



BERKSHIRE

Natural Resources Council

THE LANDKEEPERS

***100% Berkshire:
Berkshire Natural Resources Council 2020-2024***



Strategic Plan





100% Berkshire

Berkshire Natural Resources Council 2020-2024

Contents

Highlights of BNRC’s Strategic Plan	2
MISSION.....	5
FOUNDATION.....	5
HOW THIS PLAN WAS DEVELOPED.....	5
SITUATION ANALYSIS	6
VALUES	8
HOW WE WORK: BNRC’S LOGIC MODEL / THEORY OF CHANGE	9
PLAN GOALS AND PRIORITIES	10
OPERATIONS INVESTMENTS	12
FINANCIAL REQUIREMENTS	14
CONCLUSION	15



100% Berkshire

Berkshire Natural Resources Council 2020-2024

The human race is challenged more than ever before to demonstrate our mastery, not over nature but of ourselves.

— Rachel Carson

The environment and the economy are really both two sides of the same coin. If we cannot sustain the environment, we cannot sustain ourselves. —Wangari Maathai

Highlights of BNRC's Strategic Plan

BNRC 2020-2024

Open the first legs of The High Road in north, central and south county to connect people to the outdoors, support economic development and excitement about the Berkshires.

Acquire critical habitat and build wildlife corridors to support the health of our ecosystem, with particular awareness of the changing climate.

Care for properties, trails and infrastructure to ensure safe and broad access as we add miles of new trail.

Connect the community to nature in new ways to support health and love of the land.

Increase the diversity of our staff, board and users.

Accomplish the above **while mindful of our values** of integrity, respect, partnership, inclusion, sustainability, and sound scientific support.

Along with some specific, ambitious, yet achievable goals, this plan re-commits BNRC to the mission and purpose we have been working toward these many years: **to protect the beauty and ecological integrity of the Berkshires.**

The plan responds to the climate change already upon us and seeks to provide hope as we address it head on. We have also set ourselves the goal of including our diverse community in all of our work.

The High Road

This visionary, multi-year project will be a major focus of BNRC over the next five years and beyond. The High Road will connect towns to trails throughout the Berkshires, supporting economic development and creating new recreational opportunities for residents and visitors alike.

During the five-year life of the plan, we expect to complete (or have significantly underway) legs of The High Road in north, central and south county.

Land Conservation

With critical habitat still unprotected and the climate crisis altering the region, our top priorities are to **purchase or conserve critical habitat and connect wildlife corridors.**



100% Berkshire

Berkshire Natural Resources Council 2020-2024

We will also seek easements that create important trail connections for The High Road.

Stewardship

As we expand the amount of land under our protection, we must build and maintain the corresponding infrastructure, including trails, bridges, and culverts. **We will create land management and forestry plans for our properties**, while continuing to monitor our 100+ conservation restrictions. BNRC has made significant new investments in stewardship capacity in the last year, and will continue to do so.

Community Education

We are committed to connecting people with nature, as the well-being of humans and all life on Earth are mutually dependent. We will continue to make our trails and land available for passive use and provide programs that foster and inspire love and respect for the complexity of the natural world.

During the first year of this plan we'll re-examine our educational offerings to determine where BNRC should best devote its attention. As we expand our *Nature Backpacks* program in several public libraries and develop our new partnership with the Living in Recovery Center, we'll begin a strategic analysis of what gaps in nature and outdoor programming BNRC can best fill.

Expanding on our tradition of protecting rural lands and encouraging people to experience the mountains, rivers and farms in our beautiful county, BNRC is committed to serving Pittsfield, North Adams and the other urban centers of the Berkshires. We will expand the ways to connect to nature those who typically have had the least opportunity to enjoy it—people with different abilities, of different ages, without transportation or a tradition of exploring the outdoors.

Advocacy

BNRC is valued as a collaborative and essential partner with a county-wide perspective. We will continue to judiciously lend our voice to advance policies that align with our mission, strategic objectives, and core values.

