



# *Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice Strategic Plan*



Western Reserve  
Land Conservancy  
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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This report is the culmination of six months of collaborative effort of the DEIJ Working Committee:

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Western Reserve Land Conservancy wants to extend a special thanks to The Diversity Center of Northeast Ohio for their guidance and leadership in helping to craft this DEIJ Strategic Plan. Founded in 1927, The Diversity Center of Northeast Ohio is committed to creating communities where all people are connected, respected, and valued.

We recognize that our commitment to DEIJ is an ongoing journey where we learn more and adapt our practices for a more equitable, just, diverse, and inclusive organization. As such, this DEIJ Strategic Plan is a living document, and will receive updates and addenda as our learning evolves.

# DEIJ VISION STATEMENT

*In the absence of relative environmental equity, human equality is impossible.*

**We envision that our entire service area is endowed with beautiful, healthy, and accessible environmental conditions, that all of the people of our region directly benefit from the restoration and preservation of natural resources, and that previously under-resourced communities have the same access and opportunities related to our field as the communities and institutions that have traditionally held power and advantage. The Land Conservancy itself is comprised of and works closely with people who reflect the rich diversity of our region. We will continue to lead the American conservation community to become more diverse, equitable, inclusive, and just.**



# HISTORICAL CONTEXT & BACKGROUND

Western Reserve Land Conservancy's mission is to provide the people of our region with essential natural assets through land conservation and restoration. We envision thriving, prosperous communities nourished by vibrant natural lands, working farms, and healthy cities. Nationally accredited by the Land Trust Alliance, the Land Conservancy is the largest land trust in Ohio and one of the largest in the country. Established in 2006, we are the product of the merger of 13 conservation organizations and now serve a 28-county region which stretches from the Sandusky Bay to the Pennsylvania border, and from Lake Erie to Steubenville.

Historically, most of the land conservancies that merged to create Western Reserve Land Conservancy evolved out of and operated within predominantly white communities. In 2006, when eight local land trusts merged to create Western Reserve Land Conservancy, we began our journey of learning how to advocate for and partner with rural communities, primarily farmers and working-class landowners. On this journey, we also confirmed through our work that people and all organizations of people are a reflection of cultural and environmental forces. Change must be both intentional and persistently pursued to be successful. Within our service area there exists:

- Inadequate green space, tree canopy, and green infrastructure in urban areas and in rural communities which lack resources.
- Inequitable distribution of conservation and restoration funding and projects.
- A lack of Black, Latino, Asian, Indigenous and other persons of color owning and preserving land.
- Barriers to career opportunities and lack of outreach to people and communities of color in the conservation field that lead to exclusion of these groups.
- Numerous locations where people with disabilities do not have equal access to natural resource amenities.

To that end, we launched Thriving Communities in 2011 with programs that dramatically expanded the organization's impact, establishing how the traditionally rural and exurban field of land conservation could pivot to apply its unique approach to work in the urban core.

Over the past 10 years, Thriving Communities has achieved amazing results, from lobbying the Ohio legislature to pass legislation for county land banks and then generating a groundswell of financial support to fund them, to leading the way on halting the alarming loss of tree canopy in the City of Cleveland. There have been many accomplishments to change systems of racial inequity, to create a more diverse organization, and to restore and preserve environmental conditions in our service area.

**We are proud of our DEIJ efforts to date, yet much more remains to be done to address biases, prejudices, and inequity in our daily work, in the communities we serve, and in the policies and practices that shape conservation and restoration work overall.**

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Western Reserve Land Conservancy is committed to achieving thriving, prosperous communities nourished by vibrant lands, working farms, and healthy cities for current and future generations of Ohioans. Our work includes accelerating the pace of conservation efforts to meet the pressures of sprawling development, protecting habitat for rare and endangered species, opening new parks and preserves to expand public access to the outdoors, educating children and teens about the wonders and importance of nature, and replacing vacancy with vital trees and greenspaces in our cities.

