Wood-Pawcatuck Watershed Association Operational Change Plan

Prepared for:

Wood-Pawcatuck Watershed Association

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Purpose of this report:

This report was prepared for the Wood-Pawcatuck Watershed Association (WPWA) to address critical organizational questions and issues that have been identified by the Board of Trustees. This plan is intended to provide an operational roadmap that is nested within longer and broader term thinking. The plan provides general agreement (but not necessarily consensus) on the WPWA's key goals and strategies, and provides written directions to define the organizational/institutional changes that need to take place to allow/ensure the organization can move forward. This includes changes that need to be made to the organizational processes, structure, and planning systems so they can effectively follow the described strategic direction. This is critical because these structural changes allow for strategic change.

How it was prepared:

This report was prepared following these steps:

- An initial phone call with the project's managers to confirm the process' agenda and objectives. During this initial phase we developed an outline of the strategic plan and workshop agenda.

- A series of interviews with selected Trustees. These have been used to gather information about the current and intended state of the organization as well as to fine-tune the workshop agenda.

- A rolling draft of an organizational change-plan, as well as a session plan for the workshop, that captures the evolving objectives, agenda, and deliverables. The document and interviews explore topics that include:
    - Perception of current and future organizational goals; are they reasonable?
    - What is being achieved? What isn't? Why are there discrepancies with your goals? Honestly, can you really do this with your limited resources?
    - What strategic, operational, cultural, and institutional changes are necessary? What is critical to keep and what must go?
    - Are these strategic, operational, cultural, and institutional changes hard to make? Why haven't they been made already?
    - Where are the strategic, operational, cultural, and institutional barriers to change? How do they get removed?

- Several additional meetings with the project managers to discuss the rolling draft of the plan and finalize the event's objectives, agenda, and deliverables.

- A one-day workshop for the WPWA's Board and Staff following the established meeting agenda. The workshop fleshed out the items that had been captured in the rolling draft of the operational change plan. The workshop was designed to work through this draft, identify areas of agreement and disagreement, and make choices about WPWA's future direction and the organizational change necessary to get there.

Throughout, immediate change was encouraged. As the rolling plan evolved, and as the interviews occurred, there was immediate feedback to the organization about what isn't working and what needs to change. This allowed for a real-time conversation about what organizational change is necessary and an opportunity for the Staff and leadership to begin affecting change before the end of this process.

Major areas addressed by this report:

This report includes the following sections:
1. WPWA's niche and core goals
2. Work planning and forecasting for the organization
3. How the organization will address its fundraising and the fundraising culture
4. Defining the membership and initial methods for membership growth
5. Key governance issues, including Board/Executive Director and Committee/Executive Director relationships, Board development, and engaging past members of the Board

Each is presented below, capturing the final outcomes from the workshop with input from the interviews. In most instances, the words were taken directly from the workshop worksheets. In some instances the words were edited to better capture the broader discussion among the Trustees. This is not meant be a perfect dictation of the conversation and some liberties were taken so a cohesive plan could be presented.

WPWA's niche and core goals

WPWA's highest-level goal is to maintain and restore ecological health of the watershed.

This is achieved through by[1]:

- Delivering **outreach and education** to public and the membership to raise awareness and connectivity with the watershed, its functions, and its importance so WPWA's audience is motivated to act.
- Serving as an **advocate** for the watershed by forming and maintaining partnerships and serving as a coordinative hub for maintenance and restoration efforts.
- Working to **conserve and preserve** the water and watershed (land and water). To do this, WPWA invests in monitoring, restoration and water supply management.

An important method WPWA uses to achieve these results is to support and promote recreational activities in the watershed. Though WPWA is not an AMC-styled organization, it is a conservation organization that supports and promotes relational activities in the watershed.

For opportunities that present themselves, but are not included in the annual work plan, the organization will follow the decision criteria and procedures below:

1. The opportunity must fit within one of the result areas.
2. There have to be human and financial resources to carry out the work—either existing or will be added because of the opportunity.
3. The Executive Director and Executive Committee will do an initial review of these criteria and bring their recommendation to the full Board.
4. The full Board will review the EC's recommendation and concur or amend.

WPWA does see and will pursue opportunities outside of the watershed insofar as they contribute to the organization's stated result areas and ability (capacity and resources) to deliver.

