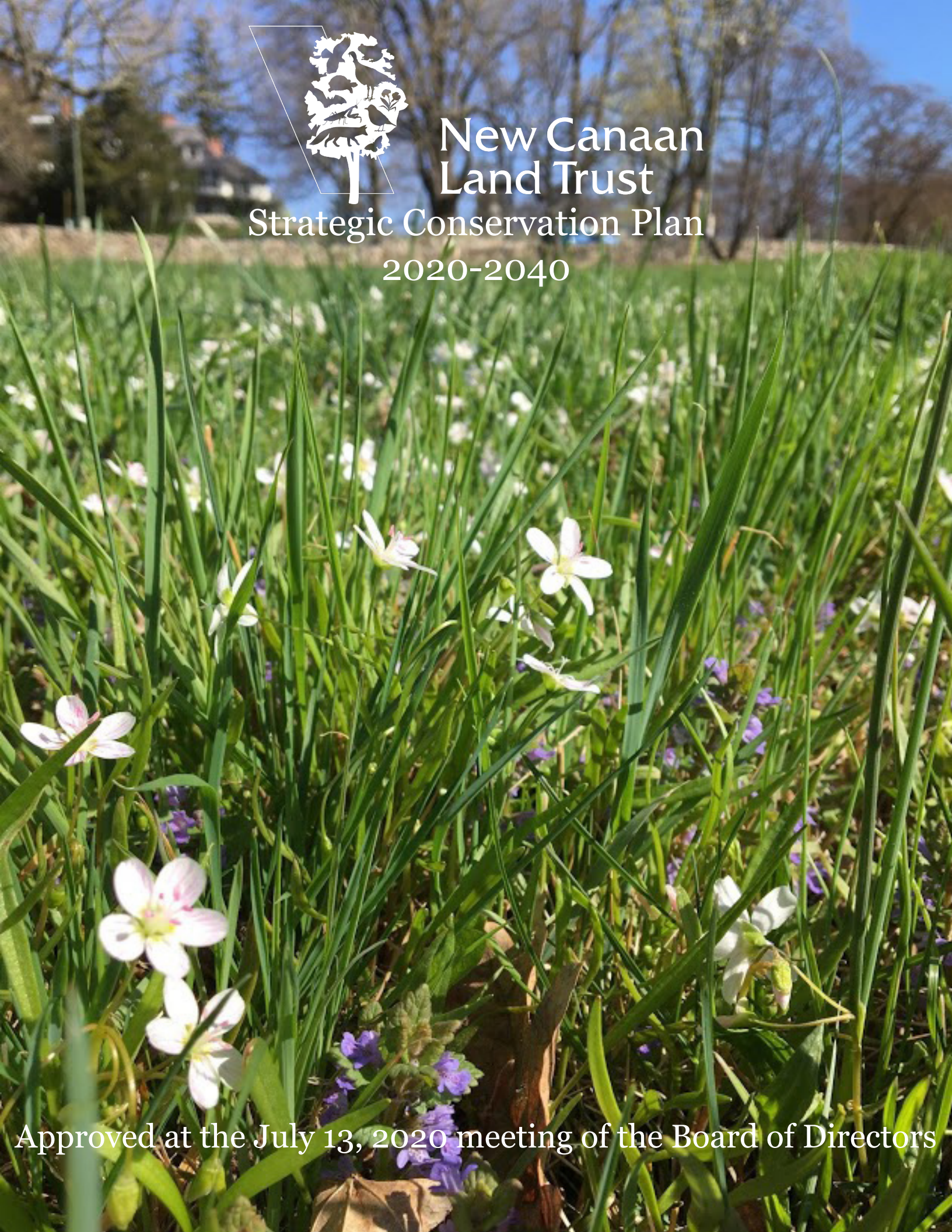




New Canaan
Land Trust
Strategic Conservation Plan
2020-2040



Approved at the July 13, 2020 meeting of the Board of Directors



Introduction

The New Canaan Land Conservation Trust, Inc. (NCLT) was founded in 1967 by a group of conservationists seeking to protect open space in our community. Following the Town's acquisition of Waveny Park earlier that year, the group realized that a more nimble, fast acting entity could facilitate conservation efforts and increase the amount of protected open space in New Canaan. By forming a Land Trust, they hoped to conserve parcels of land that the Town was not prepared to acquire, or was not interested in conserving.

Over the last 50+ years, NCLT has worked to protect nearly 400 acres of land across New Canaan. Today, nearly half of this acreage is open to the public, with the other half set aside as wildlands. This hybrid form of land management allows NCLT to maintain walking trails, host events, and restore native habitats on a portion of its properties, while keeping other areas in a wild and natural state.

Looking forward, NCLT will continue working to protect land and water resources in New Canaan. This document is meant to facilitate future conservation work by:

- Defining the four main criteria that are important to NCLT's conservation efforts
- Highlighting nearly 1000 acres of strategic conservation opportunities
- Setting a goal of protecting an additional 400 acres over the next 20 years; a combination of public, private, and water utility lands.
- Providing strategies and benchmarks to help NCLT to achieve those goals

While much of New Canaan's open space has been developed, NCLT will continue working to protect our community's remaining natural areas. With 53 years of success behind us, we will continue protecting New Canaan's special places. This plan will enable us to focus time, energy, and resources on the highest priority conservation opportunities in our community.