We are adept at forming partnerships, securing funding, utilizing political and social influence, advocating, and initiating and managing complex projects. Over the last decade our work demonstrates the transformational effect we can have on under resourced communities. Through partnerships, we have raised \$950 million in Ohio to address the blight that destroyed so many formerly redlined (and other) neighborhoods. Our research and advocacy are leading to significant policy changes in the Clean Ohio Green Space Conservation Program (Clean Ohio). These changes are leveling the playing field for where and how funds are distributed in Cuyahoga County, making possible many more grants to distressed communities of color. Our institutional knowledge and broad expertise contribute to our success in urban revitalization and farmland and natural areas preservation and restoration. We can contribute to a more equitable and just world by:

- Bringing together stakeholders to work for a shared goal.
- Securing funding and bi-partisan political support and advocating for policies that create a fair distribution of resources to all people.
- Identifying project and outreach opportunities that respect and resonate with the voice of each community.
- Conserving and restoring land and water resources and replenishing the tree canopy.
- Revisiting internal standards and practices to improve how we serve our region.
- Recruiting Staff and Board members that reflect the communities we serve.
- Without limitation, compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) will be a priority for our entire organization.

Our work meets at the intersection of people and the environment. Human impact on the natural world in the built environment has created a great need for our work. Our work benefits all living things and yet it is primarily designed to create a healthy habitat for human beings. Everyone deserves equitable access to clean air and clean water, public greenspace, and other essential natural amenities. Our vision is that our region will be filled with abundant natural endowments that nurture all of the people of our region, that all of the people of our region will feel included in the opportunities associated with conservation and restoration, and that all of our resources will be deployed to create health, equity, and fairness.



# METHODOLOGY

In September 2021, the staff of the Land Conservancy participated in an organizational Culture and Climate Survey. With the help of The Diversity Center of Northeast Ohio, Western Reserve Land Conservancy convened the DEIJ Working Committee, comprised of members of the existing DEIJ Staff Committee and members of the Land Conservancy's Board of Trustees and Senior Management Team that reviewed data from the 36 respondents who participated in the survey. The committee then determined strengths and opportunities for growth within the organization's culture and climate. The analysis was used as a guiding tool for the Working Committee to draft the DEIJ Strategic Plan with three organizational areas of focus: Workforce, Workplace, and Marketplace & Community.

During the development of this Strategic Plan, members of the DEIJ Working Committee were placed into sub-committees responsible for each of the three areas of organization focus:

- The Workforce Team developed strategies intended to influence the Land Conservancy's workforce and to grow talent to reflect the diversity of the communities we serve and live in.
- The Workplace Team developed strategies to nurture an inclusion-driven culture that encourages employees to authentically engage and live in Western Reserve Land Conservancy's organizational values.
- The Marketplace & Community Team focused on developing mutually beneficial relationships with industry partners and government agencies, and on continuing to grow our relationships with external clients, constituents, and stakeholders.

When the DEIJ Strategic Report is complete, the DEIJ Working Committee will be dissolved and the DEIJ Staff Committee will continue forward with implementing and tracking our progress towards our DEIJ goals. The Land Conservancy's DEIJ Staff Committee was established in 2018. Committee members voluntarily participate and only two Management Team members are included, ensuring that Land Conservancy staff are raising DEIJ awareness amongst their peers.

# WORKFORCE STRATEGIES

**We develop our internal workforce and grow talent to reflect the diversity of our clients and the communities we serve and live in.**

## STRATEGY 1: STRUCTURE OF DEIJ COMMITMENTS

To ensure long-term focus and commitment to the strategies within this DEIJ Action Plan, the Land Conservancy will employ a designated staff member with DEIJ work as the key component of their role. This individual will have the continued support of the DEIJ Staff Committee, the Management Team, and the Board of Trustees to ensure DEIJ focus and improvement. After budget approval, the Management Team will mobilize the approval and hiring of this position by the end of FY2023 with the support of the Board of Trustees and the Hiring Committee. In the meantime, the DEIJ Staff Committee will solicit new members to the committee by the 3rd Quarter of FY22 and will complete development of its charter by the 4th Quarter of FY22.

## STRATEGY 2: HIRING/RECRUITMENT

While survey respondents reported that "meaningful interactions with those different than me is an essential part of my professional development" (95.2% agree/strongly agreed), 46.35% said that they do not have "ample opportunities to meet people of different racial, cultural, or ethnic backgrounds".

This data demonstrates an opportunity for increasing the number of candidates from diverse backgrounds hired for full-time and internship positions. To achieve this goal, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), The Maxine Goodman Levin College of Urban Affairs, community colleges, and organizations committed to DEIJ principles will be included and prioritized within expanded job posting and recruitment efforts, especially within greater Cleveland. The DEIJ Staff Committee will continue to nurture active partnerships

with Khnemu Foundation, Rid-All, the Black Environmental Leaders, and other organizations led by people of color. We will also actively engage new partners. Expanding these relationships will include hosting and promoting social and networking events that draw a racially diverse community.

