



The three strategic treks

# Strategic Plan, 2013-16



## Thank you

This strategic plan exists thanks to the efforts of numerous GVTA volunteers, including but not limited to the following individuals. Jane Kenyon conducted the initial member survey in the Fall of 2012, which was completed by approximately 70 GVTA members, who provided enormously valuable feedback. The follow-up brainstorming session in January 2013 was attended by approximately 20 members who helped give an initial shape to the plan. Georgia Mulholland, Charles Whitlock, Jane Kenyon and Bill McDonald provided much-appreciated organizational and logistical support for this event. The final strategic planning session in April 2013 was attended by board members Nick Dinka, Andrew Bingeman, Georgia Mulholland, Anne-Marie Van Brundt and Charles Whitlock, as well as by Jan Hember, Will Van Hemmessen, Tom Friesen (president, Hike Ontario), Donica Abbinett and Arijana Ilibasic. Peter Gray, president of the Children's Water Education Council, generously donated his time and expertise as facilitator for the session (Andrew Bingeman arranged Peter's participation on the GVTA's behalf). This fruitful half-day session determined the final structure of the plan. We are enormously grateful to everyone who contributed to the overall strategic planning process. Without your hard work, this project would not have been possible.

*"Honouring and strengthening the GVTA's trail system, programs and unique community while creating fresh opportunities for the next wave of hikers to get involved and enjoy the natural wonders of the Grand River watershed."*

## Introduction

The Grand Valley Trails Association's 40th anniversary celebrations, in the Fall of 2012, were in many respects a celebration of the past: of the hikes, programs and volunteers who sustained the organization over its first four decades. But the 40th anniversary celebrations were also about the future – they provided inspirational momentum to the organization and at the same time led us to reflect on what the years ahead might hold.

As our community began to discuss its strategy for the next three years, a consensus emerged around the broad goal for this cycle of planning. The concise statement above summarizes that sentiment, and has provided guidance for the current three-year strategic planning process.

This plan is designed to serve as a brief, simple, and easily digested guide for the next three years, a set of blazes that will start us out on the right foot as we begin our fifth decade as an association. It is not all-encompassing, and will be subject to discussion and revision in the coming months. That said, the plan represents our community's best efforts to create a set of goals that balances our ambitions and capabilities. For that reason, it deserves our time, attention and respect.

The plan is the product of a broad range of GVTA voices. More than 70 members participated in the initial survey in Fall 2012 that provided the plan's foundations. A hardy group of more than 20 members braved January snows to participate in a follow-up brainstorming session. Finally, a ten-person team made up of board members, volunteers and representatives of our sister organizations came together in April, 2013, to articulate the shape of the plan itself.

The board would like to express its deep gratitude to everyone who gave so generously of their time and ideas to help create this plan. Now we would ask that the GVTA community come together once again as we set out on the next phase: completing the three strategic treks laid out in the sections below. As a great poet once said, "between the idea and the reality... falls the shadow," and our association will need your help in ensuring we successfully reach across that shadow.

It will not be easy, but we should take heart from our work to date in coming together on this project. We've succeeded in putting together a clear, manageable series of blazes to guide our steps towards success through our 50th anniversary and beyond.



Nick Dinka  
GVTA president

## Overview: the three strategic treks

In the wake of the GVTA's 40th anniversary celebrations in the fall of 2012, members of the association came together to work on a strategic plan that would cover the following three years and inform the group's subsequent activities.

The 40th anniversary celebrations provided the GVTA with a sense of momentum and an enhanced appreciation of its superb trails, programs and community. Nevertheless, times were changing: membership numbers were down, youth participation was thin, and the societal landscape was evolving around us. Emerging technologies such as smart phones social media appeared to present both challenges to quieter pursuits such as hiking and new opportunities for reaching out to future members.

Within this context, a number of key issues were identified, including the following:

- declining membership, and a lack of youth volunteers to replenish the ranks
- lack of robust communications on many fronts (eg with volunteers, with landowners, and with the broader community)
- organizational confusion, including at the board level
- failure of semi-autonomous clubs to take off on several of the trail's four sections
- not enough promotion of, or group hikes on, the Grand Valley Trail itself
- too many road sections along the trail

Recognizing that no manageable three-year plan would be able to offer a complete solution to every one of the GVTA's challenges, the team opted for a tightly focused approach that would strengthen our association's core rather than attempting to, for example, carry out an ambitious expansion of the trail.

The group ultimately decided to divide its focus over the next three years into three broad strategic "treks." These three treks are as follows:

### The three strategic treks

#### **Trek 1: Board and organization**

Improve organizational functioning, tighten the structure of the board and improve communications between the board, volunteers and the membership at large

#### **Trek 2: Membership and marketing**

Reach out to new and current members through an enhanced web and social media presence, community relations initiatives, and tangible member benefits packages

#### **Trek 3: Programs and Trails**

Create and promote hikes on the Grand Valley Trail tailored to attracting new members, and lay the groundwork for future physical improvements to the trail and its routing

*Specific milestones were identified under each of these three broad areas, and are laid out in the following pages, which are designed to outline a clear and simple mechanism for guiding our activities and measuring success.*

