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2024-2028 Strategic Plan

February 1, 2024

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**MIFarmLink 2024-2028 Strategic Plan Executive Summary**

Introduction

MIFarmLink, a program of the Washtenaw County Conservation District, aims to keep Michigan farmland in cultivation by connecting farmers seeking land with owners looking to sell, lease, or create tenure arrangements. This strategic plan, developed through workshops and expert consultation, outlines our goals and action items for the next five years. It will be periodically reviewed and adapted to changing circumstances.

Vision and Mission

Our vision is to preserve Michigan farming as a lifestyle and industry. Our mission is to connect farmers seeking land with farmland owners, ensuring the agricultural heritage of Michigan is maintained.

Strategic Goals

1. Optimizing MIFarmLink’s Online Platform
   * Enhance website functionalities, improve user experience, and maintain up-to-date content.
2. Creating a Long-Term Financial Plan
   * Develop core funding strategies, explore revenue-generating opportunities, and identify potential funders.
3. Providing Resources and Connections for Farmers
   * Offer land tenure, training connections, and promote diversity through targeted communication.
4. Building Brand Recognition
   * Cultivate relationships with key stakeholders, develop a marketing plan, and enhance our reputation as Michigan’s farmland matchmaker.
5. Identifying and Creating Key Partnerships
   * Establish and maintain strategic partnerships with relevant organizations to strengthen our network.
6. Working to Identify a Statewide Administrative Home
   * Evaluate long-term organizational structure and explore the creation of regional hubs.
7. Defining Benchmarks for Success
   * Track key metrics such as farm properties listed, connections made, and conservation practices applied.
8. Establishing Operational Systems
   * Develop legal, communication, and operational guidelines to ensure effective program management.

**Introduction**

MIFarmLink is a program of the Washtenaw County Conservation District whose main objective is to keep Michigan farmland in cultivation by connecting farmers seeking land with farmland owners looking to sell, lease or create another type of tenure arrangement. In December 2023 MIFarmLink staff and Advisory Committee members gathered at MSU for a workshop entitled “Setting Group Goals for Growth” to identify goals and objectives for the program’s 2024-2028 Strategic Plan. In January 2024 MIFarmLink staff and Advisory Committee members fleshed out the plan, adding action items and a timeline. We contracted Kathy Ruhf, Senior Advisor to Land for Good, to use her decades of experience with farm linking organizations to evaluate the plan and provide feedback. We regard the resulting Strategic Plan as a living document that will evolve as resources allow and experience dictates.

**Mission**

To protect Michigan’s farmland and agricultural heritage by connecting farmers seeking land with farmland owners looking to sell, lease or create another type of tenure arrangement.

**Vision**

MIFarmLink plays a vital role in preserving Michigan farming as a lifestyle, industry, and land stewardship practice by helping to bridge the divide between farmland owners and farmland seekers.

**MIFarmLink Advisory Committee Members**

Julius Buzzard, Growing Hope Urban Farm

Jill K. Dohner, MIFarmLink Specialist, Washtenaw County Conservation District

Rebecca Huttenga, Ottawa County

Koffi Kpachavi, Grand Traverse Conservation District

Trilby MacDonald, Agricultural Lands Preservation Advisory Committee

Lauren Marquardt, MIFFS

Kathy Sample, Argus Farm Stop

Hannah Weber, Green Things Farm Collective

MIFarmLink Organizational Assessment: Strengths Opportunities Aspirations Results (SOAR)

Where the Strategic Plan represents the blueprint for MIFarmLink’s activities between 2024-2028, the SOAR analysis represents the vision. SOAR is a strengths-based, forward-looking analytical framework used by nonprofits and businesses that focuses on Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations, and Results. MIFarmLink staff and Washtenaw County Conservation District leadership collaborated on the SOAR analysis as part of the Strategic Plan.

