



FAMILY FINALIST: **GRASS RIVER NATURAL AREA, INC.**

INITIATIVE: **Boardwalk Renovations for Universal Access**

### **OVERVIEW OF INITIATIVE – IN THE APPLICANT’S WORDS**

Access to nature provides significant and vital benefits to mental, physical, and emotional well-being. Grass River Natural Area (GRNA) is committed to ensuring people of all abilities can experience the natural world on a series of universally accessible boardwalks, which immerse visitors in a unique and biologically diverse ecosystem.

GRNA is requesting funds to replace an aging section of existing boardwalk with a six-foot wide barrier-free pathway, free span bridges across the coldwater creeks, ADA accessible observation platforms for views of stunning landscapes, and an enlarged dock with a universally accessible kayak launch at the Grass River.

These crucial improvements will create a safe space where children will find joy and wonder in the flight of a butterfly, where adults will come to quiet their minds, and where people of all backgrounds and abilities will feel the comfort and solace that comes from time spent in nature.

*The following sections contain certain key information from the application, as written by the applicant. While detailed financial information has not been provided here due to its confidential nature, each applicant submitted an initiative budget and supporting financial documents as part of their application. Each proposed initiative and the supporting financial documentation has undergone a thorough financial review by our Community Investment Review Committee (CIRC) and the initiatives proposed by our finalists have met our standards for moving forward.*

### **ORGANIZATION’S VISION STATEMENT**

GRNA, Inc. will serve as a regional leader for ecological conservation by connecting people to nature through education, research, and experiences.

### **ORGANIZATION’S MISSION STATEMENT**

GRNA Inc.'s mission is to manage the Grass River Natural Area, conserve and protect its watershed, and provide opportunities that increase knowledge, appreciation, and community-wide stewardship of the natural environment.

## **DESCRIPTION OF ORGANIZATION AND ITS HISTORY**

The journey to fulfilling our mission began in the 1960's when the Soil Conservation Director in Antrim County and a group of concerned residents recognized the unique, fragile, and important nature of the flora and fauna in the Grass River region – a beautiful, natural region ripe for commercial development. They knew the destruction of that ecology could have a strong negative impact on the Chain of Lakes Watershed which provides 60% of the water that enters Grand Traverse Bay. One of the people the conservation director shared this information with was an Antrim County commissioner who encouraged him to bring his suggestion of placing the land in conservancy to the full county commission. Fortunately, the commission saw the benefit to the plan and agreed to help fund the project and become the conservator. Land conservancy and protection of wetlands was in its infancy in 1969, so the three original parcels which started GRNA had to be put into conservancy with the Minnesota branch of The Nature Conservancy because no such organization existed in Michigan yet. With their help, the generosity of local citizens, a grant from the Kresge Foundation, and a national matching funds grant, GRNA was founded and its mission established. This collaborative model is used to this day to inform others of how counties, municipalities, and private citizens can work together to protect our environment.

Today, Antrim County owns most of the 1,492 acres of land that make up Grass River Natural Area and the Grass River Center which serves as our education and welcome center. They continue to support GRNA with an annual appropriation and funding for capital projects such as the building of our Grass River Center in 2011 and the replacement of our aging boardwalks. Over the course of our 52 years, seventy-three separate parcels of land which make up the natural area have been acquired through purchases and donations.

Day-to-day operations, maintenance for our 1,492 acres of protected land including 7.5 miles of trails, education programming, event planning, and staffing of the Center are the responsibility of the staff and nearly 90 volunteers who work for Grass River Natural Area, Inc., a nonprofit formed in 1979. Our original boardwalks were built by our volunteers in the 1980's, who also maintained trails, conducted programming, worked with the county, and governed GRNA. The first Executive Director was hired in 1991 to guide the organization, and in 2004, GRNA, Inc. hired its first Education to ensure that we were providing quality opportunities to increase knowledge and encourage community stewardship of the natural area.

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF INITIATIVE**

Two longtime visitors to Grass River Natural Area (GRNA), a couple who are now aged 89 and 95, told us, "We enjoy walking the new boardwalk short loop which offers us safe passage as we look around. We would like to take the trail down to the dock, but those boards are old, often "bouncy" and/or uneven. It's not the same if you have to watch every step and don't feel stable...We look forward to the day when we can once again walk the trail to the river dock, but on a safely constructed boardwalk. One of us may need to use a

walker or wheelchair in the not-too-distant future. A modern boardwalk would accommodate that possible change in our lifestyle.”

The funds GRNA is requesting from Impact 100 will make that dream come true for this couple, and many other visitors. We plan to replace those “bouncy” boards with the same boardwalk system used for the short loop referenced above (completed in 2018). It was the first of three phases of replacement of the 1.1 miles of boardwalk built in the 1980’s. We are prepared to finish the project, beginning with the River Access Trail. Six-foot wide pathways with integrated toe kicks, free span bridges across the feeder creeks for Grass River, ADA accessible observation platforms with clear views of the river and the birds and animals that frequent it, an enlarged dock, and a universally accessible kayak launch are included in this phase. Replacement of the Sedge-Meadow Trail, one of two sections to be addressed next, will replicate the River Access Trail. The Fern Trail, the other section, will likely have a modification to the system, to bring it closer to the ground as that area is best viewed from a lower perspective. Engineering and architectural planning was completed by Gosling-Czubak Engineering. Installation bids cannot be requested until January 2022.

We are approaching this project in phases so our visitors can still enjoy one section of the boardwalk while another is being replaced, and to raise the necessary funds to complete both sections at once. There is a significant cost savings for GRNA if installers can stage all construction at once. Advance planning is imperative, as much of the boardwalk area is not easily accessed and very fragile. If materials and equipment do not have to be brought in twice, it is better for GRNA’s environment and its budget.

