



**grounded** Strategic Plan  
8 strategies 2019-2023







## We are **Grounded.**

The organization has evolved from the GTECH of its youth - from a group of passionate people without a clear, singular focus to a highly effective team with a common goal. We have become an anchor in community conversations, often engaged to fill an essential gap in community building and revitalization efforts by supporting those who will be most impacted by change and whose engagement is needed to guide investments. We remain passionate, scrappy and intentional but have grown as facilitator, convener, and trusted partner.

As Grounded Strategies moves from its youth to maturity, it is critical that we position ourselves for longer term organizational sustainability and solidified community impact. This means clearly making the case to funders and community partners that we are worthy of investment by promoting our long-term impact, fiscal responsibility, and flexibility in responding to challenges on the ground.

Grounded Strategies is already seen as a connector and implementer. We intend to build on this strength as we look at ways to continue to hold a niche in the Pittsburgh market re-purposing vacant and underutilized land with a goal of improving the social, economic, and environmental health of communities.

**This new strategic plan is a vision for laying the foundation of long-term sustainability for the organization as an anchor to the community development and revitalization efforts of the region.**



## Grounded Strategies works for **system-level change**

Stakeholder participation in the development of the 2019-2023 Strategic Plan has highlighted the role Grounded plays or has the potential to play in the regional conversation today. With this is the acknowledgment that land is the literal foundation of every community and therefore cannot be excluded from any development conversation. Additionally, environmental and economic development policies in Pittsburgh are evolving as the city attempts to find more equitable ways to find ways to better serve its distressed neighborhoods. A new housing trust fund, operational land banks, P4 (People, Planet, Place, Performance) and One PGH frameworks are providing a space for innovative and equitable urban design and redevelopment standards that are being assessed to ensure more inclusive practices at the neighborhood level.

Grounded holds a niche in the sector that is respected and valued. The ability to engage residents and effectively prepare them to participate in revitalization efforts is key to the sustainability of those efforts. As we move through this strategic plan, Grounded will continue to be a catalyst for further and deeper action, a convener among multiple sectors and facilitator to connect opportunity with interest. Across neighborhoods and municipalities, age groups, demographics, and time, Grounded will empower communities by providing access to the knowledge, resources, and tools needed to achieve their desired outcomes.



## Who we are

Grounded uses the process of reclaiming vacant and underutilized land as a platform for engagement, education, and building trust among communities. This “people and places” approach intentionally acknowledges that any physical interventions will need to be sustained by passionate and prepared individuals and that in order for residents to thrive in all aspects of their lives, they must find support, safety, and pride in their physical environment.

### Mission

To improve the social, economic, and environmental health of distressed and transitional communities by building capacity to reclaim vacant and underutilized land.