Operations

This work requires talented and sufficiently compensated staff, appropriate technology, facilities, and equipment, and the thoughtful and effective use of our extraordinary volunteers. **One immediate need is for BNRC to move to new offices**, with room for growth, accessibility, connection to nature and the outdoors, and the ability to store vehicles, equipment and tools onsite.



100% Berkshire

Berkshire Natural Resources Council 2020-2024

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

As the land preservation movement has traditionally been a white, middle- to upper-middle-class venture, it is our moral responsibility to be diverse, both in whom we serve, and in our own composition and leadership. If we want a different outcome than we have had, we must invest our time and energy differently. We will be spending the coming year exploring what changes we are willing to make, what trade-offs might be required, and deepening our relationships with individuals and communities who have not felt included in the land trust world in the past.

Financial Requirements

We project that BNRC's operating budget will need to grow by an average of 7% a year over the next 5 years to have the capacity to achieve these goals.

In the first two years, most of that growth will be covered by funds already raised for the launch phase of The High Road. **But over the five years of this plan, we will partner with you, our community, to raise the funds that will grow our landscape legacy for current and future generations.**

In Summary

In our nearly year-long exploration of our history, our strengths, our community's needs, and where we can and should make the greatest impact, we've realized we must:

~Continue the critical work of land and habitat conservation, as well as stewardship of those lands for which we are responsible.

~Fulfill the trust of those who envisioned and contributed to The High Road and make measurable progress on realizing that vision.

~Deepen our research, community conversations, thinking, and planning in four areas, to further flesh out:

how we will become a more diverse and equitable organization;

how we will conduct educational programming to have the greatest impact;

how we will incorporate all available data to guide conservation priorities, and, critically,

how we will respond to the climate crisis now upon us to help us, and our natural communities, be as resilient as possible.

By the end of 2020 we expect to publish an update to this document incorporating this work and setting out a vision for 2025 and beyond.



100% Berkshire

Berkshire Natural Resources Council 2020-2024

MISSION

The mission of Berkshire Natural Resources Council is to protect and preserve the natural beauty and ecological integrity of the Berkshires for public benefit and enjoyment.

FOUNDATION

Berkshire Natural Resources Council (BNRC) has been a leading non-governmental organization dedicated to the protection of the natural landscape in the Berkshires since 1967. BNRC owns over 11,000 acres of forest, river and stream crossings, mountain ranges, and farmland, encompassing important habitat for wildlife as well as the beautiful vistas that define the Berkshires.

We hold and are responsible for conservation restrictions on another 12,000 acres, and have had an assisting role in conserving many times that land area. With the help of scores of volunteers, we have built and now maintain over 55 miles of trail. We conduct dozens of free walks and talks each year, partner with organizations throughout the county, Commonwealth and region, and provide support and expertise to more than a dozen local land trusts.

In our 52 years we have had just three presidents: George Wislocki, Tad Ames and now Jenny Hansell, who joined us in 2018. We have an outstanding board of directors with dedicated and committed leaders from throughout the county and an extraordinary corps of passionate volunteers and community supporters like you, without whom these achievements would never have been possible.

HOW THIS PLAN WAS DEVELOPED

Following the leadership transition from Tad Ames to Jenny Hansell in early 2018, the staff and board of BNRC were eager to define and clarify our next priorities. We knew that we had to focus on building The High Road, the ambitious county-wide town to trail project Ames had envisioned back in 2014 and to which our community has contributed \$5 million to launch. But we needed more clarity about what else we would focus on, and what, if anything, would need to take a backseat or even be set aside while work on The High Road was underway.

We launched a nearly year-long process of planning, beginning by consulting with our community to learn more about the needs of the county and to understand how we are perceived by our partners and the community as a whole. We challenged ourselves to think deeply to learn how we can become a stronger organization that can best accomplish our mission while serving the needs of the people (visitors and residents) and nature (water, wildlife, landscape) of Berkshire County.