Funds requested will have the greatest impact when used for the River Access Trail. First, it is the most heavily used trail. Secondly, if we receive the Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund grant for \$300,000 (which we anticipate will happen) and the Impact 100 grant, we will have nearly enough funding to begin construction as early as the spring of 2022. The rapid deterioration of the boardwalk dictates we begin as soon as possible. When construction begins, it will act as a catalyst for fundraising for the final sections and that will allow us the cost savings mentioned above.

### **COMMUNITY TO BE SERVED**

GRNA is located within 15-minute drive time of Bellaire, Alden, Mancelona, and Rapid City; within 30 minutes of Acme, Williamsburg, Elk Rapids, Kalkaska, Alba, Central Lake, and Torch Lake; and within 45 minutes of Traverse City, Gaylord, East Jordan, Ellsworth, and Boyne Falls.

On average, the center and site see the most visitors in summer, with a peak in July. Beginning in May the Grass River Center is open 7 days a week, which allows us to connect with about 50% of the visitors who come to hike our trails during the summer months. Approximately 7,500 people a year visit the Center. Approximately 30,000 people visit the natural area by car each year.

Before 2020, GRNA saw about 5,300 people in total program and event attendance annually. This amount was increasing each year. Public classes (paid and free) and school programs make up about 45% (over 2,400) of GRNA's program attendance, with about 1,300 of these being adults, and 1,100 being children. 100% of school programs and 75% of public programs consist of local Northwest Michigan residents. Thus, GRNA's current primary market is local Northwest Michigan children and their families (for school programs and events), and local and seasonal older adults (for public programs).

Antrim County is defined by the state of Michigan as an underserved county. We strive to make sure there are plenty of accessible opportunities for families who face financial challenges. Our site, including our trails and the GR Center, are open to all visitors free of charge. Family events, generally held on weekends, are also offered at no charge. These events include Maple Day in March when families can collect sap, learn about boiling, participate in making crafts, and purchase the finished product if they wish; Autumnfest, a day of hikes with naturalists on the trail in costumes, crafts, and games; and Winterfest that has outdoor snow games, free cross-country ski and snowshoe demonstrations, winter-themed crafts, and a customize your hot chocolate bar. Other programs at GRNA are offered for a nominal fee (usually \$5-\$10) or free. Funding for field trips is available through a family foundation grant.

To serve the 28% of our population who are over 65, we provide programming focused on extended learning and healthy lifestyles. Our accessible trails afford opportunities for easy walking; and guided walks such as the weekly wildflower tour in the summer, birdwatching, and butterfly monitoring add an educational element to the exercise. We also offer guided kayak paddles and pontoon cruises with a naturalist. There are also numerous volunteer opportunities available that appeal to their interests. These include caring for our native gardens, helping with trail maintenance, assisting with Grass River Center repairs, and helping to plan events.

## **NEEDS OF THE COMMUNITY TO BE SERVED**

The GRNA community, at large, needs a peaceful place to immerse themselves in nature. Some visitors to GRNA are seeking education on a new topic such as mushroom foraging, birdwatching, or environmental preservation. Others want to hike, kayak, snowshoe, ski, or take a bike ride. School children and day campers come to learn about nature through immersive experiences. Boaters need access to the natural area and the Grass River Center from the water. And there are people who want to become citizen scientists who help us monitor and preserve the ecology of the natural area.

We strive to satisfy all those needs by providing low cost or free programs, daily access to our trails, universal accessibility to the Grass River Center and its exhibits, a dock on the Grass River, and diverse opportunities for engagement. Currently, only one section of our boardwalk can fulfill those needs for all. The Tamarack Loop, replaced in 2018, is fully ADA

accessible. Its six-foot width, toe kicks, smooth surface, and railings provide a place to walk that can be and is enjoyed by all. Our two visitors, quoted in the Executive Summary, will have the opportunity to take their long awaited walk to the expanded dock and access the observation decks with ease. They could even go for a paddle on the river using the accessible kayak launch.

The Perception Pathway, that includes a portion of the Tamarack Trail, offers an even more specialized experience for our vision impaired visitors. Guide ropes assist with navigation and braille interpretive signs explain the habitat. We also use this trail as an instructional area for youth on field trips and in camp. Blindfolded, they safely explore the trail from a new perspective. This helps them to understand the experience of others who do not see the world as they do.

In a recent letter of recommendation for this project, James Moore, Executive Director of Disability Network Northern Michigan, wrote; "After reviewing the details of the project, we are excited to support the plan to build a universally accessible boardwalk that will lead to two accessible viewing platforms and planned accessible kayak launch on the Grass River. This will add to the accessibility features that are already in place such as the roped pathway for persons with visual impairment, the Nature Center, and the newly built Tamarack Loop. The current boardwalk and observation decks are not ADA accessible. The new boardwalk will provide access for people of all ages and abilities to enjoy the beauty of this natural area."

## **SUSTAINABILITY OF THE PROPOSED INITIATIVE**

Maintenance funds are in place for yearly repairs of the boardwalk and all areas of GRNA. A portion of that funding comes from the yearly appropriation of funds from Antrim County. GRNA, Inc. also budgets a portion of their annual funds for maintenance.

In addition, if the Feasibility Study indicates a favorable outcome, we have plans to expand the capital campaign to include funding for a minimum of \$300,000 in endowment. Currently, we receive a small yearly grant from a fund managed by the Grand Traverse Regional Community Foundation, but as we strategically expand our programming, staff, and marketing we foresee the need to increase the size and security of endowed funds managed for our use.