

FoHIVOS

FRIENDS OF HOPEWELL VALLEY OPEN SPACE

STRATEGIC PLAN FY 2024-2026



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

STAKEHOLDERS

FoHVOS is grateful to the input provided by the many stakeholders that informed strategic discussions and ultimately this strategic plan.

FUNDING

This strategic plan was made possible by funding secured from The Bunbury Fund at the Princeton Area Community Foundation.

CONSULTATION

The strategic planning process was led by Catalyst Consulting Group and this plan is the culmination of surveys, interviews, a daylong retreat, and numerous meetings with working groups comprised of board and staff members.

PREPARED BY:





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Section I. Background

Friends of Hopewell Valley Open Space (FoHVOS) was formed in 1987 by concerned citizens in response to the threat of suburban sprawl and highway construction that would impact open land in their community. The initial preserve acquired by the Friends of Hopewell Valley Open Space in 1993, located off Pennington's Main Street, now contains hiking trails, and serves as a connector to the Mercer County Equestrian Center and Rosedale Park/Mercer Meadows. Since then, FoHVOS has continued acquiring land to preserve the rural character of the Valley, protect native and rare species, guard against overdevelopment, and ensure land protection. Prepared to chart the path forward as it continues to grow its impact, the organization secured funding from the Bunbury Fund at the Princeton Area Community Foundation to undertake a strategic planning process.

In preparation for the strategic planning process, a board strategic planning committee was formed. The process launched with 23 one-on-one interviews of FoHVOS staff, board members, partners, funders, donors, property owners, media representatives, and government officials. Additionally, e-communications were sent to over 1,900 email addresses (same stakeholder groups represented in the interviews), inviting recipients to partake in an online stakeholder survey. The survey had a total of 125 respondents (119 complete responses). Informed by the interview and survey data, a daylong board and staff retreat resulted in the identification of five strategic priority areas:

1. Stewardship
2. Land Preservation
3. Community Engagement
4. Communications
5. Governance



Also, during the board retreat, the mission, vision, and values of the organization were discussed. This strategic plan includes those guiding principles, leading Due North towards the execution of this plan and the organization's broader impact metrics. For board members that weren't able to attend the in-person retreat, a separate strategy session was held to ensure their ideas were captured. Following the full day retreat, three working groups were formed, to focus on goal development for the strategic priority areas. The working groups were composed of board and staff members to balance vision with capacity. After several meetings the working groups developed objectives and goals for each of the areas with an associated timeline for implementation and accountability.

This strategic plan will serve as a guide for the organization as it further folds in equity commitments, expands programmatic impacts, and diversifies revenue streams to make all of the work possible. There cannot be success in any strategic area without forward movement in the others. Goals are interdependent and scale year over year. This plan calls for investments in communications, revenue stream optimization, and land stewardship. As a land trust, it is critical that the organization continues to prioritize the preservation and stewardship of land. Successful implementation of this plan will require board and staff involvement, as well as key partnerships (old and new). It is critical to note that implementation can change and vary as the organization encounters unexpected challenges or receives additional resources. It is a living document.



Section II. Due North

Mission

Friends of Hopewell Valley Open Space is an accredited non-profit land trust that is dedicated to preserving the Valley's character by partnering with the community to preserve land, protect natural resources, and inspire a new generation of conservation.

Vision

A greener, cleaner, and healthier future for people, wildlife, and the land within the Hopewell Valley

Tagline

Preserve. Protect. Inspire.

Values

- **Community-Informed.** We are committed to listening, learning from, and working with the Hopewell Valley community, and recognize that FoHVOS cannot do it alone.
- **Accountability.** We respect our neighbors, partners, and the environment and hold ourselves responsible for our participation therein.
- **Science-based.** We are committed to working and leading with a science-based, apolitical framework.
- **Equity.** We believe in cultivating a more just community, ensuring that all members maintain their right to clear air, clean water, and open space.