Our Mission:

The mission of the New Canaan Land Trust is to foster a connection between the New Canaan community and its natural resources through the conservation and sustainable stewardship of our open space.

Our Vision:

The vision of the New Canaan Land Trust is a New Canaan community with abundant, protected open space and the imperative to safeguard its natural resources for the benefit and enjoyment of future generations.

Conservation History & Trends

Declining Open Space in New Canaan

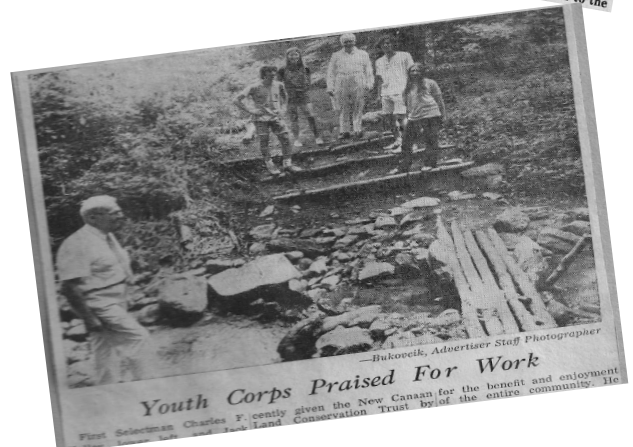
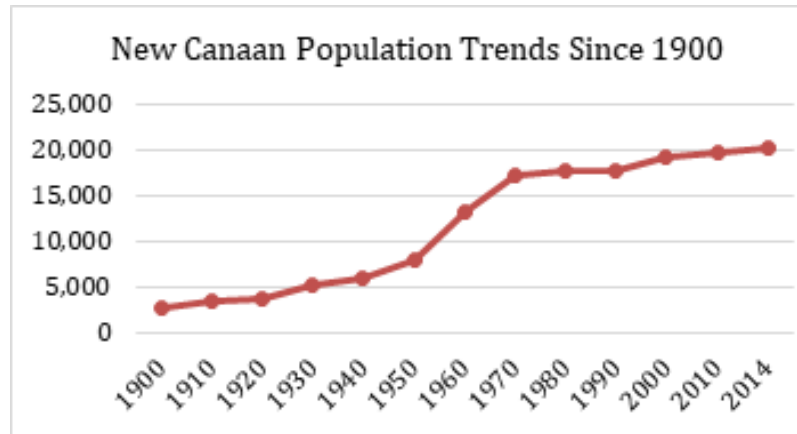
During the 19th and 20th centuries, the eastern U.S. experienced what has been termed “an explosion of green” as large-scale agricultural production shifted westward and forests began regenerating across the region. Simultaneously, a burgeoning conservation movement started to conserve open space, ensuring their permanent protection for generations to come. This history has made New England the nation’s most forested region, with approximately 33 million acres forested out of 42 million total acres.

Development pressure increased in the 1960’s as the population grew after the second world war - an estimated growth rate of 68% over 10 years. As new homes were built and open space lost, the need to protect some of the town’s natural resources became apparent. Today, there is considerable pressure to develop New Canaan’s remaining open space.

Effort to Protect New Canaan’s Special Places

Modern conservation efforts in New Canaan can be traced back to 1924, with the establishment of the 17-acre Bristow Bird Sanctuary by the Bird Protective Society. Other institutions, including the New Canaan Audubon Society, Beautification League, and Town of New Canaan have sought to protect New Canaan’s special places, yet no group has had a more significant impact than the New Canaan Land Trust. In its 53 years, NCLT has protected 79 properties totalling nearly 400 acres. In addition to being the largest private landowner in New Canaan, NCLT protects over 25% of the permanently protected open space.

Today, NCLT is one of a handful of partners working to protect open space in our town, including the Town of New Canaan, State of Connecticut, and some water companies. These other partners have helped to protect over 1000 extra acres of open space. Additionally, NCLT is a partner of the Hudson to Housatonic Regional Conservation Partnership (H2H RCP), and has close ties with land trusts in neighboring communities.



How We Work

NCLT utilizes a number of different mechanisms to conserve land, and works with landowners to determine which conservation options are right for them. Regardless of how the land is conserved, NCLT's primary goal is to ensure that land is protected in perpetuity. NCLT must also ensure that it has the resources, knowledge, and capabilities to protect the conservation values of its properties now, and into the future.



Fee Simple Transfer

In a fee simple transfer, owners transfer all rights, title and interests in their property to NCLT. This transfer can be done through donation or purchase. The transfer deed usually includes a conservation restriction that expressly provides for permanent protection of conservation values such as water, habitat and scenic beauty. This is our preferred option because it is a relatively simple transaction.



Conservation Easements

Though less common, conservation easements are another mechanism we use to protect open space. Through a written agreement, landowners place restrictions on their property to protect the land's conservation value. This written agreement is enforced by NCLT and runs with the land in perpetuity. In most cases, the easement restricts development and subdivision, and may limit the type and scope of other activities that can take place on the land.



