



Dan River Basin Association

DRBA Strategic Plan 2025-2030

Rooted in Community and Connection

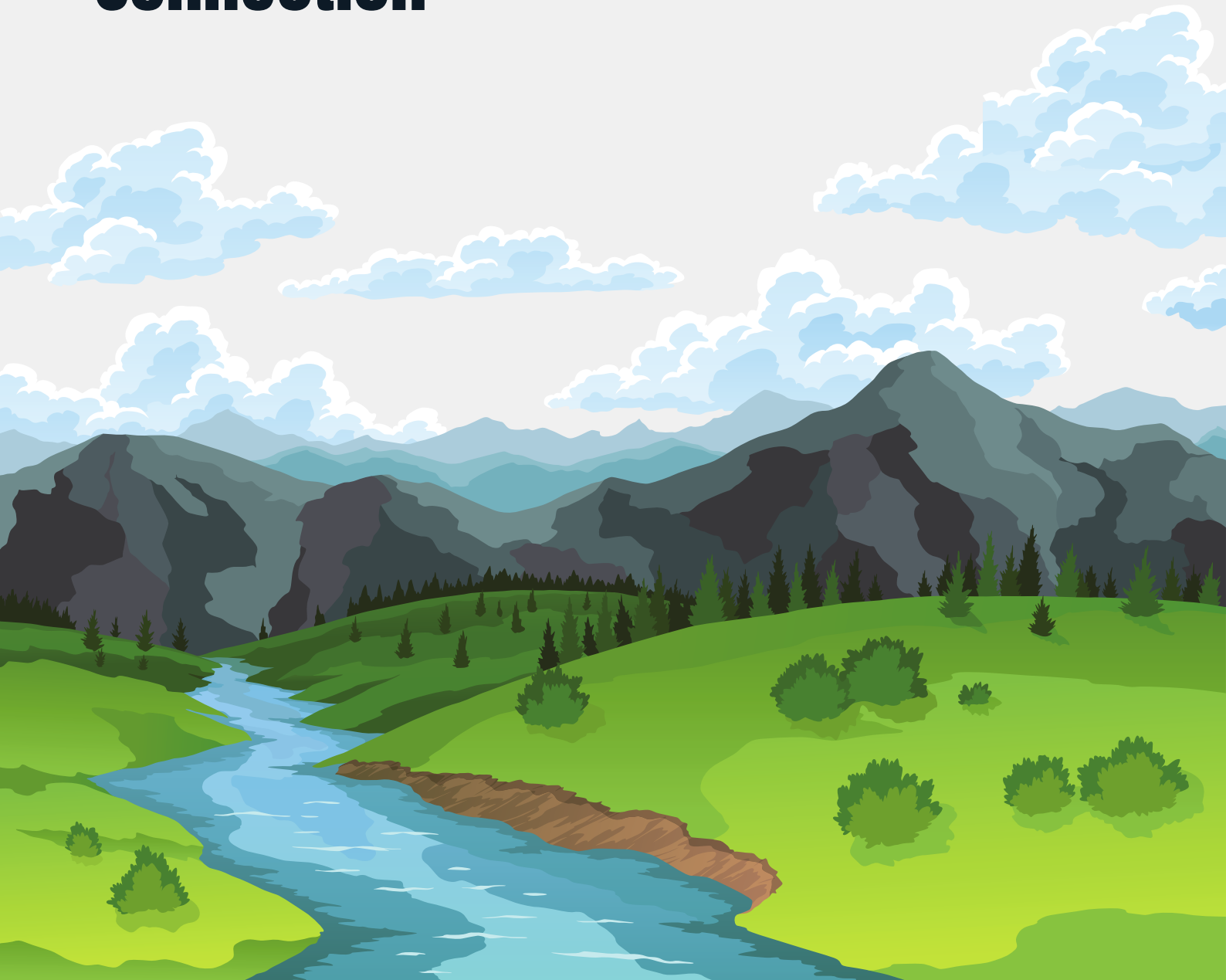


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Who We Are

MISSION

The Dan River Basin Association (DRBA) preserves and promotes the natural and cultural resources of the Dan River Basin through stewardship, recreation, and education.



VISION

We envision a bi-state region with a shared identity, a strong economy, and engaged residents and visitors who are committed to an active, connected lifestyle.

DRBA serves as a trusted community and educational convener and catalyst across Virginia and North Carolina—working at the intersection of environmental health, outdoor access, and community vitality.

A Region on the Rise

The Dan River Basin is a living system—made up of rivers and trails, communities and cultures, history and change. As the only bi-state environmental organization focused on this watershed, the Dan River Basin Association (DRBA) plays a distinct and vital role: connecting people to place through conservation, recreation, and education.

