

Sustainability Plan (2026–2031)



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Executive Summary

Franklin Park Conservatory and Botanical Gardens (“the Conservatory”) completed a comprehensive strategic planning process in 2024. Based upon strong community interest, this led to a decision to develop a more formalized sustainability plan. The strategic plan called for an assessment of current sustainability efforts, creation of a designated sustainability committee with a clear charter and resources, and adoption of formal sustainability priorities and embedding them throughout the organization.

The sustainability planning process was robust, including multiple phases of engagement of staff, community partners, and local residents. Extensive analysis was conducted on both the staff and community feedback. The analysis was presented at a Sustainability Retreat on February 10, 2025, where Conservatory staff developed five sustainability priorities and articulated the Conservatory’s own philosophy towards sustainability. It was determined that in order to have a scalable impact, the Conservatory will engage in sustainability practices both on-site and in the community. The decision to work not just on-site but also in the local community received strong support at a Community Workshop on April 11, 2025.

The five sustainability priorities serve as a framework to help the Conservatory have more impact and tell its sustainability story more effectively. Indeed, the team identified at least 60 areas where the Conservatory is already pursuing sustainability projects and programs that fit within the five sustainability priorities. The five sustainability priorities are Biodiversity and Ecosystems, Reducing On-Site Waste and Carbon Emissions, Innovative Food Solutions, Empowering Through Education, and Sustainable Economic Benefits through Collaboration.

In July of 2025, the Conservatory finalized their sustainability plan, and quarters three and four of 2025 will be spent planning and preparing for an official plan launch in January 2026.

This Sustainability Plan describes the engagement process, presents the Conservatory’s approach to sustainability & the full definitions of the five priorities, shows 5-year commitments, and presents the most important actions to pursue in year 1 of the plan as well as key actions for years 2-5 of the plan.

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Overview of the Planning Process

The Conservatory's strategic planning process included an assessment of current sustainability efforts, creation of a designated sustainability committee with a clear charter and resources, and adoption of formal sustainability priorities and embedding them throughout the organization.

The assessment was a comprehensive process that involved understanding how other similar organizations are approaching sustainability, how regional partners in the Greater Columbus and Franklin County area think about sustainability, and how Conservatory staff currently think about sustainability.

The assessment surfaced a few key findings. First, we learned that almost everyone approaches sustainability differently. Second, we learned that Conservatory staff already do a lot of sustainability practices – they just might not call them that. Third, we heard that sustainability needs a customized definition and approach for the Conservatory. There are no standard practices that all organizations adopt. Customization and collaboration – along with starting small pilot projects - will be critical to success. Starting small means the organization is learning what works and what does not work, and over time, building a portfolio of successful projects to showcase. Once that foundation is built, the projects can also grow large in scope and impact.

As part of the Conservatory's sustainability planning process, the project team completed multiple phases of engagement.

Phase 1 of Engagement:

Engaged 32 staff either by interview or survey; completed 2 interviews with Board members; and engaged 22 community partners by interview or survey.

Total engaged: 56.

Phase 2 of Engagement:

Hosted a one-day Sustainability Retreat with Conservatory staff and leaders.

Total engaged: 20.

Phase 3 of Engagement:

A diversity of staff representing all Conservatory departments participated in an idea generation and prioritization exercise (March 20-21, 2025). Staff were asked to identify opportunities that align with the Conservatory's five sustainability priorities. The staff then had to rank the opportunities based upon alignment with one or more sustainability priorities, potential for successful implementation in the next 18 months, and overall cost and feasibility.

Total engaged: 34.

Phase 4 of Engagement:

Organized a community workshop attended by community leaders, residents of nearby neighborhoods, cultural and environmental nonprofits & sustainability leaders.

Total engaged: Over 50.

Overview of Phase 1 Engagement Findings

The purpose of Phase 1 was:

Objective 1: Better understand the opportunities and trends in the sustainability space, with an emphasis on the greater Columbus area

Objective 2: Understand how a diversity of stakeholders are defining "sustainability"

Objective 3: Create a better awareness of local environmental and community needs

Objective 4: Use this information to inform how FPC defines sustainability and top sustainability priorities

Two key findings of interest were related to ranking the most important outcomes for ecosystems and human well-being.¹ Any good sustainability plan will be founded on outcomes: how ecosystems and communities will be better off because of this work. The following charts show the top ecological and human well-being outcomes, as ranked both by staff and community partners.