100% Berkshire

Berkshire Natural Resources Council 2020-2024

Our strategic planning committee members conducted dozens of interviews with conservation colleagues, political and business leadership, donors, recreation advocates, and community partners. Volunteers and donors participated in focus groups. We reviewed our history and the visions of our past leadership. We reflected on our values and affirmed what beliefs and tenets underlie our work as individuals and collectively. We reviewed comprehensive community data gathered by staff. Board and staff joined together in a day-long retreat to examine what we discovered and to set and affirm our priorities for the coming years.

After additional reflection and framing by the strategic planning committee and the hard work of staff and committees on logic models and financial projections, the BNRC Board reviewed the plan in November 2019. The plan was then presented to our community stakeholders for additional input. The final plan was approved by the Board of Directors on December 9, 2019.

SITUATION ANALYSIS

At 946 square miles, Berkshire County is the second largest county in Massachusetts and one of the most ecologically diverse and natural landscapes in the Commonwealth. It is home to more than 150 state-listed endangered, threatened or species of concern and has unusual and globally rare wetland communities. With 78% of the county forested, it provides critical species corridors between the northern forests of New England and New York and the Appalachian Mountain chain.

Through the efforts of state, federal, and private landkeepers like BNRC, an impressive 38% of the county's land has been preserved, most in the higher elevations. Yet this natural legacy is precarious. A warming planet, more frequent and severe storms, changes in the growing season, and invasive species threaten local ecologies and economies.

Hospitality and tourism are critical components of our economy, with visitors attracted to the Berkshires' outdoor recreation, scenic beauty, and impressive arts and cultural landscape. These industries often have difficulty finding qualified, reliable workers, while at the same time, well-paying jobs for all and employment opportunities for youth are needed. Berkshire County's median household income is among the lowest in Massachusetts, and there are pockets of deep need, especially in our urban areas.

Our county's population has been declining as our residents are aging—our population is older than the rest of Massachusetts or the USA. Yet, baby boomers cite proximity to walking trails, parks and open spaces among their important considerations in choosing their retirement homes.

BNRC plays a critical role in addressing these concerns. We continue to protect important ecosystems. We are stewarding habitat for native species to find refuge from a warming climate. Our trails and properties, open to all free of charge, our new fully accessible trails,



100% Berkshire

Berkshire Natural Resources Council 2020-2024

and the exciting plans for The High Road, an interconnected county-wide trail system, all contribute to our local recreational economy and the quality of life of the Berkshires. And, we are highly respected and valued by those familiar with our work, including volunteers, trail users, and our many and varied partners and collaborators.

Through our education and nature exploration programs BNRC contributes to the well-being of current and future generations, providing access to the healing power of nature and inspiring people in all walks of life to join us in protecting this uniquely beautiful county we call home.



