

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The Conservancy Lands Plan 2018-2023 is a guiding document for City of Middleton’s land stewardship activities on its conservancy lands.

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## PLAN OBJECTIVES

### *The Plan intends to:*

- Incorporate changes to conservancy lands since 2011
- Document past land stewardship activities in conservancies and summarize general conditions
- Update system-wide map of Middleton's conservancies
- Provide recommendations for management, policy, funding, development and staffing
- Help City staff focus management priorities
- Highlight opportunities for enhancement
- Seek and incorporate public input about conservancy lands

### *The Plan does not intend to:*

- Replace individual conservancy area Master Plans
- Provide recommendations related to Middleton's parks and recreation facilities (e.g. sports fields, playgrounds).

## STATEMENT OF NEED

The prior Conservancy Lands Plan expired in 2016, therefore, a five-year update is overdue. An up to date plan is a standard component for grant eligibility.

## SUMMARY OF THE CONSERVANCY LANDS SYSTEM

Middleton's conservancy lands system provides over 835 acres of open space and represents approximately 14 percent of land within the City. The conservancy system includes both conservancy lands and the trails within these lands.

Conservancy lands are public lands managed for natural vegetation, habitat, water quality and passive recreation. Although conservancy lands vary in size, vegetative communities, landscape features, management priorities, and uses, most conservancies share some or all of the following characteristics:

- Unique plant communities, wildlife, and/or geology.
- Ecological function, such as protecting water quality or preserving wildlife habitat.
- Maintained as natural area and restored to native plant community.
- Provides opportunities for passive recreation, education, and volunteering.

## VALUES OF CONSERVANCY LANDS

Conservancy Lands provide numerous benefits to Middleton and the surrounding community. Values of Middleton's conservancy lands include ecological services, recreation, education, economic benefits, and public health.

### PUBLIC INTEREST AND PUBLIC SUPPORT

The conservancy lands system is a defining feature of the Middleton and contributes to the quality of life for Middleton residents.

Conservancy lands are used and enjoyed by residents of all ages and abilities, ranging from Middleton's elementary school children to seniors, and from active exercisers to individuals with mobility impairments.

Conservancy lands additionally provide cultural, spiritual, and aesthetic values, such as the enjoyment of "spending time in nature" and providing scenic vistas throughout the city.

*The beauty and accessibility of the conservancy lands are a key element of what makes Middleton such as desirable place to live – Survey respondent, 2018*

The Conservancy Lands Plan Update Survey and public meetings conducted for this Plan indicated that Middleton residents and other conservancy lands users support active restoration of conservancy lands and advocate for the protection of these areas and the wildlife and birds they support.

### RECREATION AND PUBLIC HEALTH

Restored natural communities provide unique recreational opportunities such as wildlife viewing, birdwatching, nature photography, interpretation, education and volunteering. Natural areas also promote physical activity and enhance enjoyment of such activities, like walking, running, biking, mountain biking, and cross-country skiing, by providing an "in nature" experience.

Recreating in nature, or simply having access to nature provides physical and mental health benefits.

### ECONOMIC BENEFITS

Public lands have an immensely positive impact on Middleton's economy through direct spending, attracting and retaining businesses and residents, increasing property values, and promoting recreation-related expenditures. Conservancy lands additionally provide economic benefits through the provision of ecological services such as water quality protection, air quality protection, storm and flood water management, and mitigation of climate change impacts.

ECOLOGICAL SERVICES

Protection of Middleton’s conservancy lands preserves the value of these natural areas into the future. The upfront expenses of managing conservancy lands for restored native communities are offset by the values provided by restored land. These values include inherent ecological value, provision of ecological services, water and air quality, climate change mitigation, and increased public interest.

<i>Inherent ecological value</i>	Nature has intrinsic value beyond the value that it provides to people. Wisconsin’s endemic native communities demand protection due to their irreplaceability and rarity. Less than 0.01% of Wisconsin’s original (remnant) prairie and oak-dominated communities remain to this day.
<i>Water quality enhancement and mitigation of flood water</i>	Services provided by native communities exceed services provided by degraded (human-modified) landscapes. Services provided by Middleton’s natural areas include protection of water quality through uptake of excess nutrients and sediment in surface water, mitigation of flood water impacts, and mitigation of streambank erosion.
<i>Protection of critical wildlife habitat</i>	Middleton’s conservancy lands protect native plant communities and associated wildlife. Conservancy lands support a variety of wildlife, including grassland birds and pollinator species.
<i>Climate change mitigation</i>	Biodiversity lends to greater adaptability in response to pressures including climate change and human influence. Native species have superior resilience to conditions of flooding and/or drought.
<i>Air quality</i>	Middleton’s conservancy lands release oxygen and reduce carbon dioxide and other air pollutants.

## THE FUTURE OF CONSERVANCY LANDS

This Plan seeks to incorporate past changes to Middleton and its surrounding community as well as plan for projected future changes. Trends include population growth in Middleton and its surrounding communities, increasing infrastructure and reduction of undeveloped land, and increasing demands for outdoor recreation. Such trends are occurring while the need for preserving ecosystem services, such as clean water, is increasingly imperative. Expected stagnant funding and staffing levels put additional pressure on managing conservancy lands. Ecological and economic sustainability are therefore key components of preserving conservancy lands into the future.

