

CHARLES RIVER CONSERVANCY

Strategic Plan
2020-2024



CHARLES RIVER
conservancy





TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	2
Approach	4
Goals, Objectives, and Action Plans	5
Goal 1	9
Goal 2	11
Goal 3	13
Goal 4	15
Appendix	17



Introduction

Background

Founded in 2000, the Charles River Conservancy (CRC) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization dedicated to the renewal and active use of the urban Charles River parklands. In partnership with the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR), as well as other State, City, and local stakeholders, the Conservancy promotes the active use and vitality of the parks along the river, increases recreational and cultural opportunities, and works to ensure the beauty, integrity, and resilience of this extraordinary public resource.

The CRC's most recent programming and work includes:

- ◀ **River swimming initiatives** with the goal of bringing swimming back to the Charles River. City Splash, the signature event for these efforts, has occurred annually since 2013 with over 1,000 people having jumped into the river. The CRC is also working to support the creation of a swim park to make river swimming even more accessible.
- ◀ **Stewardship**, including the solicitation and coordination of approximately 2,000 volunteers each year to perform vital park maintenance and ensure permanent improvements in the parks. In addition, the CRC is currently partnering with several other organizations to permit and install the first floating wetland in the Charles to demonstrate the importance of shoreline vegetation and research the impact on local zooplankton and potential water quality improvements.
- ◀ **Advocacy** efforts aimed at improving pedestrian and bicycle access and safety, as well as the inclusion of parks and pathways in the Massachusetts Department of Transportation's reconstruction of the I-90 interchange in Allston.

This range of programming is supported by a small, mission-driven staff, an active Board of Directors, and approximately 2,000 Conservancy Volunteers each year.

In 2018, the CRC's founding director retired, and the Board of Directors recognized the moment for recommitment to the organizational mission and vision, as well as a consideration of strategy options for this next chapter in the CRC's story. The CRC is financially and reputationally stable, and is poised for action under its new leadership. There are myriad opportunities ahead amidst a growing public interest in placemaking, a crowded field of organizations with aligned interests but no clear convener, and increasing awareness that equitable access to greenspace is a major influence on health and well-being. In order to best capitalize on the opportunities ahead, the CRC sought to clearly articulate its identity and role and harness its own resources in service to a targeted, actionable, and flexible strategic plan.

Executive Summary

The Charles River Conservancy contracted Strategy Matters, LLC to facilitate a strategic planning process in the Spring of 2019. The outcome of this process is represented by this document, designed to guide the focus of the CRC's work from 2019 through 2024.

The planning process was designed to support the CRC team in answering three fundamental organizational questions: (1) Where are we now? (2) Where do we want to go? (3) How will we get there? To answer question 1, the CRC board worked with the consultants to reformulate organizational core identity and consider organizational and environmental assessments. To answer questions 2 and 3, the team set goals for the coming years, identified a strategy to achieve those goals, and finalized new statements of CRC's values, vision, and mission.

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At the culmination of the strategic planning process, the groups engaged have agreed that the CRC is guided by the values of Special Places, Creativity, Diversity, and Partnership. When these values are more widely and deeply embraced, they contribute to the CRC's vision: a future in which the Charles River and its parks are celebrated, well-utilized, and connected centers of public life. The CRC's mission, its role in creating this vision of the world, is to strive to make the Charles River and its parks a well-maintained network of natural urban places that invite and engage all in their use and stewardship. In order to carry out its mission, the CRC identified four strategic goals:

- ◀ **Goal 1:** Foster and build a culture of active engagement with the river through water focused activities.
- ◀ **Goal 2:** Engage new and diverse audiences with the Charles River parks by developing and strengthening partnerships with aligned organizations.
- ◀ **Goal 3:** Leverage research and placemaking expertise to support advocacy efforts.



Approach

Strategy Matters embarked on a five-step process with the CRC team. This process was highly focused on engaging the right stakeholders in meaningful ways in concert with a broad and deep environmental scan to fully understand the ecosystem in which the CRC operates. This ensured consensus around the answers to three questions: Where are we now? Where do we want to go? How will we get there?