100% Berkshire

Berkshire Natural Resources Council 2020-2024

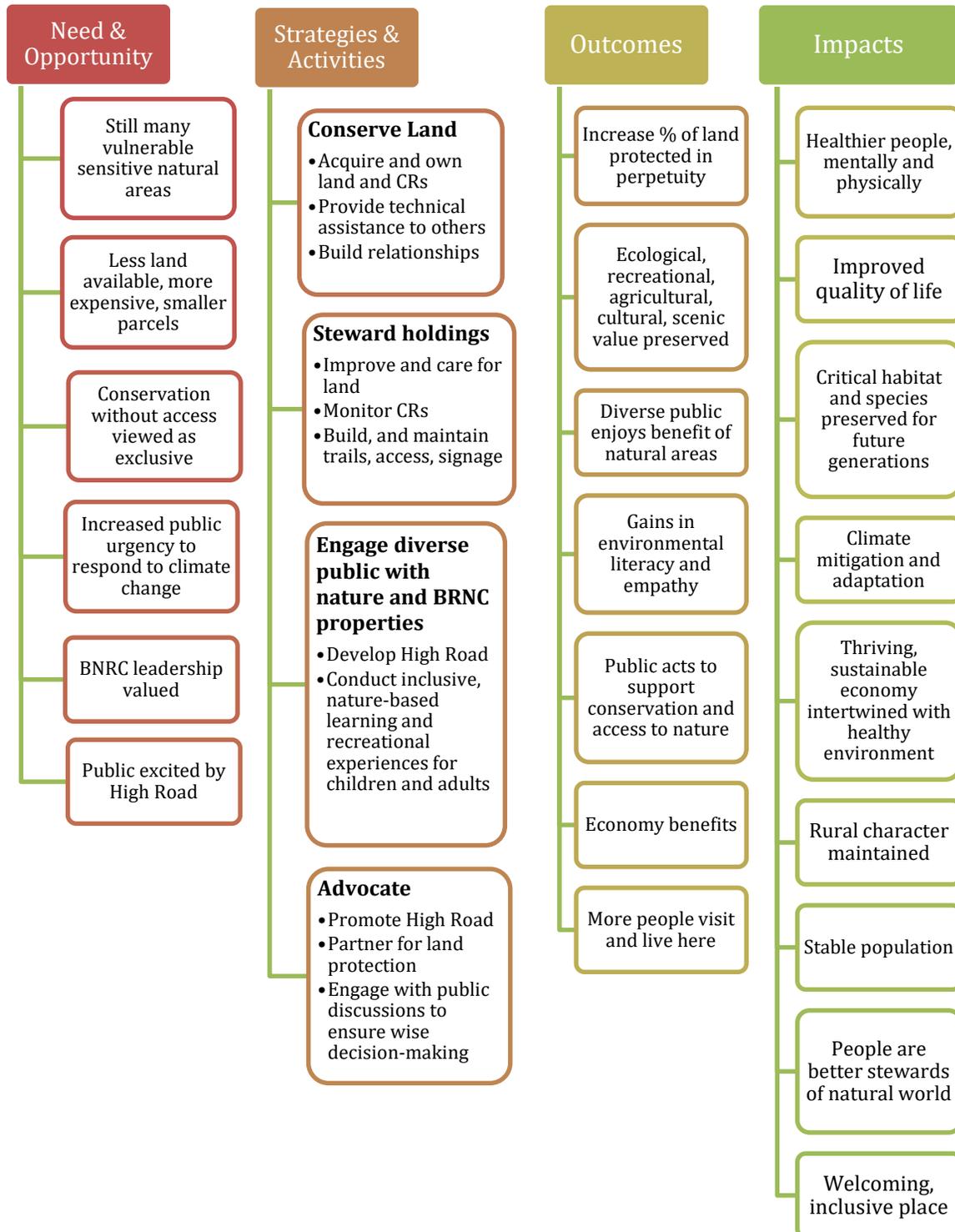
VALUES

We developed this statement of values to make sure that all our actions and decisions are rooted in our deepest beliefs about who we are and want to be and how we fulfill our mission. Fundamentally, we care for the land and make it accessible to all people, in a way that is respectful, sustainable, inclusive, and ethical.

<p>Science based</p> <p>Focusing on climate change and adaptability in the face of the changing climate</p> <p>Caring for the Land...</p> <p>While keeping an eye towards future generations</p>	<p>Welcoming all people</p> <p>Encouraging passive recreation</p> <p>Sharing the benefits of nature</p> <p>With care and respect for people...</p> <p>Respecting and listening to the community, staff, board, & volunteers</p> <p>Focusing on accessibility for all</p>
<p>Recruiting ethical leadership</p> <p>Carefully Stewarding Resources...</p> <p>Ensuring wise stewardship of donations, finances and resources</p>	<p>Moving at "the speed of trust"</p> <p>...In Collaboration and Partnership</p> <p>Finding ways to be of service to our community</p>

S

HOW WE WORK: BNRC'S LOGIC MODEL / THEORY OF CHANGE





100% Berkshire

Berkshire Natural Resources Council 2020-2024

PLAN GOALS AND PRIORITIES

This plan re-commits BNRC to the outcomes we have been working toward these many years: conservation, stewardship, access, engagement. Informing all of our activities is the need to respond to the climate change already upon us. We will mitigate climate impact where we can with a goal of connecting and protecting the habitat native species depend on to aid them in adapting as the world changes.