**Strengths**: **what the program does well, and the underlying characteristics of the program that support those strengths.**

* Unique
  + Fills a niche no other organization does.
  + Other programs and organizations provide resources and services that compliment our goals, but we have no direct competitors.
* Partnering organizations are aware of the need for succession planning.
  + We can build upon these networks.
  + Some have money set aside for linking and planning.
* Resources and knowledge to share.
  + We know agriculture and can speak directly to farmer experience.
* Farmer to farmer connection
  + Promotes direct relationships, trust building, and knowledge transfer.
* Keeps farmland in the hands of farmers.
  + Realtors are agnostic regarding what happens to farmland, but MFL works to keep it in cultivation.
* No known opposition
  + People support what we’re doing, want us to succeed, and are eager to work with us.
* Offers Michigan-wide assistance.
  + There is no inherent limit to the website–people can post from anywhere in the state.
* Can utilize best practices from other farm links.
  + Don’t have to reinvent the wheel, there are 48 examples to draw from
* Website user potential is great for both farm seekers and farm owners.
  + Neither type of farmer has an advantage when using the tool or requesting services
* Can meet farmers where they are at
  + Flexible model
  + Taylor services to farmer needs and communication preferences.
* Association with Conservation Districts
  + Seventy-five years of credibility in the community.
* Fundable mission in the short term
  + Funders are interested in mitigating climate change, and we qualify for that money.
  + Funders and state agencies want to see agricultural land and economy preserved.
  + Unlikely that we can fund the mission with grants long term. Need to find sustainable funding sources, such as getting payments from farm support organizations and realtors.

**Opportunities: things we can do to maximize our strengths**

* Add tools, continuously improve the website and our core services.
  + Our flexible model allows us to change and grow over time.
* Make use of web tools to add users.
  + SEO words
  + Digital advertising
  + Links to other websites
* Create connections with farmers of color.
  + Collaborate with ally groups to attract minority farmers.
* Account for client differences in lifestyle and behavior
  + We can accommodate tech and communications preferences.
* Townships have local preservation boards.
  + Some of these have funding for succession planning.
* Mini grant development
  + Can raise funds to help farmers with land transfer/acquisition planning.
* Connect with MDARD and MSUE for programming.
  + Various MDARD and MSEU programs may connect farmers to MIFarmLink.
  + MDARD and MSEU programs offer services we can connect farmers to
  + We may have more local resource intel.
* Identify and respond to key trends and market changes (i.e., solar)
  + Townships eager to keep solar out may want to direct farm owners to MIFarmLink.
* MIFarmLink could play the role of convenor and resource hub for ag agencies, conservation groups/boards, farmer groups etc.
* Keep strategic partnerships active.
  + Funders are vested in our success and can help facilitate connections.
  + Invite collaborators and funders to Advisory Committee meetings.
* Ask clients about unmet wants and needs.
  + Allow our services to adjust according to client demand.
* Communications between qualified PDR and land conservancy programs across MI
  + This can help raise our profile as well as increase PDR property listings.
* Keep services tight and well executed, don’t over commit.
  + Streamlining operations will free up staff time to provide services and seek new clients.

**Aspirations: what do we care about, and want to be known for?**

* MIFarmLink comes to a farmer's mind when they say to themselves “It’s time for me to make a plan for the future of my land.”
* MIFarmLink will be used by real estate agents across the state.
* All land protected with an ag easement that needs an operator/buyer will be listed on MIFarmLink.
* MIFarmLink will have a statewide office that coordinates and supports the regional hubs.
* Regional hubs will be created, nurtured, and administered similar to the current Southeast Michigan hub to coordinate with the statewide program.
* MIFarmLink could become the flagship program of a robust Statewide Agricultural Land Trust that will aim to be created over the next 5 years.
* MIFarmLink could become a program of a larger institution that provides core funding.
* MIFarmLink should be the resource farmers use when they need land or want to expand their farms.
* Businesses that depend on farmers as their customer base could help to support MIFarmLink in various ways.
* Farmers come to us for a warm hand-off to reliable resources and services.

**Results: the data we will track and measurable outcomes we will achieve based on our strengths, opportunities, and aspirations.**

* # farm properties listed
* # farmers linked in various categories
  + Mentorship
  + Leasing
  + Land transfer
* # farmers (farm seekers and farm owners) registered on site
* Utilize existing farmland mapping tools to create farmland databases.
* # acres preserved
* # unique views on website
* Dynamic website login capability
* Upgraded software for tracking metrics.
* SEO word search results
* Track demographics of land seekers and owners
* Land preservation dollars applied.
* Conservation practices implemented as a result of link, recorded on a voluntary basis by farmers.
* Number of farmers or others assisted through technical assistance/additional resources (tracked on a spreadsheet)
* Outreach numbers (e-newsletters, social media posts, presentations)
* Conferences presented at geared towards farmers
* # social media outreach via Facebook and Instagram

MIFarmLink Strategic Plan 2024-2029

1. ***Goal: Optimizing MIFarmLink’s online platform***

* Year 1 Objective: Define functions for website capabilities.
  + Action Items:

1. Continuously engage with stakeholders for feedback
2. Update the website regularly, adding and adjusting functions as needed.
3. Research other farm link websites
   1. Note differences between property linking services and farmland access programs.
4. Confer with Tamarack website developer for best user experience.