Strategic Plan

Vision

We envision a future in which the Charles River and its parks are celebrated, well-utilized, and connected centers of public life.

Mission

We strive to make the Charles River and its parks a well-maintained network of natural urban places that invite and engage all in their use and stewardship.

Values

- ◀ **Special places:** we are committed to stewarding a sustainable, beautiful, and welcoming river and surrounding parks.
- ◀ **Creativity:** we are bold, forward-thinking, and creative in our pursuit of new ways to expand people's use of and access to the river and its parks.
- ◀ **Diversity:** we value diversity in both uses and users of the river and its parks.
- ◀ **Partnership:** we value collaboration with others who share our commitment to the river, its parks, and all the users who enjoy it. We work hard to make sure all voices have the opportunity to inform the evolution of the park/river.

Partnership Strategy

Recognizing that our vision for the river and its parks is ambitious and resource-dependent, we will pursue new opportunities to partner with aligned organizations, municipal and state government, and others who share our vision for the region to increase, improve, and deepen our impact. Current examples of partnerships as “force multipliers” on this plan include our growing Conservancy Volunteers program, and in the early stages of volunteer programming in other programmatic areas and as policy advocates.

Additionally, much of the plan outlined in this document is predicated on our belief that building public awareness of the rich opportunities within the river and its parks - for recreation, education, climate resilience, community building, a natural respite - will yield increased public support for investment in the river and its parks.



To leverage the power of the public's care, concern, and participation and to maximize the impact of our limited organizational resources, we have developed the following gating questions to filter our current and potential initiatives. The questions below will be used to guide organizational decision making in this plan.



Gating Questions for new and continued initiatives

We want to remain flexible and open to new opportunities, but not at the expense of our mission or values. To steer decision-making, we will address each of the following questions honestly and thoroughly before moving forward:

- ◀ **Does it offer a new or improved opportunity for people to engage with the river and parks?**
- ◀ **Can we foresee a publicly-visible milestone or meaningful impact in the near future?**
- ◀ **Does it build partnerships in service to bringing new and diverse users to the parks and the river?**
- ◀ **Does it clearly align with all 4 of our defined values?**
- ◀ **Will we execute this project with existing staff? If so, how much time will they dedicate and what responsibilities will that take them away from? If not, where will we build capacity?**



We are also proud of the CRC's history and tenacity for bold, legacy projects and are committed to the long-term health, vitality, and resilience of the river and its parks. We recognize that to achieve this, what this resource needs most is better collaboration among its stewards. In order to be a good collaborator and adapt to the conditions of varied relationships, we need to remain flexible and transparent in how we work. Therefore, to position the CRC as a convener across the Charles, we will

- ◀ **Work through partnerships** as often as possible;
- ◀ **Seek short term projects** to express our mission and values; and
- ◀ **Harness the community** whenever possible to increase the capacity and impact of our work.

These methods have been threaded through the forthcoming goals and action plans.



Goals, Objectives and Action Plans

At the outset of the strategic planning process, the CRC envisioned a plan that would guide the organization in the coming five years while also acknowledging the sometimes unpredictable pace of change in the environments in which the organization operates. The CRC intends for this document to serve as a dynamic roadmap to be revisited regularly to ensure the timetables and objectives are on track, and that the content is serving the organization well. Fiscal Year 2022 should be viewed as directional and is intended to be refined over time.

Goal 1:

Foster and build a culture of active engagement with the river through water focused activities.

The CRC's long-term goal is to install a seasonal swim park in the Charles River, the ultimate manifestation of a river that is a widely used component of our region's environmental health, and is seen as a place to gather, rather than a barrier between cities. To achieve this, we plan to build excitement and demand for the river as an urban amenity and work to improve its health and resilience to increase its recreational capacity. In the next five years we will leverage the CRC's work to date to return swimming to the Charles and broaden the audience and uses to connect more people to recreation on the Charles.