¹ The full Phase 1 Engagement Summary of Findings Report can be seen on request.



Photo: Community Workshop that was in Phase 4 of this project.

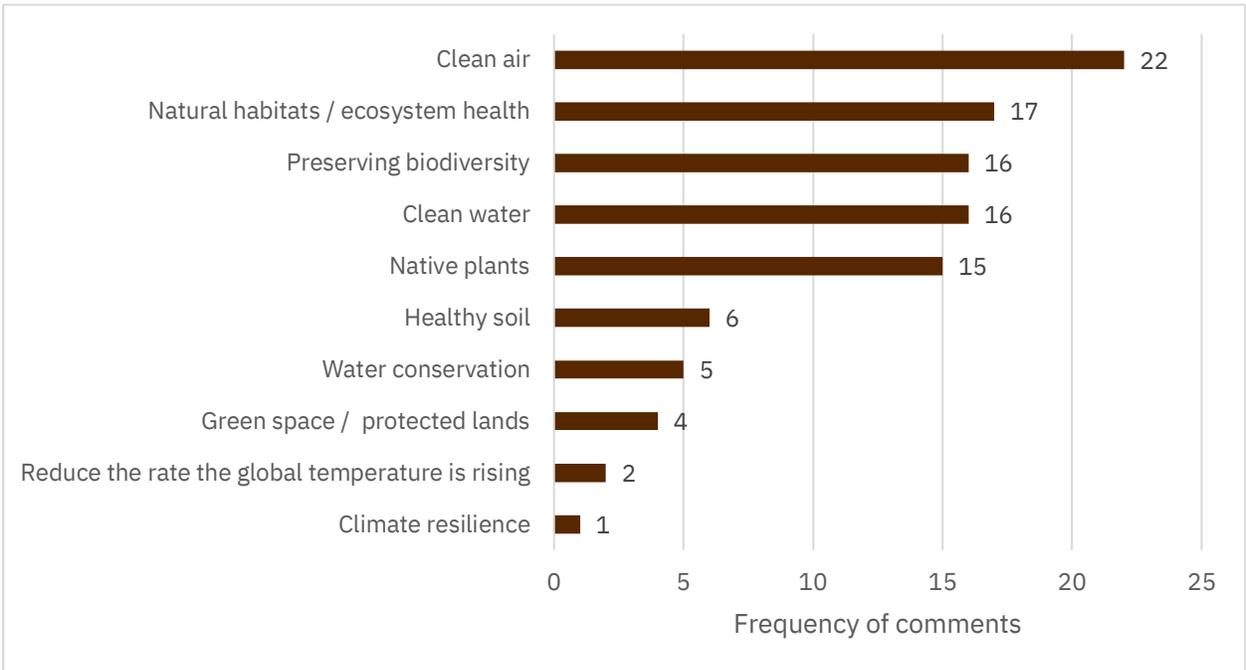


Chart 1: Most frequent ecological outcomes of importance for the greater Columbus region

