

A wooden sign for the Northland Arboretum. The top part of the sign is light-colored wood with a teal tree logo. Below the logo, the words "Northland Arboretum" are written in large, white, serif letters. The bottom part of the sign is dark wood with the words "Paul Bunyan Conservation Area" in white, serif letters. In the foreground, there are yellow and purple flowers.

Northland Arboretum

Paul Bunyan
Conservation Area

FEBRUARY 2022

Northland Arboretum

Strategic Plan

PRESENTED TO
Northland
Arboretum Board of
Directors

PRESENTED BY
Candice
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Northland Arboretum
Strategic Plan 2022-2024

UPDATES: 12/19/2022

Summary

Since the adoption of the 2022-2024 strategic plan, the Northland Arboretum encountered obstacles concerning their operational funding from the City of Brainerd, which resulted in a reduced funding agreement from the historical 10-year agreement to an 18-month agreement. The current financial agreement will end on December 31st, 2023. Since then, the organization has been working tirelessly to establish a positive reputation in the community, build awareness of its mission and programs, diversify and intensify revenue streams, and build a stronger leadership team. The strategic plan has given guidance and allowed the organization to focus on the organization's priorities as it recovers from a funding crisis and an international pandemic. This update will provide progress on the 3-year strategic plan and outline possible updates to the document as the organization moves into a new chapter of its survival.

The Northland Arboretum Strategic Plan

Strategy I: Protect and enhance our natural resources and be good stewards of the environment by maintaining biological diversity. (CONSERVATION)

A. **Objective: Encourage native plantings and natural environments**

Focus 1: Restore or enhance native plant communities throughout the Arboretum grounds

- Control invasive and undesirable species
- Establish native prairie grasses within open areas of former landfill
- Plant conifers to replace aging jack pine forest.

The prairie restoration project has been supported by the Crow Wing County Soil and Water Conservation District and is working with the Arboretum with a \$40,000 reimbursement grant to prep the area, plant, and manage the site. The installation of the prairie will take nearly two years and ongoing maintenance will be the responsibility of the Arb, but the outcome and impact of this project is well worth the effort. Having a demonstration habitat in a high-traffic area will boost nature-education efforts and provide community members a visual option for their own land management plans.

To date, invasive species have been marked, removed, and herbicide treatments have been applied. Ongoing management of invasive species will be needed.

B. **Objective: Restore Whiskey Creek into a healthy habitat.**

Focus 1: Conduct a water quality study

- Discuss student research project with CLC instructors

Focus 2: Collaborate with other agencies on ways to improve water quality of the creek.

- Discuss options with partner organizations and local agencies

This objective is still in progress, but connections have been made with Crow Wing County Soil and Water Conservation District on their impact on this project. They are working with a consulting firm in partnership with the City of Baxter on a Whiskey Creek Stormwater Project near the Super One grocery store. The Arboretum's involvement in this project will be minimal at first but as it progresses, Monet Pond could see significant improvements to wildlife and habitat. More information will be brought forward by SWCD.

**Strategy II: Provide programming that creates positive connections between people and nature.
(EDUCATION and RECREATION)**

A. Objective: Create an educational component to our trail system

Focus 1: Create and install interpretive signage that is appropriate for all ages.

- Develop a committee that will be responsible for interpretive signage

Focus 2: Update physical and virtual maps

- Marketing and Grounds Committee work together on updating the maps.

The first sign was donated and made by Leann Plinske and installed in the Arboretum's "Rain Garden" with a focus on butterflies. To date, we have \$5,000 raised for additional interpretive signs and educational components on the trail system. Signs going forward will all be branded with consistent colors and messaging. Designs for signs are in progress in conjunction with a Focal Point photographer and two Master Naturalists. Signs will likely be created by Central Lakes College and installed by the Arboretum maintenance staff. The team hopes to have the first signs installed by Arbor Day 2023.

B. Objective: Develop a cohesive and branded program that will serve the purpose of our educational pillar for people of all ages, abilities, and incomes.

Focus 1: Hire an Education Coordinator/Nature Instructor

- **Research grant opportunities that would support staff capacity**

The Arboretum chose to invest in current staff and promoted the Administrative Assistant to an "Events and Education Manager" role which took on nature-education planning and responsibilities. This staff member is responsible for coordinating the Education Committee and planning our nature camp series. In the future, any interns that the Arboretum takes on will be under the Events and Education Manager position. The Arboretum is still seeking grant funding to hire a PT Education Coordinator to take on some of the lift of the nature camp coordination and education programming.