Specifically we will:

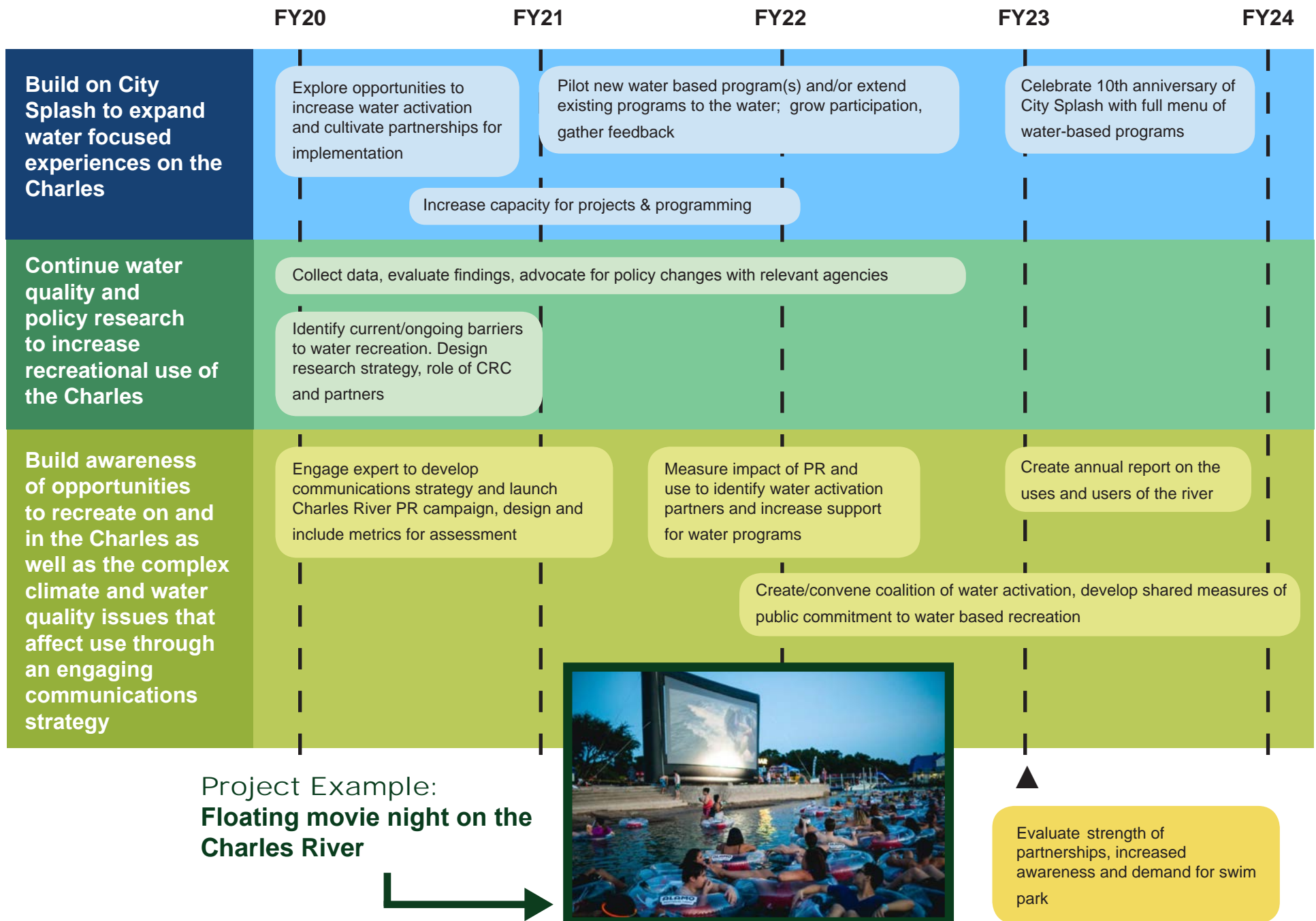
- ◀ **Build on City Splash to expand water focused experiences on the Charles**
- ◀ **Continue water quality research to increase recreational use of the Charles**
- ◀ **Build awareness of expanding opportunities to recreate on and in the Charles as well as the complex climate and water quality issues that affect use through an engaging communications strategy**



Action Plan

The implementation of programming, research, and communications to open the Charles River for further recreation will be thoughtfully coordinated over multiple years, adapting to environmental, political, and social conditions as needed.