Section III. Strategic Priorities

The following are strategic priorities identified by FoHVOS and presented in no particular order:

STEWARDSHIP

- Recreational trails
- Reforestation
- Rare species and wildlife protection
- Invasive species Strike Team

GOVERNANCE

- Board succession
- Board member engagement and development
- Refining procedures
- Funding sources

LAND PRESERVATION

- Land acquisition
- Easements
- Preservation
- Land stewardship
- Land owner engagement

COMMUNICATIONS

- Internal & external communications
- Internal policies & procedures
- Staff roles
- Professional development

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

- Engagement plan
- Expand OEA Partnership
- Develop new and expand existing partnerships
- Policy advocacy



Stewardship

FoHVOS has become known and respected for its stewardship work and education. These activities can be accomplished in partnership with other land trusts, our neighbors, private landowners, and government agencies. Successful implementation of the objectives below will lead to elevated visibility for the organization.

1. Prioritize FoHVOS trail network via proper maintenance including cultivating sponsorships and increasing trail accessibility, in all forms, to increase trail usage by diverse populations.
2. Communicate with the public the impact of our land stewardship program.
3. Develop and implement safety and security measures for FoHVOS lands.
4. Implement climate-smart stewardship practices.
5. Engage residents regarding land stewardship and utilizing native plants in their landscapes through our Community Conservation program.
6. Utilize science-based strategies to applied stewardship that may include deer management, invasive species control, land restoration, and increasing rare plants and animals.
7. Conduct research-quality monitoring of forest health and rare species.
8. Contribute to statewide stewardship initiatives to strengthen partnerships and maintain FoHVOS as a stewardship leader in New Jersey.
9. Initiate partnership with NJ Forest Fire Service to develop and implement plans on FoHVOS preserves.
10. Renew preserve stewardship plans for all FoHVOS preserves.

Land Preservation

To advance FoHVOS's commitment to community access to open spaces and land preservation, it is crucial that the organization engage with our neighbors, private landowners, and other residents in Hopewell Valley. Doing so will increase FoHVOS's visibility and create foundational partnerships with the community and key stakeholders. The key is to preserve land by determining what land parcels are or could be available and then determining financial strategies for acquisition.

1. Continue engaging with landowners to acquire additional land, provide easements, and preserve land.
2. Identify prospective acquisitions and secure funding.

Community Engagement

Increased access to FoHVOS lands and those of partner organizations advances equity in the region. Expanding FoHVOS' reach through collaboration also expands the organization's network to increase community contributions towards program design.

1. Create a community member-centered engagement plan.
2. Implement relevant programming for children and families.
3. Continue to support the Outdoor Equity Alliance (OEA) programming and engagement, in accordance with our fiscal sponsor agreement.
4. Form partnerships with colleges and universities to expand scientific research and its applications to FoHVOS land management practices.
5. Increase engagement with our neighbors for education, collaboration, and mission furtherance.
6. Engage with individual residents to sustain biodiversity, and explore other ecosystem service values from our land such as cultivating edible plants/trees in an environmentally sustainable and responsible manner.
7. Continue or develop a program to assist local corporations, schools, and other organizations with their land stewardship.

Communications

Enhancing FoHVOS's internal and external communications would position the organization as a reliable, cohesive, and trustworthy entity and partner in the community. In refining internal communications, organizational operations and programming will be streamlined and as a result, staff will experience a work environment that bolsters their existing skills and provides opportunities for professional advancement, in and out of the organization.

1. Enhance existing communications, both internally and externally, to strengthen relationships, enhance visibility, improve effectiveness and efficiency, and convey impact and equity.
2. Engage external consultants to enhance the organization's communications.

Governance

An essential part of organizational success, improved internal operations give the organization a stronger platform for its work and advocacy. Increased capacity and efforts in each of the four areas below will yield significant impact for the organization.

