



Tall Pines Conservancy

Strategic Plan: 2026-2031

The Challenge

Southeast Wisconsin is rooted in agriculture and has an abundance of lakes, the glistening remnants of Wisconsin's long-ago glacial period. Productive farmland, open fields and forests, rivers and lakes shape our region's flavor and identity and define our rural character—but are under mounting pressure from rapid development and a changing climate. Rising land costs make it appealing for farmers to sell their land for development and make that land much more expensive to conserve. Each year, more working farms disappear, and with them, the local food security, natural resilience, and sense of place they sustain. At the same time, community expectations for access to nature, clean water, and climate-smart land use are growing. This moment calls for urgent, collaborative action to protect the landscapes that connect us—the backbone of this region's rural heritage and community character—before the opportunity to do so is lost.

Our Response

Tall Pines Conservancy exists to preserve the character of place and quality of life in Southeast Wisconsin by conserving the land and water that defines it.

The nexus of land and water is at the heart of our work. As a nationally accredited regional land trust, we bring trusted expertise, deep community roots, strong partnerships with farmers and landowners, and strategic relationships with local governments to the challenge of accelerating land protection. We help farmers ensure the land they love remains in agriculture and we support the uptake of conservation-minded farming practices. We protect and steward ecologically important land. We seek to ensure that communities in our region have access to food and farms, open space, and clean water. Our bottom line: We connect people to the land and work with them to protect and steward the places they love.

Given the challenges ahead, Tall Pines must evolve our capacity, partnerships, and reach to meet the moment and ensure that future generations can enjoy the beauty and benefits of productive farms, clean water, and open space. With a water quality as one driver for our work, our service

area takes in key watersheds in an historically agricultural region that is rapidly developing; we see the need for careful, focused, and strategic geographic expansion, and in that we spirit we are expanding our service area southwest to include the Mukwonago and Scuppernong watersheds and the critical conservation opportunities there. We are seeking strategic alliances with other conservation land trusts to increase impact. We see the need to strengthen community engagement around land and water conservation, to connect more people with our work and invite them to be part our success. Expanding our reach will help us to build the financial and organizational resilience needed to protect land at a larger scale.

Mission

To conserve and care for the lands and waters that shape our past, present, and future.

Rooted in the landscapes and waterways that have long defined southeastern Wisconsin, we work alongside landowners, communities, and supporters to protect the region's farms, waters, and natural places that are under increasing pressure – acting with urgency to preserve the rural character, healthy waters, and quality of life that make this place special for generations to come.

Values

The following core values guide our team in all of our work, both with each other and with our partners and supporters. Some are more aspirational; all are important to us.

- **Inclusive.** We are open and welcoming, genuine and personable. We want people who meet us to feel like they belong with us, as part of Tall Pines' community.
- **Transformative.** When we engage with people, we want them to feel our work is a shared endeavor and that together we can do great things. Because we can.
- **Joyful.** We like to celebrate the wins and have fun. We are enthusiastic about our impact. Our work is deeply rewarding, and we are proud of our accomplishments.
- **Inventive.** We bring ingenuity to our work, seeking practical solutions to problems facing constraints, and leading creatively.
- **Collaborative.** We deeply value our partners and what we are able to do together.
- **Dedicated.** This work takes diligence and resilience. We are in it for the long haul.
- **Respectful and Caring.** We are caring and supportive and work hard to be trustworthy.



Vision

In our ideal future, we envision Southeast Wisconsin where productive farms, healthy waterways, and connected natural landscapes sustain thriving communities.

Over the next five years, we envision:

- **Dramatically more land protected and connected, and in ways that measurably improve water and soil health.** We will double or triple our protected lands acreage over the next decade, from 3,500 acres to 7,000 acres or more, with intentional land protection projects where we want to connect with new people. We will be proactive and targeted in our acquisitions, clearly identifying our conservation goals. We will use various tools to ensure public benefit and bring the desired results – whether that is protection of prime soils or key habitat, visibility, opportunity for public access or educational programming, or a combination of those.
- **More people engaged directly in the work.** Through selective access and education, we will expand our base to attract more people to our cause – and specifically, a younger and more diverse network of supporters. This connected and engaged community of supporters will understand the importance of conservation and translate that sentiment into financial support for land protection. In the places where we work, we will strengthen partnerships and develop advocates and champions for conservation.
- **Broader base of financial support.** We will mobilize and cultivate our support base to build a robust, innovative fund for land acquisition and long-term stewardship. We will work collaboratively with partners and on our own to secure the funding needed.

To accomplish this, Tall Pines will be thriving, with capacity to match our vision. We will:

- Develop the **internal team and partnerships** needed to operate proactively.
- Attract **resilient, dynamic funding for operations**

Strategic Directions

To move toward our vision, we are pursuing four impact strategies and one operational capacity strategy.



Strategy 1: Strategic Conservation

Pursue focused and intentional land conservation, aligned with our core purpose and driven by conservation values.