Timeline



Goal 2:

Engage new and diverse audiences with the Charles River parks by developing and strengthening partnerships with aligned organizations.

In order to thoughtfully increase diversity and equity along the Charles River and its parks, we need to actively invite existing communities to share culture, learning, and talent in this public space. By taking the time to understand best practice, listen to our peers, and do the internal work necessary to be mindful and truly inclusive, we will strive to make the Charles River and its parks welcoming and accessible to everyone. When our natural resources are more widely embraced, the case for sustainability is made that much more urgent. In order to engage new audiences, we will:

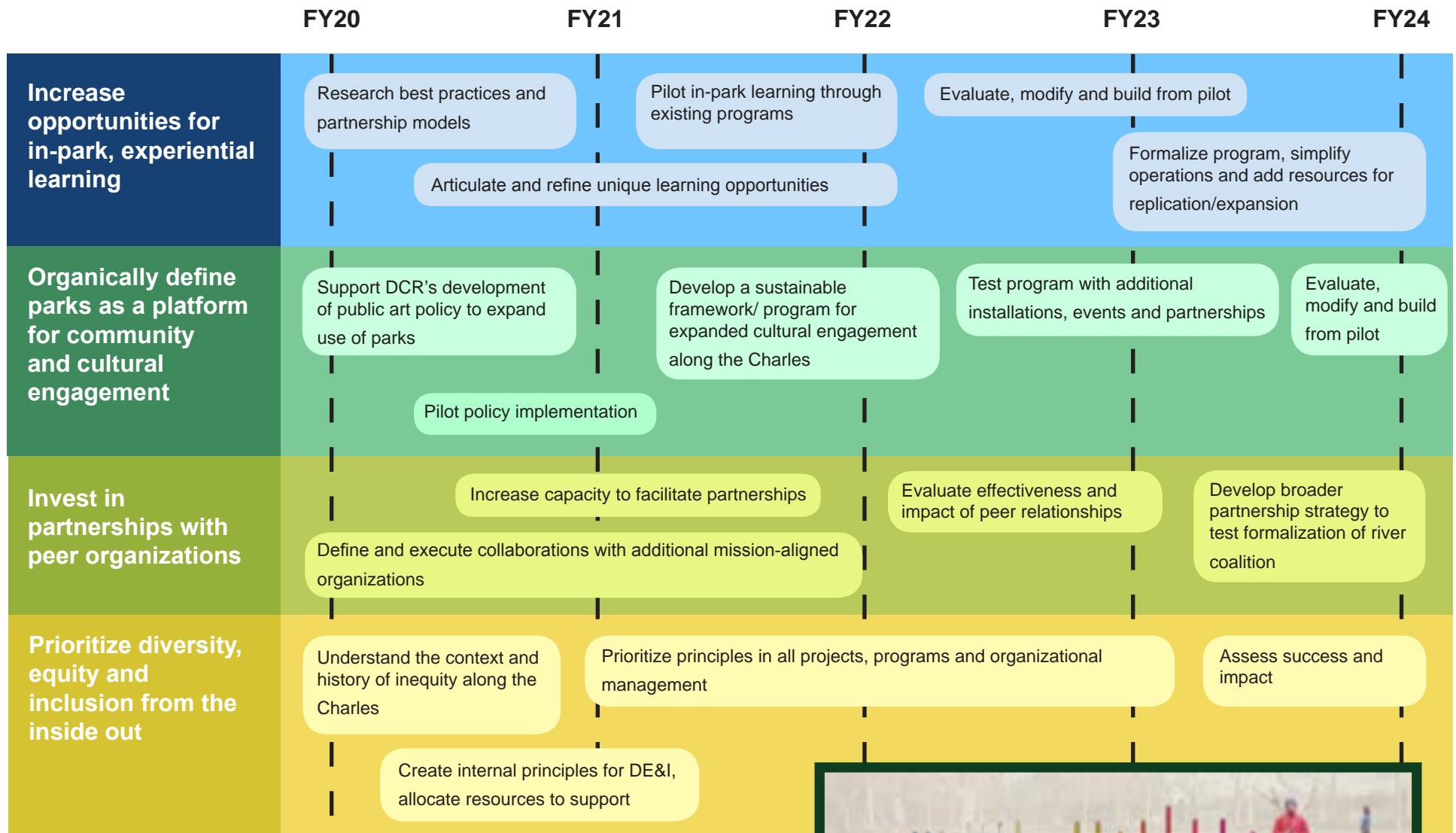
- ◀ **Increase opportunities for in-park learning**
- ◀ **Organically define parks as a platform for community and cultural engagement**
- ◀ **Invest in partnerships with peer organizations**
- ◀ **Prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusion from the inside out**