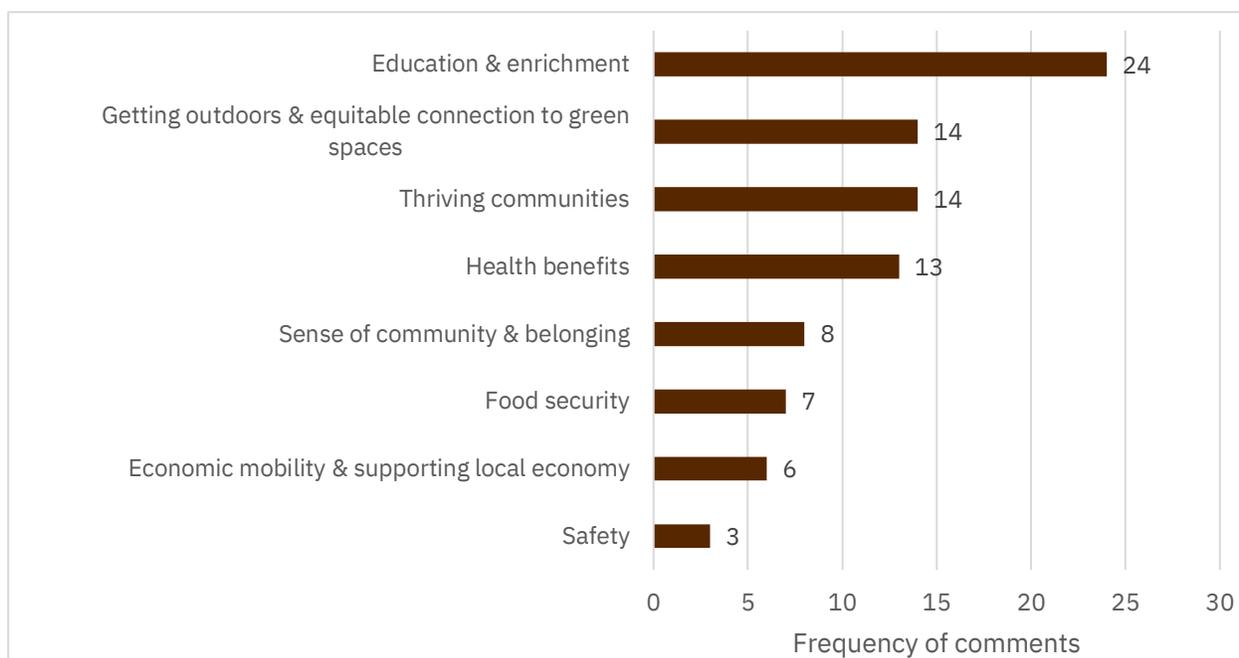


Chart 2: Most frequent human well-being outcomes of importance for the greater Columbus region

Phase 2: Sustainability Retreat

Phase 2 of Engagement was the one-day Sustainability Retreat with Conservatory staff and leaders. During this retreat, the participants collaboratively developed the Conservatory’s Sustainability Definition and Purpose Statement (shared later in this report). The participants built on the findings from Phase 1 and used those to inform the development of the five sustainability priorities. To narrow the list of potential priorities, the participants developed criteria and then applied the criteria to help rank each priority. The highest ranked priorities moved forward, and the lowest ranked priorities were eliminated. This was important to help the team focus on higher impact areas.

The criteria that the group developed to narrow the priorities were the following questions:

1. Expand and build new relationships and partnerships in alignment with existing plans?
2. Provide measurable benefits to the local community addressing a community social need (e.g., food security)?
3. Increase education and enrichment that leads residents to take action?
4. Align with the master plan with sustainability outcomes for new gardens & facilities?



Photo: Conservatory staff discussing priorities at the Sustainability Retreat on February 10, 2025

Phase 3: Narrowing Opportunities

Phase 3 of the project involved meeting with Conservatory staff representing all departments to help identify key opportunities that would fit within the plan. The following table shows the total number of opportunities submitted by staff and which of the five sustainability priorities they represented.

Opportunities Identified by Priority Area

Priority Area	# of Ideas Submitted	# of High Alignment Ideas
Reduce on-site waste and carbon emissions	39	18
Empowerment through Education	20	11
Biodiversity & Ecosystems	12	4
Economic Benefits through Collaboration	10	3
Innovative Food Solutions	7	1

 *Note: Some responses touched multiple priority areas; we categorized based on primary alignment.*

Overview of findings from the Community Workshop

As part of Phase 4 of the sustainability planning process – after the draft sustainability priorities had already been established - the Conservatory hosted a community workshop. The workshop participants included community members & leaders, residents of nearby neighborhoods, partner organizations and nonprofit leaders from arts & culture, conservation and food security.

The objective of the workshop was to unveil draft sustainability priorities, educate community members on the Conservatory’s approach and philosophy, and capture community feedback on priorities and messaging.

The following is an overview of key findings from the community workshop:

- Overall positive feedback – the participants were engaged and animated in discussions. People in general are happy that the Conservatory is taking on a bigger role in this space.
- Emphasis on community building, connection, & people. This includes accessibility and honoring community knowledge, rather than the Conservatory being seen as the expert in the room.
- Collaboration & partners were frequently cited as a critical element, including an interest in working together on creating solutions.
- Education, integration & empowerment – participants care a lot about the role of education in this work, with sustainability as a tool for culture change and with a focus on incorporating community needs. They also stressed the importance of integrating sustainability across the board, not having it be a separate initiative.
- Frequently mentioned was the importance of clear and consistent communication about these priorities, across multiple platforms and modes of communication - including showcasing successes.
- Food and Community-centered solutions around food, gardens, and local food systems were mentioned the most. Also, Innovative Food Solutions is the priority that had the most comments.
- Significantly fewer comments around Biodiversity & Ecosystems and Economic Benefits priorities implies there may be a lack of understanding of what those priorities mean and why they are relevant to communities. Broadly speaking, participants don't seem to fully understand the broad need for supporting biodiversity, why it matters, and similarly, the full suite of economic benefits that come from sustainability efforts.
- Reducing Waste and supporting Local Economic Impact (including creating green jobs) were also mentioned regularly. Energy efficiency and reducing carbon emissions were mentioned the least often of all the priorities.