Career pipeline opportunities with the Cleveland Metropolitan School District will also be explored on an ongoing basis; and, in 2023, a targeted internship program will be created to provide work experience to a diverse pool of candidates from local areas.

## STRATEGY 3: POLICY/PROCEDURE REVIEW

To ensure a DEIJ focus is reflected in all Human Resource policies and procedures, the Land Conservancy Employee Handbook will be reviewed and updated with staff input. A DEIJ lens will be applied to the review of all existing policies and procedures and also to the creation of any new ones. The handbook will include a policy and procedure detailing a formal system for filing and resolving DEIJ concerns in the workplace.

## STRATEGY 4: BENEFITS REVIEW

Equity is crucial within benefit plans to ensure fair treatment of all staff, and to help encourage increased retention rates across the organization. To this end, the Land Conservancy benefits plans will be reviewed with regularity, and any new plans will be created through a DEIJ lens. The staff survey will be used periodically as a guide to determine areas of potential policy and procedure improvement. The long-term goal is to have comprehensive benefits plans that meet the needs of our employees.



# WORKPLACE STRATEGIES

**Our inclusion-driven culture encourages employees to authentically engage in and live our organizational DEIJ values.**

## **STRATEGY 5: TRAINING**

The work of moving toward a more equitable society through DEIJ is not a task or one-time accomplishment, but an ongoing commitment to engagement, learning, and growth. Analysis of the Culture and Climate Survey revealed 52.38% of respondents said there are not adequate programs provided for employees to learn about different groups of people and other issues of diversity, and 47.62% do not feel that they have been given the tools to deal with conflicts with individuals of different backgrounds. The DEIJ Staff Committee will work to develop conflict resolution tools and processes.

In light of this, we feel it is important for all Staff and Board members to participate in DEIJ training that can be utilized in their daily workplace interactions. The forthcoming designated DEIJ-focused staff position will include responsibility for coordinating an ongoing DEIJ training schedule for current Staff and Board and will also incorporate DEIJ training into the on-boarding process for new employees and Trustees.

We will reach out to other organizations that have successful DEIJ on-boarding processes in place to help determine what would fit best for the creation of the Land Conservancy's process. Connecting with other organizations will also provide opportunities for sharing of training programs.

A DEIJ survey and data collection project will be utilized to assess organizational needs and focus training accordingly. Researching both internal and external avenues to continue with additional formal DEIJ training will continue. One particular area of interest is training on the history of land ownership in our region, land conservation, equitable access, redlining, and other issues relevant to DEIJ within our footprint. The designated DEIJ staff member, working with local partners, universities, and national partners will develop training courses to better understand barriers to our mission to make greenspace available to all.

We will continue exploring and developing a DEIJ library of educational resources that is readily available to the Staff and Board, keep the library up to date, and develop a regular internal communication about the resources available.

## **STRATEGY 6: EMPOWER STAFF TO DEVELOP EMPLOYEE RESOURCE GROUPS**

The envisioned climate of the Land Conservancy is one that permeates the organization and allows Staff to excel in their work, collaboration, and problem solving. The Culture and Climate Survey responses showed 33.33% of respondents Agree or Strongly Agree that "During my time at this organization, I have felt isolated or out of place", and 25% of respondents Agree or Strongly Agree that "At work I feel I need to minimize various characteristics of my group culture to 'fit the culture'."

We strive to create a culture where employees feel comfortable creating an Employee Resource Group (ERG). To ensure this, the DEIJ staff member will work with the support of Human Resources and the Management Team to create an environment for Staff to feel comfortable creating ERGs and a structure for how to do so inclusively. They will also formalize practices and guidelines for the creation of ERGs and add these to the Employee Handbook.

## **STRATEGY 7: BE A LEADER WORKING WITH OTHER CONSERVATION ORGANIZATIONS TO INTEGRATE DEIJ PRACTICES AND PRINCIPLES**

The Land Conservancy is viewed nationally as a leader in what is commonly referred to as "Community Conservation", which basically refers to working in communities (often, but not limited to primarily Black, Latino, Indigenous, and Asian communities) that have been historically neglected or overlooked by the white-led environmental and conservation community. We have been asked to share our journey with others in Michigan, New York, and other states; we have taught national seminars on our evolution into DEIJ work; and we have been engaged to advise other land trusts how they can create programs focused on urban revitalization resulting in increased environmental equity. That said, there is still much work to be done in this space. With the ultimate goal of broadening conversations with partners and helping to promote a more globally synergistic effect, we will seek co-involvement with additional land conservation groups (such as Conservationists of Color) to advance DEIJ practices and principles. We will assess who the current leaders are in DEIJ-focused land conservancy work and what other land conservation groups are doing in this regard. We will determine how the Land Conservancy is already leading and how we can help the broader conservancy community be proactive toward positive change. We will research the advantages of an advocacy strategy at the Land Trust Alliance level and pursue engagement accordingly.