### Vision

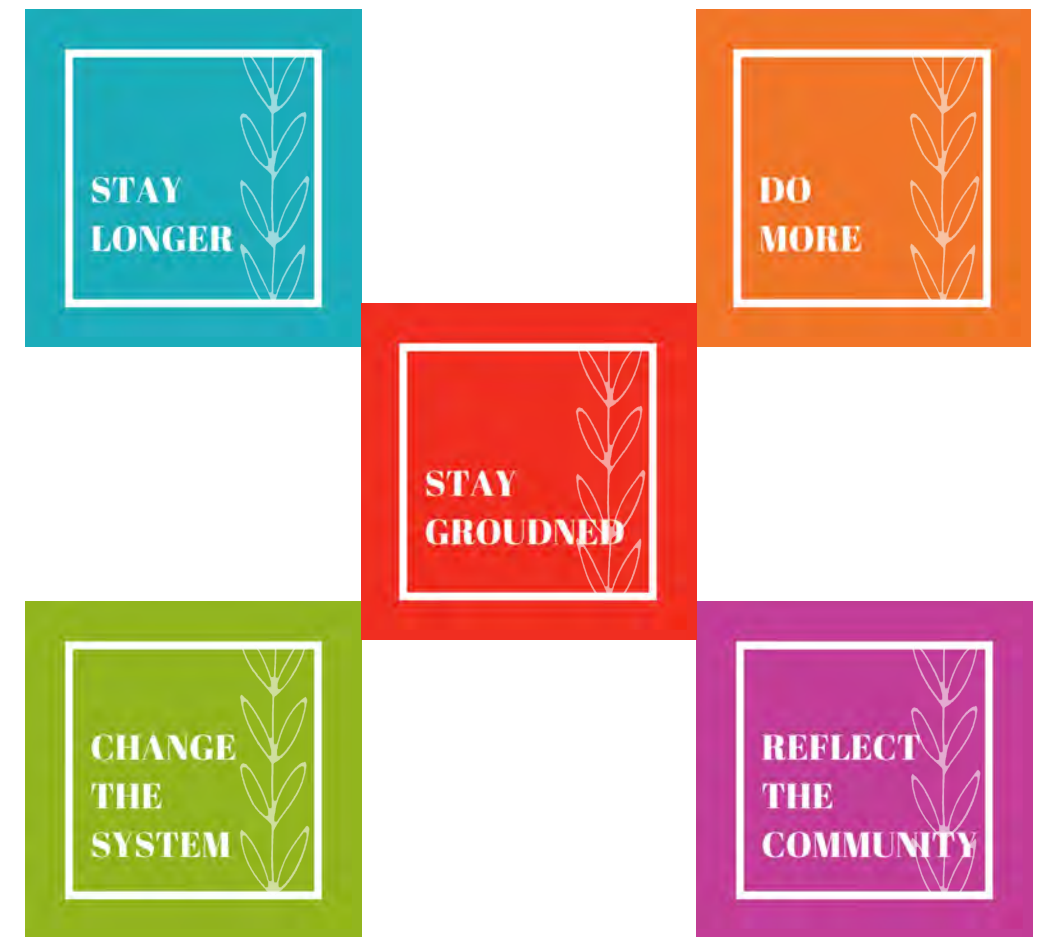
We envision a region of thriving communities- working together to sustain equitable change. We believe lasting and impactful change happens when people have the tools to work towards creating safe, green, resilient and livable spaces. In order to create these spaces, we believe that community members must have the opportunity to weigh in on the systems that affect them.

### Values

- We recognize land as the literal foundation of all communities
- We believe in the power of community-generated solutions
- We embrace the need for inclusive decision-making and collaborative action-taking
- We empower passionate individuals and encourage them to become responsible stewards
- We accept the challenge of innovation in order to do more with less
- We respect the need for accountability and transparency

### STRATEGIC PRIORITIES 2019-2023:

Over the next 5 years, Grounded will become the “go-to” organization for residents, non-profits, and municipalities working on vacant and underutilized land in Allegheny County.





# What we do



RESIDENT EDUCATION  
AMBASSADORS AS STEWARDS  
GREEN PLAYCES  
YOUTH ENGAGEMENT



PGH MOBILE TOOLBOX  
LOTS TO LOVE  
BLIGHT DOCTOR  
DESIGN SERVICES  
POLICY & ADVOCACY

# How we work

We mobilize residents, policy-makers, and like-minded organizations to ensure communities have the resources, knowledge, tools, and partners to reclaim and activate vacant land in the places they live, work, and play.

Grounded Strategies has developed a sound and consistent methodology to address community challenges. We hold to the belief that no one knows a community better than those that live, work, and play there on a daily basis. As a result, our process begins with an intentional investigation of the current state of the community. During this time, we observe and experience the interactions on the ground first hand - attending meetings, participating in events, completing interviews and often collecting data to understand the dynamics and challenges at play. Once we are familiarized with the community and begin to build relationships, we start to connect people within our network to those within the community. The connections made to develop or strengthen the existing network help to increase the capacity and breadth of what can happen on the ground.

A key tenet of our process is a physical intervention that remains behind at the end of an engagement. We have always believed that the act of doing something with a tangible outcome together is one of the biggest motivators toward future work. Additionally, bringing people together to work toward a common goal helps to solidify the relationships developed and results in a cohesive network. The actions taken generally result in a vacant lot reclamation project or other land use intervention, and the physical presence of an aesthetic improvement serves as a reminder that change is possible.

Finally, prior to exiting any community, Grounded identifies the long-term stakeholders who can keep the momentum going and develops maintenance and stewardship plans for how the community can continue to move its agenda forward. This may mean identifying partnerships, funding sources, or a work plan to take the tools and information provided to the next level.