Sustainability Definition and Statement of Purpose

Inspired by the Phase 1 engagement, the staff collaboratively developed the following definition and statement of purpose at the Sustainability Retreat.

Franklin Park Conservatory and Botanical Gardens' Sustainability Definition:

Sustainability at Conservatory means building a resilient, prosperous community and a healthy environment by deepening our connection to nature. We achieve this through targeted education, improved access to natural spaces, and strategic collaborations.

Purpose Statement:

We commit to sustainability because we understand the vital interdependence between humans and nature. Access to the natural world is a basic human need and foundational for thriving communities. As a botanical garden, we accept our unique responsibility to steward the environment for all people, including future generations.

The Conservatory's Five Sustainability Priorities

The following are the Conservatory's Five Sustainability Priorities. These are meant to be long-term outcomes that the Conservatory will work towards with partners.

1. **Enhance Biodiversity and Ecosystems:** Foster rich biodiversity and robust ecosystems that the community can easily engage with and benefit from.
2. **Reduce On-Site Waste and Carbon Emissions:** Implement effective strategies to minimize waste and cut carbon emissions.
3. **Innovative Food Solutions:** Minimize food waste, expand access to nutritious food, and fight hunger.
4. **Empower Through Education:** Leverage successful demonstration projects and educational programming to empower community members and staff to adopt sustainability practices in their everyday lives.
5. **Foster Economic Benefits Through Collaboration and Sustainability:** Collaborate with local partners to boost local economic impact and support green workforce development.

Incorporating Existing Sustainability Efforts

The “Current Practices” compiled from staff highlights a broad array of initiatives that are **already underway** at the Conservatory. This sustainability plan includes representative examples of current sustainability practices already being implemented by the Conservatory and under which priorities they fit.

Enhance Biodiversity and Ecosystems:

- Various rain and pollinator gardens in the Scotts Miracle-Gro Company Community Garden Campus, and the Scotts Miracle-Gro Foundation Children’s Garden
- Native plants in various garden areas such as the Wells Barn, and the Scotts Miracle-Gro Foundation Children’s Garden and related plant ephemeral signage
- Visitors, school groups, and tours experience global plant diversity in the Conservatory’s Biomes
- Integrated Pest Management approach to greenhouse plant collections

Reduce On-Site Waste and Carbon Emissions:

- Recycling
- Composting plant material
- Facilities converting to LED light bulbs
- Recycling bins in the park
- Repurposing plastic nursery containers in the greenhouse

Innovative Food Solutions:

- The Conservatory’s Growing to Green Program is an organized effort that supports community gardens which aims to increase the availability and accessibility of fresh produce within neighborhoods
- Farmers’ Market
- Sourcing produce from the Scotts Miracle-Gro Company Community Garden Campus for the Cafe and culinary classes
- Free Little Farm Stand, a small pantry of seasonal produce grown in the Scotts Miracle-Gro Company Community Garden Campus available to the community

Empower Through Education:

- Pollinator Palooza, an annual community festival with more than 35 vendors highlighting the importance of pollinators
- Blooms and Butterflies exhibit and school programming
- Plant adaptation and biodiversity school programming
- Youth education programming in the Children's Garden, Nature School, youth summer camps, and Columbus City Schools Summer School.
- The Sustainable Kitchen culinary series minimizes food waste and teaches guests how to do the same at home

Economic Benefits Through Collaboration and Sustainability:

- Hosting Teen Corps Programs that center on food justice and environmental education
- Over 80 businesses and organizations partner with us for the Conservatory's monthly Community Day, theme dependent, they gain exposure and awareness, while the community benefits from connection and access to resources
- Adult Programming partners with many small, local makers, producers, and non-profits to teach and co-teach classes, which spreads public awareness for small local entities
- The Conservatory works closely with Sustainable Columbus and other allied organizations on multiple climate goals in the Columbus Climate Action Plan

Sustainability Commitments by Priority

1. Biodiversity & Ecosystems

5-year Commitment:

In the next 5 years, we commit to enhancing biodiversity & ecosystems by:

- Increasing the efficiency of water usage to support healthy ecosystems
- Ensuring visibility of areas with high biodiversity and native plants, as well as targeted education around these topics through both interpretive signage and integrative programming
- Establishing more meadows and no-mow zones both through the master plan and in targeted areas within the Conservatory property
- Increasing the level of plant biodiversity in new and existing gardens and plant collections
- Supporting more native pollinator habitat and native pollinators
- Where feasible, utilizing benchmarks such as SITES and other certifications to promote biodiversity in landscape design and development of new gardens.