1. The High Road: Exciting new momentum in Berkshire County

Inspired by the Coast to Coast trail in England and the Camino de Santiago in Spain, we're working toward creating a completely walkable Berkshires—a network of trails to connect town centers with natural areas. There is tremendous enthusiasm and excitement for the potential of The High Road in Berkshire County, and donors have contributed the first \$5 million to begin. Throughout, we will be sensitive to ensuring the lasting stewardship of our natural resources.

Over the next three to five years:

- Segments of The High Road in north, central, and south county will be fully operational or well underway. Each will connect a town to a stretch of trail, encouraging use by a range of walkers, including both full-time residents and visitors.
- We will continue to build the lasting partnerships that will bring The High Road to life and build community investment.
- We will continue to develop and enhance the BNRC mobile app, which will ultimately link users to trails and local attractions including restaurants and accommodations.

2. Landkeeping: Expand and steward our land legacy

Our landkeeping includes two critical parts:

- **Land Conservation:** Actively conserving new acres of critical habitat, natural resources, farms, and viewsheds.
- **Stewardship:** Caring for the land we own for current and future generations.

Land Conservation: Based on our conservation priorities and the available data, we will continue to identify and conserve parcels of land that connect and add to wildlife corridors, enable climate adaptation, and protect the habitat of species of greatest concern.



100% Berkshire

Berkshire Natural Resources Council 2020-2024

We will further develop and formalize the ways we use data to inform our decision-making to focus future conservation efforts.

Stewardship: In proportion to our expanded resources, we will build new trails (High Road and others), maintain existing trail and other infrastructure such as bridges and culverts in good condition, create land management and forestry plans, and monitor our 100+ conservation restrictions.

We will manage habitat for climate mitigation and adaptation, including eradicating invasive species that gain a foothold in our properties.

3. Community Education: Inspiring all of our residents and visitors to access and experience the wonder and complexity of the natural world

By piloting and expanding activities like our organized hikes and nature-based community education programs, BNRC has been helping foster appreciation for and fascination with our natural world. To avoid duplicating the excellent programming offered by our colleagues such as Mass Audubon and The Trustees of Reservations, we'll explore how best to serve our community by:

- Researching and redesigning our education programs for greatest impact;
- Continuing partnerships with libraries, health centers and the new pilot program with the Living in Recovery Center;
- Developing and implementing a new interpretive trail signage program.

Once we have established new BNRC headquarters, we expect to further engage more diverse audiences through direct on-site programming.

4. Advocacy: Adding our voice to protect the natural beauty, ecological integrity, and public enjoyment of the Berkshires.

BNRC plays an important role in informing and engaging the public to build understanding and support for county-wide conservation needs. We traditionally have been respectful of the many different constituencies and their points of view.

We will continue to thoughtfully add our voice to critical public education and policy issues to ensure wise decision-making about open space, outdoor recreation, and the protection of nature and habitat.



100% Berkshire

Berkshire Natural Resources Council 2020-2024

OPERATIONS INVESTMENTS

Our plans are mere dreams without the people, technology, and facilities required to implement them. This section details the operations investments needed to achieve our goals.

We are determined to ensure that our work includes the voices of and delivers its benefits to all members of our community. We dedicate ourselves to move beyond the traditionally white and better-resourced members of our community to actively include all segments of the wonderfully diverse county in which we live.

1. People: Add needed expertise in program and operations by judiciously adding and supporting staff, independent contractors, and volunteers.

- Build on our tremendous expertise and skills in land conservation, High Road implementation, and stewardship (including trail planning and building, land management and forestry plans, and project management) with additional staffing or consultants.
- Increase expertise in marketing, communications, and community education.
- Be attentive to the administrative and managerial capacity needed to support programmatic growth and adjust as needed.
- Recruit, train, and support volunteers and interns to support and expand on the work of our staff.
- Invest in training and mentoring to ensure staff are fully supported, develop professionally, and continue to deliver their best work.

