



Willowsford Conservancy 2023 Annual Letter

Planting the Future



Dear Residents,

On behalf of the Conservancy's Board of Trustees and staff, I wish you all the very best this holiday season and into the new year. Rebecca from the HOA shared in her year-end letter that the Conservancy is one of the unique elements that distinguishes Willowsford from other communities. Our staff is dedicated to serving you by carrying out our mission and strategic plan through Land Stewardship, Farm, and various programs, events and volunteer opportunities. You make this community special; without you, protecting our natural habitat, working on our trails, growing organic veggies, tending to our chickens, and engaging with you at programs would not be possible, so WE THANK YOU.

I would also like to thank the Board, staff, and residents for welcoming me and my family to the community. It is a special place with an inspiring mission, and I am honored to serve you and continue the great work already done by the Conservancy.

This annual letter includes:

- Progress on Strategic Plan
- Goal 1: Build Engagement and Community
- Goal 2: Attain Operational Excellence in Land Management and Farming
- Goal 3: Continue Building a High-Performing Governing Board of Trustees
- Goal 4: Build and Strengthen Staff Talent
- Goal 5: Expand/Diversify Funding Sources to Meet Capital/Operating Needs
- Volunteerism
- Collaboration with HOA
- Budget and Assessment Increase

Wishing you and yours a wonderful holiday season. Contact me at any time with questions!

Sophie Lambert
Executive Director, Willowsford Conservancy



PROGRESS ON STRATEGIC PLAN

Our Board approved our Strategic Plan in late 2022. Staff and the Board are focused on carrying out the new mission and the vision the plan lays out for the future of our community. Being an Agrihood is what makes Willowsford unique, and we continue to play a big role in making the open space and farm as efficient and impactful as possible. Our Agrihood needs a thriving ecosystem and restored habitats just as much as it needs healthy fields and greenhouses. We aim to connect you with these resources through programs, events, and volunteer opportunities. You are the “neighborhood” part of Agrihood; we can’t do our work without you.

The goals of our strategic plan are necessarily aspirational, and it will take a few years to see the results. In 2024, we will craft our implementation plan so we can make bigger strides towards our goals and better serve our land and you.

MISSION

To protect our land and promote conservation and sustainable farming so that our community discovers a deeper connection to nature and each other.

VISION

Willowsford is a world class agrihood that inspires community-based conservation and farming.

STRATEGIC PLAN GOALS

Goal 1: Build Engagement and Community

Goal 2: Attain Operational Excellence in Land Management and Farming

Goal 3: Continue Building a High-Performing Governing Board of Trustees

Goal 4: Build and Strengthen Staff Talent

Goal 5: Expand/Diversify Funding Sources to Meet Capital/Operating Needs





Goal 1: Build Engagement and Community

Our team planned a robust series of programs and events for the year to educate residents about their Agrihood and to foster community between neighbors. The impact and breadth of this engagement increased once we hired our Program and Engagement Coordinator, Sarah. We also started adding more educational content to our website in a new Field Notes section started by Ranger Emily.

- Our **Amphibian Walk and Aquatic Wildlife Discovery classes** were very popular. Seeing the excitement and pride on a young scientist's face as he caught a baby trout in Broad Run during an Aquatic Wildlife program was especially rewarding.
- Residents from all Villages and all ages joined us for **"Let's Talk Trash,"** a community trash pickup event which we plan to host annually.
- The **Farm Stand** continued to be a strong venue for building community. We loved seeing you there each week, at the monthly wagon rides, our Harvest Market with craft vendors and kids' activities, or our year-end potluck for our farm customers.
- The **Willowsford Book Club** held a monthly meeting at the Farm Stand and worked with Farmer Rachel on book selection and leading discussion.
- Kids of all ages coming to **Farm Camp** where we started seeds, harvested veggies, learned about how we control weeds, how honeybees and native bees play an important role for our crops, how we take care of the hen and wash eggs, and the ever-popular Farm Wagon Ride. We look forward to collaborating with the HOA on a camp offering in 2024 that continues to bring junior farmers to the Farm in the summer.
- **Some new events we tried** in 2023 included yoga at the Farm Stand, a time trial at the new obstacle course in The Greens, the previously mentioned Harvest Market, and a year-end Potluck for our Farm community (which had delicious food and company).