# STAY LONGER

Sustainable change is not instantaneous, but rather gradually picks up momentum over time

**We will deepen and develop authentic community relationships, committing to at least 3 years of programming on the ground.**

## Activities:

- Be more present through tabling, networking, and volunteering opportunities before and after program interventions
- Multi-year, incremental strategies for programming that responds to the unique needs of partners, layering program investments
- Ensure program investments are cultivated to include as many variant demographics in a single community - accounting for age, race, economic diversity, education and culture so access is not limiting
- Leave only when all partner communities have actionable plans for sustaining the momentum and capacity built through programming
- Evaluate programming impact within existing communities
- Conduct a network analysis of each community where Grounded is recognizably present

## Outcomes:

- Strong organizational presence and grow cross-sectional relationships within target partner communities
- Clear process for partnership development and design of programming to maximize impact
- An awareness of our impact and information needed to course correct as needed
- Grounded team is recognized, known, and welcome in all community events

## Measures of success:

- Active Ambassadors in the network
- Engagement and independence of partner communities
- Quality of greenspace investments after 3 years; after 5 years
- Number of participants who have continued to actively engage in their community
- Number of projects implemented



*“They have found their niche and shouldn’t reinvent themselves.”*

## To get there, we will need:

- Multi-year funding opportunities
- Support for data analysis and evaluation
- Increased level of commitment and engagement from the Board on programs
- Increased coverage for staff for outreach, networking, and technical assistance
- Flexible funding to reengage and celebrate the small (and large) wins



To get there,  
we will need:

- Startup funds to launch new services in design and to establish the Blight Dr. as a resource
- A second work vehicle
- Investment in program software and tools to keep the team mobile and able to work remotely
- Resources to attend and present at local, regional, and national conferences
- Support for maintaining the LotstoLove.org platform and expand its use



“They help communities actualize good ideas.”

# DO MORE

Communities are complex, requiring an interdisciplinary and collaborative approach to change

We will expand our team expertise to increase the impact of our investment in communities, expanding and formalizing services.

Activities:

- Infuse Ambassador process in all programs, ensuring resident capacity
- Launch Grounded Design Services
- Bring the PGH Mobile Toolbox operations fully in-house and increase the level of service
- Be available to provide one-on-one technical and design assistance for vacant land reclamation to individuals as needed by promoting Blight Dr. services
- Share lessons learned and collaborate with partners beyond the regional market to identify new opportunities and establish our role in the market

Outcomes:

- An internal design team framework and work flow process that generates a pipeline of programmatic work
- Community residents have robust and consistent access to tools, knowledge, and resources and become grassroots leaders
- Every member of the team has established expertise as a land use technical assistance provider (Blight Dr.)
- PGH Mobile Toolbox is accessible through the whole season annually

Measures of success:

- Strength and size of the resident network
- Success rate of RFP response for design services and income generation
- Number of days the Toolbox is engaged
- Level of engagement of the Blight Dr. services



# CHANGE THE SYSTEM

Processes, policies, and programs need to be accessible and responsive

We will advance policies and investments aimed at reducing the impact of blighted and vacant land in the region.

## Activities:

- Design, brand, and lead a public engagement campaign to bring awareness to the impact of vacant land
- Work with municipal partners to simplify vacant land access and provide resources to support community projects
- Map the political landscape
- Synchronize efforts between media communications and grassroots advocacy
- Assist in the development of a vacant land maintenance strategy for the Pgh Land Bank
- Build relationship with candidates and elected officials to prioritize framework

## Outcomes:

- More vacant and blighted land is being maintained and activated
- Residents are mobilized as diverse advocates who are able to navigate the system independently
- Greenspace, environmental justice, and public health advocates are united in prioritizing vacant land issues
- Grounded becomes a go-to resource for municipalities as they work on land use policy and vacant land issues

## Measures of success:

- Recommendations are shared via blog, newsletters, and white papers
- Relevant actors convene to share strategies and solutions
- Annual contract to manage vacant land portfolio for Land Bank
- Contract to provide technical assistance to municipal partners
- New and improved policies in the City
- Increased level of public investment allocated to address vacant land

