

A CLEAN, RESILIENT CHARLES RIVER FOR ALL

STRATEGIC PLAN
2021-2025



Charles River
Watershed Association





OUR MISSION

Charles River Watershed Association's mission is to protect, restore, and enhance the Charles River and its watershed through science, advocacy, and the law. CRWA develops science-based strategies to increase resilience, protect public health, and promote environmental equity as we confront a changing climate.

GRATITUDE

This Strategic Plan is a confluence of many voices, but it could not have been accomplished without tremendous collaboration from our Board of Directors. We humbly thank our Board for their leadership, guidance, and support in helping us chart the path forward to a clean, climate-resilient Charles River for all.

We are grateful to Paul Levy and Farzana Mohamed for volunteering their time over several months to facilitate the strategic planning process that led to this vision.

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LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Recognizing Indigenous Stewardship

Historians differ on the name given to the Charles River by the Indigenous inhabitants of these lands. Some say it was "Quinobequin" for "meandering one," others say it was "Mushauwomuk" for "where there is a big river," later shortened to "Shawmut."

We humbly recognize the Massachusett, Pawtucket, Wampanoag, and Nipmuc Nations, as our work is carried out across their traditional territory, and we acknowledge them as the past, present, and future caretakers of this land.

Fifty years of progress with our friends and partners has transformed the “Dirty Water” of the past to the People’s River, a river once again worth celebrating.

A MESSAGE FROM LEADERSHIP

Our Vision for a Clean Charles

Since 1965, CRWA has been the voice of the Charles. Together, we’ve spoken for the river when it desperately needed a champion. Our community formed CRWA because industrial dumping, untreated sewage, and suburban sprawl had the river under siege. Over several decades—with the help of hundreds of devoted, dawn-rising volunteer river monitors—our expert science staff pinpointed the sources of harm and devised solutions to bring the river back to life. Relentless advocacy combined the power of education, collaboration, and the law to transform the river into the jewel we know and enjoy today.

But the work is not done, and new challenges have emerged. Water quality in the river is greatly improved, but sewage releases and stormwater runoff are still significant sources of pollution. Ecosystems are being restored, but derelict, defunct dams prevent free-flowing water and fish passage. Climate change is an existential threat to all in our watershed, bringing increased precipitation, flooding, heat, and drought. Effectively addressing all of these issues requires recognition that we live in a society built on systemic injustice.

Like our founders, who saw a disgusting, trash-filled waterway and envisioned the beautiful river we see today, we do not shy away from these challenges. We take them on, basing our advocacy on science and data and centering equity and inclusion in all aspects of our work.

CRWA’s Board of Directors is excited to release this Five-Year Strategic Plan with our collective vision of the most pressing challenges facing the river and its watershed lands, as well as our plans to tackle them, in partnership with you—our supporters, volunteers, and allies. **Together, we will deliver an even healthier and more resilient Charles River for future generations.**



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Linda McLane".

Linda McLane, Board President



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Emily Norton".

Emily Norton, Executive Director

PREPARE FOR CLIMATE CHANGE

We're working with nature,
to create a better future.

Climate change is bringing significant weather impacts to Massachusetts including extreme storms, heat waves, more frequent drought, sea-level rise, storm surge, and inland flooding. The Northeast has seen an 8% increase in average precipitation since 1991, and the amount of precipitation falling during very heavy precipitation events (99th percentile) increased 71% between 1958 to 2007, the greatest increase nationwide. Adapting to this continually changing climate starts with rejecting the hubristic assumption that humans can control nature. Instead we must work with nature, learning from and replicating natural systems.

We're investing in nature-based solutions, restoring natural hydrology, improving water quality in the Charles, and protecting people and property from the weather extremes of climate change.



GOAL

Protect human and ecological systems in a changing climate by replicating nature and natural processes

OBJECTIVES

- Promote Green Stormwater Infrastructure through education, resources, and projects
- Promote regional collaboration and solutions, e.g. the Charles River Climate Compact (CRCC)
- Implement nature-based solutions
- Identify and protect critical watershed lands under threat of development or degradation

ACTIONS

- Partner with elected allies to introduce and champion legislation to support the governance and investments necessary to prepare for the impacts of climate change
- Grow the CRCC to advance climate adaptation regionally
- Employ the Charles River Flood Model to identify effective flood mitigation strategies and work with the CRCC and watershed residents to implement them

Let's harness the power of nature for our mutual flourishing and health.



RESTORE THE RIVER ECOSYSTEM

We're setting the standard for healthy, pollution-free waterways.

The Clean Water Act (CWA) of 1972 was a game-changer for our nation's rivers, including the Charles. The CWA establishes the legal and regulatory framework for reducing pollution to our waterways and restoring healthy rivers and streams for people and wildlife. For example, the CWA established standards for water quality that result in limits on how much pollution can enter our rivers and streams. By collecting and analyzing water samples, CRWA has been able to measure how well the Charles is meeting these standards. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has used this information when issuing permits under the CWA, resulting in strict requirements for municipalities within the watershed to reduce their phosphorus pollution. In this way, CRWA's work is critical to achieving the goals of the CWA.