Today, DRBA and other environmental nonprofits are working in a time of rapid transition. Across North Carolina and Virginia, communities are experiencing more extreme weather events, climate stress on ecosystems, and growing pressure on public lands. At the same time, the region is navigating aging infrastructure, population shifts, and rising interest in outdoor recreation.



During the height of the pandemic, many people turned to trails, rivers, and parks as safe and meaningful ways to spend time outdoors. That trend continues. As the cost of travel and daily living rises, more families are choosing local and low-cost ways to connect with nature. These changes bring both challenges and opportunities. Nonprofits are being asked to adapt—to stretch limited capacity while also increasing relevance, deepening partnerships, and responding to evolving community needs. For DRBA, this is a moment to reflect on what is working, clarify where we are headed, and stay rooted in what people across the Basin care about most.

STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK AND TARGETED PRIORITIES

How can DRBA evolve to meet this moment with clarity, relevance, and impact? In August 2024, led by Kakati Consulting Group, we launched a ten-month strategic planning process. Through learning centered discussions, in-depth interviews, surveys, and a retreat with board and staff, we designed a strategic framework that reflects what we heard—and what we are committed to pursuing over the next five years.

DRBA engaged in a wide-reaching process of reflection and input gathering—including stakeholder interviews, tailored surveys, and a culminating strategic retreat with staff and board members. Six strategic priority areas consistently emerged from the planning sessions reflecting both enduring commitments and areas where new energy, investment and alignment are needed.

These priorities are grouped into two categories:

-  **Upstream priorities:** the internal systems, resources, and partnerships that power DRBA’s mission.
-  **Downstream priorities:** the outward-facing work in communities, on the ground, and in the natural environment.

Together, these upstream and downstream strategies form a coherent and forward-looking framework—one that honors DRBA’s legacy while charting a path toward deeper impact and broader inclusion across the basin. Each strategic priority area is accompanied by annual action goals to frame future strategic decision-making for staff and board members. The action goals should be considered minimums for the success of DRBA and do not preclude additional strategic efforts.

UPSTREAM PRIORITIES: INTERNAL SYSTEMS AND PARTNERSHIPS

These foundational strategies focus on strengthening DRBA’s internal capacity and resilience to ensure long-term impact.

1. ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Build efficient internal systems that support leadership development, staff well-being, board engagement, and succession planning.

Efficient internal systems help DRBA grow and thrive, including leadership development, staff support, board engagement, and succession planning. Clarity around internal roles, strengthening pipelines for volunteers, and capacity building across the organization is critical to staff and board success and the inclusion of diverse voices from the local community.

Action Steps for Organizational Development:

1A.

Conduct an annual review of staff roles and the organizational structure to ensure clarity, alignment, and growth opportunities across all levels. Evaluate staff capacity in relation to project deliverables and future programming needs, while preserving quality in execution.

1B.

Provide access to professional development opportunities for all staff and board members, including those newer to nonprofit work or environmental fields.

1C.

Develop and document a board succession plan by December 2027 to preserve institutional knowledge, roles, and responsibilities. Continue efforts to recruit board members from a variety of regions and sectors.

2. STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS

Strengthen and diversify collaborations with corporate, municipal, and grassroots partners to expand impact and broaden reach.

Strengthening and diversifying collaborations with corporate, municipal, and grassroots partners continue to be a core value. DRBA maintains a strong desire to deepen ties with local governments, schools, healthcare institutions, and with whom it does not already have a strong partnership. DRBA also recognizes that such partnerships must align with and advance DRBA's mission, vision, outcomes, and program initiatives.

Action Steps for Strategic Partnerships:

2A.

Identify, engage, and co-host annual collaborative meetings with 2 to 3 new local government leaders or administrative departments, including those groups that historically have not participated in traditional planning spaces.

2B.

Formalize two cross-sector partnerships annually (e.g., with schools, healthcare providers, or similar organizations) that reflect local priorities and deepen program and service impact.

2C.

Strengthen coordination with regional partners, including chambers of commerce, community-based organizations, and interest groups, by promoting project and event calendars that reflect diverse perspectives and community needs. Participate in activities that align with focus areas and organizational capacity.

3. FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

Secure long-term impact through financial resilience built on diversified revenue and trust-based funder relationships.

DRBA's long-term impact relies on financial resilience through diversified revenue and strong, trust-based funder relationships. Because visibility and funding vary across the region, locally informed strategies are essential. While the Executive Director will lead foundation relationships, staff and board will help build local partnerships—with chambers, municipalities, community foundations, and conservation allies—to ensure donors connect with the full organization, not just one individual.

Action Steps for Financial Sustainability:

3A.

Identify and prepare two staff or board members annually to represent DRBA in donor and partner meetings, expanding relational capacity beyond the Executive Director and reinforcing the organization's broader presence.

3B.