Pedestrian Easements

As NCLT works to build new trails for the community, pedestrian easements are a useful tool in creating linkages between parcels of open space. A pedestrian easement gives NCLT the right to build and maintain a trail, while the landowner still retains ownership of the property. Additionally, the pedestrian easement grants the general public the right to pass over the land.

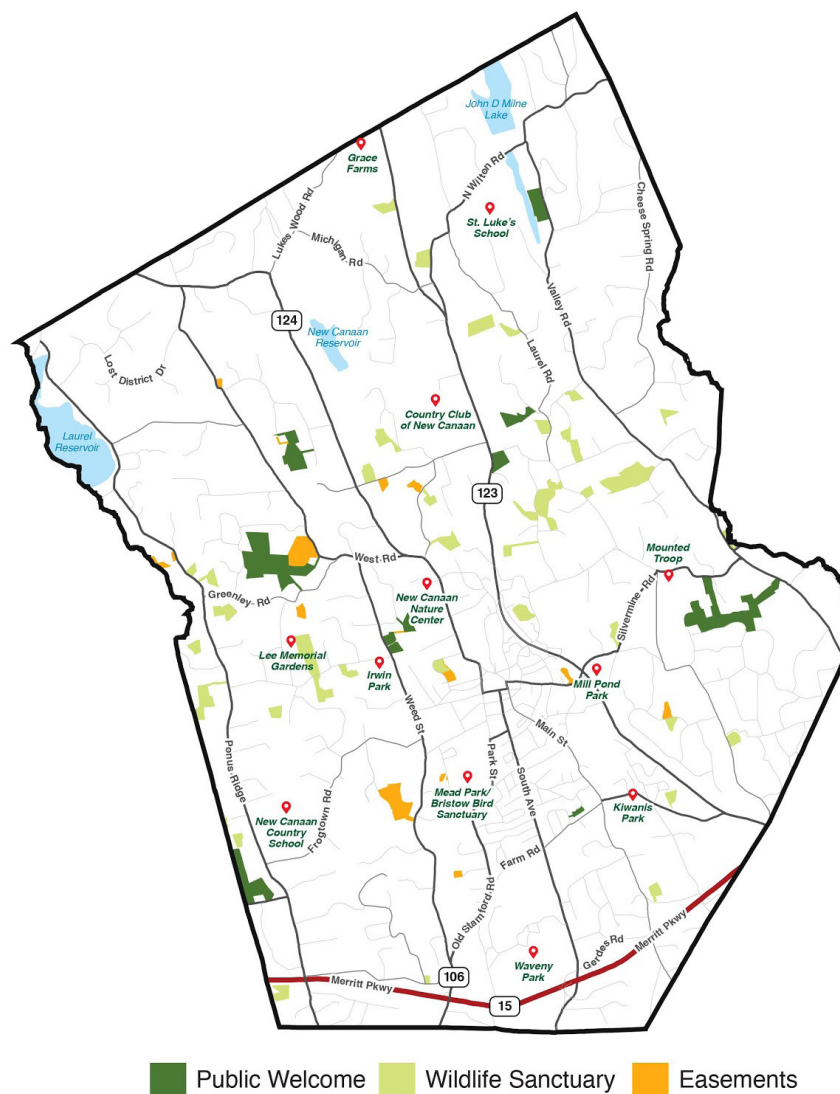
Whether protecting land in fee simple or with an easement, there are three main ways that NCLT acquires land: through donation, bargain sale, or purchase. Nearly all of NCLT's fee simple lands and easements are the result of generous donations from local families. While NCLT will consider a bargain sale or purchase of land, these situations are exceedingly rare.

Our Protected Lands

Since 1967, the New Canaan Land Trust has been working to protect special places across New Canaan. Thanks to the generosity of individuals, families, and business, we have permanently protected just under 400 acres in our community. Our preserves range in size from 1 to 47 acres, and include diverse ecosystems such as wetlands, forests, and meadows.

Nearly half of the Land Trust's acreage is open to the public for recreation. With a total of 5.5 miles of walking trails across 9 preserves, opportunities abound for hiking, cross-country skiing, birding, and more. The land trust also hosts a wide range of community events at these preserves, including guided walks, art installations, volunteer days, and neighborhood campfires. The remaining acreage is kept in its wild and natural state, free from human disturbance and management, and forever protected as a home for wildlife.

Our protected lands provide many benefits to the New Canaan community: trails connect neighbors and provide safe walking paths to schools; wetlands absorb and filter rainwater; and meadows protect the scenic beauty of our community. Open space is integral to the character and wellbeing of New Canaan.





Resource Protection Priorities

Land trusts across the United States protect land for different reasons. Conservation decisions are largely dependent on the needs of a community, and the way that a community interacts with their land. Working in the suburban community of New Canaan, the New Canaan Land Trust recognizes the following four priorities to guide future land conservation initiatives.