Since 2010 Middleton's population has grown 15%, with continued expected population growth through 2040<sup>1</sup>. At the same time that Middleton grows, it also ages. At the County scale, the population of residents over 65 is expected to increase at three times the rate of youths under 19. Middleton seeks to improve user experience for aging seniors through its ongoing accessibility initiatives later discussed in the Plan.

Population growth in Middleton and adjacent municipalities is correlated with increased urbanization and new building development. Development of previously agricultural or open space areas creates new demands for storm water management and reduces wildlife and bird habitat. Anticipating landscape changes in Middleton and the surrounding region is necessary for envisioning the future of Middleton's conservancy lands system, its connectivity to other regional public lands, and its ability to serve ecosystem functions.

At a regional and national scale, interest in outdoor recreation and fitness is experiencing a sustained upward trend<sup>2</sup>. The positive health effects of exercise are well documented and more recently, the positive health effects of spending time in nature are being elucidated. Providing opportunities for exercising concurrently with experiencing nature is an essential element of Middleton's conservancy lands system.

### *Future funding*

Current staffing and funding levels are a constraint on conservancy lands management and enhancement. Future funding, staffing levels, and staff expertise will need to adjust to demands of the conservancy lands system. Future funding of conservancy lands will require contributions through grants and donations, including the Middleton Area Public Lands Endowment (MAPLE).

### *Land management strategies*

Land management strategies guiding recommendations in this Plan include maximizing return on investment of past management efforts, developing and maintaining connections between conservancy lands, protecting vulnerable and ecologically significant areas and incorporating stakeholder investment in restoration and management.

<sup>1</sup> Wisconsin Demographic Services Center. 2013. Population and Household Projections, produced in 2013, based from 2010 Census. Wisconsin Department of Administration. Accessed January 1, 2018. <https://doa.wi.gov>

<sup>2</sup> Outdoor Industry Association. 2017. Wisconsin Outdoor Recreation Economy Report. Accessed February 2, 2018 <https://outdoorindustry.org/resource/wisconsin-outdoor-recreation-economy-report/>

SUMMARY OF CONSERVANCY LANDS GOALS

Conservancy Lands Goals were established in the 2011-2016 Conservancy Lands Plan and updated as part of this Plan process to reflect the changing role of the conservancy lands system. A complete description of the Conservancy Lands Goals and Objectives is listed in Chapter 3.

GOAL 1	Protect and restore native landscapes and designated conservancy lands to maintain and improve natural habitat, scenic beauty, passive recreation and outdoor education for persons of all ages and abilities.
GOAL 2	Expand partnerships for maintenance of conservancy lands and hands-on restoration and learning opportunities for the residents of Middleton.
GOAL 3	Improve water quality within the conservancy lands properties.
GOAL 4	Increase connections between Middleton’s conservancy lands and other adjacent and regional conservation areas including corridors and linkages with other government/municipal lands of similar management.
GOAL 5	Provide adequate funding, management and staffing to oversee the maintenance of conservancy lands.
GOAL 6	Promote conservation of wildlife and wildlife habitat in Middleton’s conservancy lands.



## PLANNING PROCESS

The planning process was guided by the Public Lands, Recreation and Forestry Department and the Conservancy Lands Committee.

The process involved stakeholder engagement, solicitation of public input through a formal public meeting and a dedicated Conservancy Lands survey. The survey reached 419 respondents.

November 7, 2017	Award of Service approved by Common Council
November 15, 2017	Kick-off meeting with project team including Adaptive Restoration LLC (AR), Resolution Studio, LLC (RS), the Director of Public Lands, Recreation and Forestry, and the Assistant Director of Public Lands and Forestry/Forester. Timeline of project and project scope was discussed.
December 12, 2017	Stakeholder Meeting: AR and RS presented to the Friends of Pheasant Branch Board. Discussed project goals and timeline, and solicited input from the Friends.
December 16, 2017	Stakeholder Meeting: AR and the Director of Public Lands, Recreation and Forestry hosted a walk and talk with the Friends of Kettle Ponds and other interested residents at Tiedeman Pond. The walk and talk provided an open forum for public comment and discussion.
January 1, 2018 - January 31, 2018	The Conservancy Lands Plan Update Survey was open for response through Polco's online platform or printed surveys available at the Middleton Senior Center. Public written comments were solicited and received.
January 20, 2018	Public Input Meeting: AR and the Assistant Director of Public Lands and Forestry/Forester hosted a 2-hour public meeting at the Middleton Public Library, Central Library.
January 24, 2018	AR and RS provided a project update to the Conservancy Lands Committee (CLC). The CLC provided input regarding Conservancy Lands goals and objectives and system facilities maps.
February 28, 2018	AR and RS provided a project update to the CLC. The CLC provided input regarding prioritization of conservancy land areas.
April 11, 2018	A draft Plan was made available to the CLC and the public for review.
April 25, 2018	AR presented a draft Plan to the CLC for approval.
May 15, 2018	AR presented Plan to the Common Council for approval.

SUPPORTING PLANS

- City of Middleton Conservancy Lands Plan (2011-2016)
- City of Middleton Comprehensive Park and Open Space Plan (2014-2019)
- City of Middleton Comprehensive Plan (2006)
- City of Middleton Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan (2009)
- Middleton Urban Greenway Area Study, TID#3 (2016)
- Dane County Parks and Open Space Plan (2018-2023)
- Wisconsin State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (2011-2016)
- Middleton’s Comprehensive ADA Review (2012)