Connect with 2 to 3 new potential funding partners each year, including chambers of commerce, municipalities, community foundations, corporations, outfitters, and land trusts. Outreach should be guided by local context, existing relationships, and geographic relevance.

3C.

Create and implement a recurring giving campaign designed to engage a broad base of community supporters through storytelling, consistent outreach, and transparent stewardship by December 2026.

DOWNSTREAM PRIORITIES: COMMUNITY AND ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

These priorities focus on how DRBA shows up in the community and stewards the natural environment—made possible by strong internal infrastructure.

4. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Foster inclusive, intergenerational engagement that reflects and connects people of all backgrounds to the natural environment.

DRBA is committed to building meaningful connections across generations, cultures, and communities. Through programming that invites participation from youth, elders, and everyone in between, DRBA creates space for shared experiences in nature that cultivate belonging, stewardship, and collective memory. DRBA recognizes that lasting impact requires authentic relationships, and it continues to evolve its strategies to deepen trust, grow community voice, and expand participation across the region.

Action Steps for Community Engagement:

4A.

Deliver environmental education to 2-3 new schools or community groups per year, with an emphasis on geographic, age, and cultural variety.

4B.

Host or co-host four or more community events annually across different counties, in North Carolina and Virginia, shaped by local input and needs. These events should meet the accessibility needs of all groups.

4C.

Design strategies to recruit, retain and recognize volunteers that are representative of the population of the Dan River watershed. Assess organizational needs for volunteers and develop action plan for implementation annually.

4D.

Design and implement a local ambassador or community champions program by December 2028 consisting of 6 to 10 individuals reflecting the region's range of voices and experiences. These individuals will help elevate community stories and support engagement.

5. RECREATIONAL ACCESS

Enhance broad access to outdoor spaces through expanded trails, accessible infrastructure, and inclusive regional promotion.

DRBA is committed to improving accessibility across the Dan River Basin’s trail systems and outdoor sites, ensuring that people of all ages, abilities, and backgrounds can experience and enjoy nature. Trail development and infrastructure improvements are designed with accessibility in mind, reflecting the organization’s belief that outdoor spaces should be inclusive, navigable, and welcoming for everyone. Trail access remains a top priority among DRBA staff, board members, and community partners.

Action Steps for Recreational Access:

5A.

Develop a toolkit by December 2026 to help municipalities and partners plan and design accessible trails along the Dan River Basin. In subsequent years, promote adoption and support local use of the resource.

5B.

Explore and publicize transportation options such as local shuttles or neighbor-to-neighbor rides that help community members connect and travel together to Dan River Basin activities. These efforts aim to foster connection and expand access for those facing transportation hurdles over the next five years.

5C.

Install updated, multilingual signage at key Dan River Basin access points over the course of the five-year plan to ensure safe access and more inclusive navigation support. Begin by assessing signage needs, then design updates, and complete installation by the end of the plan period.

6. ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION

Maintain deep commitment to clean rivers, habitat preservation, climate resilience and strong partnerships across the region.

River cleanups, water quality monitoring, and advocacy are core DRBA strengths that should be preserved and expanded. These efforts are critical to building inclusive partnerships with communities and local governments, and they play a vital role in protecting regional ecosystems and advancing long-term environmental stewardship.

Action Steps for Environmental Conservation:

6A.

Organize quarterly river cleanups and/or habitat restoration events, with outreach to civic groups, schools, and new volunteers.

6B.

Expand citizen science and water monitoring efforts by training five new volunteers each year on core methods and practices, with an emphasis on inclusivity to reach new generations and local neighborhoods.

6C.

Launch an Advocacy Taskforce by July 2026 composed of board members, community members, and staff to identify and respond to emerging threats to the Dan River Basin. The task force will monitor issues, raise awareness, and mobilize local action. Members will be equipped to share template advocacy letters with residents and local decision-makers, lead public education sessions on environmental impacts, and convene stakeholders to build shared understanding and coordinated responses.

6D.

Collaborate with one or more new local partners—such as a river club, outfitter, or land conservancy— within the five-year timeframe on a conservation demonstration project that highlights diverse approaches to land use and environmental stewardship.



A Visual Guide: DRBA's Strategic River Map

To complement this strategic plan, a visual shows DRBA's six strategic priorities flowing from core capacities to community and environmental outcomes. The **upstream focus** highlights foundational capacities such as Organizational Development, Strategic Partnerships, and Financial Sustainability. These feed into **downstream outcomes** that include Community Engagement, Recreational Access, and Environmental Conservation.