# MARKETPLACE & COMMUNITY STRATEGIES

We are committed to developing mutually beneficial relationships with our partners in this work and continuing to grow our relationships with external communities and constituents.

## STRATEGY 8: AMERICANS WITH DISABILITIES ACT (ADA) WILL BE A HALLMARK OF OUR ORGANIZATION AND WORK

Parks and recreation facilities play an important part in the life of a community and its members. Unfortunately, many parks and recreation facilities were built without accessibility in mind. Because of this, individuals with disabilities and their families often cannot participate in programs and activities offered at such places.

As we continue to build parks and preserves, we will endeavor to reduce barriers and will comply with ADA, including accessible parking spaces, trails, toilet facilities, and more. We will also continue to innovate in virtual experiences and programming for people with disabilities. We will develop the capacity to be a regional and national advocate for ADA conservation and restoration, we will utilize our research and lobbying capacity to increase awareness of inequities and to increase access to funding, and we will explore the idea of creating or joining a national platform that ensures that all people will have equitable access to the parks and preserves we design and create in our region and nation.

We will actively seek out ways to ensure our written materials, website, and publications are accessible to those with disabilities.

## STRATEGY 9: MAINTAIN AND GROW RELATIONSHIPS WITH CITY AND COUNTY LEADERS ACROSS OUR REGION

Our service area currently includes a 28-county region where relationships with city and county leaders are critical. Our work is guided by those who invite us to help create solutions to revitalize Ohio's urban centers, conserve natural lands and working farms, protect biodiversity, mitigate the effects of climate change, and support efforts to promote environmental equity and justice.

By making cities healthier and more attractive places to live, we can address the root cause of natural land loss: urban sprawl. Northeast Ohio is a microcosm of a growing American problem. We've spread our metropolitan region and its shrinking resources dangerously thin. We're sprawling without growth when we should be growing smarter and together. And we can help to improve the environmental conditions for all people in our region, not just for those lucky enough to live in places with abundant natural resources.

We are focused on re-greening vacant lots, planting and distributing thousands of trees, and creating much-needed urban parks and preserves. Many urban communities have faced decades of redlining, poverty, and disinvestment that manifested in neighborhoods that are under-resourced, including lacking tree canopy, parks, and greenspaces. We are working with many partners to begin to rectify these past harms in our cities, which pose substantial threats to public health and community well-being. This holistic approach to conservation and restoration maximizes our organization's impact upon our region.

We look to create a model that tightly focuses steps to increase the pace of conservation and restoration across our service region and responds to the unique needs of each community.

## STRATEGY 10: BUILD HEALTHY AND RESILIENT CLEVELAND NEIGHBORHOODS THROUGH VACANT LAND REUSE

We seek to build upon previous investments in vacant land planning to establish an environmental justice framework for vacant land reuse and management in the City of Cleveland. There are over 30,000 vacant lots in the city, many of which experience illegal dumping and pose a legitimate health and safety threat to residents. Creative reuse and management can turn vacant land into a tremendous public asset that not only stabilizes neighborhoods, but also addresses pressing environmental justice and public health challenges. We will look to create a model that can be replicated for other communities in Ohio and even nationally. Our Thriving Communities program is well suited to lead this task.

We will convene groups and recommend strategies for better positioning and empowering people of color and organizations working on equity issues to address placemaking and repurposing vacant land. We will engage in relationships with the City of Cleveland, local community development corporations, and other stakeholders to create a coalition to identify vacant lots and a system that ensures the work is managed within the City of Cleveland. We will do this by creating a predictable and easily accessible online dashboard that communities can access and that the Land Conservancy will use to lead the strategy on repurposing vacant land into revitalized community assets. The online tool will provide associated metrics for how to repurpose vacant land. Each land reuse project and intervention will differ within each community depending on a variety of conditions (e.g., topography of the land, community engagement, prioritization, etc.).

