



Lake Erie Nature & Science Center

To our visitors, friends, volunteers, and supporters of Lake Erie Nature & Science Center,

Lake Erie Nature & Science Center is a treasured destination valued for its high quality experiences that connect children, families, and young adults to the natural world.

Founded in 1945, it now reaches more than 100,000 people each year who visit from across Northeast Ohio and the country. Served by an experienced team of professionals, the Nature Center's impact on young lives is lasting and memorable.

To continue its positive momentum and sound foundation, the Board of Directors and Staff developed a new Strategic Plan informed by widespread community input. This plan, approved by the Board of Directors in February, 2025, will help to chart the organization forward for the next several years.

More than 700 voices were heard in this process through stakeholder interviews, focus groups, employee discussions, and surveys. The result is a well-informed map that will continue the organizational mission to educate and inspire each of us to understand, appreciate, and take responsibility for our natural world.

We thank The Cleveland Foundation for its grant funding for this important process. We recognize the experienced facilitators of Strategy Design Partners. And, we extend our gratitude to the board members and employees who helped to steer the plan, and to everyone who provided input through interviews, discussions, and surveys.

With the success of many endeavors over the past several years, the Nature Center is strategically positioned for an even brighter future. The new Plan has been created from a position of strength with impactful programs, capital investments in exhibits and free experiences, and generous community support.

On behalf of the Board and Staff we are pleased to share with you the new Strategic Plan, and we welcome your participation in pursuing these goals to connect people to the natural world.

Sincerely,

Catherine Timko
Executive Director

Zach Stephens
Board President



Lake Erie Nature & Science Center

STRATEGIC PLAN

Approved by the Board of Directors February 3, 2025



Funding for this plan has been made possible with a grant from The Cleveland Foundation.

STRATEGIC PLAN CONTEXT, GOALS + PLAN PROCESS

A Beloved Institution Building from a Position of Strength

Lake Erie Nature & Science Center (the Center) is a beloved community anchor serving generations of families since 1945. The Center has not only maintained its relevance but has expanded its market reach as, more than ever, families are looking for authentic, nature-based experiences in an increasingly disconnected, 'phone-based' world. The Center is currently completing an impressive \$1.9 million Wildlife Gardens Renovation Project that will significantly enhance its visitor experiences and wildlife programs and has also made investments in its planetarium, one of only two in the region. Its preschool and out of school learning programs remain in high demand, known for nurturing a sense of discovery and wonder, a hands-on appreciation for nature, and for the excellence of its staff. In addition, the Center is widely recognized for the professionalism of its leadership, the incredible expertise and dedication of its mission-driven staff, its ability to cater programs to partner needs and its free admission. All these factors put the Center in an enviable position of strength as it considers what priorities will shape its next three to five years.

Environmental Scan Confirms Strong Standing, Reinforces Respect for Leadership

For the Center, this planning effort is an opportunity to consider how best to maximize its impact in the community. While leadership came to the process with a strong sense of what the next chapter should hold, the process was designed to allow partners, funders, participants, Board and staff to provide input through an extensive outreach effort. As further evidence of the organization's sound footing, findings from this outreach confirmed much of what was known and did not present any significant surprises.

Outreach attested to the incredibly high regard for the Center and the respect that partners and funders have for the professionalism and effectiveness of its leadership. Enthusiasm for its tremendous work inspired numerous ideas for program expansion. Rather than diving into program specifics, this plan focused on the strategic considerations that would guide such expansion and the need to address staff capacity within any program growth. Many expressed enthusiasm for potential facility enhancements and expansion opportunities. This plan considers how to explore and prioritize future capital projects in accordance with revenue goals and program needs. Given the success the Center has had in fundraising, there is a desire to build on this with an even more sophisticated approach to revenue generation. Succession of leadership staff is anticipated, perhaps within the plan's timeline. Both internal and external partners are committed to proactively preparing for an eventual transition and have confidence in the organization's ability to do so.

Finally, an important consideration within the plan process was the Center's relationship with the Cleveland Metroparks. The Metroparks owns the land and building occupied by the Center, which is memorialized in a License Agreement, like those held by other affiliate organizations

of the Metroparks. Several conversations were had with Metroparks as part of this process, including with one of its three Commissioners and the Chief Executive Officer. Those conversations confirmed the value the Metroparks places on the work of the Center and its appreciation for the high level in which it operates and the service it provides to the community. The Metroparks values the independence of the Center and indicated a willingness to explore how to partner more effectively in the future. Such assurances give confidence about the stability of the relationship and encourage additional investments in the facility as well as ways to explore strengthening this partnership.