*“They have an attractive and respectful approach.”*



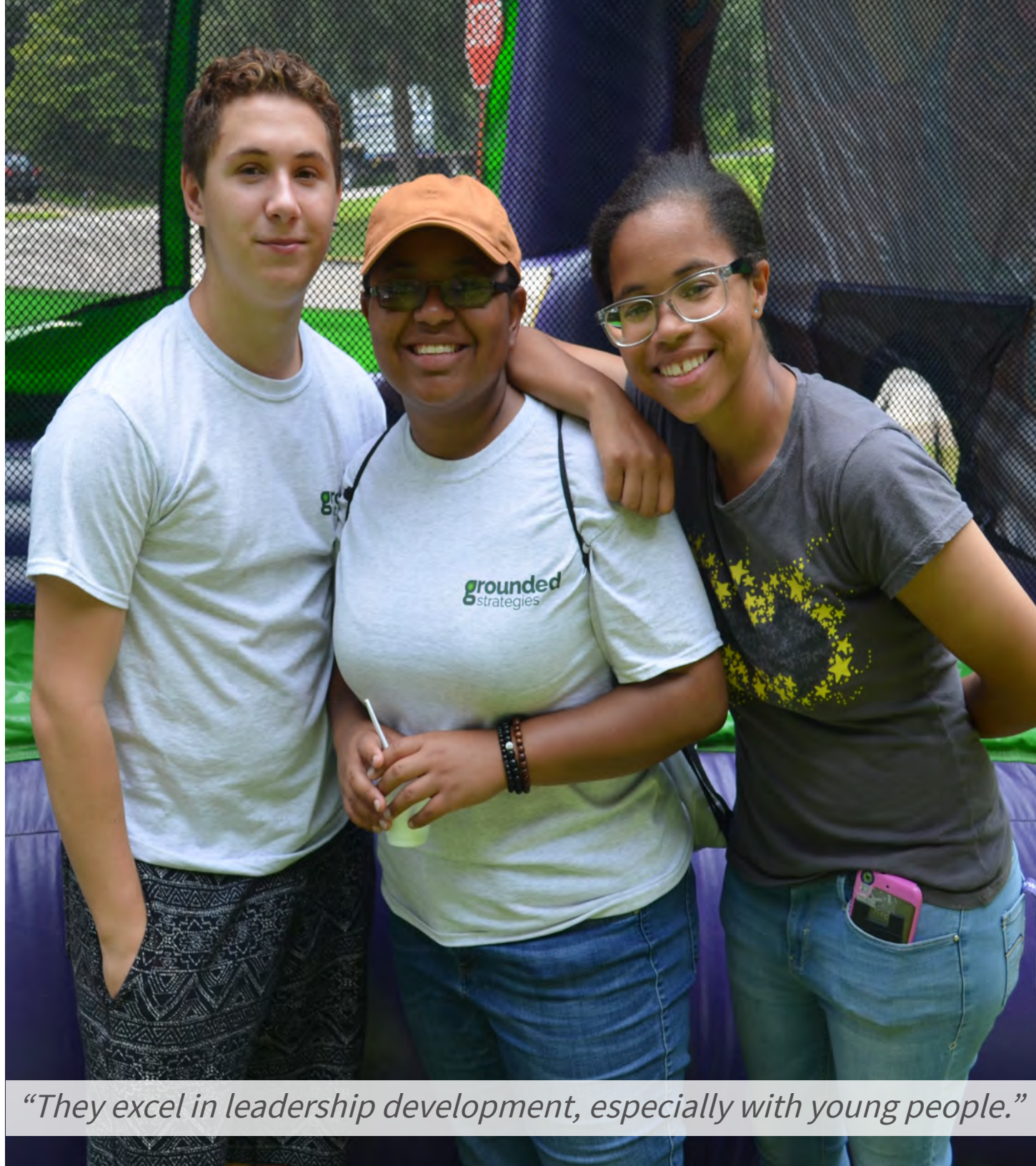
**To get there,  
we will need:**

- A dedicated team member to advance our advocacy agenda
- Increased support for research, publication, and communication of the issues
- Professional development training related to grassroots advocacy
- Resources to attend and present at local, regional, and national conferences



## To get there, we will need:

- A scholarship or fellowship fund to engage young talent
- Underwritten first year of employment to allow for customized professional development and training
- Board recruitment plan to increase its diversity and community connections
- Strong community relationships and individuals to act as liaisons between Grounded and the community



*“They excel in leadership development, especially with young people.”*

# REFLECT THE COMMUNITY

Building trust requires the need to understand, respect and reflect the communities we serve

