purchase of Meadowlands license plates from the New Jersey Division of Motor Vehicles.

For tax purposes, the MCT is currently recognized as a 501(c)1, or government entity. When seeking funds through grant assistance, sponsorships, and donations, it is often desirable to work with an established, or create an affiliated, 501(c)3 organization. The enabling legislation of the MCT allows for this option. N.J.S.A 13:17-91(f) states that the MCT shall have the power to: "Authorize, if deemed useful, establishment by appropriate persons or organizations of a non-profit organization or organizations exempt from taxation pursuant to section 501(c)3 of the federal Internal Revenue Code of 1986, 26 U.S.C. § 501(c)3, for the purpose of assisting the trust in furthering the purposes of the trust as set forth in the act".

To date the Meadowlands Conservation Trust has raised limited funds. The following are measures to raise funds:

### Strategies:

- Develop a diverse fundraising strategy;
- Establish an advertising campaign for the Meadowlands license plates in the MCT focus area. Start with better signage in local Motor Vehicle Commission offices, brochure distribution to local car dealerships, and advertising in local newspapers;
- Offer programs at MCT properties to promote environmental conservation, land preservation and enhancement, and passive recreation. Provide opportunities for MCT to increase exposure and showcase sites to environmental commissions, green teams and other parties of potential interest, (e.g. an open space program held at River Barge Park's Environmental Education Pavilion, community clean-up at Skeetkill Marsh Park);
- Research potential grants available from corporate foundations;
- Develop partnerships with companies that provide financial and other sponsorships through foundations;

- Create an annual sale of an iconic item that becomes branded to the MCT (e.g. annual birdhouse sale or spring plant sale); and
- In the short term, the Trust shall continue to operate as a 501(c)1. In accordance with the legislation, the MCT may partner with established 501(c)3 organizations, as needed, to pursue grants and/or other matters where such status is of benefit to the Trust. At the end of 2016, the Strategic Plan Committee and staff shall make a recommendation to the BOT as to whether it is in the best interest of the Trust to pursue 501(c)3 certification for an organization directly associated with the MCT, such as the Friends of the MCT.

## Goal #5: Enhance Environmental Awareness

Making the public aware of how living a more sustainable lifestyle maintains and enhances the viability of our ecosystem is critical for the future of the Meadowlands, the Hackensack River watershed and the entire state of New Jersey. We live in the densest state in the country; it is important for us to share the message about what we are doing and to encourage others to incorporate sustainability initiatives into their lives.

This should be a longer term goal of the MCT. The Strategic Plan Committee can gauge progress of other plan elements to determine when it is appropriate to initiate public outreach. Strategies below afford the MCT with opportunities to disseminate information about the Trust and the benefits of donating land and conservation easements to the public.

### Strategies

- Standardize communications through branding – develop a series of electronic brochures or a blog for easy online access to information;
- Offer Green Living Program as a regularly scheduled series for a small fee to attract people to our locations and find out about the MCT; and
- Hold sustainability themed (environmental, wellness and local artisan) events that raise funds for the MCT. Ideas include:
  - River Paddle;
  - Art in the Park;
  - Local Artisan Silent Auction
  - Partner with Meadowlands Regional Chamber of Commerce and other charitable organizations to hold it at one of their events or galas with proceeds benefiting the MCT;
  - Sunday Bike Tour or Walk-a-thon in Bergen County - get a volunteer group to take up this cause and raise money for the MCT;
  - Plant Sale;
  - Birdhouse and Bird Food sale – partner with scouts and/or Wild Birds Unlimited;
  - Band Concert or Battle of the Bands;
  - Winter Farmers/Artisan Market; and
  - Farm to Table Dinner.

## Implementation Milestones

While the strategic plan is a fluid document, it is still appropriate set some annual goals. During the Strategic Plan visioning sessions held on October 19th and November 19th, 2012 the BOT decided to propose several first year goals, and then revisit the plan to establish year two and year three goals at later points in time. The following goals will provide the MCT with direction as to areas that the Board finds to be of greatest importance, as well as establishing a means of assessing outside interest and participation:

- Create a Strategic Plan Committee of the MCT Board of Trustees to recommend priority tasks and determine suitable responsible parties to perform tasks noted throughout the plan of which some may be performed by and/or overseen by staff, others by specific board members or volunteers.
- Create an ad hoc committee of the MCT Board of Trustees to review the benefits of establishing a Board of Advisors. Determine gaps in needs of the MCT that advisors may be able to assist in providing guidance and services.
- Brand the MCT. Develop a new brochure to be used for meetings and events.
- Meet with mayors, environmental commissions and green team representatives in MCT constituent municipalities. Hold a land trust informational event. Start to perform individual meetings with municipal representatives.
- Give a presentation at a Chamber of Commerce event to introduce the MCT to businesses. Seek potential employee volunteers and corporate sponsors.
- Create the Friends of the MCT program. Advertise for volunteers in local newspapers. Invite participants to join in an MCT site clean-up. Purchase clean-up equipment.
- Increase license plate sales by getting prominent signage at motor vehicle stations within the MCT jurisdiction and reintroducing the plate to car dealerships in the Hackensack River watershed. Explain what the MCT is and how revenues from the license plates benefit to the Trust. Present monthly sales statistics to BOTs at regularly scheduled meetings.