## STRATEGY 11: MAKE LAND CONSERVATION MORE ACCESSIBLE TO UNDER-RESOURCED COMMUNITIES

In order to comply with Land Trust Alliance Accreditation Standards, we are required to endow our conservation easement stewardship obligations. Several years ago, we began to require landowners to contribute a stewardship gift of \$7,500 when they finalized their easement. \$2,500 of that gift covers our hard costs for the transaction and the remaining \$5,000 goes into a restricted fund for ongoing stewardship and future legal defense of the easement. This practice has created barriers for some landowners to voluntarily preserve their land through our programs, which deprives them of the ability to enjoy their land knowing that it will always be preserved by a large and enduring organization. This policy affects historic inequities in landownership including women, people with disabilities, people of color, and working-class landowners. We will explore alternative fee options for both donated and purchased conservation easements and implement a fee waiver program at a small scale for landowners of limited financial means. This will be rolled out to a small group of landowners first to better understand the challenges and rewards of such a program before broadcasting it to a larger landowner audience. At the end of the pilot, we will develop a financial model that will fund some or all of the cost for eligible landowners.



## STRATEGY 12: INFLUENCE COMMITTEES THAT MAKE DECISIONS REGARDING PUBLIC FUNDING

Lobbying for changes to policy on public funding sources will create a more equitable distribution of funding, giving organizations working in and with traditionally under-resourced communities a new source of funding to continue their work. Nontraditional public funds recipients will have access to funding sources for projects in their communities, specifically community development corporations and other nonprofits that may not have a primary focus on an environmental agenda but are doing environmental work.

For example, we will build upon changes made in Cuyahoga County's Natural Resource Assistance Council (NRAC) 1 for projects that are receiving Clean Ohio funds. We will expand efforts to other Clean Ohio NRACs across other counties to adopt changes that will make it easier for organizations in under-resourced communities to be eligible for funding.

We will also continue to share our research on funding disparities, and we will seek to change policy in other programs that have established discriminatory funding policies or practices.

## STRATEGY 13: OUTREACH TO LANDOWNERS OF COLOR

Our goal is to see the number of engaged landowners of color increase annually. With more landowners coming from diverse backgrounds and experiences involved with the Land Conservancy, we hope to expand our awareness of DEIJ issues and develop products and programming that will be important in the continuing partnership with these landowners. To date there have been no landowners of color who have engaged in conservation easement transactions with the Land Conservancy. And very few Black- or Latino-owned parcels have been purchased or acquired to become parks and preserves. We intend to use census data to identify landowners of color, develop a strategy for engagement, and then involve these landowners in our conservation and restoration work.



## STRATEGY 14: SEEK CONSERVATION AND PRESERVATION PROJECTS IN BLACK, LATINO, ASIAN, AND INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES THAT ENGAGE RESIDENTS AND PARTNERS

To align the perception of who we are as an organization with that which is stated in our DEIJ Vision Statement, and to demonstrate our authentic commitment to people and communities of color, we will:

- Continue to work with communities to co-create equitable and high-quality biodiverse green spaces that are clean, safe, and healthy within traditionally underserved communities of color.
- Increase outreach to historically under-resourced communities and foster an interest in conservation work with a commitment to involve community members throughout the entire project, from planning to completion.
- Use the collective resources of the Land Conservancy to support and empower organizations and leaders of color with diverse backgrounds and experiences.
- Expand our consortium of contractors of color who will be engaged to carryout projects we lead.

## STRATEGY 15: LAND CONSERVANCY PROGRAMS TO ENGAGE COMMUNITIES AND HOUSEHOLDS OF COLOR

We will know we are performing successfully on this goal when we have increased Land Conservancy programming dedicated to under-resourced communities, landowners of color, and others. One way we will work toward this is through outreach to community organizations to promote our Tree Steward program and encourage people to sign up and get involved in tree planting and tree maintenance in their communities.

Educating the next generation of conservationists is important. We will seek to partner with a number of organizations to co-create learning opportunities on nature education and recreational experiences for youth participants ensuring the next generation of conservationists are better represented in our region and nationally, leading to a more inclusive movement.

We will also continue to partner with organizations such as Boys and Girls Clubs, Cleveland Police Foundation, Khnemu Foundation, Rid-All Green Partnership, and others to engage youth participants in education and workforce development programs.





Western Reserve Land Conservancy's DEIJ Action Plan is available upon request. It includes detailed information about each of the strategies mentioned in this report, including strategy leads, deadlines, and results.