Opportunities for Growth / A Commitment to Staff & Financial Health

Given the fiscal health, stable leadership and good work of the Center, the overarching question to be addressed by this planning process was what should come next and why. Recommendations endorsed prioritizing growth aligned with revenue generation and mission delivery. In addition, a unanimous commitment was made to invest in the dedicated staff that is currently working at capacity and to safeguard the sound financial position of the Center.

Strategic Plan Consultant Team + Planning Process

The Center has consistently engaged in strategic planning. Previously, these efforts have been led by Board and staff. For this plan process, the local consulting firm of Strategy Design Partners (SDP) was engaged to facilitate the process. SDP has led a number of strategic plan initiatives for nonprofits throughout the region. Ann Zoller and Erika McLaughlin led this effort for SDP. A leadership team of the Center's staff worked with SDP to shape the process. A Strategic Plan Steering Committee comprised of Staff leadership and Board members was actively engaged in all aspects of the process.

An extensive environmental scan was conducted that included interviews with more than fifteen partners and funders. Several focus groups engaged program participants and volunteers. Surveys were conducted for all staff, program participants, partners, funders and Board members. All staff were invited to participate in individual interviews with the consultants, and the great majority took advantage of this opportunity. In total, more than 700 voices were heard from as part of this process. A Strategic Plan Workshop was conducted that included members of the Steering Committee and almost all Board members. Findings from the environmental scan were presented and participants were asked to provide input on key strategic issues, the results of which have directly shaped this plan.

MISSION, VISION, VALUES

Our Mission

Lake Erie Nature & Science Center educates and inspires each of us to understand, appreciate and take responsibility for our natural world.

Our Vision

To give every child and adult the opportunity to make a lasting connection to the natural world and to build a lifelong passion for discovery

Our Values

We value and respect people's differences in age, color, ethnicity, ancestry, sex, family or marital status, gender identity or expression, language, national origin, physical and mental disability, political affiliation, race, religion, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, veteran status, citizenship status, and other characteristics. We recognize that every employee is responsible for inclusion and ensuring that the organization's mission is accessible and relevant to everyone.

GOALS

Goal One: Invest in *organizational capacity and infrastructure* as a means of continuing to improve operations, maximize impact, generate increased revenue, and create a more sustainable business model

Goal Two: *Enhance programs* that leverage the Center's expertise, align with capacity, and prioritize revenue generation and mission impact

Goal Three: *Develop a facilities plan* to optimize existing space for programs, identify strategic opportunities, and enhance the Center's visibility and presence

Goals + Strategies + Tactics

Goal One: Invest in *organizational capacity and infrastructure* as a means of continuing to improve operations, maximize impact, generate increased revenue, and create a more sustainable business model

Strategies + Tactics:

- Prioritize investments and strategies that can alleviate current staff capacity challenges and create a more sustainable organizational structure
 - Balance program expansion with staff capacity, funded by a combination of earned and contributed income
 - Consider strengthening of volunteer programs and activities that can take advantage of strong personal connections to the Center and harness new opportunities, address areas of constant challenge, while creating a resource for staff
 - Align staffing structures, roles and schedules, to address peak capacity challenges
 - Foster interaction and support between departments to address challenges, create new opportunities and enhance the organization's strong culture
 - Consider exploration of ways to enhance staff benefits
- Build on success of the development department as a means of elevating fundraising efforts and enhancing future sustainability
 - Create a multi-year development plan, with an annual work plan to help fulfill the strategic plan and its goals
 - Develop strategy and timeline for increasing endowment to \$10 million
 - Leverage the opening of the Wildlife Gardens as a launch for future development campaigns focusing on continued facilities investment, programs, and endowment
- Continue to strengthen and evolve the capacity and experience of the Board
 - Formalize committee structure, including creating a Program Committee, with a goal of all members serving on one committee with defined roles, annual goals, and an annual calendar of activities and a staff point for each
 - Annually assess member capacity and create pipeline for future members to ensure balanced Board expertise
- Strengthen the partnership with Metroparks while highlighting the Center's strength and independence
 - Create an ad hoc group of Board members to plan and collaborate with Metroparks

- Create schedule of regular check-ins with Metroparks staff liaison and Executive Director as well as an annual strategic partnership meeting with Metroparks CEO and Center Board / Staff leadership
- Create a plan for leadership succession that institutionalizes current management practices and invests in and showcases overall organizational capacity
 - Further engage staff leaders regularly with the Board, partners and funders to demonstrate confidence in the organization beyond the strong reputation of the Executive Director
 - Document systems, organizational approach and policies as a means of institutionalizing professional standards, culture and organizational practices to ensure consistency during leadership transitions
 - Build out a plan for staffing structure to grow capacity and create a clear path for staff advancement
 - Continue emphasis on staff development / leadership training throughout the organization to elevate overall organizational capacity

Goal Two: Enhance programs that leverage the Center's expertise, align with capacity, and prioritize revenue generation and mission impact.