**We will prioritize diversity, inclusion and equity in our services, staff, board, and programs.**

### Activities:

- Form an internal and ongoing committee to develop organizational policy addressing diversity, inclusion, and equity
- Reflect on adherence to internal goals and actions
- Prioritize team hiring and board recruitment from a diverse candidate pool with a focus on community relationships
- Incorporate quarterly training opportunities to increase literacy of current community challenges
- Review all internal and external language to ensure broad outreach and accessibility to information and services

### Outcomes:

- Grounded is known for its commitment to diversity, inclusion, and equity in all aspects of operations
- Staff and board are made up of a diverse set of professionals
- Programs and services are approachable and accessible to all audiences

### Measures of success:

- Staff and board make up
- Regular updates on adherence to diversity, inclusion, and equitable practices within annual report
- Qualitative feedback from partners, funders, and residents





# STAY GROUNDED

Our ability to serve others begins at home

We will continue to provide opportunity for individual and team growth within a positive and stable organizational culture.

Activities:

- Improve compensation, benefits, and growth opportunities
- Outline the pathway for advancement within the team
- Identify or develop revenue generation strategies
- Increase levels of social and investment capital
- Standardize and scale fund- and friend-raising events
- Explore the potential of organizational investment and ownership of key vacant lots

Outcomes:

- Increased staff tenure and reduction of turnover
- Steady, operationally-focused revenue streams
- Recognition on the regional and national stage for program accomplishments
- Expansive and diverse donor and partnership network

Measures of success:

- Equal number of team and individual development opportunities
- Positive qualitative feedback from staff and board
- Investments with revenue generation
- Increase in donor giving
- Number of publications and presentations annually
- Access to 3-month operating reserve



To get there, we will need:

- A dedicated operational fund for team growth and extended learning
- Increased support for business development, promotion, and documentation
- Investment partners for new research and ventures
- Access to new networks and sustained presence with audiences

“[Grounded] is a part of what is going right in Pittsburgh.”





[www.groundedpgh.org](http://www.groundedpgh.org)

## APPENDIX



# THE PROCESS

**Coordination with Grounded Strategies board, staff, program participants, community partners, and funders has been an integral part of this strategic planning process.**

## Phase 1: Q4 2017

### Kick-Off and Preliminary Planning

Beginning in the fall, Grounded began to explore the opportunities around the update and refresh of our Strategic Plan. A critical component has been centered on the identity and clarifying the positioning of the organization and therefore an engagement to update our brand and name was secured with consultants from Blender. This preliminary outreach gave us a starting point for deeper discussions in 2018 that feed into the next set of strategic priorities. Grounded Strategies was selected to better reflect the work we do on the ground and the branding was retained to reduce brand confusion. During this time, the Executive Director sought consultant support to guide the planning efforts for the following year.

## Phase 2: January - February 2018

### Internal Engagement

Beginning in the new year, Strategic Consultant, BW3 led by Cheryl Hall-Russel, was contracted to support Grounded's strategic plan refresh. In February, a full staff and board retreat was hosted off site to understand the internal priorities and ensure that everyone was on the same page to build from. The retreat resulted in a review of

the previous plan, current programs we want to grow or end, key partnerships and communities. A SOAR (strengths, opportunities, aspirations, results) analysis was developed at this time.



## Phase 3: March - April 2018

### Community and Partner Engagement

Grounded Strategies has multiple stakeholders whose opinions help shape the organization. These include its board of directors whose job it is to have a “duty of care” that ensure prudent use of

assets—including people and property are protected, and that the activities advance the mission. The staff who keep the board informed about the issues and activities that are part of the life in the organization. Community members work with the organization to deliver its mission and programs at the community level and are the primary focus of the organization. Partners work directly with the agency on collaborative programming and policy advancement, and finally funders who work with the leadership leverage support for the activities of the organization. Allegheny County, the City of Pittsburgh and neighboring municipalities are also counted among important stakeholders. To that end, it was vital to interview these stakeholders to assess their opinion on the role of Grounded Strategies, both in terms of their prior relationships and what they believe the future should hold.

External stakeholders (program participants, funders, and partners) were interviewed and asked a series of questions focused on their experiences with Grounded Strategies. A summary of these responses were generalized to four areas: What external stakeholders believed was the mission and programming of the organization, how they felt it was performing and what they would like to see them do in the future.

