



# **Strategic Plan**

## **2024–2028**

Created by the board and staff of UpstreamPgh.  
Facilitated by Concentric Strategy.

Adopted by the board on March 4, 2024.

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# Executive Summary

## Background

Over the past several years, UpstreamPgh has been in the midst of transformation, with new leadership, a fresh name and brand identity, and expanded advocacy and engagement efforts. Growing from our origins in watershed restoration as the Nine Mile Run Watershed Association and in green infrastructure projects via StormWorks, UpstreamPgh has become the Pittsburgh region's leading resource for water management.

The complex water-related problems facing our region require complex solutions. We must *think, act, and be* "upstream," addressing problems at the source, with intentionality and care for the downstream implications. We feel the urgency of this moment: the increasing impacts of climate change are compounded by long-running socio-economic disparities.

UpstreamPgh works at the intersection of *people* and *place*, connecting residents with the natural environment, co-developing solutions alongside communities, and advocating for systemic change. Through this strategic plan, UpstreamPgh seeks to advance a truly people-first approach to watershed restoration and water management, rooted in innovative stewardship, environmental justice, systemic response, creative engagement, and capacity-building.

Going forward, we must continue to evolve as an organization, combining our 20+ years of expertise as Nine Mile Run Watershed Association with the wisdom and experiences of environmental justice communities to collectively nurture a healthier urban environment for all people, for generations to come. We acknowledge the need for a shift in mindset and approach to how we function as an organization. The following are core values that UpstreamPgh will uphold throughout all of our programming:

- Strive for all things UpstreamPgh to be regenerative.
- Act with urgency to address the environmental and climate injustice in our region.
- Think from a greatest potential perspective, recognizing possibilities rather than just solving problems.
- Institutionalize systems thinking across all of our programs.

## Process & Approach

UpstreamPgh engaged consultant Melinda Steffy (she/her), founder and principal of [Concentric Strategy](#), to guide our strategic planning process. We began in the summer of 2023 by listening to and learning from stakeholders through focus groups, interviews, and a survey, to understand the current opportunities and challenges in our broader communities. At a full-day board and staff retreat in September 2023, we discussed the current landscape of UpstreamPgh and began to establish a vision for the future. Through the fall of 2023, a committee of board and staff members then participated in generative workshops to develop the plan. The final plan was approved by the board on March 4, 2024.

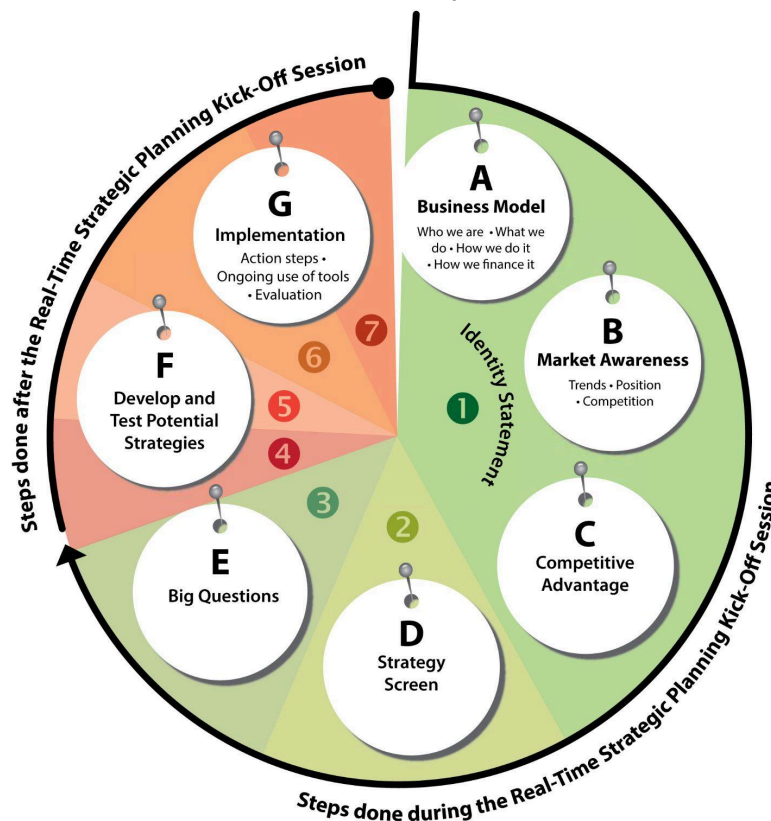
Concentric Strategy’s approach to strategic planning draws on two sources:

[The Nonprofit Strategy Revolution](#) by David La Piana  
*Real-time strategic planning in a rapid-response world.*

[Emergent Strategy](#) by adrienne maree brown  
*Looking to human relationships and patterns within the natural world to transform society.*

Both of these authors look at strategy through the lens of CHANGE. To keep up with a changing world, organizations must operate with a mindset that is inherently responsive and adaptable, while holding true to their core values. As brown says, “We are working to transform a world that is, by its very nature, in a constant state of change.” In La Piana’s approach, strategy development is a constant cycle, “an ever-evolving, ongoing attempt to determine the right approach – the best pattern of behavior – to achieve the organization’s ends.”

*David La Piana’s Real-Time Strategic Planning cycle, on which our process was based:*



adrienne maree brown’s “Principles of Emergent Strategy,” which anchored our conversations:

Small is good, small is all. (The large is a reflection of the small.)

Change is constant. (Be like water.)

There is always enough time for the right work.

There is a conversation in the room that only these people at this moment can have. Find it.

Never a failure, always a lesson.

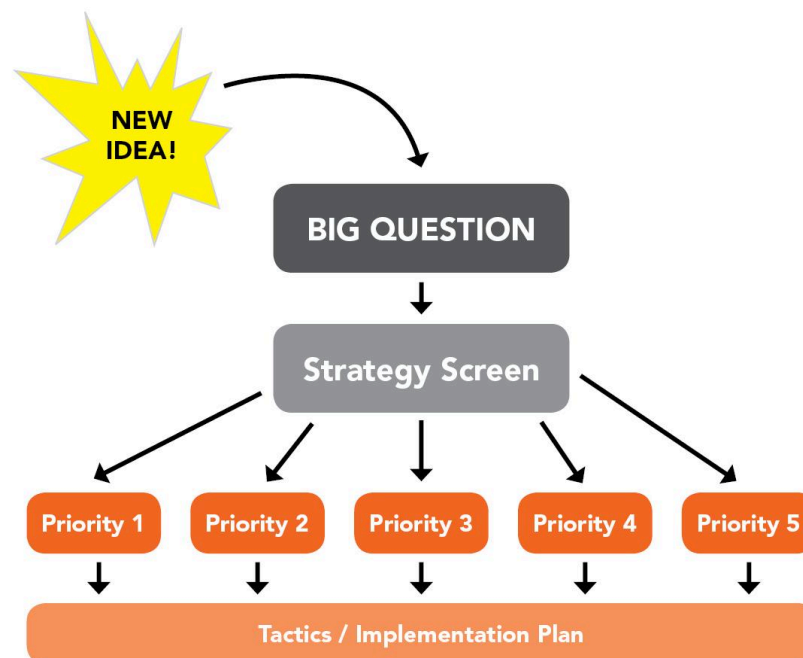
Trust the People. (If you trust the people, they become trustworthy.)

Move at the speed of trust. Focus on critical connections more than critical mass – build the resilience by building the relationships.

Less prep, more presence.

What you pay attention to grows.

The strategic plan is intentionally structured to provide a shared sense of vision and direction, while also giving flexibility to adapt over time. The Big Question is the fixed point, the “North Star” that UpstreamPgh should follow and continually seek to answer, with the Strategy Screen and Strategic Priorities providing signposts to guide the journey. There are many possible paths forward, and the goals, tactics, and implementation plan outlined here offer a starting point that may shift as circumstances change or new opportunities arise. With the Big Question in mind, anyone in the organization, no matter their role, may make strategically aligned decisions and remain responsive in real-time.



## The Big Question

*The Big Question serves as a “North Star” to provide strategic direction for ongoing decision-making. It’s not a destination itself, but by continually seeking to answer the following question, the organization will see progress.*

**"What we practice at the small scale  
sets the patterns for the whole system."  
—adrienne maree brown, *Emergent Strategy***

How can UpstreamPgh’s [people-first](#) approach to [watershed restoration](#) uplift [climate justice](#) and connect people with the natural environment?