Strategic Priorities

1 Organizational Development

- ∴ Conduct annual staff and org review
- ∴ Support professional development interests
- ∴ Complete leadership succession plan



2 Strategic Partnerships

- ∴ Co-host annual public sector meetings
- ∴ Formalize cross sector partnerships
- ∴ Promote activities with regional partners



3 Financial Sustainability

- ∴ Include board members in donor meetings
- ∴ Connect with new funding partners annually
- ∴ Launch a recurring giving campaign



4 Community Engagement

- ∴ Deliver education content to local groups
- ∴ Co-host events across different counties
- ∴ Engage with volunteers across watershed
- ∴ Implement DRBA ambassadors initiative



5 Recreational Access

- ∴ Disseminate accessible trails toolkit
- ∴ Publicize ride sharing to DRBA activities
- ∴ Install signage at key Basin access points



6 Environmental Conservation

- ∴ Organize river cleanups with local groups
- ∴ Train volunteers on citizen science and water monitoring methodology
- ∴ Launch Dan River Basin advocacy task force
- ∴ Lead a conservation demonstration project



Ensuring Success in Implementation

As DRBA moves forward with this strategic plan, staff and board members will need to keep several key considerations in mind. These considerations are crucial for implementing the work and ensuring long-term impact.

GROWTH WILL REQUIRE MATCHING CAPACITY

There is growing momentum around expanding DRBA's programs, partnerships, and visibility. However, that growth must be supported by realistic assessments of staffing, systems, and volunteer infrastructure. DRBA will need to pace expansion carefully, investing in internal capacity and clarifying roles to ensure that staff and volunteers are supported as the organization scales.

FUNDING WILL NEED TO MATCH THE VISION

Achieving the goals outlined in this plan will require financial resources that are aligned with DRBA's bold vision. DRBA will pursue new partnerships and funding streams, including unrestricted support, to build a more diverse and resilient funding base. Long-term sustainability will depend on intentional cultivation, transparent stewardship, and alignment between mission and fundraising efforts.

BROAD ACCESS WILL DEMAND DEPTH AND CONTINUITY

DRBA's commitment to providing access to all and engaging with all communities is embedded in this plan—and its success will depend on deepening that commitment through action. DRBA will continue to prioritize meaningful engagement with communities previously not engaged in this work,

ensuring that lived experience and multifaceted leadership inform programs, partnerships, and decision-making. The goal to include all communities will not be a one-time effort but an ongoing practice woven into how DRBA operates.

RESPONSIVENESS WILL BE VITAL IN A CHANGING REGION

The Dan River Basin is not static. Climate challenges, population shifts, and community needs will continue to evolve across North Carolina and Virginia. DRBA will remain attentive to these changes and maintain flexibility in its programming. Being responsive will mean listening actively, adjusting priorities as needed, and embracing innovation while staying grounded in community input.

VOLUNTEERING WILL REQUIRE FLEXIBILITY AND ACCESSIBILITY

Expectations around civic engagement are shifting, and DRBA will need to evolve its volunteer strategies to meet people where they are. The organization will design volunteer opportunities that are flexible, clearly impactful, and accessible to individuals with different schedules, physical abilities, and lived experiences. This includes offering both short- and long-term roles, and providing support that makes community involvement more inclusive and rewarding.



Moving Forward Together

The 2025-2030 Strategic Plan reflects a meaningful pause for DRBA to listen, reflect, and chart a clear path forward. Informed by staff, board members, community partners, public agencies, and volunteers, this plan captures shared priorities and a renewed commitment to collaboration, transparency, and action. As implementation begins, DRBA will continue to center listening, learning, and partnership—ensuring this plan remains a living guide to deepening impact and advancing the health of the Dan River Basin.



DRBA's Commitment

GOVERNANCE AND IMPLEMENTATION ROLES

To ensure the successful realization of this Strategic Plan, clearly defined roles and responsibilities have been established for both the Board of Directors and the organizational staff.

BOARD OF DIRECTORS RESPONSIBILITIES

The Board of Directors is responsible for overseeing the strategic direction of the organization. This includes managing and guiding the overall strategic planning process, determining the key strategies needed to achieve the organization's long-term goals, and approving a comprehensive tactical plan provided by the Executive Director that outlines how the Strategic Plan will be implemented. Additionally, the Board monitors progress toward strategic objectives and makes adjustments to strategies as needed to maintain alignment with the organization's mission and vision.

BROAD ACCESS WILL DEMAND DEPTH AND CONTINUITY

The staff is responsible for carrying out the operational work that supports the Strategic Plan. This includes planning and executing programs, services, and events that directly contribute to the organization's strategic priorities. Staff members are also tasked with tracking and reporting on the outcomes of their efforts, providing regular updates to the Board on activities and milestones. These reports enable the Board to evaluate progress, identify challenges, and ensure that the organization remains on course to achieve its strategic goals.

This structure establishes a collaborative and accountable framework for implementing the Strategic Plan, with the Board focused on strategic oversight and the staff focused on operational execution.