2. Prioritize Diversity, Equity, Access, and Inclusion (DEAI)

BNRC staff, board, and volunteers commit to assess and reflect on how to define, prioritize, and improve DEAI for BNRC.

- Some of the strategies we may choose to pursue include:
 - i. Understand why DEAI is important and necessary in the conservation world and in our community;
 - ii. Enhance partnerships that support inclusion, equity, and diversity;
 - iii. Incorporate Indigenous Peoples' narrative into our work;
 - iv. Enhance signage to welcome newcomers to properties;
 - v. Explore ways each staff and board member can commit to incorporating DEAI into their goals and work plans.



100% Berkshire

Berkshire Natural Resources Council 2020-2024

3. Fully realize board member or leadership volunteer potential in advancing strategic priorities

- Recruit volunteer and board member expertise in areas such as engineering, wetlands protection, marketing and development, legal, and financial management.
- Encourage board members to establish and nurture relationships with key partners and assist in raising funds needed to develop BNRC's operations capacity.
- Recruit board members to help us achieve the goal of becoming a more diverse organization. Engage outside expertise as needed to deeply explore equity at BNRC.
- Engage board members and other experts in BNRC stewardship activities through task forces or special projects.

4. Invest in development capacity for revenue growth

- Invest in fund development as needed, including supporting leadership volunteers.
- Increase unrestricted contributed revenue via a combination of small donations, major gifts, grants, and other giving opportunities.

5. Strategically relocate the office to serve a more diverse community and reinforce our mission

- Ensure the location works for staff growth, optimizes staff health, includes accessible parking with ability to store and move equipment, and has sufficient meeting, workshop, and storage space.
- Connect our office to trail access, ideally as a jumping-off place for The High Road.
- Develop relationships with surrounding community to serve a more diverse constituency.

6. Prepare for Land Trust Alliance accreditation process

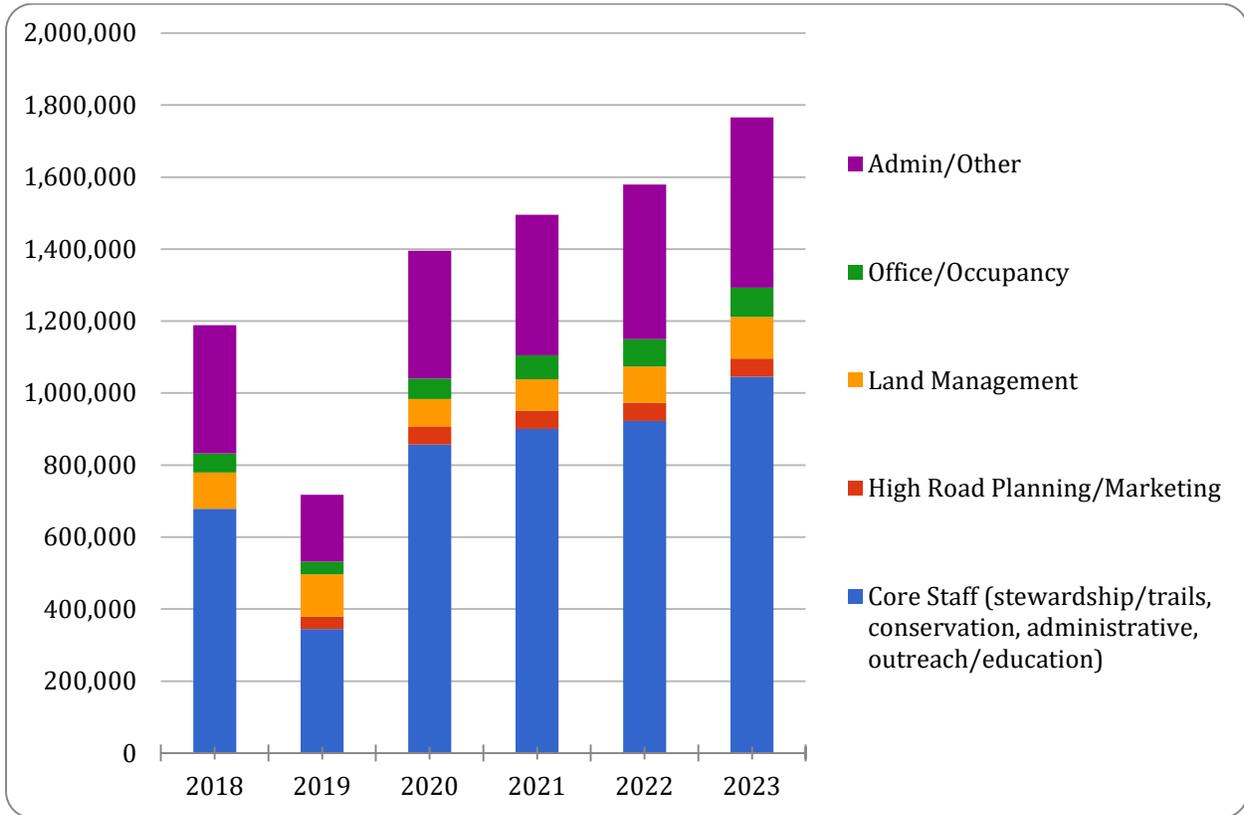
- Assess capacity needs to undertake the extensive work needed for accreditation.
- Complete the required record-keeping and organizational tasks.