[See [Appendix A – Definitions](#) for additional information about the above terms.]

## Strategic Priorities

### 1. Innovative Stewardship

Our original Nine Mile Run project remains a national model for [watershed restoration](#) and a living laboratory for ongoing stormwater management and urban stream restoration. UpstreamPgh will continue to steward our home base in the Nine Mile Run watershed through innovative solutions that are data-driven, ecologically and [culturally restorative](#), and responsive to emergent situations. At the same time, we will expand our reach and share our expertise across the region: both by directly leading projects in other watersheds and by guiding others to implement their own people-first restoration projects.

#### GOALS:

- A. We will oversee the ongoing management of Nine Mile Run, including finalizing the Fern Hollow Vision Plan, developing a Nine Mile Run Environmental Justice Watershed Plan, and partnering with Allegheny Land Trust and Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy to create long-term management plans for green stormwater infrastructure projects and restoration efforts in Frick Park.
- B. We will outline clear parameters for expanding our programs to other watersheds, with a focus on environmental justice communities in Pittsburgh priority watersheds, as well as watersheds that currently lack resources/attention.
- C. We will grow our Plan/Build green stormwater infrastructure program by developing clear protocols for community engagement, site selection, and the designing, building, monitoring, and maintenance of projects.

- D. We will build up a base of volunteers, interns, Urban EcoStewards (see 4D), and other partners to support monitoring, data collection, and stewardship efforts.
- E. We will increase our capacity and preparedness to respond quickly and effectively when emergencies or other time-sensitive issues arise within the Nine Mile Run watershed that require advocacy and community engagement.
- F. We will package our knowledge, methodology, and data (such as the GSI Monitoring Dashboard) to share information with others working on watershed restoration and urban ecology.

## 2. DEI & Environmental Justice

UpstreamPgh recognizes that [Black, Indigenous, and People of Color \(BIPOC\)](#), [Aborigine American](#), low-income, and other underinvested communities have been systematically excluded from broader watershed and stormwater management efforts, yet remain the most severely impacted by climate change, pollution, deteriorating infrastructure, and more. We commit to reexamining how UpstreamPgh can better embody diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice (DEIJ) and build trust within [environmental justice communities](#). We will learn from and center the wisdom and expertise of environmental justice communities to co-develop resilient solutions amid climate change.

### GOALS:

- A. We will engage our board and staff in a comprehensive DEIJ process that will result in specific, actionable steps to increase the representation of and leadership by environmental justice communities across UpstreamPgh's people, programs, policies, and more.
- B. We will collaborate with the [Environmental Justice Table](#) (EJT) to further define their role and strategic vision within UpstreamPgh, and to integrate the EJT across all of UpstreamPgh's program areas.
- C. We will uphold our [Climate Equity Principles](#) and work to build trust within environmental justice communities by attending community meetings, regularly checking in with community members, providing clear and transparent communication, and maintaining a mindset of humility about our privilege and accountability for our actions. We will collaborate with like-minded organizations to co-create regenerative frameworks that break down oppressive systems.

### 3. Systemic Response

We will embody an “upstream” mindset, recognizing that our ability to enact solutions within a local watershed requires awareness of and engagement with the larger systems that affect water quality. We will leverage partnerships and build coalitions to address regional issues and use our collective voice to advocate for systemic changes at local, county, and state levels.

#### GOALS:

- A. We will co-develop the Three Rivers Urban Watersheds Council, pulling together other watershed organizations and existing coalitions to share information, resources, and action steps on a large scale.
- B. We will develop an advocacy agenda that defines UpstreamPgh’s position on issues around environmental and climate justice, water quality, urban watershed management, and green infrastructure.
- C. We will build partnerships with state and federal entities, such as the Ohio River Basin Alliance, to drive funding for Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania.
- D. We will continue to work with Pittsburgh United and other partners on the Our Water Campaign, to ensure clean, safe, affordable, and publicly-controlled drinking water in the City of Pittsburgh.