Strategies + Tactics:

- Further capitalize on unique offerings to enhance existing program basing growth on program success, community need and revenue generation.

Nature Based Education/Out of School Learning

- Determine strategy, aligned with facilities planning, to expand pre-school offerings and consider the development of a plan for the addition of a kindergarten program

Planetarium

- Further capitalize on unique offerings of the planetarium and consider program expansion opportunities that can elevate the Center position through this asset
- Consider opportunities to grow and enhance Astronomy Club programming and other space science programs

Wildlife Rehabilitation/Animal Care

- Recognizing the Center's role in Wildlife programs, further establish standard operating procedures to help alleviate the pressures of rehabilitation work, consider various staffing and schedule structures and expanding the use of volunteers to provide more support to staff
- Further expand partnerships with Veterinarians that would take advantage of unique services/experience offered at Center
- Determine strategy to better leverage extensive research and data collection from Wildlife Rehabilitation with local universities and others; explore potential contracts and means of capitalizing on this resource

All Programs

- Establish a staff committee to develop a process for program expansion recommendations that will balance revenue and community impacts with staff capacity. Areas of focus include partnerships, joint fundraising, expanded youth programming, and ideas from staff, partners, and participants.
 - Share updates regularly with Board and staff on new program opportunities and the decision-making process used
- Maintain Continual Improvement approach and annual program assessment through continued surveying of participants and partners
- Continue to elevate brand and market position to keep pace with organizational growth

- Engage consultant for comprehensive marketing plan and potential rebranding to develop strategies to expand Center narrative through ongoing outreach and communications strategies, public relations, and advertising
- Develop messaging/branding to specifically highlight the Center's independent status as part of all communications strategies
- Continue strategies to highlight the Center's unique strengths in Wildlife programs and the Planetarium
- Consider opportunities for partnership and cross-promotion with community partners to reach new audiences

Goal Three: *Develop a facilities plan to optimize existing space for programs, identify strategic opportunities, and enhance the Center's visibility and presence.*

Strategies + Tactics:

- Conduct a comprehensive facilities plan designed to maximize the current building, the outdoor campus and to explore expansion opportunities
 - Form a Task Force of Board and staff to help direct the effort
 - Focus on methods for more efficient use of current space and mechanisms for short-term expansion of pre-school and related programs that have immediate revenue impacts
 - Make recommendations for improved traffic flow and safety
 - Consider outdoor spaces to complement programs that could serve as an important asset for the Center
 - Study opportunities to increase visibility in nearby public areas and roadways while also using this increased exposure to highlight the Center's brand and independent narrative
- Engage key partners, funders, and individuals during the plan process to help assess viability of future investments, identify potential phasing and unique opportunities for naming, philanthropic and other revenue sources related to specific plan recommendations
- Assess signage and messaging for best impact throughout facility/campus that can help tell the story of the Center and its impact in a way that can encourage revenue generation
- Explore best use of space for Wildlife activities that can create more efficient use of space at the Center and allow for expanded and improved rehabilitation operations

CONCLUSION

This Strategic Plan summarizes the key goals, strategies and tactics intended to capitalize on the Center's strength and guide its growth over the next three to five years. The success of the Strategic Plan will be dependent on the ability of staff and Board to integrate the implementation of recommendations from each of the goal areas. Program recommendations are dependent on staffing, revenue, capacity and facility limitations. Future expansion is contingent on building on the successful campaigns used to complete recent investments and the ability to continue to engage and expand donors. All of which is dependent on this vision, leadership and capacity of staff and board leadership. The Center takes great pride on the synergy within its program agenda. The strength of the organization and its impact results from the interweaving of elements into a comprehensive approach to nature-based education, exploration, and experiences. This same holistic approach will be needed to make strategic decisions in the delivery of the plan elements. The level of engagement during the execution of this planning process shows a leadership team ready and excited for the challenge.

Leadership and program staff will continue to work with the consultant team on Action Planning. The Action Plan will establish the timing, staff lead, and other key metrics for the Goals, Strategies and Tactics of the plan over the course of the plan period. Once completed, the Action Plan can be used as a dashboard to monitor progress and outcomes for Board and staff. Importantly, the Action Plan will help ensure that the necessary organizational capacity exists in advance of any anticipated program growth.

While the intent of this plan is to create a clear roadmap for the Center, it also provides room to accommodate new opportunities and challenges that may arise during the plan period. As these opportunities arise, Board and staff leadership should ground decision making in the same thoughtful process and dialogue that shaped the carefully considered priorities of this plan.