Why this matters:

We will clearly define our conservation agenda, focusing on protecting properties that enhance our vision. We will be proactive, focused, and intentional about our land protection and stewardship: not just more parcels but thinking at a landscape scale, focusing on proximity, adjacency, and contiguity to protect a critical mass of lands around priority areas to create visible, resilient environmental corridors and natural areas and to help support agricultural viability. We will link farmland protection with measurable water quality gains and soil health / climate resilience practices. Being intentional about all of this will require deliberate relationship building with key landowners and partner organizations in the coming years. Finally, closer to our region's population centers, we will consider smaller farms for visibility and local food production alongside large-acre preservation.

Focus areas:

- **Strategic conservation planning.** Evolve our current project selection criteria into a conservation priority framework that guides and streamlines our process for all land protection, stewardship, and partnership decisions. Ensure decisions are clearly aligned with our strategic priorities and move us toward our vision, informed by such criteria as landscape connectivity, water quality impact, agricultural viability, habitat value, climate resilience, and community benefit.
- **Proactive landowner engagement.** Build long-term relationships with priority landowners and agricultural partners in targeted focus areas to proactively advance conservation opportunities before development pressure intensifies.
- **Conservation easement stewardship.** Strengthen working relationships with easement landowners through stewardship and technical support, peer-to-peer engagement, and ongoing connection to Tall Pines as conservation partners and supporters.
- **Strategic fee ownership.** Continue to pursue strategic property ownership and use fee-owned properties to demonstrate best practices in stewardship, expand public access and connection to conserved lands, support education programming, and catalyze broader conservation impact.



- **Collaborative conservation partnerships.** Pursue strategic alliances, shared initiatives, and innovative conservation tools that expand regional conservation capacity and accelerate protection outcomes.

Measures of success:

- Protected an additional **3,500+ acres of farmland and natural areas**, with at least **75% located within identified priority conservation focus areas**.
- Engaged at least **15 easement landowners** in advanced stewardship practices such as habitat restoration, prescribed grazing, invasive species management, soil health improvements, or volunteer stewardship leadership.
- Implemented **at least one major strategic partnership, alliance, or organizational integration** that significantly expand Tall Pines' regional conservation impact and long-term capacity.
- At least **50% of easement landowners** making annual philanthropic contributions to Tall Pines.

Strategy 2: Community Engagement

Inspire action by engaging more people directly in our work.

Why this matters:

There is extraordinary pressure for us to increase our conservation impact, because time is of the essence as our region continues to develop, and there is no way for us to do it all ourselves. Engaging the public in our work through multiple means – volunteerism on restoration projects, increased conservation education programming – will help people understand the value of our work. People love what they know, and they care for what they love. Giving people hands-on experiences on our land and in our watersheds will set the foundation for growing our base of support and will help build the next generation of land stewards.

Focus areas:

- **Conservation experiences and education.** Create meaningful opportunities for people of all ages to experience conserved lands through education programming, recreation, stewardship activities, and community events.



- **Youth engagement and leadership.** Cultivate the next generation of conservation stewards by expanding youth -focused programming, partnerships, internships, and hands-on outdoor learning opportunities.
- **Volunteer stewardship and public engagement.** Build a strong volunteer community that actively contributes to restoration, stewardship, advocacy, and public engagement efforts across Tall Pines properties and partner lands.
- **Partner-led programming.** Invite volunteers or partner organizations – such as youth-serving organizations, universities, conservation organizations, community groups, and outdoor educators – to help guide or even spearhead structured educational programming aligned with Tall Pines’ mission and vision on Tall Pines-conserved lands.

Measures of success:

- Engaged at least **1,000 people annually** through Tall Pines programs, volunteer opportunities, tours, events, and educational activities.
- Established recurring youth programming at Ravensholme and other Tall Pines properties serving at least **250 youth annually**.
- Developed volunteer staff capacity and built an active volunteer corps of at least **100 annual volunteers**, including site stewards, restoration volunteers, educators, and event volunteers.
- Established partnerships with at least **10 educational or community organizations** delivering programming on Tall Pines lands.
- Increased participation from younger and more geographically diverse audiences across the service area.

Strategy 3: Smart Growth

Promote and enable informed land use decision-making and balanced growth to support thriving rural landscapes.

Why this matters:

Direct land protection is insufficient to protect all the places in our region that are threatened by development pressure. The other major lever we can push on is policy. Through policy, local planning and zoning commissions and local town councils can protect local farmland and waterways. Governing bodies are more likely to adopt sound environmental policy if they



understand the potential impacts of regulations they are considering. That's where we come in: with our expertise, we can help them make informed decisions that are good for farmland conservation, good for water quality, good for the environment, good for community. While staying studiously apolitical, we can help policymakers take the long view, consider policy implications, ensure development and density go where they belong, and protect rural character. Side by side with that work, we can similarly help community members throughout our region to understand the potential impacts of policy under consideration, so that they can mobilize and bring their grassroots voice as well.