Over 30 programs & events
Over 1,900 residents & visitors
attended
A few thousand people visited
the Farm Stand and Harvest
Market

We also value the external collaborations we have fostered, including the following:

- One of most well-attended programs over the summer was a Butterfly Walk with Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy in the Wet Meadow.
- Our fishing classes with the Rapidan Chapter of Trout Unlimited were a hit and we loved seeing how popular fishing is becoming at Willowsford.
- We harvested seeds from native grasses and common milkweed, then made "seed bombs" with Daisies from two local Girl Scout Troops, followed by a hike and bonfire event at Hidden Meadow including two groups of older Girl Scouts.
- We partnered with three Eagle Scouts on service projects (new benches on a trail, a bee hotel at the Wet Meadow, and a fishing line disposal system at Willow Lake and Cedar Pond) and hosted a few Boy Scout camp-overs at Hidden Meadow.



Goal 2: Attain Operational Excellence in Farming

This was a year of continuing to invest in the Farm fields, buildings, and infrastructure. We have seen improved soil health and fertility, greater nutrient retention, and decreased weed and pest pressure as a result of our sustainable farming practices led by Farmer Andrew and his team. We have achieved this using various techniques – highlights include continuing to incorporate our laying hens into our crop rotation and changing tillage practices to increase low-disturbance spading actions over soil-destroying rototilling. **To build our farm soils in 2023, we met our goal of cover cropping at least 85% of production ground at some point during the year.**

If you've visited the farm this year, whether to volunteer or go on one of our monthly summer farm tour wagon rides often led by Farmer Eric, you've likely seen a tall plant that looks a bit like corn. This plant is actually a cover crop called Sorghum Sudangrass. Cover cropping is a sustainable agricultural practice that involves planting specific crops in between periods of crop cultivation. Cover crops are not meant to be harvested, sold, or eaten. Instead, they are grown to cover and enhance the soil between vegetable crops.

These cover crops serve a multitude of purposes, primarily aimed at **improving soil health** – soil erosion prevention, enhancing soil fertility by adding nutrients and organic matter to the soil, and suppressing weeds. It is a long and continuous process, but we're already seeing great improvements in yield and quality of some of our produce, like our bell peppers this past season!

Our Farm team and our customers shared **how tasty the vegetables were this growing season**. Whether it was the early greens of spring, the tomatoes or snacking peppers of summer, or the frost-kissed spinach and carrots of our fall/winter season, we are pleased to see how the improved soil health is increasing yield and flavor of our vegetables. We continue to carry out practices according to organic standards – **Willowsford Farm is USDA Certified Organic by CCOF**. This third-party audit gives you peace of mind about what you are eating since we are required to limit exposure to chemicals and instead use practices that are beneficial to habitat, wildlife, and eaters.

We also increased production of crops like the fairy tale eggplant and okra, favorites of Farmer Ben, and the popular microgreens, started by Farmer Rachel. We appreciated our CSA shareholders (Farmer's Choice, the increasingly popular Custom Share, eggs, flowers), online store customers, and regulars or occasional visitors to the Farm Stand. Farmer Anna enjoyed meeting many of you on her delivery route and we wrapped the van in the fall, so we hope you love her new ride with Willowsford Farm branding on it! For the season, **our Farm Stand exceeded our projections by almost \$10k!** We hope to continue that trend in 2024 and we hope to grow CSA numbers in 2024 since we have plenty of growing capacity at the Farm due to improved soil health.

From an infrastructure perspective, we improved the electrical capacity at the Packing Shed, completed a new Cooling Enclosure which will enable us to keep produce fresh longer and increase our productivity, as well as made investments in our wells and irrigation. We have a robust set of improvements scheduled in 2024 to help us continue to increase our productivity while creating more engagement and educational opportunities at the Farm.



Goal 2: Attain Operational Excellence in Land Management

On the Land Stewardship side, there were innovative projects as well as necessary maintenance.

Trail care and improvement was the largest part of our workload, taking nearly 35% of our time and resources. The team started off the year with a survey of all trail infrastructure, then in the second quarter completed trail improvements in The Grange. Bridge repairs and other maintenance took place on various trails, supported by the Mountain Biking Club and other volunteers. More than 100 tons of stone was laid in trail resurfacing.

Our 2022-23 **deer management program** concluded with strong participation and we kicked off the 2023-24 program with innovation in disease-tracking, not to mention continued meat donation to help those experiencing food insecurity. We are grateful for Taryn's leadership and the support of our core volunteers.

Over the summer, we were pleased to **open an obstacle course in The Greens**. Andrew Richardson, who just celebrated his 10th anniversary working for the land stewardship team (first with the developer and then with the Conservancy) designed and managed its construction. It is a challenging "ninja warrior"-type course, and we love seeing kids and adults of all ages tackling it!

Conservation is an important part of our stewardship work, totaling 15% of our team's time. We **looked after tree plantings, seeded in meadows, focused on invasive species removal, and carried out pond maintenance**. In the summer, we worked on a vegetation survey in The Grant to assess the spatial distribution and quality of the plant communities in our open spaces. This is also an area for future expansion of tools and strategies. In April, we carried out a **prescribed burn in the Wet Meadow** to control invasive arthraxon and to encourage native plant development. The team is excited to increase our efficiencies and impact by bringing prescribed burn delivery in house in 2024.