## Trek one: Board and organization

*Rucksack one: board communications and procedures*

Task	Owner	Cost	Timeline	Notes	Status
Upload e-copy of board package to Flip Drive and send link to each board member	Vice-president	NA	3 months		Not started
Begin each board meeting with "lightning round" discussion of a policy	President	NA	After AGM	Keeps board familiar with GVTA policies	Not started
Create and update of full board and volunteer org chart and phone list	Volunteer director	NA	3 months		Not started
Institute annual budgeting process	Vice president, Treasurer	NA	1 year	Helps unlock unused funds	Not started
Simply and clarify procurement rules	Vice president, Treasurer	NA	6 months	Helps unlock unused funds	Not started

*Rucksack two: organizational structure and roles*

Task	Owner	Cost	Timeline	Notes	Status
Fill key board positions, including Hike Ontario rep position, marketing director position and programs director position	Volunteer director	TBD (ads)	6 months		Not started
Hire a part-time admin to look after board business	Volunteer director, president	\$5000 per year	One year		Not started
Create new overall "Trails director" position on board	President, Volunteer director	NA	Two years	Current system of four trail directors needs simplification	Not started
Simplify board structure, consolidating roles such as four trail director positions	President, volunteer director	NA	Three years	Heads of each section of trail would still be invited to board meetings	Not started
Switch to two-year director terms, and encourage each director to nurture an apprentice	Board as a whole	NA	One year	Helps ensure board membership continuity	Not started

*Key metrics:*

- number of vacancies on board
- amount of our revenue and cash on hand annually reinvested in each area of activity
- possible board-member quiz re. board bylaws and standing rules

## Trek two: Membership and marketing

*Rucksack one: base electronic and print presence*

Task	Owner	Cost	Timeline	Notes	Status
Redevelop website	Publications director	\$5000	One year	Procurement process for this project underway at start of planning cycle	Started
Highlight news and hike feeds on new home page and publicize via social media	Publications and programs directors	NA	One year		Not started
Create showcased hikes section on website with five good introductory hikes	Marketing director	NA	One year	Gives newcomers a quick and easy first taste of the trail	Not started
Integrate website renewal and e-store into web presence	Marketing and pubs directors	\$500 per year	One year	One-click membership renewals are crucial to building membership	Not started
Newsletter: add colour, continue shift to digital, and integrate content into website	Publications director, Newsletter editor	~\$250 per year	Two years		Not started

*Rucksack two: general marketing and outreach*

Task	Owner	Cost	Timeline	Notes	Status
Prioritize hiring a strong marketing director	President, volunteer director	\$200 (ads)	One year		Not started
Complete a market analysis and report	Marketing director	NA	1-2 years		Not started
Create updated marketing materials and swag for marketing	Marketing director	\$2500	Two years		Not started
Ramp up advertising and promotion in local publications and media	Marketing director	\$2000	1-2 years		Not started
Carry out community relations initiative	President, marketing director	TBD	Three years	Groups to liaise with: local government officials, local media, GRCA, other hiking groups, Hike Ontario	Not started

*Key metrics:*

- membership increase of 1-2% per year
- increase in number of followers on social media
- increase in number of hits on website

## Trek three: Programs and trails

### *Rucksack one: programs*

Task	Owner	Cost	Timeline	Notes	Status
Reminder email to hike leaders to send photos and reports of hikes to social media coordinator	Programs director, social media coordinator	NA	3 months		Not started
Find new programs director to work with current volunteers on this area	Volunteer director, current volunteers	NA	One year		Not started
Institute and publicize new policy: increasing hikes on Grand Valley Trail	Programs director, board	NA	6 months		Not started
Institute and publicize new series of beginner, youth and community hikes	Programs director	TBD (ads)	1-2 years		Not started
Create new annual all-volunteer meet-up and appreciation day	Programs and volunteer director	\$1000 per year	2-3 years		Not started

### *Rucksack two: trails*

Task	Owner	Cost	Timeline	Notes	Status
Commence quarterly check-in with Carolinian Crest group re. its needs	Trails director	NA	6 months		Not started
Develop landowner relations annual thank you mailout	Marketing director, trails director	\$750 per year	One year		Not started
Update trail signage and markers with new branding and association contact/info	Trails director	\$3000	Three years		Not started
Complete a trail assessment and inventory	Trails director	TBD	Three years	Study, eg, % of the trail current on road, % of trail currently being well maintained, etc.	Not started
Provide recommendations re. improving trail route in next three-year planning cycle	Trails director	NA	Three years		Not started

### *Key metrics:*

- percentage of hikes on GVTA trails
- number of beginner hikes
- number of new signs/markers placed along trail

## Evaluation

Progress toward the fulfillment of the Strategic Plan will be measured annually by the board, and an update will be presented at the Annual General Meeting. On the basis of each measurement cycle, the board will determine whether adequate progress has been made and whether any adjustments to the plan are required.

Such adjustments might include: refining the suggested timelines for achieving various milestones, replacing or revising specific milestones, and eliminating tactics identified as impractical or unproductive.

## Conclusion

*“Honouring and strengthening the GVTA’s trail system, programs and unique community while creating fresh opportunities for the next wave of hikers to get involved and enjoy the natural wonders of the Grand River watershed.”*

This three-year Strategic Plan lays out an ambitious agenda for the Grand Valley Trails Association. It is consistent with the goal (reiterated above) set out by our community at the outset of the planning process. If the plan is successfully undertaken, the GVTA will find itself in a strengthened position – with more members, an enhanced organizational structure, and more accessible trails and programs. Ultimately, this plan will help us to succeed in the mission, vision and values that have guided our association over its four decades of activity and that will continue to animate it in the years to come.