- Healthy Habitats
- Opportunities for Recreation
- Water Resources
- Historic & Cultural Resources



Healthy Habitats

New Canaan is home to diverse habitats including woodlands, wetlands, meadows, and waterways such as ponds and streams. These habitats support an array of species that are otherwise displaced by development and intensive land uses. NCLT's preserves are critically important for native plants and animals; at one property alone, experts have observed over 50 different species of birds, and 20 unique tree species.

Healthy habitats are needed to sustain biological diversity, and ensure that plant and animal populations do not decline. Threats to our habitats include shifts in land use, development, fragmentation, and degradation (including the spread of invasive species). Other threats include a lack of knowledge about habitat conservation; lack of coordinated, landscape scale conservation efforts; and insufficient resources to maintain or enhance native habitats.

By incorporating data from state and federal agencies, as well as other non-governmental organizations, we are able to identify areas with high quality habitats and focus resources on conserving these special places. Moving forward, we will accelerate the pace at which we conserve New Canaan's healthy habitats.



By the Numbers

Connecticut's diverse habitats are home to several species, including:

50 Reptiles & Amphibians

84 Mammals

169 Fish

335 Birds

20,000 Invertebrates

Many of these species are found in New Canaan



Opportunities for Recreation

When New Canaan residents need local places to play, New Canaan Land Trust lands are often where they turn. Approximately 50% of NCLT's acreage is open to the public for passive forms of recreation including hiking, nature walks, birding, and exploration. NCLT seeks to increase opportunities for outdoor recreation by enlarging existing preserves and by building connections between existing parcels of open space.

New conservation projects also create new opportunities, and may allow us to develop biking or horseback riding trails, hunting and fishing areas, and more. We're also exploring new ways to use our existing preserves. One vivid example is our collaboration with local artists to create the 2020 New Canaan Sculpture Trail.

Regardless of how New Canaan residents choose to recreate, parks and open space benefit us all by lowering stress levels, encouraging exercise, providing places to gather, and promoting overall well-being. With increased urban sprawl, sedentary lifestyles, and excess screen time, it is more important than ever for all of us to have access to green space and a place to connect with our natural surroundings.



Access to the outdoors also creates economic benefits. In Connecticut, 69,000 jobs depend on the outdoor recreation industry - more than the total number of CT jobs in the aerospace and defense industries. These jobs provide nearly \$3 billion in wages and salaries, and contribute to the \$9 billion total consumer spending on outdoor recreation by Nutmeggers.



Water Resources

Water is a critically important resource in New Canaan. Approximately 50% of homes derive their drinking water from wells, so the quality and quantity of groundwater is important to New Canaan Residents.

Open space is important for both water filtration (removing contaminants from groundwater) and infiltration (allowing water to absorb into the ground). Undeveloped land acts as a filter, catching pollutants from lawns, roadways, and other sources, and improving the quality of downstream water. Undeveloped lands also help to protect against flooding, by allowing greater quantities of water to enter underground aquifers, instead of flowing into streams and rivers. These aquifers, when adequately recharged after a rainstorm, can also help prevent water shortages during times of drought. With climate change bringing more frequent and severe rainstorms, open space plays an important role in regulating New Canaan's water resources.

Of course, New Canaan is part of a much larger water cycle. All of New Canaan's streams and rivers flow into Long Island Sound and impact the water quality in that important ecosystem. Both the fishery and tourism industries are dependent on clean water in Long Island Sound, so it's vital that New Canaan does its part to control water pollution.

By increasing our rate of land conservation, our goal is to protect water quality and quantity and to ensure that increasingly severe storms do not cause increased flooding. We will do this not only by conserving land, but by specifically focusing on conservation opportunities that protect wetlands, streams, and rivers.





Historic & Cultural Resources

New Canaan has a rich history spanning from pre-colonial times to today, and NCLT recognizes the importance of protecting our community's past. Some sites carry particular significance to the town's pre-colonial history, with streets still bearing the names of Native peoples including Ponus and his sons Oenoke and Wahackme. Other features in New Canaan bear witness to the town's colonial history, including historic homes, cemeteries and stone walls. In more recent times, mid-century modern homes have highlighted New Canaan's important role in architectural design.

New Canaan also harbors scenic beauty, from rolling hills to craggy ridgetops. These scenic landscapes offer more than a view; they create a sense of place and identity. We believe these scenic qualities are important to New Canaan's character and charm. NCLT understands the power and potential of scenic places, which is why we work to protect them.

Conservation Resource Analysis

NCLT took a detailed approach to assessing conservation resources in New Canaan, and identifying priority conservation opportunities. Much of the groundwork for this analysis had been done through previous work by students at the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies. These students identified properties with high conservation value based on their size, level of development, proximity to open space, and more.