### 4. Creative Engagement & Storytelling

In UpstreamPgh’s people-first model of watershed restoration and stormwater management, relationship-building is key. Our work succeeds when communities and individuals understand their connection to, reliance on, and effect on land and water resources. UpstreamPgh will engage the communities in and around our watershed projects through arts, beautification, recreational, and educational activities that help build trust, advance justice, increase ecological and climate literacy, and connect people with the natural environment and each other. We will prioritize ethical storytelling that humanizes the work of UpstreamPgh and celebrates the successes of our communities — helping the general public care about the “*why*” behind *what* we do.

#### GOALS:

- A. We will create a storytelling-focused marketing plan based on amplifying the stories of residents, sharing coalition communications, and expanding UpstreamPgh’s brand regionally. We will communicate more frequently across our various platforms, and boldly invite support from donors and volunteers.
- B. We will partner with Shiftworks Community + Public Arts and other creative partners to engage local, regional, and national artists to create projects and events — such as temporary public art installations, water walks and talks, workshops, etc. — with a priority on collaborating with artists who represent environmental justice communities.
- C. We will embed design/artistry into our Plan/Build initiatives through landscape design, interpretive signage, public artworks, etc., so that our green infrastructure projects reflect



- local ecology and the values and cultures of the communities in which we work.
- D. We will rebuild the Urban EcoStewards program to increase the role of community members in stewarding their watershed through hands-on learning opportunities centered around the Nine Mile Run restoration and green stormwater infrastructure sites.
  - E. In collaboration with the EJT and local partners, we will host workshops, clean-up days, recreational activities, and community events directed toward the goals of the EJT and our to-be-developed advocacy agenda.

## 5. Capacity-Building

UpstreamPgh is poised for growth and expansion beyond the Nine Mile Run watershed, to become a regional leader in water advocacy and people-first solutions. To support this growth, embed DEIJ across all aspects of our organization, and ensure the organization's long-term sustainability, we will thoughtfully revisit our mission, business model, staffing, board, and the systems and infrastructure that enable UpstreamPgh to carry out our programming.

### GOALS:

- A. We will refresh our mission and vision statements to better align with the values and direction articulated in this strategic plan.
- B. We will revamp our business model and development plan based on the [Community-Centric Fundraising principles](#), aiming to increase contributed revenue from a variety of sources (individual giving, corporate sponsorship, multi-year general operating grants, marquee fundraising event, etc.); enable shared funding applications with partners; and create a balanced funding landscape across the fiscal year.
- C. We will create a staffing expansion plan to prioritize the new positions needed to carry out this strategic plan, including a Watersheds Director position, as well as staff for data management, canvassing/organizing, policy leadership, operations, and fundraising.
- D. Based on the learnings from our DEIJ process (see 2A), we will conduct an in-depth review of employee policies, salary ranges, duties, onboarding, training materials, succession plans, etc, and implement best practices designed to recruit and retain a diverse staff team, increase employee satisfaction, prioritize self-care, prevent burnout, and ensure continuity through staffing/leadership transitions.
- E. We will activate our board to serve as ambassadors for UpstreamPgh within their networks and communities. We will develop a pipeline for volunteers and community members to join our board of directors, with a thoughtful onboarding process for all board members.
- F. Through a DEIJ lens, we will institutionalize project management best practices across all program areas, and identify technology and systems needed to support greater efficiency and long-term stability.



## BIG QUESTION

How can UpstreamPgh's people-first approach to watershed restoration uplift climate justice and connect people with the natural environment?



**upstreampgh**  
strategic plan  
2024-2028



...and does it match with our

## STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

### Innovative Stewardship

Nine Mile Run  
Watershed Expansion  
Plan/Build  
Urban EcoStewards

### DEI & Env. Justice

DEIJ Plan  
EJT  
Climate Equity Principles

### Systemic Response

Urban Watersheds Council  
Advocacy Agenda  
ORBA  
Our Water Campaign

### Engagement & Storytelling

Marketing Plan  
Public Art  
Volunteerism

### Capacity Building

Mission Refresh  
Staff/ HR Structuring  
Board Activation  
Project Management

# Appendix A

## Definitions

*We offer the following definitions to ensure we are moving forward together with shared understanding and common language.*

**Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), Aborigine American:** This is the current language used by the [Environmental Justice Table](#) to describe the communities of color in the Pittsburgh region. We recognize that the language of racial justice regularly shifts, sometimes very rapidly, and we will continue to evaluate what terms are most meaningful within our organizational/institutional context and for residents in our communities.