* Years 1-3 Objective: Optimize frontend user experience.
  + Action Items:

1. Support new users as they navigate the site.
2. Establish dynamic login capabilities.
3. Address questions and problems with periodic check-ins with Tamarack
4. Refresh photos, keep listings and data up to date.

* Years 1-2 Objective: Optimize backend user experience.
  + Action Items:
    1. Ensure steps are intuitive with minimal coding so MIFarmLink Administrator can easily maintain the site.
    2. Address questions and issues with periodic check-ins with Tamarack

1. ***Goal: Creating a long-term financial plan***

* Years 3-5 Objective: Cultivate core funders to promotes long-term financial stability.
  + Action Items for consideration:

1. Earn revenue by selling ad space on our site to realtor group.
2. Charge realtors per listing.
3. Approach agencies, programs, and departments that regularly refer farmers to MIFarmLink, or benefit from its impact, for core funding.

* Years 1-2 Objective: Conduct grant prospect research to identify 25-30 potential funders.
  + Action Items:

1. Use paid online funder databases, personal contacts, and 990’s of nonprofits with missions that are aligned with MIFarmLink’s to identify and vet potential funders.
2. Create a database with deadlines, contact, areas of interest, previously funded organizations, funding range, and funder likelihood assessments.
3. Confer with Advisory Committee for feedback on potential funders.
4. Meet face to face, or by phone, with potential funders to gauge interest before submitting LOIs/proposals.

* Year 3 Objective: Consider a user fee structure.
  + Action Items:

1. Learn if other farm links use a fee structure; ask about pros and cons.
2. Research sliding scale models that could help keep barriers low.
3. ***Goal: Providing resources and connections for farmers***

* Years 1-5 Objective: Offer beginning farmers land tenure and training connections through leasing, sales, mentorship, and networking opportunities.
  + Action Items:

1. Engage with stakeholders to learn which farm matchmaking, support, and information referral services they want
   1. Send out electronic and paper surveys to farmers who opt in
2. Evaluate which services are realistic with existing staff resources. Narrow the focus and only refer people to services we approve.
3. Build relationships with MSU staff to increase posts and referrals to MIFarmLink.
   1. Meet with staff from MSUE, CANR, MSU Connect

* Years 1-5 Objective: Promote diversity among the farming community through targeted communication and networking.
  + Action Items:

1. Understand unique issues faced by each farming group.
2. Learn how best to reach and serve each farming group.
3. Maintain communication with Washtenaw County Black Farmer Fund, Detroit Black Farmer Land Fund, Washtenaw Food Policy Council Racial Equity chair/team, and other regional groups to proactively reach minority farmers.
   1. Send newsletters; invite to meetings/events.
4. Rural vs urban farmers
5. New vs legacy farmers
6. Organic vs conventional farmers

* Years 1-5 Objective: Upon request, provide a list of resources and services curated to each farmers’ needs selected from the Master List.
  + Action Items:

1. Define a narrow scope of resources and services we will provide referrals to and ensure that we have personal contact information.
2. Develop a Master List of key institutions and contacts.
   1. Connect farmers to mentorship possibilities through MSUE.
   2. Provide referrals for farm owners who would like a succession plan.
   3. Connect farmers with [MSUE Succession and Estate Planning](https://www.canr.msu.edu/farm_management/succession-estate-planning), and Farm Navigator Becky Huttenga.
   4. Direct farmers to resources on different types of land purchasing and leasing agreements

* Years 2-5 Objective: Help next generation farmers plan for business success.
  + Action Items:

1. Work with ag conservation groups to identify farmland with easements to reduce land costs.
2. Engage lenders in communications, events, and meetings, esp. low interest lenders.