1. Implement processes to enhance organizational effectiveness, including scheduling, committee activation, and executive director evaluation.
2. Enhance communications and clarify responsibilities between Board and staff.
3. Recruit board members with strategic skills that are not currently reflected on the board.
4. Expand and implement organizational communications goals and key performance indicators.
5. Identify and secure new funding sources and revenue streams.
6. Evaluate staff requirements and clarify roles and responsibilities.
7. Explore opportunities for staff professional development and continuing education.
8. Review and update policies and procedures and implement changes informed by best practices and the actions of other similar organizations, that are equitable and in alignment with the desired work culture.



Section IV. Timeline

The milestones below advance the broader strategic objectives for each strategic priority area. The goals are building goals that prepare the organization for the next year’s implementation. The timelines chart the path forward and serve as an accountability tool to track progress. Each year, FoHVOS will evaluate and update the timelines as needed, based on their progress at that time.

Year	Strategic Area	Milestone
FY 2024	Stewardship	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Develop a written trails plan across all preserves (currently a total of 20 acres of trails) that includes database creation, trail maintenance, trail widening, volunteer/staff operations, and tool/equipment acquisition. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Establish a work plan that designates individual trails as having specific purposes for uses, one of which is ADA-accessible. b. Coordinate volunteers for trail maintenance and sponsorships with corporations. c. Identify funding sources for paid workers/crews to maintain trails. 2. Conduct research-quality monitoring of forest health and multiple rare species utilizing science-based stewardship practices (e.g., deer management, land restoration, invasive species control) 3. Develop strategy map showing FoHVOS lands, Community Conservation, and trails with existing open space; Connecting Habitat Across NJ (CHANJ) to guide stewardship efforts with partners and the public. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Ensure stewardship accounts for climate and land use change considerations using reforestation and restoration. 4. Contribute to statewide stewardship initiatives including participation in NJ Invasive Species Council and implementation of NJ Forest Stewardship Task Force recommendations (dependent upon passage of legislation), Partnerships for New Jersey Plant Conservation, and Stewardship Roundtable. 5. Within 3 months, complete an evaluation of safety and security approaches and best practices by local/regional NGOs, state/county government, and LTA. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Update website and signage on properties and trails denoting security practices. 6. Increase Strike Team capacity through training module development, contracts, and grants with partners throughout NJ; expand strategy through partnerships. External capacity growth strategy through partnership.

FY 2024	Land Preservation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Build off of existing land acquisition evaluation criteria form. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Focus land preservation on extending existing trails, CHANJ, and connecting trail heads to schools. 2. Encourage very large landowners to sell in fee as a preserve or sell rights as an easement. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Develop metrics to understand the market (land left to acquire vs. what we've already acquired), and costs (acquisition costs, startup costs, etc.)
	Community Engagement	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Develop ideas to increase public use and enjoyment of FoHVOS preserves. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Explore opportunities for geocaching, scavenger hunts, t-shirt club, digital map, Instagram tags/following, etc. 2. Engage with our neighbors and private landowners to sustain biodiversity, and explore other ecosystem service values from our land such as cultivating edible plants/trees in an environmentally sustainable and responsible manner. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Foster use of "edible landscapes" using Rosenbaum's Wild Plant Culture book as a guide. 3. Partner with the OEA to develop workshops for young and emerging conservationists. 4. Develop a FoHVOS package for high schools that would include community conservation service opportunities. 5. Integrate STEM in family workshops through the integration of Place Based Learning. 6. Incorporate Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (JEDI) into all community programming. 7. Create an initiative for corporate land stewardship to expand and develop a fee schedule, including consulting services. 8. Develop additional Community Conservation programs at privately held properties to advance individual stewardship. Goal of reaching 25 new HV households annually.
	Communications	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Clearly define our community educational goals and communicate them widely. 2. Develop the State of FoHVOS that assesses our accomplishments in preserving our environment and our preserves. 3. Develop metrics for assessing the extent and impact of community engagement. 4. Data dashboard: tracking stewardship, conservation, STRIKE team, deer levels, and other management actions. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Include details about rare species (allowable ones) and forest health. 5. Develop a monthly calendar listing topics and content areas for all publications to which FoHVOS contributes.