100% Berkshire

Berkshire Natural Resources Council 2020-2024

FINANCIAL REQUIREMENTS



BNRC Operating Expenses budget growth, actual and projected 2018-2023

(this chart does not include capital costs such as land acquisition)

Note that in 2019, BNRC shifted its fiscal year from Jan-Dec to July-June so FY19 was a six-month year.

We project that BNRC’s operating budget must grow by an average of 7% a year over the next four years to achieve the goals set out here. In the first two years, most of that growth will be covered by funds already raised and set aside for staffing, planning and implementing the first phases of The High Road.

In the second half of the plan period, we expect to add more back-office staff to support programming growth. Additional marketing or finance staff must be covered by general operating revenue. To ensure we are able to meet that need, we have already invested in a new position, a full-time development director, who has been laying the groundwork for this growth. Building on existing community support for our work, we are confident that we can reach a modest annual increase of \$100,000 in 2021, growing to \$185,000 additional per year (over 2018 unrestricted revenue) by 2023.



100% Berkshire

Berkshire Natural Resources Council 2020-2024

High Road Fund Spend Down: By 2018, BNRC raised \$5 million to launch The High Road. Approximately half was for land acquisition, with the understanding that the funds would be used to leverage additional donations or grants. The balance is intended, though not formally restricted, for stewardship and trail-building. To achieve The High Road construction goals set out here, we will need to spend those funds aggressively: we estimate an average of \$400,000 a year towards land and easement purchases (this scenario assumes an average annual growth in the fund of 7%). Some years we may spend much more if there are critical parcels that must be acted on quickly without sufficient time to raise other donations. As these categories are not binding restrictions, we will also shift funds as needed from acquisition to stewardship or vice versa.

The funds allocated to stewardship and trail-building will be used for a combination of an in-house staff crew and professional crews for more highly technical projects. Our goal is to use these funds as principal and spend only an average of a 4% draw annually, but there may be projects that justify a greater spend, such as a major crossing over a river or highway.

CONCLUSION

Led by a talented and highly professional staff, guided by a committed and wise board of directors, supported by a cadre of enthusiastic volunteers and passionate donors, BNRC has been a leader in land conservation in the Berkshires for over 50 years. With the continued investment of our partners, funders, and the Berkshire County community, we are confident that we will build The High Road, connect people to nature, and create a resilient environment for all of us.