* Year 5 Objective: Mini grant development
  + Action Item:

1. Raise funds to help farmers with land transfer/acquisition planning.

* Year 5 Objective: If staff has the capacity, consider inviting posts for mentorship/apprenticeship opportunities.
  + Possibly cross post with MSU Connect

1. ***Goal: Building brand recognition***
2. Years 1-5 Objective: Cultivate relationships with program managers and technicians in organizations/agencies/departments where we refer farmers for services.
   1. Action Items:
      1. Add them to outreach list
      2. Invite them to our events/meetings
      3. Attend their events
      4. Highlight their work on social media
      5. Link to their sites
   2. Develop marketing and communications plan
   3. Advertise to desired stakeholder groups
   4. Farm journals i.e., Michigan Farm News, Michigan Agriculture,
   5. Ag suppliers
   6. Farmers markets in Washtenaw County and across Southeast MI
   7. Pitch industry leaders for newsletter announcements/features/ads
   8. A2view
3. Reach out to non-farming ag landowners to inform them about the opportunity to lease or sell their land.
   1. Advertise in popular publications.
   2. Leverage relationships with business like Argus to promote MIFarmLink in their communications.
   3. Put up flyers.
   4. Ensure our signs, ads, and materials for general distribution are inclusive of the non-farming community. Messaging like: Need a farmer for your land? MIFarmLink can help!
4. Develop communications materials and distribution strategy: presentations, brochures, flyers, web content, social media posts.
5. For stakeholders less comfortable with technology, offer a telephone hotline and/or a paper application.
6. Conduct press outreach: write press releases when big milestones are reached, pitch journalists by phone.
7. Keep county and state representatives in the loop.
8. Attend and present at relevant conventions, panel discussions.
   1. Great Lakes Crop Summit
   2. MACD
   3. MSU MI Ag Ideas
   4. Michigan Agriculture Advancement "Underground Innovations “conference
   5. National Young Farmers Coalition
   6. Take Root Farm Succession and Estate Planning Conference
9. Attend and present at relevant community meetings.
   1. Conservation District events
   2. Land Preservation Township board meetings
   3. ALPAC
   4. Land Conservancy
   5. Farm Bureau
10. Assess impact of marketing and communications plan (WCCD Outreach Coordinator)
11. Adjust and improve plan to increase stakeholder engagement.
12. Engage agriculture-related businesses that gain from keeping land in cultivation in promotion of MIFarmLink i.e., Tractor Supply, Carleton Farm Supply, Rosseel’s Farm and Garden Supply, Boullion Sales and Service
13. Years 4-5 Objective: Build a reputation as farmland matchmaker across Michigan.
    1. Action Items:
14. Develop strategy for targeted partnership building region by region.
15. ***Goal: Identifying and creating key partnerships***

* Years 1-5 Objective: Develop and maintain strategic partnerships with all relevant organizations.
  + Action Items:

1. Engage with MSUE, MIFFS, Greenstone, realtors, commodity groups, MDARD, food, agriculture, and environmental groups, farm suppliers, land trusts, ag land conservation groups.
   1. Ensure that conservation groups are committed to referring all property owners with conservation easements to MIFarmLink for posting their land if it comes on the market.
   2. Year 3-5: create a database where we add names of groups we are, or would like to be, connected with. Include contact people, goals and flagship programs of the organization, ways we work or could work together, opportunities for further collaboration, their funders, their publications, etc.
2. Year 4-5 Objective: MIFarmLink acts as convenor.
   1. Action Item:
      1. Bring ag agencies, conservation groups/boards, ag and food security groups together to discuss and collaborate on issues, potentially including:
      2. Creation of a Michigan Farmland Trust
      3. Identifying gaps in resources and services for farmers
3. ***Goal: Working to identify a statewide administrative home***

* Years 4-5: Objective: Define long-term organizational structure.
  + Action Items:

1. Debate pros and cons of creating a statewide organization as a program of an established organization vs starting our own nonprofit.
   1. The Michigan Farmland Trust could be the nonprofit we would create, with MIFarmLink as the flagship program.
2. Investigate the need for 5 regional hubs: Upper Peninsula, West Michigan, Northern Lower, Southeast Michigan, and Mid-Michigan. Is there partner interest, funding, and farmer demand for these hubs in addition to a statewide office?
3. Identify regional partners willing to house and financially support the hubs.
4. Decide if the statewide organization will house the majority of the staff, with a handful of employees conducting regional outreach from local offices (i.e., Washtenaw CD for Southeast Michigan, Grand Traverse Bay CD for the Northern Lower Peninsula,) or if each Hub will be fully staffed with minimal reliance on the statewide organization for support.
5. Core funding will be a key consideration as grants can’t support the hubs or statewide office long term.
6. ***Goal: Defining benchmarks for success, including target #s***

Year 2: Objective: Track ‘Links” and/or connections made directly through MIFarmLink.