 Please note that the Empowering Through Education Priority will directly coordinate with this Priority, ensuring education and visibility around these key actions and practices.

The most important short-term actions for the period from July 2025 through December 2026 are as follows:

<i>Description of the action</i>	<i>Which departments will be working on this action</i>
Targeted improvement in efficiency in irrigation systems	Horticulture and Engineering
Expand signage on biodiversity and native plants to educate the public in both paid and public facing existing gardens	Community Outreach and Education and Horticulture and Marketing
Expand impact and footprint of pollinator programming – including Pollinator Palooza	Community Outreach and Education and Development

2. Reduce On-Site Waste & Carbon Emissions

5-year Commitment:

In the next 5 years, we commit to reducing on-site waste and carbon emissions by:

- Implementing a more robust composting system for food and plant materials
- Implementing Green Purchasing Standards
- Advancing a more comprehensive recycling program, prioritizing recycling and waste reduction strategically around areas of greatest waste
- Increase opportunities for Zero Waste Events
- Improving energy efficiency and evaluating where renewable energy is appropriate
- Utilizing benchmarks such as LEED and other certifications or measurements, where possible in master plan projects.
- Consider sustainability factors in the design, planning, and construction of current and future capital improvement projects.

The most important short-term actions for the period from July 2025 through December 2026 are as follows:

<i>Description of the action</i>	<i>Which departments will be working on this action</i>
Measure the Conservatory's current carbon footprint as a baseline	Planning/Engineering
Investigate potential alternative, sustainable energy supply	Planning/Engineering
Audit energy, waste and purchasing practices across all departments to determine new standard operating procedures (SOPs) for sustainability practices needed	Community Outreach and Education, Engineering, Planning
Write initial SOPs and begin implementation of key sustainability practices	Community Outreach and Education, Leadership Team, Human Resources
Identify next steps and potential funding sources to begin to expand composting program for both food	Events, Horticulture, Community Outreach and Education

and plant materials, potentially including a biodigester	
Review this sustainability plan with the design team	Planning Department

 **3. Innovative Food Solutions**

5-year Commitment:

In the next 5 years, we commit to reducing food waste and increasing access to nutritious foods by:

- Conducting a feasibility study and plan for the new restaurant that supports nutritious food initiatives and decreases food waste
- Increase availability and access to nutritious food through more community gardens and Farmers’ Market awareness.
- Provide a framework so that every new community garden assisted by Growing to Green is sustainable in leadership and productivity.
- Providing the education and support needed for community gardens to thrive and nourish their neighborhoods, including exploration of innovative growing methods.

The most important short-term actions for the period from July 2025 through December 2026 are as follows:

<i>Description of the action</i>	<i>Which departments will be working on this action</i>
Leadership Academy through Growing to Green designed to support more productive community gardens	Community Outreach and Education
Expand marketing to increase awareness and access to nutritious food at the Farmers’ Market	Community Outreach and Education, Marketing
Expand local sourcing of ingredients in cafe, as well as produce from gardens here	Events
Continue to find ways to reduce food waste	Events

4. Empower through Education

5-year Commitment:

In the next 5 years, we commit to empowering community and staff through education by:

- Implementing sustainability training for all staff
- Including sustainability messaging through on-site signage to ensure visibility as part of the overall visitor experience.
- Including sustainability messaging in online resources, storytelling, and programming.
- Considering community feedback around new programming to be interactive, applied, fun, creative, and/or include features like take-home kits or DIY elements
- Teaching skills and knowledge to build confidence needed to implement sustainability practices through demonstrations and programs
- Developing Standard Operating Policies and Procedures for most common sustainability questions and effectively communicating these with all staff

The most important short-term actions for the period from July 2025 through December 2026 are as follows:

<i>Description of the action</i>	<i>Which departments will be working on this action</i>
Develop and implement interpretation for Big Bugs exhibition in 2026 focusing on reuse of materials and the role of insects in ecosystems	Exhibits, Marketing, Community Outreach and Education
Develop a series of trainings (e.g., lunch and learns) on sustainability	Community Outreach and Education, Human Resources
Developing Standard Operating Policies and Procedures for most common sustainability questions and effectively communicating these with all staff	Community Outreach and Education, Leadership Team, Human Resources

5. Economic Benefits through Collaboration

5-year Commitment:

In the next 5 years, we commit to boosting local economic benefits through collaboration by:

- Support and celebrate local businesses, including incubating local farm businesses
- Cultivating the next generation of green workers by expanding Teen Corps, increasing the number of internships, and launching a horticultural apprenticeship program.
- Support the advancement of garden tourism in Central Ohio with area partners, such as the Ohio Chamber of Commerce.

The most important actions for year 1 include:

<i>Description of the action</i>	<i>Which departments will be working on this action</i>
Identify funding and expand Teen Corps through the Leadership Program	Community Outreach and Education, Development
Complete research on existing horticulture workforce training and apprenticeship programs	Administration, Community Outreach and Education
Seek opportunities to build partnerships to support tourism in the Greater Columbus area, with one initial key step being participation in the Yokohama 2027 Horticultural Exhibition Steering Committee, with a goal of promoting garden tourism in the United States	Administration

A Bold Opportunity: Embedding Sustainability into the Master Plan

The Sustainability Plan launches at a pivotal moment in the Conservatory's history. As part of the broader North Star Strategic Plan, the **North Star Master Plan** lays out a transformative vision to evolve Franklin Park Conservatory into a world-class botanical destination over the next 25 years. This bold expansion will enhance visitor experiences, improve connectivity with Franklin Park, and deepen the Conservatory's role as a cultural and environmental anchor in Columbus.

The timing is no coincidence. The integration of sustainability practices into this next phase of growth ensures that the buildings, gardens, and operations of the future reflect our deep commitment to people, planet, and place.

This alignment opens up powerful possibilities, including:

- **Rooftop gardens and underground parking** that reduce surface heat and preserve green space
- **A new Visitor Center** with energy-efficient systems and biophilic design and shared community space
- **Restored historic structures** like the Palm House, preserved with sustainability and access for future generations
- **New biomes and expanded gardens** that prioritize biodiversity, native species, and pollinator habitats
- **Renovated educational spaces** that model sustainability in materials, operations, and programming

Together, the Sustainability Plan and North Star Master Plan position Franklin Park Conservatory as a living demonstration of what's possible, where natural beauty and bold vision grow hand in hand.

Future Projects and Planning for Exciting Changes

The recommendations from this sustainability plan are already being applied to new projects – and to how the Conservatory approaches sustainability.

In the next 5 years, we commit to improving the sustainability of our major building, infrastructure and garden projects by:

- Utilizing benchmarks such as LEED, SITES and other certifications or measurements, where possible in projects.
- Consider sustainability factors in the design, planning, and construction of current and future capital improvement projects.

An example of a project underway that is already considering sustainability factors is the design *the Wolfe Terrace* and *Grand Garden North Star Master Plan* projects, which will be eligible for SITES certification upon completion.

Launching the Plan: A Sustainable Future at the Conservatory

In Summer 2025, the Sustainability Committee Charter will be finalized, and by fall 2025, members will be selected for the official launch of the committee. This committee is for Staff, Managers, and Leadership Team members who are dedicated to supporting the shared responsibility of the Conservatory in advancing the five sustainability priorities in this plan.

One significant value that the committee will bring is the ability to look for synergies across departments. This ensures that staff are working collaboratively to determine areas of greatest impact, where together, staff can work to advance the sustainability priorities in this plan. This committee's role includes:

- Fostering accountability
- Collaboratively helping establish annual priorities across departments
- Identifying and advocating for resources for highest impact initiatives
- Being passionate advocates
- Supporting implementation of key initiatives
- Building a culture of sustainability at the Conservatory through training and presence

Franklin Park Conservatory and Botanical Gardens is entering an exciting new chapter. Sustainability is not just a project, but a purpose woven into everything we do. This plan marks a bold step forward by aligning our internal practices, community partnerships, and public programming with a vision for a thriving, more sustainable Columbus.