Focus areas:

- **Trusted conservation expertise.** Serve as a credible regional resource for local governments, planning bodies, and community leaders on farmland preservation, watershed protection, conservation development, and rural land use planning.
- **Relationship-building with local governments.** Build proactive working relationships with municipalities, counties, regional planning entities, and conservation partners in priority growth corridors and watersheds.
- **Community education and civic awareness.** *Help residents understand how land use decisions affect water quality, farmland viability, housing patterns, transportation, taxation, and community character.*
- **Regional collaboration and thought leadership.** Participate in regional planning conversations and coalitions that shape the future growth and conservation of Southeast Wisconsin.

Measures of success:

- Maintained active working relationships with at least **12 municipalities, counties, or planning bodies** across the service area.
- Influenced adoption or advancement of conservation-supportive planning, zoning, farmland preservation, or watershed protection policies that **impact at least 5 communities**.
- Recruited board or advisory members with expertise in land use planning, real estate, conservation finance, municipal leadership, or watershed management.
- Delivered at least **10 public education presentations, workshops, or community forums annually** related to land use, conservation, or watershed protection.



Strategy 4: Advancing Our Work

Expand our reach to new constituencies and expand the base of financial support for conservation.

Why this matters:

Our region includes people who have lived here for generations and people who moved here last week. It includes legacy farmers, longtime conservation folks, hunters and anglers, people who live in town or in the big city and love to get out for a drive in the countryside... and all of them are current or potential supporters of Tall Pines and our work. We want to bring people together over shared values. We have a committed base of support, but it is small and a lot of people don't know us. While maintaining ties to our current base, it will be critical for us to increase our visibility, promote our work to a broader audience, and strengthen our brand awareness through strategic communications. In a highly competitive funding environment, we need to inspire people in the region to learn about, explore, care for, and actively support the region's lands and waters, and to translate their love of this place and the outdoors into financial support for conservation through Tall Pines.

Focus areas:

- **Brand visibility and storytelling.** Increase awareness of Tall Pines and the importance of land and water conservation through compelling storytelling, strategic communications, media engagement, and consistent brand identity.
- **Audience development and outreach.** Build relationships with new and emerging audiences across the region, including conservation-minded residents, farmers, urban edge communities, outdoor enthusiasts, and youth in priority geographies.
- **Culture of philanthropy.** Cultivate a mindset of "philanthropy facilitators" across the organization in which board, staff, volunteers, and partners actively contribute to donor engagement, stewardship, and fundraising success.
- **Development systems and capacity.** Strengthen fundraising infrastructure, staffing, donor stewardship systems, planned giving efforts, and campaign readiness to support long-term organizational sustainability.
- **Campaign and major gift growth.** Prepare for and execute a successful capital and/or comprehensive campaign to expand conservation impact and long-term stewardship capacity.

Measures of success:



- Hired and retained dedicated development leadership and supporting fundraising capacity.
- Completed and implemented a refreshed brand identity and messaging framework.
- Successfully completed a **\$15 million comprehensive campaign** supporting land protection, stewardship, facilities, and organizational sustainability.
- Increased our annual operating revenue to **\$1.5 million**.
- Increased **total annual donors by 25%, donor retention by 30%, and average annual giving by 15%** over baseline.
- Strengthened Tall Pines' long-term financial resilience through growth in unrestricted funding, planned giving commitments, and stewardship or endowment support.
- Grown donor participation and major gift support across all major regions within the expanded service area.
- Increased public awareness and engagement metrics, including **growth in email subscribers (25%), social media reach (50%), event attendance (30%), website traffic (25%), and earned media coverage (30%)**.

Strategy 5: Organizational Capacity

Attract and support board and staff members whose talent, knowledge, and networks will help us move toward our vision.

Why this matters:

It is crucial that the board and staff teams remain aligned on purpose, vision, and strategic direction, and that teams share accountability and responsibility for organizational success.

Focus areas:

- **Organizational culture and accountability.** Foster a mission-driven culture grounded in shared ownership and transparency, empowering board and staff to deliver on shared goals through clear roles, regular reporting, and consistent performance feedback while leaning into the values of being joyful, transformative, inventive.
- **Board development and governance.** Develop board capabilities and capacity to move Tall Pines to the next level of governance – including opportunity thinking, strategic mindset, fundraising skills, and ambassadorship to build excitement for Tall Pines' work.



- **Staff capacity and professionalization.** Expand and professionalize staffing capacity in priority areas including development, stewardship, communications, and operations.
- **Internal systems and communication.** Enhance communication and collaboration among staff, board, and volunteers through mentorship, orientation, and use of accessible internal communication tools.
- **Leadership development and succession.** Build long-term organizational resilience through mentorship, leadership development, and succession planning for board and staff leadership roles.

Measures of success:

- Established and consistently used systems for board and staff onboarding, reporting, goal-setting, and performance evaluation to inform accountability, leadership development, and governance decisions.
- Achieved high levels of board and staff alignment around strategic priorities as measured through annual assessments or retreats.
- Maintained strong staff retention, a positive organizational culture, and a fully staffed organizational structure aligned with strategic priorities, including dedicated leadership in development and other identified priority functions.
- Achieved **100% annual board participation in philanthropy** and meaningful engagement in fundraising or ambassadorship activities.
- Increased board diversity in expertise, geography, age, and professional background aligned with organizational needs.