## Phase 4: April - August 2018

### Putting information to work

After the work completed to date, 3 ad hoc committees with representation from staff, board, and partners were formed and met to discuss:

- Current programming
- Potential new programs and or program expansions
- Communications and messaging

The staff subsequently had several follow up meetings to discuss governance challenges and refined the expectations and opportunities of current and future programming. The internal and external processes provide key information and feedback for the Grounded Strategies team that influence how the organization will operate in the future. This includes some consensus on the core programmatic/project areas, socio/cultural engagement, and strategies for growth and potential fund generation.

During this period, strategic areas of focus were finalized and specific actions were developed for each area along with indicators of success and relevant measures.



# STAKEHOLDER FEEDBACK

## Mission and Programming

- There was a consensus among the stakeholders that the mission of Grounded included **blight mitigation, the creation of greenspaces and the empowerment** of neighborhoods through the provision of technical assistance.
- They felt the agency excelled in **community engagement** and they considered them experts that provide good **technical assistance and community education**

## Increasing value

- In terms of increasing value to the community, they felt Grounded was doing a good job, **delivered well** on projects, but **under-communicated**—they felt too few people knew about their services. They felt that the core of their work was lot beautification and technical assistance and both funders and community members felt this was a good fit for them.

## Funding

- Funders expressed that they would like Grounded to **stay in the lane** they created and not “bastardize” the model in the name of growth.
- They felt they also needed to work on **diversifying their program staff** so they would look more like the neighborhoods they served.

## Program/Project Partners

- Some felt the project **model increased costs** to the overall projects
- Others wanted Grounded to **share its annual, if not bi-annual strategy** so they could plan to work with them and understand their focus
- Staff is **very efficient and well liked** but not diverse.
- Some shared that the Ambassador program seemed to be a good model that could help the agency create a pipeline for diversity
- Grounded should **spend more time at the community level**



## Program expansion and Impact

- The programs and projects were seen as having a **positive impact on communities** by all of the external stakeholders.
- Respondents felt the programs increase community capacity, togetherness and opportunities for growth.
- An **increase in green stormwater training** and potentially the purchasing of land to help in this matter was mentioned by one partner.
- Some community members wanted the team to **stay longer in the community** once projects were finished.

## Future State

- There was a consensus by all external respondents that Grounded needs to **continue to work in vacant lot management and beautification**.
- A need to see a longer term strategy for projects and funding.
- Some respondents expressed that communities in Pittsburgh and surrounding municipalities could benefit from Grounded’s staff who have **extensive design experience** and that it was a possible program that could bring in income.
- Planning for stormwater management was also mentioned as a potential revenue generator.
- Multiple respondents reacted that trends on the **increase of awareness on equity and race** indicate that Grounded need to seriously address its diversity challenge.
- A few respondents added that the agency needed to become **more deeply rooted** in the communities they support and increase their sharing of data with their partners.



# REGIONAL TRENDS



## 1. The region is recognizing and grappling with system-wide challenges related to stormwater management, aging infrastructure, and climate change.

New estimates of the Pittsburgh stormwater problem illustrate sewer overflow volumes are 15 percent above original estimates. Expected rainfall patterns alongside the dynamism of land-use and population shifts could exacerbate the problem. Developing resilient technologies such as rain barrels, bioswales, and other GSI interventions has been shown to reduce overflows in Allegheny County by 5 and 21%. Implementation of GSI remains a highly effective in managing stormwater overflow, yet primarily at the neighborhood-scale. Joint implementation strategies alongside substantial infrastructure upgrades, retrofitting, and proactive maintenance can have the greatest impact on mitigating risk from overflow (Rand, 2017). Additionally, the City of Pittsburgh will soon be instituting a sewer tax to raise additional dollars to address runoff challenges by assessing impervious surface area.

## 2. The City has adopted a P4 Framework which intersects with a focus on People, Place, Planet, and Performance.

The metrics take an inclusive and performance-based approach of evaluation with the backdrop of urban design and real estate. The framework strives to promote projects which have an economically beneficial, environmentally minded, and equitably distributed impact. In part developed by the Urban Redevelopment Authority, this tool acts as a evaluation rubric for projects focused on both tangible and intangible indicators

such as energy, community connection, land use, design, and innovation. Intended for use by practitioners, public officials, and funding sources, the initiative aims to shape city-level projects with quantifiable results for the foreseeable future.

