

# THE CHESAPEAKE AND OHIO CANAL ASSOCIATION

## STRATEGIC PLAN FOR 2019-2021

FEBRUARY 2019

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

#### **Our Mission:**

The C&O Canal Association is an all-volunteer, independent (from the National Park Service) organization of citizens dedicated to preserving and protecting the historical and natural resources of the 184.5-mile long Chesapeake and Ohio Canal National Historical Park. Established in 1954, the Association led the citizens' campaign to create the national historical park in 1971.

Today the Association works with the Park and other organizations to maintain and restore the canal's historic structures; help ensure the continuity, safety, and public access to the 184.5-mile long towpath; and advocate for the continued viability of the Park.

To support these objectives, the Association provides funds for large and small projects; organizes volunteer programs (level walking, work parties); provides recreational activities for the public (hikes, bike trips, paddle trips, nature walks); educates the public (*Along the Towpath*, canal festivals, "canal conversations" along the canal, research on canal history) and advocates on behalf of the Park.

#### **Our Strategic Plan**

This strategic plan is designed to help the Association better focus its resources — both human and financial — on what it does and how it does it.

Shortly after the Association's newly formed Special Projects Committee began looking at funding priorities, the Board of Directors in April 2017 directed the committee to develop a strategic plan addressing the Association's priorities and goals.<sup>1</sup> In response, the committee:

1. developed a mission statement
2. identified the Association's formal legal documents
3. assessed the Association's internal strengths and weaknesses and its external challenges and opportunities
4. identified the strategic issues facing the organization
5. formulated strategies and plans to address these issues.

1 The committee used John Bryson's *Strategic Planning for Public and Non-Profit Organizations*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition (© 2011) as a template for its planning process.

The Committee identified three critical, interrelated strategic issues facing the Association: communication, membership, and support for Park projects. The strategic plan examines these issues in further detail.

Because strategic planning is an ongoing and iterative process, the Association will have to monitor and update this plan on a regular basis and adjust it to take into account changes in priorities and the environment.

## **STRATEGIC ISSUES**

### **1. Communication**

***Improve our visibility within the canal community at large and to get out our message.***

**Short term goal: Evaluate our existing methods of communication and their effectiveness in reaching our audiences in the greater canal community.**

#### **Facebook:**

Maintain an ongoing and current presence on Facebook by continuously updating text and photos with the latest information about our projects, programs, and activities.

Actions to be taken:

- Set up a small group to look at Facebook issues, drawing on members who post on, or otherwise use, Facebook.
- Determine whether to continue our Facebook presence.
- If continuing use of Facebook, establish policies for administration and guidelines for information to be posted.
- Develop a strategy to evaluate the effectiveness of our Facebook page on a periodic basis. Who is it reaching? What response are we receiving?

#### **Website:**

Improve the appearance and accessibility of our website as a way to attract new members and increase our visibility.

Actions to be taken:

- Set up a small group led by the current web master to address website issues.
- Develop a plan to evaluate mobile friendly website tools.

- Identify costs associated with website hosting and transition.
- Identify roles and responsibilities for administration and management of content.
- Develop a plan for website migration.
- Recommend a path forward.

## **2. Membership**

***Use a cloud-based membership database service to improve membership workflow and learn more about members.***

**Short term goal: Transition to a more effective and comprehensive membership software program.**

### **Membership Software:**

Improve membership processing workflow by reducing manual work-arounds. Collect information about skills and interests of members.

Actions to be taken:

- Set up a small group to research available commercial cloud-based membership software and associated costs.
- Develop a list of requirements for such software, and evaluate how the software meets these requirements and handles security issues.
- Obtain Board approval for moving to a commercial membership service with its associated costs.
- Develop a plan to transition from the current Access database to the new membership database.

### **Design and Print a new Membership Brochure:**

Develop a new membership brochure that is appealing, up-to-date, and able to collect more information about members.

Actions to be taken:

- Set up a small group to design a new membership brochure and arrange to print copies with an eye to attracting more and younger members.
- Strategize ways to distribute the new brochure for maximum impact.

## **3. Project Support**

***Identify needed projects along the canal that the Association can perform or fund in conjunction with the National Park Service. Reach agreement with the park on the projects and have them completed in a timely manner.***

**Short term goal: Develop a project list and work more effectively with NPS in order to successfully develop, implement, and complete projects in a timely manner.**

**Project List:**

Develop and maintain a list of Association Board approved projects to be presented to the Park.

Actions to be taken:

- Develop a list of Board-sanctioned park projects the Association wishes to undertake with the funding resources that are available.
- The Special Projects committee will submit revisions to the list for Board approval. Revisions can originate from member suggestions through the committee or feedback from meetings with NPS.
- Review the project list at each Board meeting.
- Annually review, with NPS, our official Board-sanctioned list of projects and use it as the basis for discussion, planning, and implementation.
- Assign two or more interested Board members to projects requiring NPS involvement. Board members will work closely with NPS in ushering the project through to completion including, when appropriate, coordinating with NPS to set goals, schedules, assignments, etc.
- Use our newsletter, *Along the Towpath*, to bring attention to needed projects in order to raise member awareness and buy-in, thereby creating pressure on NPS.

**Longer-term goals:**

**1. Communication**

- Improve public awareness of the Associations contributions to the Park.
- Monitor trends in social media and electronic publishing, evaluating their usefulness to communicating the Association's message.
- Evaluate how our supported programs and activities are carrying out our mission.
- Monitor issues affecting the park that need our advocacy, for or against.

**2. Membership**

- Improve our understanding of who our members are, how we can serve them more effectively, and how they can better serve the Park.
- Foster an environment that encourages members, new and existing, to be more involved, ensuring continued viability of the Association.

**3. Project Support**

Executive Summary--C&O Canal Association Strategic Plan 2019-2021  
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- Actively publicize and promote Park projects the Association has accomplished, supported, and would be willing to support.
- Investigate ways to work with other Park partners to fund and support projects.
- Hold regular meetings with the Park to discuss projects, perhaps develop a yearly joint “partnership” agreement with the Park.
- Investigate using grants from other organizations to support our priority projects.
- Advocate for one large multi-year project requiring support beyond the Association’s manpower and funding resources.