Work planning and forecasting for the organization

Work planning
To put the result areas into effect, the Trustees committed to developing an annual work plan. This purpose of this plan is to:

1. Set annual priorities.
2. Keep the Staff and Trustees "in bounds" and focused on these priorities.
3. Guide Staff in day-to-day decision making and allocating limited resources.
4. Guide decision making when opportunities arise or when resource allocation decisions need to be made.
5. Provide the narrative for the budget so budget items are directly tied to activities defined in the work plan and vice versa.

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[1] Author embellished these as practical examples of what needs to eventually be written by WPWA.

The annual work plan will be based on the result areas as defined above (or in updated versions). These will provide the section heads and the agreed upon tasks will fall under these areas. The budget will also be aligned with these result areas and, therefore, there should be direct and clear link between the two. The work plan will be approximately 10–15 pages long, plus the budget, and will be written primarily for an internal audience. However, we agreed this could be shared publically.

The work plan will be internalized into WPWA's management system and culture by using it to set board meeting agendas, serving as the basis for annual reporting, and in outline form using it as a "dashboard" to monitor progress.

The work plan will be developed on the following schedule:
- Executive Director/Staff write the first draft between August and September.
- The Executive Committee to review, with a strong focus on connecting the budget to the work plan in October/November. By the November board meeting, the Executive Committee should have a work plan ready for their recommendation to the Trustees.
- The Trustees should formally accept (or not) the work plan and budget at the November board meeting by motion.

Forecasting
Given the financial uncertainty the Board committed to:
- Complete an 18-month forecast that estimates worst-mid-best case scenarios and offer options to address each of these fiscal projections.
- A process that will prioritize these options from most to least desirable.
- Include options for any shortfalls, taking into account the conditions of the situation, and surpluses.
- Review the forecast annually and formalizing the decisions in a forecasting memo.

Possible options, as discussed by the Board, include:
Worst case scenario
- Tap rainy day fund, use contingency funds
- Membership plea
- Staff reduction, layoff, sequestration
- Borrow money
- Tap endowment, use unrestricted endowment funds (short-term need)
- Cut programming
- Fundraising
- Short-term development efforts
- Response depends on federal funding as part of budget (need for bookkeeper)

Best case scenario:
- Reserve funds, create contingency funds
- Expand programming

- Infrastructure investment, create capital improvement funds
- Stipend for Staff
- Hire development director/consultant
- Capital purchases
- Invest in endowment funds

How the organization will address its fundraising and the fundraising culture

The Trustees agreed that the reasonable expectations for the Board as it relates to fundraising responsibilities is that every Trustee:
- Is expected to contribute financially—both membership dues and a donation—to WPWA.
- Will contribute to WPWA's fundraising activities. Specifically, this means contributing effort to at least one of WPWA's fundraising activities and/or events. This does not mean that Trustees will have to solicit directly for funds from current or potential members, although this is one of the fundraising activities that could be chosen voluntarily.

As part of the annual work planning process, fundraising activities for the year will be specified in the work plan. These activities should focus on areas where WPWA has existing high capacity to deliver and the activity is a high priority for the organization. Medium priorities where there is moderate capacity to deliver may also be considered. WPWA should not pursue those activities that are either low priorities or where only low capacity to delivery exists.

Annex A provides a snapshot of an exercise designed to collect specific fundraising activities and place them on a scale ranging from high capacity/high priority to low capacity/low priority.

Defining the membership and initial methods for membership growth

WPWA has approximately 750 members and had been adding 6–10% annually for the last three years. WPWA believes that its typical member has one or more of these characteristics: is retired, part of a family, has a strong environmental ethic, and is recreationally minded.

When asked to define the profile of an ideal member, characteristics included: wealthy with disposable income, recreational users of the watershed, have a family, have a willingness to invest time/volunteer, make an annual donation, socially conscious/active in community, passionate for/proud of WPWA, and "puts sticker on the car, wears swag.

It was agreed that more could be done to track members' attributes and build a profile of what the current and ideal member would look like. This would aid in developing and deploying membership growth programs. To this end, WPWA will consider tracking:
- Retention versus new members.
- Percentage of members in watershed versus outside.
- How new members came to WPWA.

- Basic demographics (city/state, age, gender, income range, family size) that could help tailor programming and new membership drives.