One idea that has been considered is building a Nature Education Collaborative which would include several financially-supportive "members" that would rely on the Arb's education staff to provide nature-based programming to their organization (i.e. schools, nonprofits, camps, daycares, Montessori's, homeschool associations, etc.). Their membership fees would pay for the staff person's time and capacity and the Arb would become the hub of nature-based learning opportunities. Grant opportunities are being sought to pilot this collaborative.

Focus 2: Expand our education beyond the Arb and into the community

- Partner with school district on Elementary classes and workshops
- Take classes “offsite” and into local public parks
- Offer a balance of fee-for-service and free activities/classes

Arboretum staff and volunteers have done our best to do effective outreach. The Arb has been involved in the following “off campus” activities:

1. Virtual Education classes to Harrison Elementary schools
2. Attendance at Crow Wing County Fair
3. Education at Nisswa Summer Camp
4. Involvement in Chamber Events
5. Attendance at Crow Wing Energized Summit
6. Involvement in Nature Network – Passport Program
7. Involvement in Happy Dancing Turtle – Nature BINGO, Nature walk
8. Upcoming: Family Nature Summit at Cragun’s
9. Upcoming: Collaboration with The Shop

Focus 3: Education Committee develops Nature Camp

- Come up with consistent name, brand, and logo alongside Marketing Team
- Work with local partners on collaboration opportunities
- Build in cooking classes – how to best use fresh produce

The Arboretum’s “No Break from Nature” camp for the Summer 2022 was a huge success. We had full classes every Thursday and the volunteer instructors were engaging and great with the kids. We had 180 individual sessions recorded with an impact to about 25 kids (Grades 2nd – 6th). Collaborations with area groups and organizations was a success including volunteers from the Master Gardeners, Master Naturalists, Loon Center, Wild and Free and more! Grants are in progress to support increasing the amount of Nature Camp days. Ideally, the camp would run two days per week during the Summer 2023 series.

Focus 4: Maintain an engaging calendar of educational opportunities.

- Plan events and activities 90 days in advance to allow for marketing
- Put the activities calendar on our website
- Seek feedback from participants and members on topics they would like to see

By promoting current staff to focus on Education and Events, we’ve been able to promote activities well in advance. We are leveraging Facebook and creating events and have moved to add an online ticketing option on our website for all events. This has increased attendance, at least from what we can tell from this initial push. We have also scheduled an event “Better Together” to hear from Arb member on what they’d like to see.

Strategy III: Broaden our visibility in the community (MARKETING)

A. Objective: Raise awareness of the Arb’s offerings and location

Focus 1: Install large sign at Excelsior Drive

- In progress: working with Signs Plus (August 2021)

- Keep sign updated with events and activities

Completed October 2021

Focus 2: Increase online presence providing convenience for members and visitors

- Designate a staff or volunteer willing to take on social media
- Update website and provide a user-friendly platform for making donations, renewing membership, and understanding the activities the Arb has to offer.

The Arboretum hired an enhanced role of “Volunteer and Office Coordinator” in September of 2022. This staff has been responsible for volunteers and marketing/outreach and has completely taken over social media marketing for the organization. This has positively impacted the Arb’s reach in the community and has increased awareness of events, workshops, classes, and trail system.

Strategy IV: Increase visitation by providing great guest experiences. (MEMBERSHIP)

A. Objective: Increase visitation by non-members

Focus 1: Create a marketing plan with tourism partners to increase reach in community and beyond.

Focus 2: Create a tracking system that will provide data to Membership committee on number of visitations from non-members.

- Increase visitation by 10% year over year

B. Objective: Increase visitation and engagement of members

Focus 1: Create a Membership Experience team that will help engage members in everything the Arb has to offer.

- Committee should meet regularly and share goals with the Executive Director.

Member Experience Committee was formed but not effective. The Committee Chair asked to keep Member Experience top of mind in each sub-committee and keep it top of mind when planning events and outreach.

Strategy V: Invest in improving our current infrastructure and seek opportunities to grow. (GROUNDS AND FACILITIES)

A. Objective: Develop a capital campaign that will address key infrastructure improvements.

Focus 1: Meet with consultants to understand timeline and capital plan.

Focus 2: Develop a capital campaign committee to guide the process.

The Northland Arboretum formed a capital campaign planning committee and hired an outside consultant to talk through capital campaign planning potential. In these conversations, leadership realized there were key fundraising foundations that are necessary but not yet in place for the Arb in order to have a successful campaign. The leadership team has formed a Planned Giving/Fundraising Committee to focus on these fundraising components and set the organization up for success in a future campaign. Some of those components are: setting up an agency fund with the Brainerd Lakes Area Community Foundation (done) implementing a donor management software (done), creating a planned giving program, updating donor engagement materials, and updating the Arb website to give donors options in their gifts to the Arb.