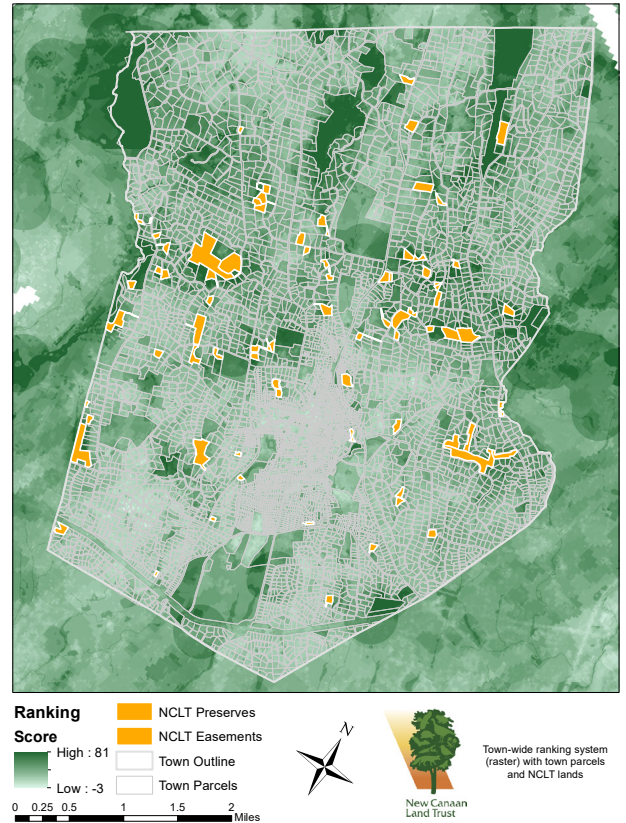


Methodology

In developing this plan, we built on previous work and created a sophisticated computer model to identify areas of high conservation priority. This model was developed using Geographic Information Systems (GIS), a framework for analyzing spatial data. Multiple datasets from CT DEEP, federal agencies, and regional conservation groups were weighted and layered together. When completed, the model identified areas of New Canaan with the highest conservation value.

As a final step, NCLT used institutional and on-the-ground knowledge to curate a list of high, medium, and low priority conservation opportunities. This multifactor analysis allowed us to map conservation resources across New Canaan - like wetlands, natural diversity, and migratory bird habitat - and identify areas with the highest concentration of conservation resources. The individual parcels identified in this analysis are proprietary to NCLT.

Using this methodology, we identified just under 1000 acres of land that we view as priority conservation targets. This land is spread across 136 parcels. 505 of these acres are designated as Class 1 water company land and have some existing, but not permanent, protections. The remaining 486 acres are a combination of private property and state/town lands that do not have formal protection.



Conservation Opportunities

In addition to ranking our strategic conservation opportunities, we've also grouped them to help understand the different strategies that might be used to protect these lands. These groupings include land that is:

- Adjacent to or in close proximity to existing protected open space
- Large, unbuilt parcels, or clusters of undeveloped parcels
- Water company land
- Historically or culturally significant properties

Grouping	Acres to Conserve				Number of Parcels			
	High	Medium	Low	Total	High	Medium	Low	Total
Adjacent to NCLT Preserves	31.3	27.3	12.0	70.6	11	24	5	40
Adjacent to Other Open Space	12.8	1.9	41.7	56.5	4	1	11	16
Proximity to NCLT Preserves	24.3	16.5	6.9	47.7	7	7	3	17
Proximity to Other Open Space	5.6	6.9	0.0	12.5	2	1	0	3
Large & Undeveloped	94.9	29.5	0.0	124.4	2	6	1	9
Clustered & Undeveloped	72.6	23.4	73.5	169.5	9	12	20	41
Water Company	473.0	0.0	32.8	505.8	5	0	2	7
Historic or Culturally Significant	9.2	0.0	0.0	9.2	3	0	0	3
Total	723.7	105.5	166.9	996.1	43	51	42	136
Total without Water Co Lands	250.7	105.5	134.2	490.3	38	51	40	129



Adjacency and Proximity to Existing Open Space

Conserving land that is adjacent to or in close proximity to existing open space is a priority for NCLT. These properties allow us to expand existing preserves, create wildlife corridors, and forge trail linkages through town. NCLT has identified a total of 70 acres that are adjacent to NCLT preserves, and an additional 56 acres that are adjacent to other existing open space. NCLT has also identified an additional 60 that are in close proximity to NCLT preserves or other existing open space.