What sets this plan apart is its reach. Every department will play a role. Every garden, program, and gathering space will reflect our priorities—from restoring biodiversity and cutting waste to expanding food access and investing in the green workforce. We are not just protecting the environment. We are using our platform to deepen community well-being, opportunity, and connection.

In the years ahead, the Conservatory will become a living example of sustainability in action. Visitors will see, feel, and learn what it means to live in harmony with nature. Staff will be equipped and empowered to lead change from within. Partners and neighbors will find a willing collaborator in building a greener, more just future.

Appendix A.

Examples of Sustainability Practices from Staff Survey

From the staff survey, these are examples of sustainability practices they have seen in other places and could be adopted by the Conservatory.

1. Renewable Energy & Energy Efficiency

- Cincinnati Zoo: Solar panels providing shade in parking lots.
- Phipps Conservatory: Geothermal heating and cooling, solar energy, and Platinum LEED certification.
- Social charger stations for devices (seen in DC gardens).

2. Waste Reduction & Composting

- OSU Stadium: Zero waste program with only composting and recycling for visitors.
- Onsite composting: Utilizing plant waste for compost rather than hauling it offsite.
- Digital receipts and reducing single-use plastics in the café.
- Interactive sustainability exhibit for kids, teaching about composting and biodiversity.

3. Sustainable Landscaping & Biodiversity

- The High Line (NYC): Green infrastructure, native plantings, and wildlife habitats in an urban setting.
- Replacing turf grass with native prairies and short/long grasslands for carbon sequestration and habitat creation.
- Expanding biodiversity beyond paid areas to educate visitors.
- Waterwise gardens and research beds to showcase soil and water conservation.

4. Green Buildings & Sustainable Infrastructure

- Phipps Conservatory: Green buildings with rainwater collection, LEED certifications, and sustainability signage.
- LEED-certified buildings and integrating alternative energy sources (solar, geothermal).
- Drainage parking lots and rain gardens to improve stormwater management.
- Ohio State University has moved away from LEED and decided to design their own set of building standards that more closely aligns with the performance metrics they are tracking

5. Transportation & Emissions Reduction

- Adopting "no idling" policies for staff and public vehicles.
- EV chargers in parking lots.
- Switching from gas-powered landscaping equipment to battery/electric-powered alternatives to reduce emissions and noise pollution.
- OSU Fisher College: Encouraging biking over driving, with showers for cyclists.

6. Sustainable Food & Consumer Practices

- Phipps Botanical Gardens restaurant: Commitment to sustainability and equality in staff facilities.
- Offering plant-based options in the café and food trucks.
- Eliminating non-compostable/recyclable food packaging.
- Grocery store-style drop-off bins for hard-to-recycle items like plastic bags, batteries, and old electronics.

7. Community Engagement & Education

- Sustainability collage at a history center showcasing 100+ ways to make a difference.
- Encouraging neighborhood input on sustainability initiatives through FPC's Master Plan.
- Developing signage and interpretation around sustainability efforts, like LEED certification and water recycling.

8. Water Conservation & Management

- Chicago Botanic Garden: Rainwater harvesting, drought-tolerant plants, and native species for minimal irrigation.
- Brown water reuse: Collecting and using water onsite for irrigation.
- Idaho river restoration: Returning streams to natural flows and reintroducing beavers to improve water quality, drought resistance, and biodiversity.
- OSU Fisher College: Emphasizing sustainable water use and infrastructure.

Appendix B.

Examples of Potential Sustainability Programs from the Community Workshop

- Toolkit for Women (seasonal check list)
- Kids: here's how to make money
- Kids: Build Your Sustainability side hustle Model after programs that lend lawn mowers to Kids for Summer Jobs
- Backyard medicinal plants/ how to make tinctures/teas/ cocktails
- Classes for parents- how to entertain/enrich w/ Small Kids - fairy gardens
- Give away "kits" as take-home projects
- Sustainability for apartment living component around safety for pets & kids
- Would come for sustainability-related classes but not about gardening- e.g., electricity
- Basic food preparation – e.g., making stock, etc.
- How to form a community co-op & keep it running
- Teaching sustainable practices within regular cooking classes
- Cooking classes advertised leading w/ menu
- How to forage for food safely / sustainably (not allowed to forage in metro parks)
- How to use invasive plants in different ways - e.g., cooking
- Hands-on classes, not just talking about Sustainability- BUT does not necessarily have to be about gardening / produce etc.