When asked why current and potential members join WPWA, the following points were noted:
- Access to and availability of programs (though only an estimated 10% of the members actually use programs).
- Because WPWA has a good reputation.
- To get information about the watershed, including how to access recreational opportunities (hiking, paddling, and fishing guides).
- Promote a personal agenda (personal advocacy through WPWA).
- Programmatic discounts.
- Volunteer opportunities.
- Clean water, healthy watershed, protection of resources.
- Communication about WPWA success and activities.
- See WPWA as an important advocate for the watershed.

Membership development activities should be specified in the annual work plan. These may include, but not be limited to:
- Define who WPWA's members are, what are characteristics and clarify what they want from WPWA.
- Better general branding to get WPWA's name and mission to the potential audience, both in RI and in CT. Consider the message: WPWA is the largest/best watershed association in RI and it is the oldest in the state. Promote what WPWA does.
- Understand how new members find WPWA and build upon those channels.
- Substantially populate the potential member list with those that meet the member profile characteristics; actively market to this group.
- Undertake a robust "we miss you" program for those members that haven't renewed.
- Ask each director to name ten people in their network who are likeminded and work with Staff to encourage their membership through writing letters and direct calls.

WPWA governance

Relationship between the Executive Director, Executive Committee, and Board
It was uniformly recognized that the relationship between the Executive Director, Executive Committee, and the Board is working well. This includes agreement on the following:
- Executive Director manages day to day within agreed upon work plan.
- Executive Director works with Executive Committee to discuss/decide operational issues and short-term strategic questions within work plan that generally need immediate attention. Executive Committee may meet more regularly with Executive Director. Executive Committee meetings are always open to any members of the Board. Executive Committee will provide a quick summary of any decisions made/conversations of substance to the full Board as a way of keeping the information loop completely open and transparent.

- Board will continue to meet ten times a year. The Board meetings will be refocused to use the work plan as the agenda and serve to provide updates from Staff to Trustees and to take committee reports, decide on questions that couldn't be handled by staff or the Executive Committee and other business matters.

Board Development

The bylaws provide specific procedures for Board development. To clarify and improve this process, the following recommendations were discussed:

- The timelines and Trustees involved in the process should be reviewed to ensure consistency with the bylaws and/or the bylaws should be revised so they are in sync with common practice:
    - President appoints Development Committee; VP is chair of Committee as stated in bylaws
    - Prepare analysis of needs and present in January. This report should clearly define what the needs are against existing Board capacity.
    - Board works with Committee to:
        - Identify potential candidates
        - Make contact with candidates
        - Conduct interviews as necessary
        - Manage a vetting process to answer: will candidate meet the needs and expectations?
        - Decisions and announcements per bylaw's timeline and requirements

- The Board Development Committee does create and the Board does review a matrix of skills and knowledge for current and future Board members. This matrix could be revised to include: geography, ideal member characteristics, other types/needs.

- The Board Development process should consider a deeper engagement with the membership as new Trustees are being sought (e.g., a call for nominations from the membership) and the use of committees as a vetting opportunity for potential new Trustees. Committees include:
    - Board Development
    - Forecasting
    - Membership Development/Growth
    - Bylaws
    - Fundraising
    - Science/Technical
    - Annual Meeting

- New Trustees should be welcomed with a letter that outlines their responsibilities as discussed herein. This should be presented at an orientation session organized and delivered by the chair of the Board Development Committee, Staff, and other Trustees. This is critical, as it helps new Trustees understand the Board's procedures, responsibilities, and culture.

- Emeritus designation does exist as a mechanism to maintain relationships with Trustees who have timed off the Board. Heretofore it has been bestowed as an honorary title only. Using this as a more active designation could create reasons and opportunity for Trustees to continue working with WPWA once they've transitioned off the Board.

- The Board of Advisors, although formed, has never been active. At this moment in time there does not appear to be a strategic need for this group to be charged. Consider deleting from the bylaws to accurately reflect the Board's practice.

- The question of term limits was discussed and it was agreed that terms limits should be included in the next round of bylaw amendments. This did not preclude a Trustee from timing out and then rejoining the Board. The group respectfully recognized that a number of Trustees have been on the Board for a substantial number of years and how the bylaw changes affect them will have to be considered.

ANNEX A

High
Priority

Annual appeal letter

Creating sponsorships for programs

Board member donations

Cultivate current donors for more

Solicit foundation/corporate donations

Birthday/ other parties

Rent canoe slip/rack space

Expand paid kayaking programs

Pursue legacy gifts

Solicit/cultivate new donors

Capital campaign

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