FY
2024

Governance

1. Revisit and define Board roles and responsibilities.
 - a. Establish processes and expectations for decision making and program implementation at the Executive Director, Committees, and Board levels.
 - b. Establish a system to allow for Board awareness and oversight of staff and organization's operations.
 - c. Develop framework or expectations for Board commitment and giving.
2. Develop a board governance committee to support policy implementation.
3. Develop board member and officer term limits.
4. Create a matrix of Board member expertise and their time on the Board, and identify the pros and cons of term limits.
 - a. Develop ways to increase board engagement, especially with respect to taking on leadership roles.
5. Schedule Board meetings for the year in advance.
 - a. Ensure agendas and board reports are posted in advance with time for board member review.
 - b. Regularize Committee meetings to implement and report on work plans.
 - c. Create a plan for repeat governance matters including annual reorganizing, officer slate, financial statement reviews and budget approval, conflict statements, Executive Director evaluation, and identification of people and groups for gala recognition.
6. Recruit a communications specialist to the Board.
7. Develop a Board approval process prior to endorsing pending legislation on behalf of FoHVOS as an organization.
8. Reactivate Board Development Committee for Board member training and education .
9. Create cross communication between the Development Committee and the Finance Committee.
10. Revisit/develop an investment strategy for the FoHVOS endowment, to include annual withdrawal policy with review every 5 years.
11. Clearly define staff roles to execute strategic plan priorities.
12. Explore opportunities for staff professional development and continuing education.
13. Host a staff retreat to review 2022 and 2023 activities and develop priorities for 2024.
14. Review and update Policies and Procedures.
 - a. Create ad-hoc committee(s) to review bylaws, policies, and Board roles, and recommend updates. Include consideration of JEDI.
15. Identify and engage an attorney for the organization.
16. Integrate JEDI goals into FoHVOS Board, staff, and community projects.
 - a. Identify and hold a JEDI training course for Board and staff.
17. Review and update HR policies against best practices and the actions of other similar organizations.

FY 2024	Governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 18. Co-develop communications cadence and content format between board and staff to keep the board informed on projects and activities as they are implemented by staff, and to keep staff informed on Board priorities and objectives. 19. Develop, update, and implement an Executive Director performance review process. 20. Impact dashboard: reviewing internal issues, including number of members and financial matters.
FY 2025	Stewardship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. January-April: purchase equipment necessary for trail maintenance, using either FoHVOS funds or donations to the “equipment fund” by corporate sponsors. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Seek contributions from corporate trail sponsors for purchase of necessary trail maintenance equipment that can be used by corporate trail sponsors or FoHVOS. 2. April-December: begin maintenance program using FoHVOS staff, volunteers, or employee groups of corporations that sponsor trails. 3. Complete construction of pilot/first ADA compliant trail. 4. Pilot climate smart stewardship planning for 3 projects, such as a FoHVOS forest and a FoHVOS grassland. 5. Complete implementation of work plan for safety and security measures on FoHVOS properties. 6. Develop 1-2 new partnerships to expand Strike Team capacity. 7. Train our neighbors and local landowners to identify and eradicate invasive species.
	Land Preservation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Continue searching for appropriate land to preserve. 2. Discuss current and new ways to encourage very large landowners to preserve their land. 3. Execute funding solicitation plan where needed for land acquisition, development and/or maintenance.
	Community Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Develop and implement a rewards structure for volunteer participation in furthering FoHVOS' mission, especially with respect to trails. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. T-shirt club: receive a t-shirt for traveling all FoHVOS trails. 2. Implement nature scavenger hunt, including “what is blooming this month” kiosk signage that highlight flora/fauna. 3. Create partnerships with colleges and universities for collaborative scientific research. 4. Develop neighbor specific programming/engagement opportunities. 5. Explore policy advocacy through partnerships. 6. Engage Board members and experts as guest columnists for media outreach and as contributors to other outreach, including newsletters.

