

Renewing our roots, Re-imagining our future

The case for Blandford Nature Center



BLANDFORD | nature
center

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This is an exciting time at Blandford Nature Center. More than 40 years after our start, Blandford is being renewed and re-imagined to continue changing lives through fun and engaging experiences in the natural world.

As the only environment of its kind in Grand Rapids, Blandford plays a unique role in our community. Over 140 acres of meadows, woodlands, wetlands, wildlife, and farmland serve as an urban retreat ideal for exploration, play, learning, and more.

With diverse and vibrant ecosystems as the backdrop, Blandford:



- > **Educates** our community about our environment, our heritage, and our connection to natural systems. Over 12,000 local students participate in our environmental education curriculum annually, and over 1,000 people have participated in our Saturday programs since they reopened in early 2010.
- > **Engages** people to actively use natural spaces and adopt sustainable practices. Over 3,000 individuals and families participate in our annual community events, such as Sugarbush and Fall Harvest Festival.
- > **Empowers** people to embrace nature and new perspectives. Over 38,000 visitors experienced Blandford in 2009, and over 3,700 hours of service were volunteered.

After decades of sharing these experiences with novice and veteran nature lovers alike, Blandford has become one of our community's treasures, albeit a quiet one. Many transitions along the way helped preserve Blandford as a place but left much work to be done on Blandford as an organization. For most of its history, Blandford was tax-funded. It was not until 2007 that Blandford became an independent nonprofit organization.

This shift means Blandford now has more freedom to innovate and adapt to our changing community. It also means that Blandford must rally our community's support and build the resources needed to sustain itself. We believe this call for support begins with sharing a vision that celebrates Blandford's history, sets forth a realistic plan for the future, and most importantly, excites and engages people.

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Do you remember the first time you held a frog? Or how you felt after an evening among fireflies? Have you ever experienced the satisfaction of eating something you grew? When was the last time you had dirt in your fingernails?

The future of Blandford lives in moments like these. We believe understanding our connection to the natural world begins with experiencing it. We want Blandford to become our community's favorite place for returning to real nature... a place where people of all ages can enjoy and experience nature as it happens, through the changing seasons, and with all the surprise of untamed sights and sounds. A place where the only sign that warns "do not touch" is near the poison ivy and the special wildflowers.

Becoming one of our community's favorite places will not happen overnight, and it requires the vision, resources, and stability of a strong organization. Indeed, this has been one of the greatest challenges facing Blandford: creating sustainable operations to match the beauty and potential reflected in its 143 acres.

Never afraid to get our hands dirty, Blandford has used a recent time of transition to face this challenge directly. We have:

Clarified our purpose, which included learning from other nature centers, taking stock of our programs and facilities, getting feedback from funders and the general community, and being more intentional about how new opportunities serve our mission.

Hired a new executive director, Annoesjka Steinman, who brings a unique background in environmental work and nonprofit management to a role that had been waiting for the ideal candidate for more than a year.

Strengthened our board leadership, which included recruiting new board members from both the corporate and nonprofit sectors and securing full board support for Blandford's future.

Streamlined our staff, which included reducing inefficiencies that remained from previous organizational transitions and refining all staff roles to deliver existing programs and meet facility needs effectively while setting the stage for future growth.

With these changes, Blandford is more energized than ever to share a new vision and more prepared than ever to deliver on its promises. Our vision focuses on renewing Blandford as it has been known and re-imagining its future through new opportunities to serve the community. **Blandford will be renewed and re-imagined in three areas explained further on the following pages.**



Experience

Blandford will continue to be an urban sanctuary. Even without participating in a program, individuals and families can enjoy rich experiences with their environment at Blandford. We want to encourage free exploration of our trails, meadows, streams, and heritage buildings. We also want to make it easy for new audiences to get to know Blandford.

Therefore, Blandford will invest in:



- > **Facility and land improvements**, including renovation of our 40-year-old buildings, construction of a commercial kitchen and new classroom space to host programs, and assessment of land management issues, such as the condition of Blandford's wetlands and streams.
- > **Active play spaces**, which will engage children and provide more safe, easily accessible areas for families to spend time at Blandford.
- > **Resources and tools for self-guided experiences**, including backpacks with trail maps and exploration kits, ski and snowshoe rental, and other items that encourage independent activities and expand people's experience of Blandford throughout the seasons.

Education

At a time when kids are spending more hours than ever indoors and everyone seems attached to a screen, Blandford provides a critical outdoor learning lab.

Our passionate, knowledgeable staff helps people get their hands dirty and discover their relationship to the natural world. We want to share this one-of-a-kind education with more people and offer more programs to make every visit to Blandford a new one. **We will do this by investing in:**



- > **School programs**, including enhancements to existing programs that can make use of our improved facilities and the creation of programs focused on urban agriculture.
- > **Community workshops and events**, including Saturday programs and weekend and evening events such as our new Field of Greens Festival, all of which could be geared toward Blandford's diverse audiences, including nature lovers young and old, new and experienced.
- > **Wildlife Education and Rehabilitation Center improvements**, including new signage, cage and classroom renovations, and acquiring new animals, such as a barn owl, to enhance educational programs and replace those that have died due to old age.

Agriculture

The movement to eat and buy local has been underway for some time in Grand Rapids, and it has intersected with people's growing awareness of living in ways that are sustainable and environmentally friendly.

With our available land and experience, as well as our mission to connect people to nature through hands-on engagement, Blandford is ready to play a larger role in Grand Rapids' urban agriculture movement.

Therefore, in addition to renewing existing programs and facilities, we will re-imagine our future through the addition of urban farming spaces and programs. Five acres are readily available for community gardening and farming, and another 40 are under consideration for various agricultural uses. **Activities related to this could include:**

- > **Creation of a Community Supported Agriculture program**, allowing community members to buy "shares" in our farm and then receive packages of produce throughout the growing season.
- > **Partnership with local nonprofits that fight hunger**, allowing them to use our land to grow produce and supplement their food supply.
- > **Expansion of community gardening**, enabling more individuals and families to experience the rewards of starting and maintaining their own garden.
- > **Training and expert guidance** for individuals, families, partner organizations, and the community at large. This will include hiring a full-time farmer and farming assistants.
- > **Purchase of equipment and appropriate infrastructure**, such as fencing, irrigation, and a tractor. These will provide needed capacity to support a fully functioning farm and urban agriculture program.



Will you join us?

For as amazing and active as Blandford's diverse ecosystems are, it is people and their stories that help complete them. As we emerge from a time of change to share our vision, we invite you to support our work and learn what your story will be.

We are looking for people who like the sun on their face and dirt on their hands. People who want to help ensure kids are looking at a big blue sky and not just big screen televisions. We're calling on people who believe that even with all the bells and whistles available today, there is still something eerie and amazing about the hoot of an owl in an otherwise silent forest.

Will you join us in making Blandford one of our community's favorite places? Whether you already have memories of Blandford or have yet to experience the nature center personally, we invite you to connect with us. We would like to introduce you to Blandford through a personal or group tour, a Saturday program or community event, or through our website and e-newsletter at BlandfordNatureCenter.org.

As you discover how Blandford is being renewed and re-imagined, we hope you will offer your support. There are many ways to be part of Blandford's vision, including:

- Financial support, in the form of cash, in-kind gifts, stock, and planned gifts
- Memberships, new in 2010 and providing program discounts and other benefits
- Volunteers, for administrative and program support
- Corporate partnerships
- Grants





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