Large, Unbuilt or Clusters of Undeveloped Properties

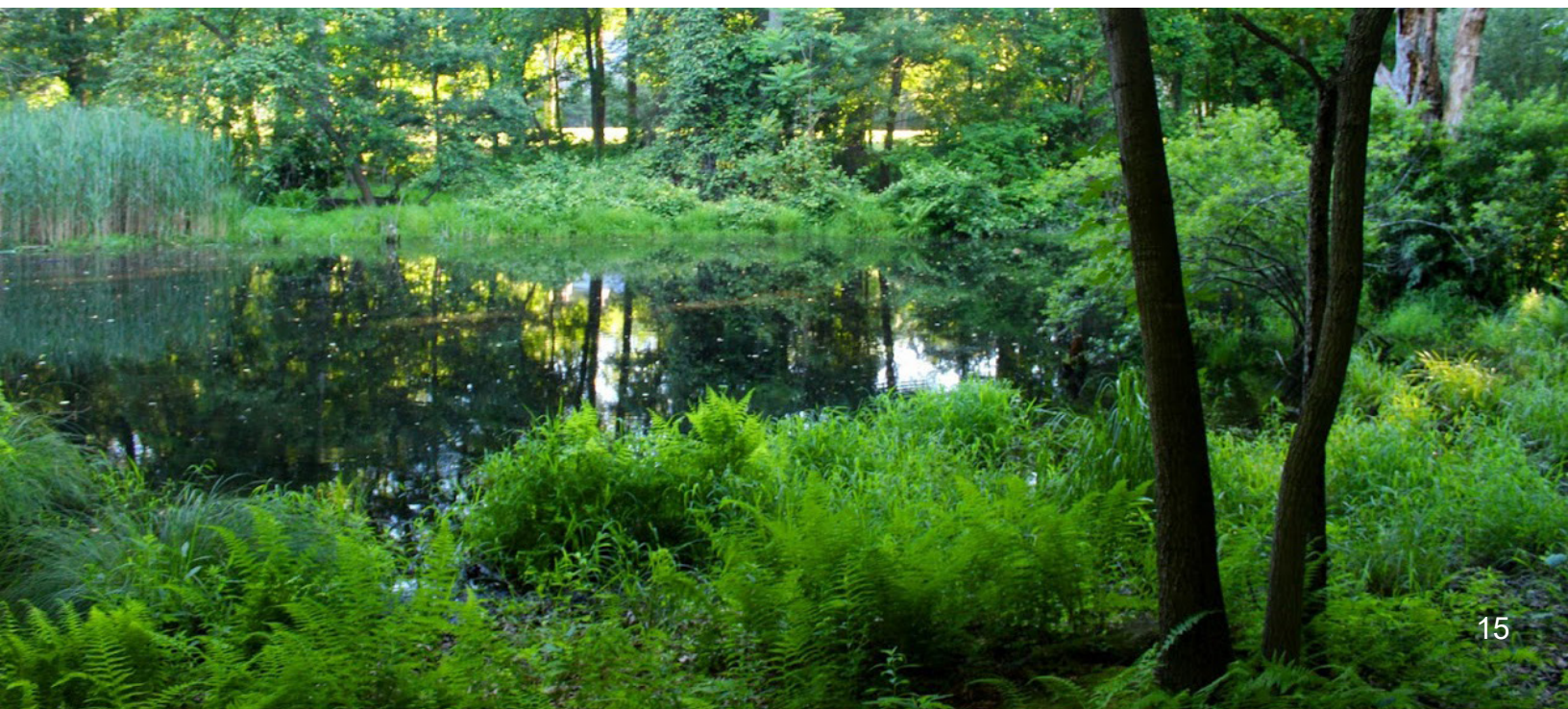
While many of New Canaan's large estates have been subdivided and developed, there still exist some large parcels with swaths of undeveloped land. NCLT has identified 9 of these parcels, totaling 124 acres. While not exceedingly common, there are also a few instances where multiple unbuilt parcels are adjacent to or in very close proximity to one another. In many cases, these parcels are slated for development. NCLT has identified 41 of these parcels totaling 170 acres.

Water Company Lands

Much of the remaining water company land in New Canaan is designated as Class 1, which means there are existing restrictions on what can be done with these lands. While we have no reason to believe that the water companies operating in New Canaan would try to reclassify or dispose of these lands, they hold significant conservation value for our town. In addition to being the largest parcels of open space remaining in New Canaan, the various water company lands received top scores in the GIS conservation model described earlier. NCLT will continue to work with the water companies, and other stakeholders, to ensure that these 500 acres remain as open space.

Historic or Culturally Significant Properties

New Canaan is home to a number of historically and culturally important sites. NCLT has identified two such sites as "high-priority" and that it would work to protect. The 4.2-acre Grupes-Browne House is one of New Canaan's oldest remaining homes, contains healthy second-growth forest, and is directly adjacent to NCLT Browne Preserve. The 6.6-acre Eliot Noyes House (divided into two parcels) is a prime example of the mid-century modern style of architecture that partially originated in New Canaan, and is situated on a largely undisturbed and incredibly scenic patch of woodlands. With tremendous natural and cultural value, NCLT would love to ensure that these sites are protected in perpetuity.





Charting a Path Forward

Using the data provided in this plan, the New Canaan Land Trust has set a goal of protecting an additional 400 acres of land by 2040. This will bring our total holdings up to 800 acres. If completed, this would more than double the rate at which NCLT has been conserving land.

This is an audacious goal, but it is not without context. In his 2019 speech at the Land Trust Alliance (LTA) conference, LTA President and CEO Andrew Bowman called for a 10-fold increase in the rate of land conservation across the United States over the next decade. The Wildlands and Woodlands Vision for New England, a report published by academics and practitioners from across the region, calls for 70% of New England to be protected from development. At the state level, CT DEEP created the Green Plan to set a goal of protecting 21% of the state as open space by 2020. DEEP will surely release another plan in the near future, with an even more ambitious goal.