Goal 2: Attain Operational Excellence in Land Management

What You Can Do to Help Manage Your Land

Our resident conservation project programs allow you to contribute to habitat restoration in your own backyard. Taryn does an excellent job educating residents in our popular Backyard Conservation classes and guiding residents about native plantings. We received five applications this year, including a notable submission where three streets collaborated to remove invasive species in the open space behind their homes. We'll share more information about this program on our website, in our newsletter, and via case studies in 2024.



Why Plant Native?

- Native plants and trees evolved in this region and are well adapted to the specific climate and soils of the area requiring less maintenance.
- Native plants provide essential habitat and food for our local wildlife. Some animal species require specific plants in order to reproduce and survive such as Monarch caterpillars which exclusively feed on milkweed leaves.
- Native plants help combat climate change by sequestering carbon. The root system of native grasses can grow many feet below the soil surface and hold significantly more carbon mass than many trees!

Our assistant Land Stewardship Manager, Sam, started a native plant program to help residents improve the biodiversity of their yards. This began with building a small greenhouse and starting seeds (many of which came from seeds gathered from our Open Spaces), which we sold at the Farm Stand all summer and fall. **We look forward to offering a broader selection of native plants in 2024 and bringing them to you earlier in the season at the Farm Stand, as well as through online sales.**



Goal 3: Continue Building a High-Performing Governing Board of Trustees

The Conservancy is governed by a dedicated Board of Trustees. Our resident board members are Greg Licamele, Karyn Moreland, Claudette Papathanasopoulos, Chase Rowan, and Jake Virag and we value the professional input of our one non-resident board member, Avi Sareen. We saw transition in 2023 as Claudette stepped into the role of President and Chase transitioned to Vice President. Harry Pugh from the HOA Board served on our Finance Committee in 2023, part of broader efforts toward creating a liaisons between the HOA and Conservancy Boards.

We look forward to focusing on board development during the implementation phase of the strategic plan. We're particularly interested in how to best engage youth. **In 2024, we will be creating an Advisory Board which will afford opportunities to more residents and non-residents**, chiefly through expertise that can provide guidance to our Board and staff.



Goal 4: Build and Strengthen Staff Talent

Our Conservancy work is carried out by a great team. We appreciate their expertise and dedication to our mission and community.

The Conservancy's Board hired a new Executive Director who started in May. Sophie Lambert hit the ground running while the Land Stewardship and Farm teams were in the midst of their busy summers. Since Sophie started, she's led efforts to improve our accounting system, supported Farm Camp, prepared the budget with the team, initiated new marketing strategies, helped to plan new events and Harvest Market, and met with allied organizations.

We welcomed Emily, our new Ranger, who joined in April. As mentioned, Sarah, our Program & Engagement Coordinator, joined in August. We look forward to adding one new team member to support our operations, plus seasonal staff supporting the farm. Many of you were probably delighted to see Deb Dramby back at the Farm Stand all season and we hope to have her join us in 2024 as well!





Goal 5: Expand/Diversify Funding Sources to Meet Capital/Operating Needs

The Conservancy anticipates capital and operating expense needs beyond what current Community Enhancement (transfer) Fees and Annual Assessments can support. We ultimately need to find new funding sources to cover these costs. In 2024, we will judiciously withdraw funds from our developer-provided endowment to address urgent capital expenditure costs. We are targeting funding opportunities that will help us repay this withdrawal as soon as possible.

A few budget highlights from 2023 include:

- Land Stewardship was managed efficiently and finished the year under budget. Strong firewood sales and attention to production efficiencies from Ranger Rob, who manages the program, contributed to their outperformance.
- Native plant sales showed that the new operation was viable.
- Hidden Meadow saw an uptick in rentals.
- Many projects were entirely carried out using in-house labor, such as the obstacle course and trail maintenance.
- Farm Stand revenue exceeded projections, while CSA and online sales have shown growth since engagement and marketing investment have increased.
- Additional funds were prioritized to cover allowed additional investment in capital expenditures.





VOLUNTEERISM

The Conservancy's work would not be possible without our volunteers. A special thank you to residents who “go above and beyond” and donate their time and expertise, working alongside our team.

Our land stewardship team has a large group of volunteers who helped us with the following in 2023:

- Stream monitors who count macroinvertebrates in our water bodies to assess their health;
- Our archers and hunters who help control our deer population;
- “Let’s Talk Trash” volunteers in all four Villages, plus others who participated in ad hoc clean ups during the year;
- Trail and invasive species volunteers; and
- Bluebird monitors who count the fledglings each year.