* Action Items:

1. Amplify the concept of a successful match. A link/match can be putting farmers in touch with each other. A land transfer is a different metric and much rarer.
2. Consider how to capture all the links/connections once communication is established between farmers.
   1. Can we claim a connection in our metrics if a post created a connection that didn’t use our services?

* Years 1-5: Objective: Track data related to stakeholder and conservation targets and goals using updated website software.
  + Action Items:

1. # farm properties and farm seekers registered
2. # Landowner and seeker demographics
3. # Land preservation dollars applied
4. # of acres preserved
5. # Conservation practices applied as a result of link (voluntarily submitted)
6. # farmers linked in various categories
   1. Mentorship
   2. Leasing
   3. Land transfer
   4. Networking

Years 1-5: Objective: Track data related to targets and goals for Other Assistance

* Action Items:
  + # Number of farmers who received technical assistance/additional resources through email. Track manually on a spreadsheet
  + # Number of farmers who received assistance/additional resources by phone.

Years 1-5: Objective: Track data related to general outreach targets.

Action Items:

1. Use Google Analytics, social media, website tracking tools, Excel sheets, Mail Chimp to collect:
   1. Outreach numbers from e-newsletters, social media posts, presentations (tracked manually on a spreadsheet).
   2. # total website visits
   3. # of Facebook and Instagram followers
   4. # of subscribers to newsletter
   5. # of farm owners/seekers receiving postcard mailings
   6. # of outreach events attended
   7. # of people attending presentations
   8. # of outreach materials distributed
2. ***Goal: Establishing operational systems***

* Year 2 Objective: Apply legal real estate expertise to model.
  + Action Items:

1. Consult with Charlie Koenn and other agricultural realtors.
2. Put a disclaimer on the website at the profile stage and in the introductory document to protect ourselves from liability.
3. Talk to a lawyer.

* Year 1-2 Objective: Determine criteria for listing descriptions and types of listings will we allow.
  + Action Items:

1. Define which information is required vs optional for farm owner and farm seeker listings.

* Year 1 Objective: Ensure communications on and offline are friendly, professional, and respect boundaries.
  + Action Item:

1. Include rules for engagement and liability disclaimer in stakeholder welcome email.

* Year 1 Objective: Make sure that farmers seeking land address interests and concerns of legacy farmers in their profiles.
  + Action Item:

1. Create guidelines for farm seeker posts to ensure they are professional, objective, and address farm owner needs/concerns.

* Years 1-5 Objective: Help landholding and farmland seeking farmers to agree on terms.
  + Actions Items:

1. Upon request, facilitate supportive communications, and quickly refer farmers to expert resources when they are ready to negotiate.
2. Establish guidelines as needed to protect staff time.

* Year 3 Objective: Develop Advisory Committee succession plan.
  + Action Items:

1. Determine which skill sets are needed on the Advisory Committee.
2. Create list of potential candidates based on skill sets, interests, and availability.
3. Ask departing AC members to refer replacements.

* Years 1-5 Objective: Use strategies that other land linking organizations have found successful.
  + Action Items:

1. Consult with Kathy Ruhf, Senior Advisor from Land for Good to get her feedback on strategic plan and website.
2. Review other farm linking services for ideas.
3. Engage with other farm link staff for feedback and discussion.
   1. Attend conferences where other farm links will present.

**MIFarmLink Funders**

A heartfelt thank you to the funders who share our commitment to keeping Michigan’s farmland in cultivation and provided the funding to make this work possible:

Carls Foundation

Towsley Foundation

Americana Foundation

Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (MDARD)

USDA Beginning Farmer and Rancher Program

Ottawa County Conservation District

Washtenaw County Conservation District

**Conclusion**

MIFarmLink staff, consultants, and Advisory Committee members designed this strategic plan to guide the work of the program in its first five years so that it would have the greatest chance of success. The goals, objectives, and action items are meant to be realistic and attainable, in accordance with current staff and budget capacity. The plan will be reviewed annually by the Advisory Committee to ensure that it is aligned with changing circumstances, and that the program continues to advance towards its goals. Goal prioritization, timelines, and action items will be refined as staff, funding, and partner support allow. Our intention is to strengthen the program over this five-year period, positioning ourselves to launch a statewide program in 2029.