Action Plan

Partnerships are intended to permeate all areas of the CRC's mission-based work. In order to do so successfully, the organization needs to first take on internal, reflective work to identify what we need and offer as a collaborator.



Timeline



Project Example:
River Tree Installation in the parks



Goal 3:

Leverage research and placemaking expertise to support advocacy efforts.

In order to be an effective advocate for the Charles River and its parks at a time when insufficient public funding persists and massive infrastructure projects loom, we need to be informed, focused, and consistent. By working with our partners to determine the areas facing the greatest threats and opportunities, we can develop interventions that speak for themselves, create tangible places to bolster support, and further our role as a “critical friend” to our public partners, all in service to ensuring the environmental sustainability of the river and its parks. To continue our history as an organization that “gets things done” through advocacy, we will:

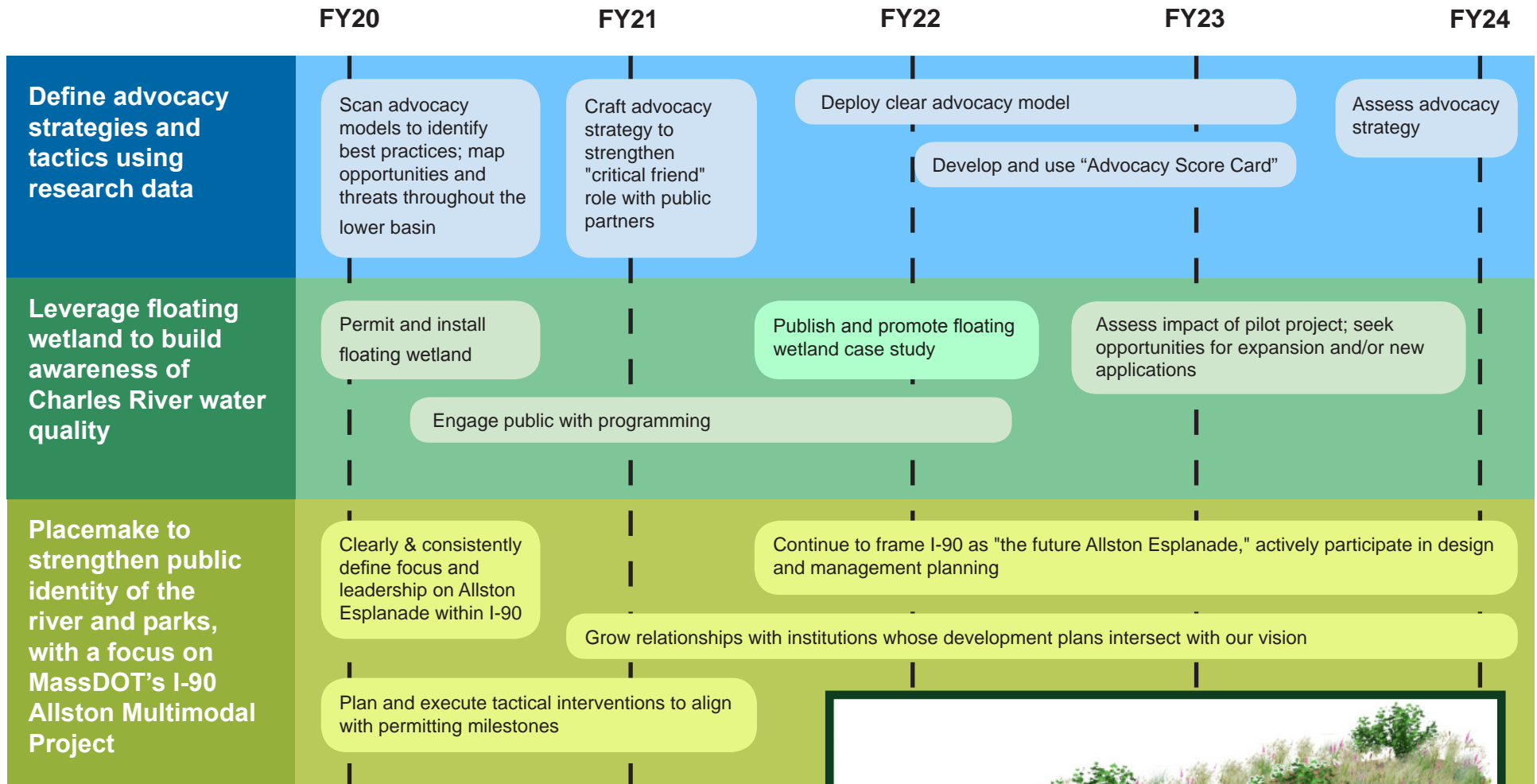
- ◀ **Define our advocacy strategies and tactics using research and data**
- ◀ **Leverage a floating wetland to build awareness of Charles River water quality, both positive and threatening**
- ◀ **Placemake to strengthen public identity of the river and parks, with a focus on the I-90 project**