## 3. The pipeline for local residents with the interest and capacity to join the community development and environmental sectors is limited.

The environmental sector is lacking in diversity and the pipeline to infuse fresh talent into existing organizations is limited according to “The State of Diversity in Environmental Organizations: Mainstream NGOs, Foundations & Government Agencies,” the most comprehensive report on diversity in the environmental movement. It surveyed 191 environmental non-profits, 74 government environmental agencies, and 28 leading environmental grant-making foundations to investigate their gender and racial diversity composition, the majority of which state diversification as a “value.” The study included confidential interviews of 21 environmental leaders from diverse backgrounds and experience. Currently, the racial composition in environmental agencies has not broken the 12-16% “green ceiling” that has been present for decades, Pittsburgh is no exception.

## 4. The region now has two operational land banks.

The Pittsburgh Land Bank’s strategic plan has drawn from various sources to achieve a sustainable Land Recycling Vision. The PLB aims to both support affordable housing efforts in conjunction

with blight elimination. The plan relies heavily on market-based interventions spurred by either public or private investment while assuming the public inventory of land will be acquirable and end users identifiable. Additionally, the TriCOG land bank aims to revitalize neighborhoods through the reduction of blighted properties into beneficial use. As these two agencies become fully operational, attention is needed on the equity of access to land among distressed communities as well as the ongoing system challenges of maintenance. The scale of the challenge and strength of these agencies is currently mismatched.

## 5. Community plans are happening at the neighborhood scale in the City of Pittsburgh.

Pittsburgh’s Department of City Planning partners to protect and improve the built and natural environment of the city for present and future generations. DCP provides leadership for the integration of sustainability and resilience practices into the city’s operations, policies and investments, and works to implement the climate planning and resilience strategy for the city. Principle activities include: measurement and performance benchmarking, policy research and development to assist City operations, community education for sustainability, and identification of innovation and strategic investment opportunities at the neighborhood level. Plans are overlaid onto community priorities and then coordinated to meet City goals. Neighborhood Planners serve to empower neighborhoods to plan for their future, providing a key link to city government and resources. The division is also charged

with coordinating and developing the City’s Comprehensive Plan, a resource combining analysis of neighborhood and system-wide challenges with identification of opportunities.

## 6. The partnership and competition landscape is shifting.

Currently, Pittsburgh is undergoing a shift in the community development sector. Longstanding organizations such as the Design Center of Pittsburgh have closed its doors, while many others are undergoing a leadership change. Until a clear strategic direction is made public related to these changes, it is undetermined how they may affect work in this sector.

## 7. Technology provides both opportunity and barriers in already distressed communities.

As stated by the Allegheny Conference, the Pittsburgh region’s base of many fields requires a concentration of relevant technological skills. While high-speed Internet access (measuring at least 10 Mbps downstream and 1Mbps upstream) is available in all parts of the city, FCC data shows disproportionately low broadband use in several city neighborhoods. This speaks to the incomplete distribution of Internet access. Individuals need broadband access, the physical hardware to go online, and the appropriate skills to perform desired tasks such as gaining access to city lands. Continued efforts to provide technical assistance to bridge this gap is needed to ensure more individuals can effectively engage with city systems and opportunities.



# 2015-2018 STRATEGIC PLAN ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Grounded Strategies (as GTECH) created a 3-year strategic plan for the years 2015-2018 that was updated in September 2016. As a part of the new planning process, the board and the staff looked back at that plan to assess its effectiveness and determine which pieces may be worth moving forward into the Grounded Strategies planning process.

In terms of the environment in which Grounded Strategies finds itself, it has not changed significantly since the last strategic plan was written. Operating funding is still difficult to obtain which can create a very unnecessarily competitive environment as nonprofits, and potential partners compete for the scarce dollars that are released for this purpose. Everyone continues to do more with less and good practices are encouraged but are not necessarily funded. Additionally there has been some movement toward combined efforts to coordinate environmental health awareness in vulnerable communities and Grounded Strategies has been a leader in this area. Groups have formed and grown that support public transportation and healthy food access and serious discussions on infrastructure challenges have been elevated. Bureaucracies still abound that make addressing these issues systematically very difficult. Finally, Grounded still holds its place as an intermediary organization providing technical assistance, overseeing land care management programming for government entities, and increasingly becoming one of the lead voices and educators on green stormwater infrastructure.