GOAL

Restore a clean, flowing, swimmable river for humans, plants, and animals

OBJECTIVES

- Achieve compliance with, and strengthen, water quality standards across the watershed
- Implement Charles River pollution standards, or Total Maximum Daily Loads (TMDLs)
- Protect and restore habitats to support a healthy ecosystem
- Improve communication about and accessibility of Charles River data and research
- Utilize and collect data to support our goals
- Advocate for drought resilience to protect aquatic life

ACTIONS

- Fight for complete and successful implementation of the Combined Sewer Overflow (CSO) Long-Term Control Plan and push the Massachusetts Water Resources Authority Board (MWRA) to develop a path to CSO elimination
- Push EPA to implement a new stormwater permitting program requiring owners of large impervious properties, like big box stores, to take responsibility for pollution from their properties
- Advocate for statewide legislation on effective drought management and invasive species harmful algal bloom (HAB) control

A fishable, swimmable Charles is our standard.



PROTECT PUBLIC ACCESS

We're defending public access to the Charles.

Over a million people call the Charles River watershed home, as do a myriad of other animal and plant species. Accessible by all major public transit lines and numerous bus routes, the Charles offers a natural respite in the heart of Boston and many other urban areas, improving quality of life and physical and mental well-being. Since before the Commonwealth of Massachusetts was established, protections have been in place to ensure its use by everyone. However, with the evolution of the Charles River from a "D" grade in 1995 to an "A-" in 2019—and a steadily growing population—comes a rising interest in laying claim to the water and riverfront for an entitled few at the expense of the many.

CRWA applies savvy advocacy and, when necessary, litigation, to defend public parklands against land grabs and to protect public access, so the Charles can truly remain the People's River.

GOAL

Defend and promote public trust lands, parks, and open space

OBJECTIVES

- Prevent privatization of public trust lands
- Increase open and equitable access to and along the river
- Ensure parklands are a part of the healthy river ecosystem and provide resilience to climate change

ACTIONS

- Ensure that Article 97 land transfers within the watershed are in the public interest
- Advocate for maintaining/enhancing public benefits and access under the Massachusetts Public Waterfront Act (“Chapter 91”)
- Support projects that promote safe and equitable public access for people along the river while maintaining or improving river health

Everyone deserves access to
“the People’s River.”



CENTER EQUITY & JUSTICE

We all win in a world with greater equity and true justice for all.

As an environmental organization, we acknowledge that the roots of the environmental movement were steeped in racism. Early 20th century conservationists sought to set aside land for white people; Indigenous communities were forced to leave their own land to create national parks. Even today too many people of color do not feel welcome or safe in our wild and public spaces. Environmental groups have long been led and run by predominantly white staff and volunteers.

CRWA is committed to ensuring that our organization—staff, board, and volunteers—reflects the diversity of our watershed. We also have a powerful voice, and we are committed to using it to denounce systemic racism and empower and lift up those who have been historically marginalized.

Why must we do this? First, it's the right thing to do. It is morally unjust for some to have access to clean air, clean water, and the benefits of nature, while others do not. Second, we are not going to successfully and equitably implement the massive societal and economic changes necessary to ensure a livable planet for all without a broad and diverse coalition. As we prepare to take this step and form meaningful partnerships with frontline allies, we acknowledge we must first look inward to identify deficiencies and develop plans for remediating them.

To this end, CRWA is working closely with a Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) consultant to guide our internal operations, organizational culture, programming, engagement, and cultural sensitivity with marginalized communities living and working in the watershed.

GOAL

Promote environmental equity and climate justice in the Charles River watershed and beyond

OBJECTIVES

- Increase understanding of vulnerable community needs and environmental equity issues in the watershed
- Identify environmental equity projects in partnership with frontline environmental justice groups
- Incorporate DEI appropriately and effectively across all program areas
- Expand diversity at the staff, board, and volunteer levels

ACTIONS

- Create a DEI Vision Statement
- Establish staff/board Diversity Committee to set goals and track progress toward meeting them
- Engage with nontraditional allies in housing, public health, economic justice, and other sectors aligned in the climate justice space
- Use our voice to speak out against racism, sexism, bigotry, and discrimination

We're using our voice to champion environmental equity.



BUILD MOMENTUM

We're growing our impact for the Charles.

Over the next five years, CRWA will need to grow substantially to be an even more effective champion of the Charles for the good of all who live within its watershed communities. Effectively carrying out the ambitious goals established in the strategic plan will require a strong, modern organization.

We will build the infrastructure necessary to achieve our programmatic goals as we **prepare for climate change, restore the river ecosystem, protect public access, and center equity and justice.** This includes building and growing the human capital to expand our programmatic efforts. In addition, CRWA needs to focus on a healthy revenue model that inspires donors to participate in our goals.

CRWA leadership is committed to modernizing and continually improving internal operations to be an attractive and welcoming place to work and support.



GOAL

Be a modern, effective organization with the ability to fund our goals, inspire our donors to deeper engagement, serve a broad constituency, and attract and retain talented and diverse staff members and volunteers

OBJECTIVES

- Ensure financial strength to support programmatic growth
- Position CRWA as a trusted partner and information source for climate resilience challenges
- Effectively and equitably engage watershed residents and other interested people in our work
- Incorporate management best practices for greater effectiveness and accountability

ACTIONS

- Grow annual fund and endowment to support the impact needed for the Charles
- Increase engagement via earned and social media to boost membership, volunteers, and donors
- Build the human capital infrastructure to support programmatic impact and growth
- Grow programmatic staff steadily over five years

Let's grow, together.



Photos courtesy of
Julia Hopkins, Lisa Kumpf, Corey McFeeley, Sean Seltzer, and Perri Vanderclock



@CharlesRiverWatershed



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41 West Street, Floor 8, Boston, MA 02111 | 617.540.5650 | charles@crwa.org