Land Stewardship Volunteer Stats

10 Volunteer Events
3 Eagle Scout Projects
4 Volunteer-Led Programs
5 Volunteer Groups
388 Volunteers
1,338 Volunteer Hours

Farm Volunteer Stats

42 individual volunteers
1,260 volunteer hours

Farm produce donations to Dulles South Food Pantry totaled 4,950 pounds (if you are unable to pick up your share it does not go to waste!)

On the Farm, a troop of consistent volunteers carried out the following critical tasks and allowed our Farm team to be maximize their productivity:

- Washing eggs (and occasionally helping us fetch the eggs) from our 500-hen flock;
- Washing and packing vegetables freshly harvested, then helping us pack our CSA boxes;
- Joining us at the Boathouse or Farm Stand for CSA pick up;
- Washing tote boxes and just plain helping as needed;
- Our team enjoys spending time with these volunteers. Some of these tasks and special projects were completed by Exceptional Ed students from Lightridge High School. The Lightridge High Cross Country team took time out of their successful season to volunteer at our inaugural Harvest Market. Finally, a core group of volunteers joined us to canvass each of the four Villages to greet neighbors and share info on the Farm and invite them to join us in 2024. A “Support Your Agrihood” postcard will be delivered to you over the next few weeks offering a special discount for Willowsford residents to be used towards any 2024 share.



COLLABORATION WITH THE HOA

This year has seen **increased collaboration between the Conservancy and HOA** working towards “One Willowsford.” At the staff level, regular meetings and informal chats between peers help us strategize about how to best serve the community. Sophie and Rebecca meet regularly; Rebecca’s extensive knowledge about Willowsford has been very helpful during the transition. Taryn and Matt, along with Farmer Andrew and Chef Emily, meet and collaborate regularly about their lines of work.

Beyond staff, we have seen our two boards engage and work together more than ever on specific topics like **invasive species removal, development pressure from a potential park, and strategizing on the direction of our budget.** There is great potential to work together and look for synergies and efficiencies in our work, especially since **both organizations will focus on implementing their respective strategic plans in 2024.**

We also collaborated on security concerns and continued to contribute towards the HOA’s security contract to cover nighttime patrols for parking lots at various Conservancy amenities. We also installed various surveillance signs and tools at these locations.

Finally, we coordinated our response to the county about Dulles South Community Park. As many of you are aware Loudoun County Parks and Recreation is proposing a new park adjacent to Lightridge High School next to Lotus Pond Place in The Greens. We will work with the HOA to continue to make sure we have a seat at the table to share concerns and provide input on this new park.





2024 CONSERVANCY ASSESSMENT

Funding the strategic plan in its initial year, as well as inflationary costs, led the Board of Trustees to approve a **modest \$2.84/month increase per household** for the 2024 Conservancy assessment (which is different from, but collected with, the HOA assessment).

Each household will now contribute \$48.67 per month to sustain Willowsford Conservancy. This will enable us to maintain 40+ miles of trails, partially fund Farm operations and manage 2,200+ acres of protected open space and ecosystems (we manage more than 50% of all Willowsford land that will never be developed, but those forests, wetlands and grasslands need attention and care). **In total, households will contribute \$146 per quarter or \$584 per year towards our operating budget.**

HISTORICAL BUDGETING CONTEXT

When Willowsford was under development, the Conservancy benefitted from additional investments from the developer. This meant that while trails were added, ponds created, and the farm was built out, the developer covered the shortfalls. That changed in 2021, and the Conservancy is now entrusted with building a sustainable organization, guided by a strategic plan, respecting that resident assessments currently fund the majority of the budget. As identified in the strategic plan, the Conservancy is committed to exploring revenue strategies and making more investments and process improvements to operate as efficiently as possible.

STAFF TALENT

The Board believes deeply in the staff serving you. Rewarding their work (including during difficult inflationary times) continues to be a top priority each year. Conservancy staff members possess highly specific skills unique to our community - namely a farm team and a land stewardship team.

Through Farmer Andrew's leadership and Taryn's management of the land team, and Sophie in our Executive Director role, the Conservancy is well positioned for its next chapter guided by implementing the strategic plan. The whole team is committed to serving you well (and as efficiently and effectively as possible) next year!





MORE INFORMATION

This annual letter features references to more information and details you can find on our website at <https://willowsfordconservancy.org/> including:

- 2024 Budget
- November 28, 2023 Board Meeting Slide Presentation
- 2023-26 Strategic Plan

Reach out to us at any time at info@willowsfordconservancy.org and we look forward to serving you and working alongside you in 2024.



Planting the Future

Strategic Plan 2023-2026

