



GREAT LAKES AND ST. LAWRENCE
CITIES INITIATIVE
L'ALLIANCE DES VILLES
DES GRANDS LACS ET DU SAINT-LAURENT

Strategic Plan

2022
2025



According to BoardSource,¹ planning for an organization's future is one of the primary responsibilities of a nonprofit board. The process provides board members an opportunity to take a good look at the organization and identify where it needs to be headed and what problems it should be solving. It is an opportunity to align the leadership team – board and staff – around a shared vision for the future and take the necessary action to make that vision a reality.

In fall 2021, the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Cities Initiatives started a strategic planning process. The Cities Initiative engaged in planning not to solve a particular problem but to make sure the organization continues to evolve to meet members' changing needs while maintaining its focus on the issues critical to the restoration and protection of the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River Basin.

Between November 2021 and January 2022, staff participated in a series of in-person and virtual meetings to draft a framework for a three-year strategic plan. The conversations focused on articulating a vision – *What does the Cities Initiative look like in the future, and what impact will we be having?* – and identifying what actions need to be taken to achieve that vision – Where must we focus our energy, and what must we do to achieve the vision? On February 8, 2022, the board of directors reviewed and refined the plan to ensure the final product reflected the needs and interests of Cities Initiative members. The result of this work is an actionable plan that can guide decisions around when and where to allocate resources and energy to achieve the desired outcomes.

¹ For information about BoardSource, visit www.boardsource.org.



The Cities Initiative used the framework outlined in **figure 1** to guide their discussions. The framework shows how elements of the plan are connected and how each part plays a role in delivering value to members. Elements were inspired by a strategic framework developed by the City of Grand Rapids.²

The graphic first outlines elements that make up the organization's identity, including core values, vision, and mission. The identity discussions and the resulting

statements – core values, vision and mission – guided the development of the next phase of planning, how we will work to accomplish our purpose. These conversations led to the identification of five broad strategic initiatives and corresponding tactics. At the center of all discussions was member value and how we provide that value to members. A corresponding member value statement is included in this report.