Action Plan

Being an effective advocate requires flexibility and vigilance to stay on top of important issues. To make the most of limited resources, the CRC will invest in developing a structure that can be applied and adapted to current and future advocacy.



Timeline



Project Example:
Floating Wetland Pilot Project



Goal 4:

Ensure the CRC's sustained organizational health.

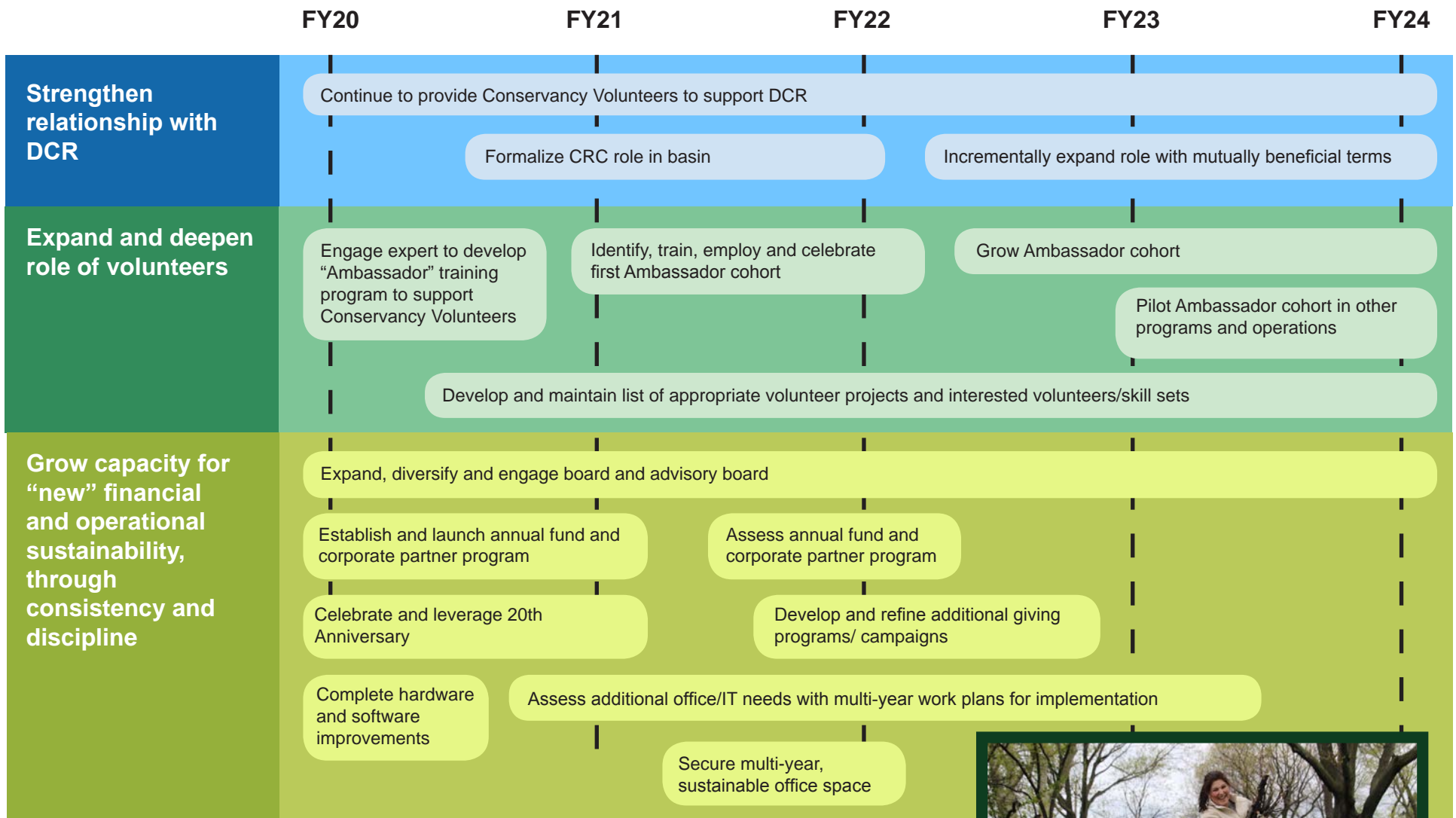
The CRC has smoothly and successfully completed a major leadership transition, confirming our strength as an organization. With this plan, we programmatically move into the next generation and need to be intentional about bringing the financial, operational, and political components along with us, while fostering our core park maintenance and stewardship work to support the DCR. In addition to revisiting the strategic plan on an annual basis and adjusting operational goals accordingly, we will:

- ◀ **Strengthen organizational relationship with DCR**
- ◀ **Expand and deepen the role of volunteers**
- ◀ **Grow capacity for “new” financial and operational sustainability, through consistency and discipline**

Action Plan

To enable implementation of all goals, the CRC will strive to make our internal operations more effective and efficient. In the first years, we will build off of our successful track record working with volunteers and add tools and capacity to our development strategy.

Timeline



Project Example:
Volunteer Ambassadors



Appendices

Appendix A: Stakeholders Consulted

The consulting team engaged the following individuals in interviews:

Councilor Dennis Carlone, City of Cambridge
Michael Celona, Chief Water Toxics Unit at Mass. Department of Public Health
Katie Everett, The Lynch Foundation
Kate Fichter, Assistant Secretary for Policy Coordination, Mass. Department of Transportation
Jennifer Gilbert, Board Member, CRC
Caroline Hart, The Wagner Foundation
Debra Iles, Board Member, CRC
Laura Jasinski, Executive Director, CRC
Lonsdale Koester, Board Member, CRC
Wendy Landman, WalkBoston
Pallavi Mande, Charles River Watershed Association
Vanessa Nason, Project Manager, CRC
Michael Nichols, Executive Director, Esplanade Association
Emily Norton, Charles River Watershed Association
Tim McHale, Friends of Herter Park
Cathie Zusy, Magazine Beach Partners

In addition to the above individuals, the team had one-on-one conversations with members of the public-at-large in strategic locations adjacent to the Charles River (Harvard Square, The Esplanade, and North Point Park). These conversations focused on park user experience and perceptions, and awareness of the CRC as an organization.

The consulting team distributed a stakeholder survey. Respondents were comprised of the following:

- Staff member (4)
- Board member (10)
- Donor (17)
- Volunteer (5)
- Program participant (13)
- Interested community member (60)
- Part of an organization that partners with the CRC (16)
- No relationship to the CRC (18)

A scenic view of a river with a bridge in the background. A person is sitting on a wooden dock in the foreground, reading a book. The scene is surrounded by lush green trees and foliage.

Charles River Conservancy

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