FY 2025	Community Engagement	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 6. Create partnership for edible fruit tree project. 7. Create partnership for a lecture series on how to grow your own food sustainably. 8. Develop corporate land stewardship program with two organizations. 9. Focus Community Conservation efforts using analysis from 2024; recruit 20 new properties each year.
	Communications	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Create a strategic communications plan. 2. Develop communications explaining FoHVOS's preservation process, underscoring how access is made available to all. 3. Refine digital map and website utilizing volunteer support. 4. Focus on developing and disseminating educational plans and materials. 5. Explore a single portal for internship applications with partners, such as the Watershed Institute, D&R Greenway, and other environmental organizations. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Implement staff professional development and continuing education.
	Governance	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Continue advanced scheduling of Board meetings for the year. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Ensure agendas and board reports are posted one week in advance with time for board member review. b. Regularize Committee meetings to implement and report on work plans. 2. Present and approve new Bylaw and policy updates at Board meetings. 3. Staff to identify and pursue 2-3 potential new revenue sources (funders). 4. Seek and renew only funding sources that align with FoHVOS' mission and strategic plan. 5. Host a staff retreat to review 2024, and create a summary report for the Board, including recommendations. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Implement at least 2 recommendations. 6. Commit to implementing JEDI goals.
FY 2026	Stewardship	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Enlist additional corporations to join the corporate sponsors trail program. 2. Demonstrate effectiveness of pilot ADA trail and seek sponsors to sustain and build more. 3. Assess costs and effectiveness of safety and security measures, and adjust work plan accordingly. 4. Evaluate climate-smart stewardship practice implementation, and develop a work plan to incorporate in land management of all FoHVOS properties. 5. Develop 1-2 new partnerships to expand Strike Team capacity, for a total of 2-4 by the end of 2025.

FY 2026	Land Preservation	1. Buy land, develop with trails (or other), and maintain with appropriately balanced resources.
	Community Engagement	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Increase membership by 5%. 2. Sustain educational programming, partnerships, and stewardship efforts. 3. Evaluate the effectiveness of the edible fruit program. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Harvest edible fruit trees. 4. Implement a single portal for internship applications with partners. 5. Implement a neighbor stewardship and education strategy to promote independent stewardship. 6. Implement a geocache project to find digital objects on the trail as an engagement tool. 7. Develop corporate land stewardship program with 2 more organizations, for a total of 4 by the end of 2025. 8. Focus Community Conservation efforts using analysis from 2025; recruit 20 new properties, for a total of 40 by the end of 2026.
	Communications	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Assess the effectiveness of new communications, policies, and tools implemented in the prior year. 2. Continue expanding educational plans and activities.
	Governance	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Assess the effectiveness of the new scheduling, communications strategy, and committee activation from prior years. 2. Board to conduct Executive Director performance review. 3. Staff to identify and pursue 2-3 potential new revenue sources (funders). 4. Address staff recommendations, capacity, and benefit needs. 5. Host a staff retreat to review 2025, and create a summary report for the Board, including recommendations. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Implement at least 2 recommendations. 6. Ongoing commitment to and implementation of JEDI goals.



Appendix A. SWOT Analysis



Strengths

- FoHVOS' stewardship and neighbor engagement
- FoHVOS' partnerships with key stakeholders
- Diverse expertise and ongoing commitment of FoHVOS staff, volunteers, and Board members.

Opportunities

- Forging additional partnerships with other NJ-based organizations, and strengthening existing ones
- Focused outreach to younger generation on climate change & land issues
- Establishing a fee-for-service stewardship program
- Add programming for young people from emerging topics at OEA



Weaknesses

- Lack of capacity, both financial and time
- FoHVOS' trail quality and inability to provide them with routine upkeep
- FoHVOS' lack of capacity to raise funds for its growing programming

Threats

- Lack of diverse funding streams
- Reliance on specific volunteers for capacity
- FoHVOS' inability to react via advocacy and land interventions
- Lack of understanding the connection between FoHVOS' work and the ecosystem at-large