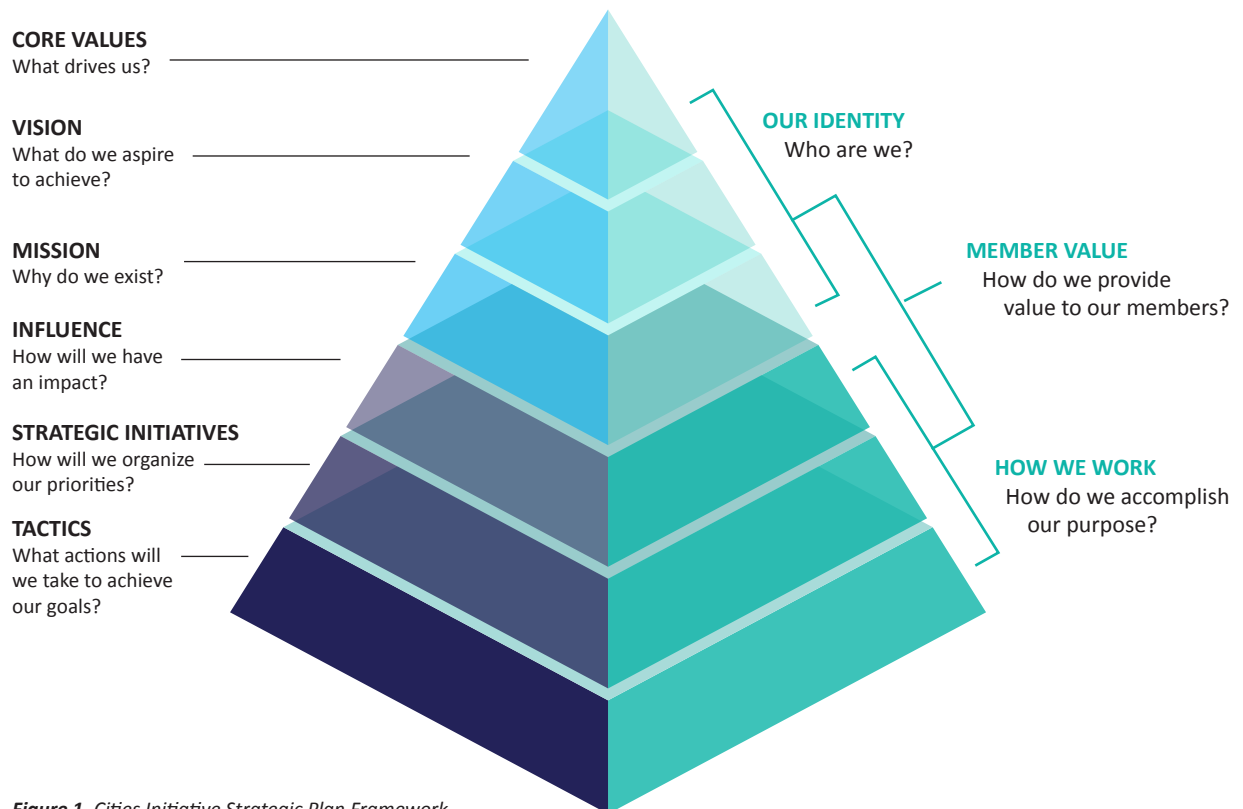


Figure 1. Cities Initiative Strategic Plan Framework

² For more information on the City of Grand Rapids strategic plan, visit <https://www.grandrapidsmi.gov/>

Our Identity – Who are we?

CORE VALUES: What drives us?

The fundamental beliefs that guide the behavior and actions of leaders and staff.

VISION: What do we aspire to achieve?

The desired future state of our organization in terms of strategic direction.

MISSION: Why do we exist?

The description of the organization's purpose and reason for its existence.

How We Work – How do we accomplish our purpose?

INFLUENCE: How will we have an impact?

The primary avenues for mobilizing the organization's mission and vision.

STRATEGIC INITIATIVES: How will we organize our priorities?

The high-level goals on which the organization's resources and attention are focused.

TACTICS: What actions will we take to achieve our goals?

The methods and approaches taken to advance the high-level goals.

MEMBER VALUE: How do we provide value to our members?

The unique benefits an organization offers, how it can help members find solutions to problems, and why choosing to be part of the community benefits them.

Our Identity

CORE VALUES: What drives us?

The Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Cities Initiative is:

- Outcome-oriented with benefits for current and future generations
- Guided by science, including traditional ecological knowledge
- Member-driven
- Nonpartisan
- Binational
- Trusted, credible, and collaborative
- Committed to diversity, equity, and inclusion
- Agile and responsive to emerging issues

- Focused on advocating for positive outcomes for the basin's freshwater resources

VISION: What do we aspire to achieve?

An economically vibrant, sustainable, and resilient Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River Region, supported by a healthy freshwater basin.

MISSION: Why do we exist?

A multinational coalition of municipal and Indigenous government executives representing communities in the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River Region who are working to promote economic prosperity in our communities and protect our fresh water for the benefit of current and future generations.

How We Work

MEMBER VALUE: How do we provide value to our members?

We bring together municipal and Indigenous government executives to identify and advance solutions to common challenges facing freshwater communities across the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River Region and influence the future course of our dynamic economy and the health of our shared waters.

INFLUENCE: How will we have an impact?

We provide a platform that supports communities through:

- Programs to provide results on the ground
- Advocacy for solutions and resources
- Collaboration to address shared challenges
- Education on best practices to common challenges

The Cities Initiative will use **PACE** to move toward realizing its vision and mission, and influence change.

STRATEGIC INITIATIVES: How will we organize our priorities?

The Cities Initiative will prioritize the following outcomes for the region:

- Economic Transformation
- Safe and Affordable Water
- Healthy Lakes and Rivers
- Climate and Coastal Resilience

Strategic Initiatives and Tactics

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CLIMATE AND COASTAL RESILIENCE

Help municipalities plan for and take action to strengthen their resiliency to impacts from climate change with a focus on the coastal zone.

Example topics: shoreline flooding, coastal erosion, severe weather events, water infrastructure, water withdrawals, and climate migration.

TACTICS: What actions will help us achieve our goals?