**Culturally restorative:** We will engage in practices and processes that build community and repair relationships where harm has occurred.

**Environmental justice & climate justice** (definitions from the [Washington State Department of Health](#)):

“Environmental justice focuses on communities of color and low-income communities who are both most likely to live closest to, and are disproportionately impacted by, pollution and other environmental burdens.”

“Climate justice focuses on those who are experiencing climate change first and worst, which encompasses a much broader group of people, ... [which includes] environmental justice communities, as well as unemployed and unhoused people, people in high-risk occupations, people with specific health needs, people with limited English proficiency, some immigrant and refugee groups, and any other group that has been systematically underinvested in, overlooked, or discriminated against.”

In this strategic plan, UpstreamPgh seeks to uplift climate justice broadly, with a specific emphasis on engaging the environmental justice communities in and around the watersheds we serve.

**People-first:** We prioritize the experiences and well-being of people – individuals and communities – emphasizing care, trust-building, and inclusion. We believe people are part of, not separate from, our natural ecosystems.

**Watershed restoration:** UpstreamPgh’s work is rooted in the care of urban watersheds and their impacts on the surrounding communities, with an emphasis on stormwater management and reducing pollutants. We seek to restore watersheds in ways that are regenerative towards both ecological and human systems. Our current focus areas include our original restoration work in the Nine Mile Run Watershed, as well as other critical watersheds in environmental justice areas throughout the Pittsburgh region. We will continue to assess the viability of projects in other watersheds in collaboration with the Environmental Justice Table and other partners.

# Appendix B

## Climate Equity Principles

*Adopted by the Board of Directors in June 2020*

UpstreamPgh acknowledges the systems of advantage that cause underserved communities to be disproportionately affected by pollution and climate change, resulting in public health problems, disconnection from nature, and degraded natural environments. This is environmental injustice; as climate change escalates, this injustice will be compounded. We recognize that as environmental stewards working in diverse urban neighborhoods, we must uphold certain social justice principles and practices when collaborating with communities to address these inequities.

We strive to accomplish this through five core climate equity principles:

### **Combating Institutional and Structural Racism**

*We believe all people deserve equal access to resources and opportunities.* Environmental injustice cannot be addressed without combatting the systems of oppression that are perpetuated at each level of society. This means assessing our own privileges, recognizing our city's history of discrimination, segregation, and inequality, calling out racist and unjust practices when we see them, and listening to and advocating for the needs of residents in the communities that we serve.

### **Promoting Accessibility and Inclusion**

*We honor the uniqueness in all people.* As such, our aim is to create an inclusive and accessible space within our community. We will ensure that our projects and programming are welcoming and engaging to all regardless of race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, age, marital status, political belief, religion, immigration status, or mental/physical ability.

### **Illustrating Environmental Inequality**

*We understand the problems caused by industrial legacy and spatial inequality.* Cities are designed so that pollution, illegal waste disposal, brownfields, poor air quality, and flooding have historically and disproportionately affected Black and low-income communities due to decades of institutional and structural racism. Climate change is highlighting and exacerbating these inequities. We are committed to using our privilege and resources to shine a light on environmental inequality through thoughtful and intentional community engagement.

### **Organizing Grassroots**

*We will continue our advocacy for climate equity.* Unequal power structures within government and community organizations can perpetuate environmental injustices. Our work will apply best practices of our partners and predecessors to further grassroots organizing efforts. This includes social actions, advocacy for equitable policies, building community partnerships, and creating accountability for ourselves, other organizations, and our local, state and federal governments.

## **Modeling Ethical Practices**

*We strive to ethically serve community needs.* Our staff includes environmentalists, activists, educators, landscape architects, horticulturalists, urban planners, and social workers. Our diverse backgrounds allow us to maintain honesty, integrity, competence, and justice in carrying out our projects. We are open to continued education, both professionally and in the community, that will enhance our ability to uphold and model best practices for environmental justice work.