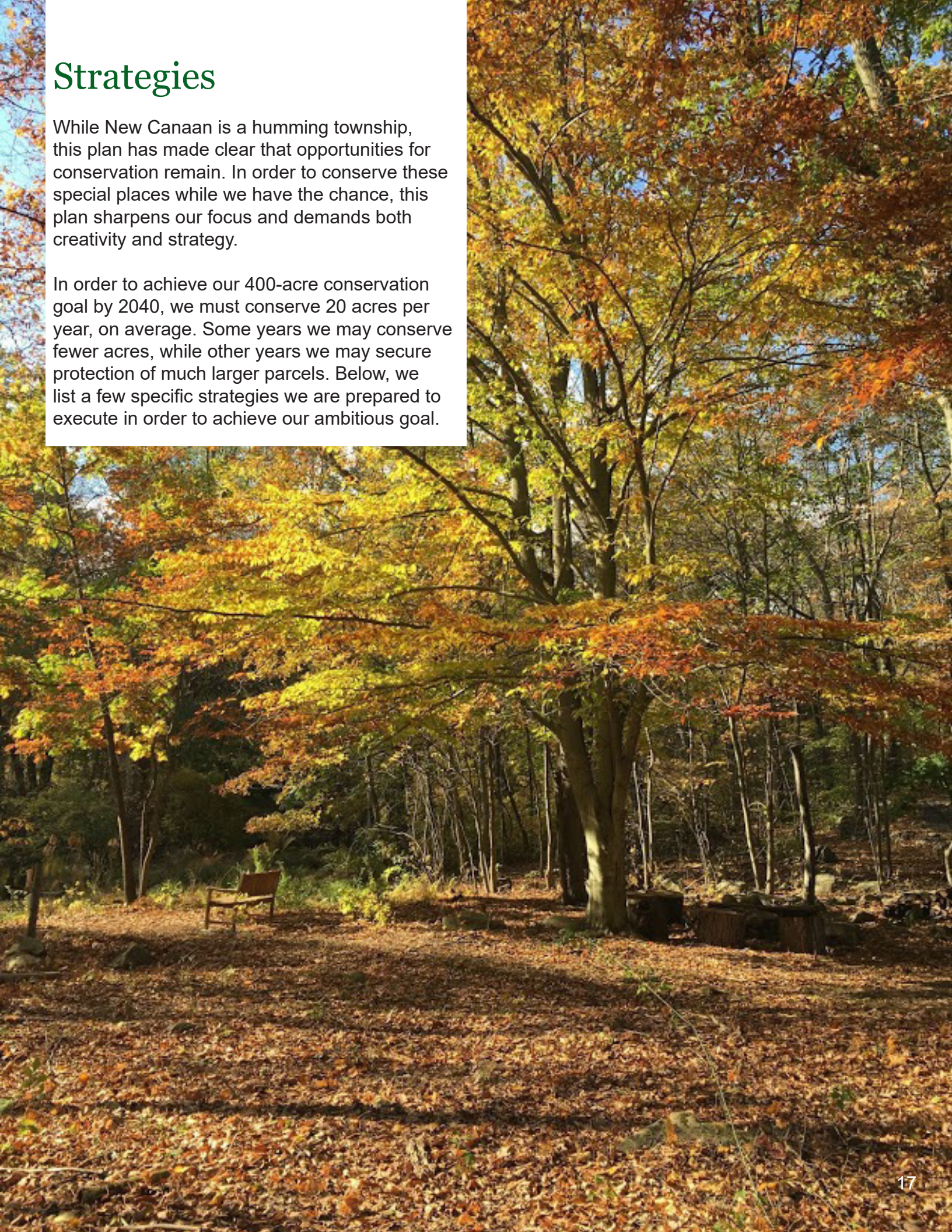
The loftiness of these goals demonstrates the critical role that land plays in our lives. If we are to have healthy habitats, places to recreate, quality drinking water, and to protect our history and culture, we must increase the rate at which we conserve our land in our community.



Strategies

While New Canaan is a humming township, this plan has made clear that opportunities for conservation remain. In order to conserve these special places while we have the chance, this plan sharpens our focus and demands both creativity and strategy.

In order to achieve our 400-acre conservation goal by 2040, we must conserve 20 acres per year, on average. Some years we may conserve fewer acres, while other years we may secure protection of much larger parcels. Below, we list a few specific strategies we are prepared to execute in order to achieve our ambitious goal.



Conserve Land, Strategically

Protecting new parcels of land is at the core of NCLT's mission, and is more important than ever. Using the information from this plan, NCLT has the ability to become more proactive in its land conservation efforts, and focus its resources on protecting the lands with the highest conservation value.

Strategies:

- Focus efforts and resources to conserve high- and mid-priority lands, and those that align with the Resource Protection Priorities identified in this plan
- Cultivate gifts of high- and mid-priority lands through regular meetings and communications with the landowners
- Develop working relationships with directors of water companies with land in New Canaan to better understand current land uses, and potential changes to those uses
- Build and maintain partnerships with government entities and other conservation nonprofits (land trusts, regional conservation partnerships, etc) to increase the scale at which NCLT can conserve land





Broaden Community Outreach

NCLT is a growing organization, and many residents of New Canaan are unaware of our ongoing work to protect our community's natural resources. Bolstering community awareness of NCLT, and educating the public about our work, is crucial to increasing our impact and the rate at which we can conserve land.