Ongoing Efforts:

- **Resilient Coastal Projects Initiative** – Working with municipalities to identify high-impact coastal resilience projects and outline implementation plans, including key funding sources.
- **Mayors Advisory Council on Coastal Resilience** – Convening mayors, field practitioners, and researchers on a regular basis to identify coastal needs, outline recommendations for improvement, and create action plans around identified recommendations.
- **Lake Michigan Coastal Resilience Initiative** – Partnering with NOAA's Office for Coastal

Management to provide training and technical assistance to municipalities surrounding Lake Michigan while advancing nature-based solutions to impacts on shoreline areas.

- **Coastal Resilience Needs Assessment Survey** – Conducting a basin-wide survey to formally document the needs of Great Lakes and St. Lawrence communities.
- **Research with Leading Universities** – Partnering with the basin's leading universities to conduct research that assesses coastal needs and available resources (e.g., University of Illinois, University of Michigan, University of Waterloo, Brock University).

Additional Areas for Exploration:

- Expanding programming to help municipalities navigate and apply for federal funding.
- Developing resources to guide and support coastal decision-making.
- Creating guidelines for developing and managing public and private collaborations on coastal issues.



SAFE AND AFFORDABLE WATER

Develop resources, capacity, and knowledge to ensure equitable access to high-quality water resources, services, and opportunities for municipalities and their citizens.

Example topics: lead water lines, water affordability, water workforce development, urban flooding, public access to water recreational spaces, public access to water services, and Indigenous community's water needs.

TACTICS: What actions will help us achieve our goals?

Ongoing Efforts:

- **Mayors Commission on Water Equity** – Supporting and monitoring progress on the commission's recommendations.
- **Monitoring Implementation of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act** – Ensuring the efficient and equitable administration of funding for water infrastructure in Great Lakes and St. Lawrence municipalities, including technical support for small municipalities and disadvantaged communities and minimizing cost-share requirements and other obstacles.
- **Providing Technical Support for Project Development and Funding Applications** – Assisting members

and other municipalities in developing water infrastructure projects and applications for funding.

- **Exchange Best Practices and Assist Municipalities in Addressing Key Water Infrastructure Challenges** – Helping municipalities develop programs to remove lead water lines and safeguard water supplies from contaminants such as PFAS, among other challenges.
- **2020-2030 Action Plan** – Supporting and monitoring action plan recommendations to protect the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River in ensuring clean and safe beaches; developing programming on water and Great Lakes-St. Lawrence literacy.

Additional Areas for Exploration:

- Exploring and showcasing innovative financing mechanisms for water infrastructure modernization projects.
- Exchanging innovative programs and practices for key water infrastructure priorities, including water workforce development, water affordability, urban flooding, stormwater, etc.
- Strengthening collaboration with other organizations working on water infrastructure (e.g., US Water Alliance, U.S. Conference of Mayors).



Strategic Initiatives and Tactics

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ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION

Help municipalities sustainably and responsibly leverage economic benefits from local freshwater resources to create an attractive region for all to live, work, and play.

Example topics: waterfront development and revitalization, recreation and tourism, commercial navigation, fishing, sustainable business development, water as an input to industrial or agricultural operations, water technologies and ecosystem restoration, water infrastructure, and sustainable agriculture.

TACTICS: What actions will help us achieve our goals?

Ongoing Efforts:

- **Annual Meeting 2022** – Developing a meeting theme around the Blue Economy, including guest speakers and mayor-to-mayor conversations on the subject.

Additional Areas for Exploration:

- Forming an advisory council to focus on Blue Economy topics.
- Conducting a literature review and case studies on other regional and municipal initiatives, economic development programs, and policies and laws related to the Blue Economy and waterfront development and revitalization.
- Raising the profile of municipalities with senior governments and the private sector as key actors in developing and promoting a Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River Basin Blue Economy.
- Developing tool kits and sharing best practices to help municipalities develop sustainable waterfronts, including the balance between ports and harbors with other activities.
- Offering webinars focused on the Blue Economy.



HEALTHY LAKES AND RIVERS

Help build the capacity of mayors and their communities be an effective force in advancing the protection and restoration of the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River Basin and safeguarding the environmental, social, and economic health of their communities.