B. Objective: Develop sustainability plans for each area of the Arboretum.

Focus 1: Develop maps of each garden and region of the grounds

Focus 2: Work with Committee Chairs to communicate any changes needed to the gardens or grounds.

Focus 3: Develop a structured process for new projects including plans, budgets, documentation and presentations needed to committees or full Board.

The Arboretum now follows a project planning process and template to make decisions on special projects outside of the normal operational budget. This process helps plan, budget, and ensure all projects are aligned with the goals of this strategic plan and consider the long-term effects of the project.

Strategy VI: (FINANCIAL)

A. Objective: Increase new donors, improve donor retention and increase overall donations received 10% per year.

Focus 1: Understand the need for an endowment or agency fund.

- **Contact BLA Community Foundation for information**

Completed January 2022

Focus 2: Create a donor recognition program

The current Planned Giving/Fundraising Committee is working on this program.

B. Objective: Grow general operating fund by \$100,000

Focus 1: Increase membership counts, visitation, and gift shop.

There has been a significant increase in members and membership revenue. Since 2020, we have seen an increase from 800 members to 1300 members (38% increase) and membership revenue has increased to \$52,572 (32% increase). Membership rates have been increased effective January 1st, 2023.

Focus 2: Increase event revenue

The Haunted Trail fundraiser alone saw a 28% increase in revenue this past year in addition to a \$1,100 jump in Trunk or Treat revenue.

We created a new outdoor concert fundraiser called the Firefly Festival, which will turn into an annual revenue stream.

Building rentals are also seeing a significant increase. Pre-COVID our facilities brought in about \$3,500 per month on average and now our rental income is \$6,600 per month on average.

Focus 3: Increase donations

Since 2020, the Northland Arboretum has seen a 24% increase in community donations and a lot more success with sponsorships and grant awards. FY 2023 is trending to see a record-breaking year as we are \$27,000 above our donations from the previous year and \$23,000 over budget.

Strategy VII: Retain and recruit organizational capacity who will lead the strategic plan and assist in accomplishing its goals. (LEADERSHIP)

A. Objective: Retain a diverse and knowledgeable Board to assist the Executive Director in meeting goals.

The Arb has made improvements to the diversity of the Board in regards to the skills and knowledge they can each contribute.

1. Lori Scharenbroich
2. Chris Schucker
3. Ben Berghuis

B. Objective: Increase staff capacity by adding to employee roster, specifically in the areas of education, outreach, and maintenance.

The Arb has made staff changes in order to align with our future goals. To maintain the grounds more effectively and plan for future management, the Arb invested in an additional maintenance crew member that will train under the current manager. The Arb also created an Events and Education Manager position in order to increase facility/grounds rental revenue and concentrate on expanding our nature education programs. The Arb also hired a new Volunteer and Office Coordinator which took on more of a marketing and outreach role so we can reach beyond our campus.

C. Objective: Increase the volunteer roster to provide greater capacity to the maintenance and administrative teams.

The volunteer base has not only grown but I believe the engagement of our existing volunteers has also increased. There has been a renewed energy to our volunteers, particularly the Master

Gardeners, which has allowed us to complete essential projects to improve the member and visitor experience here at the Arb. The hiring of Lacey Dobozenski was a landmark decision in increasing the communication to volunteers and notifying volunteers of opportunities even in the winter season.

D. **Objective: Foster and create partnerships that will assist with meeting our goals, not distract from them.**

Current partnerships (excludes individual donors):
Considered new or renewed relationships

Nature Network

Brainerd YMCA

Central Lakes College

ISD #181

City of Brainerd

City of Baxter

Crow Wing County

Wondertrek Childrens Museum

Brainerd Nordic Ski Club

Brainerd Master Naturalists

Minnesota Women's Woodland Network

Crow Wing County MG's

Focal Point

Brainerd Noon Sertoma Club

Brainerd Rotary Club

Brainerd Lions

BNI – Lakes Country Connections

Habitat for Humanity

The Nature Conservancy

Greater MN Parks and Trails Commission

Minnesota GreenCorps

Girl Scouts

Lakes Printing

Brainerd Sports Boosters

Boy Scouts

Crow Wing County Vet Services

Crow Wing County SWCD

PORT Group Homes

MN Adult and Teen Challenge

Visit Brainerd

BLAEDC

Sourcewell

Minnesota Department of Natural Resources

Minnesota Pollution Control

Mike's Tree Service/Mike's Mulch

Cuyuna Regional Medical Center

Jim's Electric

Bee-Nay-She Bird Club

Essentia Health

Crow Wing Energized

Family Nature Summit

Initiative Foundation

The Shop

Lakes Area Music Festival

Crossing Arts Alliance

Jack Pine Brewery