Strategies:

- Emphasize NCLT's role as a leader in conservation by serving as a trusted advisor and resource to maximize our conservation impact
- Deliver education programs and create supplemental materials that explain the tax benefits and other financial incentives for conserving land
- Involve residents in using NCLT lands through community-focused programming
- Partner with other non-profits who can use NCLT's preserves as a community resource



Ensure Adequate Funding for Future Conservation

NCLT has identified a number of high priority parcels that would add significant conservation value to our portfolio and address several of our resource protection priorities. While we will continue to rely primarily on land and easement donations, NCLT must be prepared to execute capital campaigns when all else fails.

Strategies:

- Identify potential funding sources for future land acquisition projects enumerated in this plan
- Advocate for the Town of New Canaan to add funds to the Land Acquisition Fund
- Establish a board-restricted Strategic Conservation Fund for NCLT's use in strategic acquisitions
- Explore opportunities to leverage conservation funding for regional or landscape-scale conservation work, through regional conservation partnerships





Be Model Land Stewards

Stewardship will continue to be at the center of our conservation effort, including any new properties we acquire. When NCLT takes on a new property or easement, we are making a promise to protect that land in perpetuity.

Strategies:

- Ensure that all NCLT properties are inspected on an annual basis and that encroachments or other violations are handled promptly and consistently
- Continue maintaining and improving the conservation values of NCLT's existing preserves, to demonstrate NCLT's ability to care for lands that we may acquire in the future

Measuring Success

On a 5-year basis, we will measure and report our performance against a number of quantitative and qualitative metrics, described below. This will enable us to track progress towards achieving our 20 year target. It will also enable us to review and adapt our strategies to respond to changes that might be needed during the course of implementing this plan.

Benchmarks with an asterisk coincide with benchmarks in NCLT's 2019-2024 Strategic Plan

Conserve Land, Strategically

1. NCLT has protected a total of 800 acres of open space by 2040. 5-year benchmarks are as follows:
400 acres in 2020 450 acres in 2025 525 acres in 2030 650 acres in 2035 800 acres in 2040
2. Approximately 500 acres of high-priority water company lands remain protected, either through the water companies themselves or through new Land Trust protections
3. NCLT meets with all owners of High-Priority and Mid-Priority lands, every 2 and 3 years, respectively, to cultivate future donations of that land
4. NCLT has developed working relationships with all water companies operating in New Canaan by 2025, and has check-in meetings with their directors every other year thereafter
5. NCLT has expanded its preserves or created pedestrian easement linkages that enable us to build at least an additional 2 miles of walking trails by 2040
6. NCLT continues its involvement in the Hudson to Housatonic Regional Conservation Partnership, and has developed strong relationships with land trusts from neighboring towns*
7. Identify and recruit strategic partners capable of assessing the state of natural resources on NCLT properties for future conservation decisions*

Broaden Community Outreach

1. NCLT proactively educates property owners and the community on the public and tax benefits of land donations and conservation easements through at least two programs every 5 years*
2. NCLT offers monthly programs that engage New Canaan residents with our mission*
3. NCLT partners with at least two community nonprofits per year to offer programs or collaborative events on our preserves
4. NCLT engages New Canaan's non-profit community as stakeholders in future land conservation projects

Ensure Adequate Funding for Conservation

1. By 2025, NCLT has identified potential funding sources for future land acquisition projects, including sources specific to historic/cultural preservation, expanding recreation opportunities, and traditional open space conservation
2. Annually, NCLT advocates for Town funding for the Land Acquisition Fund
3. By 2040, NCLT creates a board-restricted fund of \$250,000 to be used solely for the future purchase of strategic conservation opportunities. 5-year benchmarks are as follows:
\$25,000, in 2025 \$75,000 in 2030 \$150,000 in 2035 \$250,000 in 2040
4. By 2025, NCLT's open space committee is well versed on regional or landscape-scale funding opportunities that could be used to conserve land in New Canaan

Be Model Land Stewards

1. NCLT completes and documents property inspections and easement monitoring visits on an annual basis*
2. NCLT continues completing stewardship projects that demonstrate our ability to manage land and protect its conservation values in perpetuity



Call to Action

Thanks to the support and vision of so many, the New Canaan Land Trust protects more private land in New Canaan than any other conservation organization, and our conservation impact grows each year. We have an opportunity to shape the landscape of New Canaan and protect its special places. Unfortunately, that opportunity shrinks every year as open space is lost to development and fragmentation.

People remain at the heart of what we do. Establishing relationships based on a reputation of trust and excellence is core to our mission. Thank you for joining us as we protect our community.

We invite you to:

- Reach out to learn about the ways we can help to protect your land
- Make a financial gift to support our work
- Attend events and explore our preserves
- Share our work with your neighbors, friends, and family

We've set a lofty goal for the next 20 years. When achieved, New Canaan will be a better place for all. Land conservation is more important now than ever before. We look forward to continued success and a future with abundant open space for all to enjoy.

Sincerely,

Aaron Lefland
Executive Director



Tom Cronin
Board President





New Canaan
Land Trust