Example topics: pollution and environmental degradation, plastic pollutants (microfiber, plastics, microplastics), eutrophication and phosphorus loading, Areas of Concern cleanup, legacy pollutants (PFAS), and aquatic invasive species (e.g., invasive carp).

TACTICS: What actions will help us achieve our goals?

Ongoing Efforts:

- **Supporting Regional Restoration Programs** – Advocating for and helping mayors engage in the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative and the Action Plan to Protect the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence 2020-2030.
- **Education/Resource Sharing** – Sharing educational materials produced by expert organizations (e.g., governments, environmental groups) and providing access to resources to address relevant issues through a variety of platforms, including our monthly webinar series.

- **Invasive Species Prevention** – Preventing aquatic invasive species from entering the Great Lakes, including advocating for the Brandon Road Lock and Dam project to prevent the movement of invasive carp into the Great Lakes.
- **Thames River Phosphorus Reduction Collaborative** – Supporting the collaborative in their efforts to reduce phosphorus loading in Lake Erie to prevent or minimize harmful algae blooms.
- **Responding to Emerging Issues** – Staying up to date on the basin's most pressing issues and adjusting strategies to respond when deemed critical.

Additional Areas for Exploration:

- Conducting a literature review on other regional and municipal initiatives and case studies addressing water pollution.
- Assisting mayors in planning for waterfront revitalization in follow-up to environmental cleanup and restoration activities.
- Using the basin's freshwater resources as a link between public, private, and nonprofit sectors.



Strategic Initiatives and Tactics

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ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY

Optimize internal operations to ensure the Cities Initiative has the resources needed to do its work and provide robust services to its members and attract new members.

Example topics: organizational funding and financing, member recruitment and retention, communications, organizational impact

TACTICS: What actions will help us achieve our goals?

Ongoing Efforts:

- **Fundraising** – Creating and implementing a fundraising strategy.
- **Membership Recruitment and Retention** – Enhancing and communicating the value of membership.

- **Impact** – Developing a communications strategy to increase awareness of the Cities Initiative’s work.
- **Efficiency** – Improving programs and processes to maximize efficiencies that allow staff to manage multiple priorities while producing high-value outputs for members.

Additional Areas for Exploration:

- The executive director will work with staff to explore options to optimize operations further and create efficiencies.



The Cities Initiative has taken a significant step in its strategic planning journey. With the finalization and approval of this report, the leadership team's focus now shifts to implementation. The first step will be to continue vetting and defining the strategic initiatives. Outcomes describing what the organization hopes to achieve for each initiative must be identified, and the build-out of tactics continued. Performance metrics for tactics must also be included as metrics provide indicators by which to measure progress and success.

The leadership team will need to determine how the plan will be monitored and progress reported to the board. It will be helpful to establish a process for monitoring and tracking activity. The tracking process should be dynamic and updated as action items are added, prioritized or dropped, and as next steps, responsibilities, and timeframes are established. It will be important to integrate existing activities and programs into the process, including what already is being done and by whom.

When new ideas and activities are introduced, the organization will need to consider if they fit within the vision and mission and if integrating these ideas into ongoing efforts is an option. Ongoing efforts are

included with each initiative to keep these efforts at the forefront. Over time, the organization will also want to consider if there is anything the Cities Initiative should stop doing. Eliminating programs that are less impactful or no longer aligned with the strategic plan can free up resources – human and financial – that can be redirected more productively.

While discussions about the plan should occur regularly among the leadership team, time should be set aside at least once a year for deeper reflection on overall progress. Consideration should be given as to whether or not modifications to the plan are necessary. Circumstances will change, and the ecosystem in which the organization operates will shift. The most effective organizations refine their strategies and tactics as these changes occur and lessons are learned.

At its core, this plan is about meeting members' needs. It should be considered a living document, used as a tool for decision-making around resource allocation and new activities. Closely adhering to the plan can help the Cities Initiative bridge the gap between where it is now and where it wants to be in the future.

Thank you to the individuals who participated in the planning process on behalf of the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Cities Initiative. For more information, please visit glsclcities.org.

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