The areas identified in the last plan as key to the organization's success were:

- Continuing a "Places and People" focus
- Targeting underutilized land as the starting point for a community health strategy
- Being respectful and mindful of historical context without being governed by it
- Investment in collaborative infrastructure with an eye toward necessary systemic change

An assessment of how these key areas were attended to resulted in the following:

## **Increase growth opportunities for people and places through on the ground strategies**

- Great application – stormwater usage is an example of that expansion
- Grew Ambassador program engagement
- Increased "Lots to Love" projects and made the website more informational and user friendly
- More creative funding models were instituted

## **Expanding a practice of innovation through research and application**

- Methodology that used investigation and evaluation was normalized
- Piloted new technology, Salesforce was added, refined, and

internal processes realigned for efficiency

- There was a conscious attempt to measure and evaluate practices as well as speak to them publicly and publish practices. Staff attended and spoke at conferences to share and discuss best practices.
- New time-banking model was piloted to increase levels of stewardship while addressing neighborhood level equity issues.

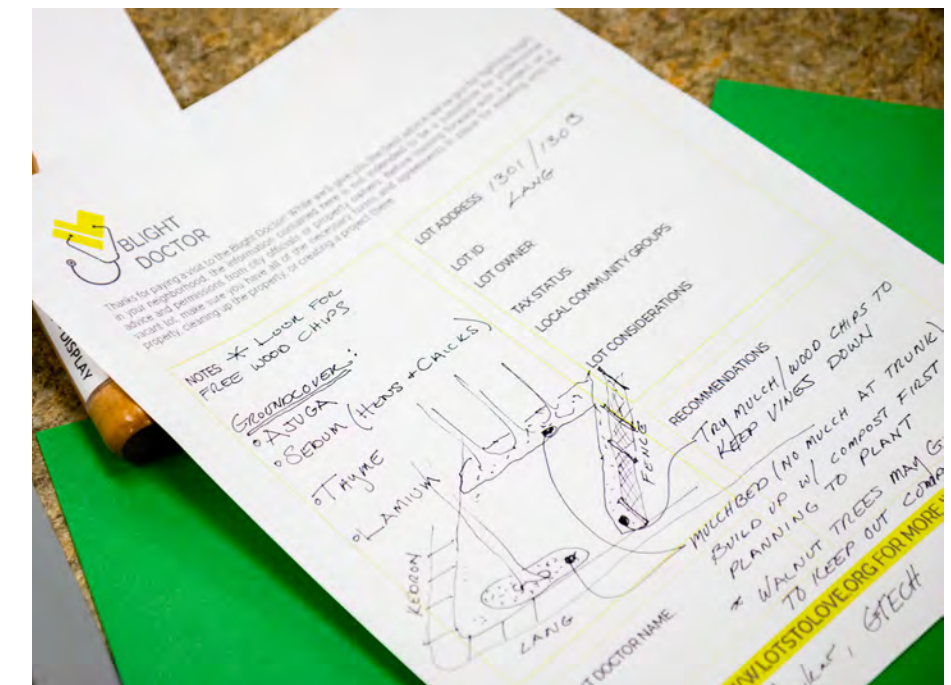
## **Increasing collective impact through cross sector collaboration**

- The agency was highly engaged in multiple relevant working groups and appropriate committees in the city and county.
- Community health conversations with the public health community now demonstrate alignment between distressed communities addressing blight and vacancy and communities with health access disparities. A renewed commitment to tackling this challenge collaboratively has been made.

## **Ensuring GTECH is a great place to work and produces great work**

- Worked on best practices, diversity, inclusiveness internally and with clients – many improvements have been made internally, but no external commitment has been made and there is still work to do
- Recognized for our ability to provide a depth of service because of the breadth of experience of the staff

The last 18 months of the strategy had to include moving the agency through an executive leadership search, the hiring of a new leader, and measuring the impact of having a founding executive leader leave the organization. The board worked closely with the staff and outside consultants to ensure a smooth transition including the addition of a communications strategy which saw the agency change its name from GTECH Strategies to Grounded Strategies, launching the new brand in April of 2018. One of the reflections when looking at the last plan was that it was intended to stay the course and work through significant staff transitions while maintaining its reputation as an organization that delivers great projects and is a significant player in the environmental and leadership development arena.







Strategic Plan  
2019-2023

