ENVISION THE CHOPTANK

Multi-Sector Collaboration for Large-Scale Water Quality Improvement

Joanna Ogburn, Ogburn Consulting, LLC
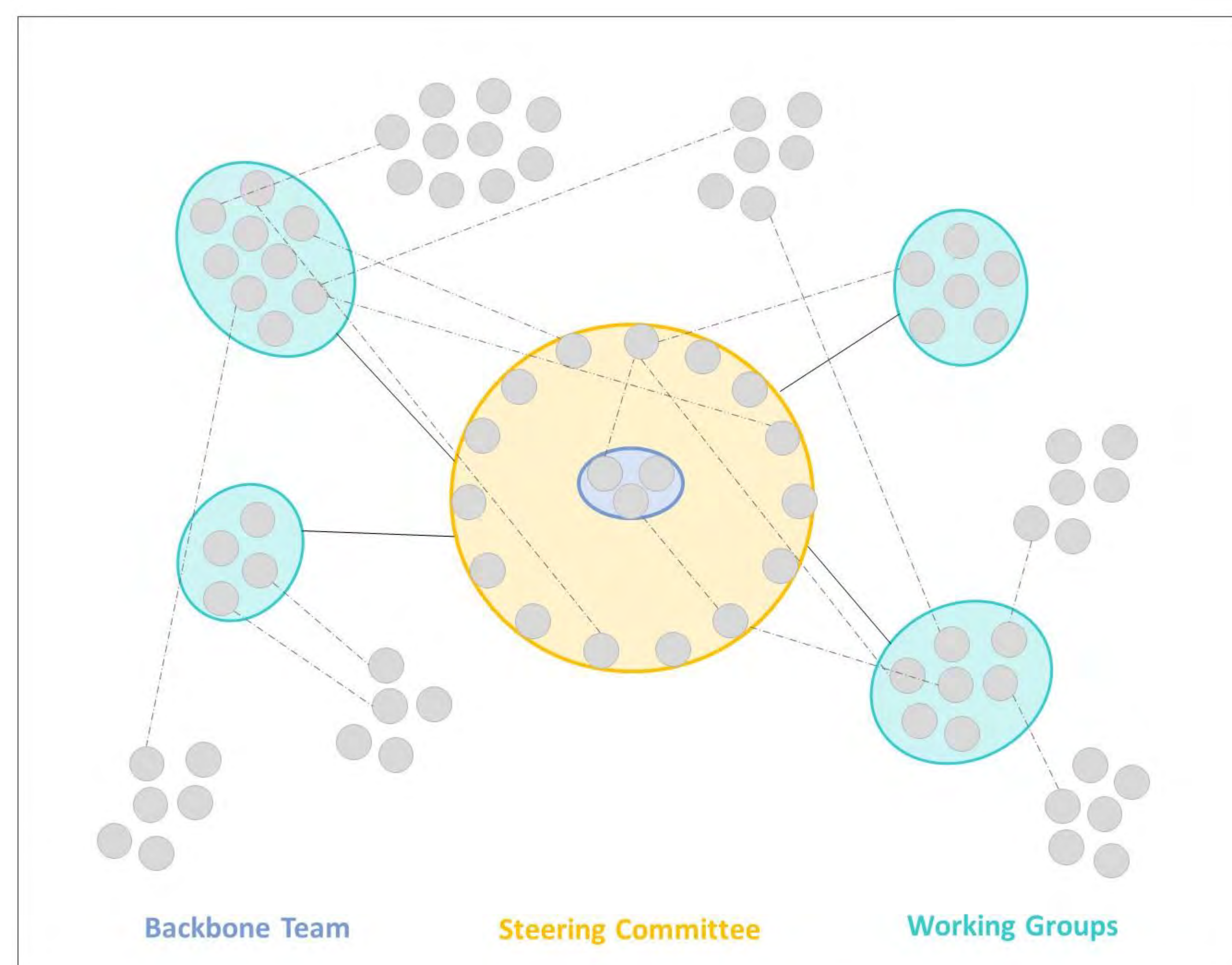joanna.ogburn@gmail.com

The Choptank River watershed is a treasured part of the Chesapeake Bay ecosystem that serves as an ecological, economic, and cultural engine for the region. The area embodies the history and culture of the Delmarva peninsula, with rich traditions in agriculture and commercial fishing, and a landscape that served as part of the Underground Railroad. Its waters serve as one of the most productive blue crab fisheries in the Bay and are home to one of the largest oyster restoration efforts in the world. However, increases in pollutants, changes in land use and impacts from a changing climate threaten the system. The Choptank is the only river in the Chesapeake watershed to show continually increasing levels of nitrogen since water quality monitoring began by the U.S. Geological Survey in 1965.

To combat these threats, organizations and agencies working in the watershed have come together as *Envision the Choptank* to identify collaborative solutions to achieve large-scale improvements in water quality. Since 2015, representatives from 15 nonprofits, government agencies, academic and agricultural organizations have guided the initiative; improving coordination among those working in restoration and integrating the latest science into these efforts. The partnership also engaged over 800 stakeholders from a variety of sectors in defining the challenges that exist to improving and maintaining a healthy watershed and identifying potential solutions. The group looked for ways a collaborative effort could complement ongoing work and fill in the gaps in existing restoration activities. These efforts culminated in the completion of the Choptank Common Agenda, a detailed set of objectives and strategies focused on achieving the mission of *Envision the Choptank: providing swimmable, fishable waters and enhancing the health and productivity of native oysters in a way that best meets the needs of surrounding communities*.

NOAA Chesapeake Bay Office

Structure of Collaborative

Backbone Team   Steering Committee   Working Groups

Stakeholder Engagement Process

NOAA Chesapeake Bay Office

Purpose: 1) Learn from stakeholders living and working in the Choptank watershed what barriers exist to implementing restoration activities, how well current programs are working, and what a collaborative can do to fill in the gaps in on-going efforts. 2) Engage these stakeholders in developing objectives and strategies to overcome the barriers and elevate the collective restoration effort.

Methods:

- Completed interviews with 64 conservation practitioners working in the agriculture, fisheries, habitat conservation and restoration, and community planning sectors.

- Conducted multi-modal survey with 733 residents to understand how the needs and interests of those living in the watershed overlap with the initiative's environmental objectives.

- Held focus groups with 16 professionals working in sectors identified as key to resident concerns: economic development, heritage preservation, health, and recreation.

- Organized a Stakeholder Forum with 50+ stakeholders to review the information collected and begin coalescing the lessons learned into objectives and strategies.

- Held multiple Advisory Panel meetings, composed of Steering Committee members and stakeholder representatives, to finalize objectives and strategies.

Result: A collaboratively-developed Common Agenda for the Choptank watershed that includes 6 objectives and 15 strategies that fall under four main goal areas: conserving natural resources, restoring habitat and clean water, engaging communities, and strengthening and expanding the partnership.

Next Step: Building multi-sector working groups to carry out the strategies developed and scale-up the implementation of water quality improvements.

David Harp Photography

Mechanisms for Scaling Up

Strategies being used to address barriers identified during the Stakeholder Engagement Process and expand the scope of restoration efforts taking place include:
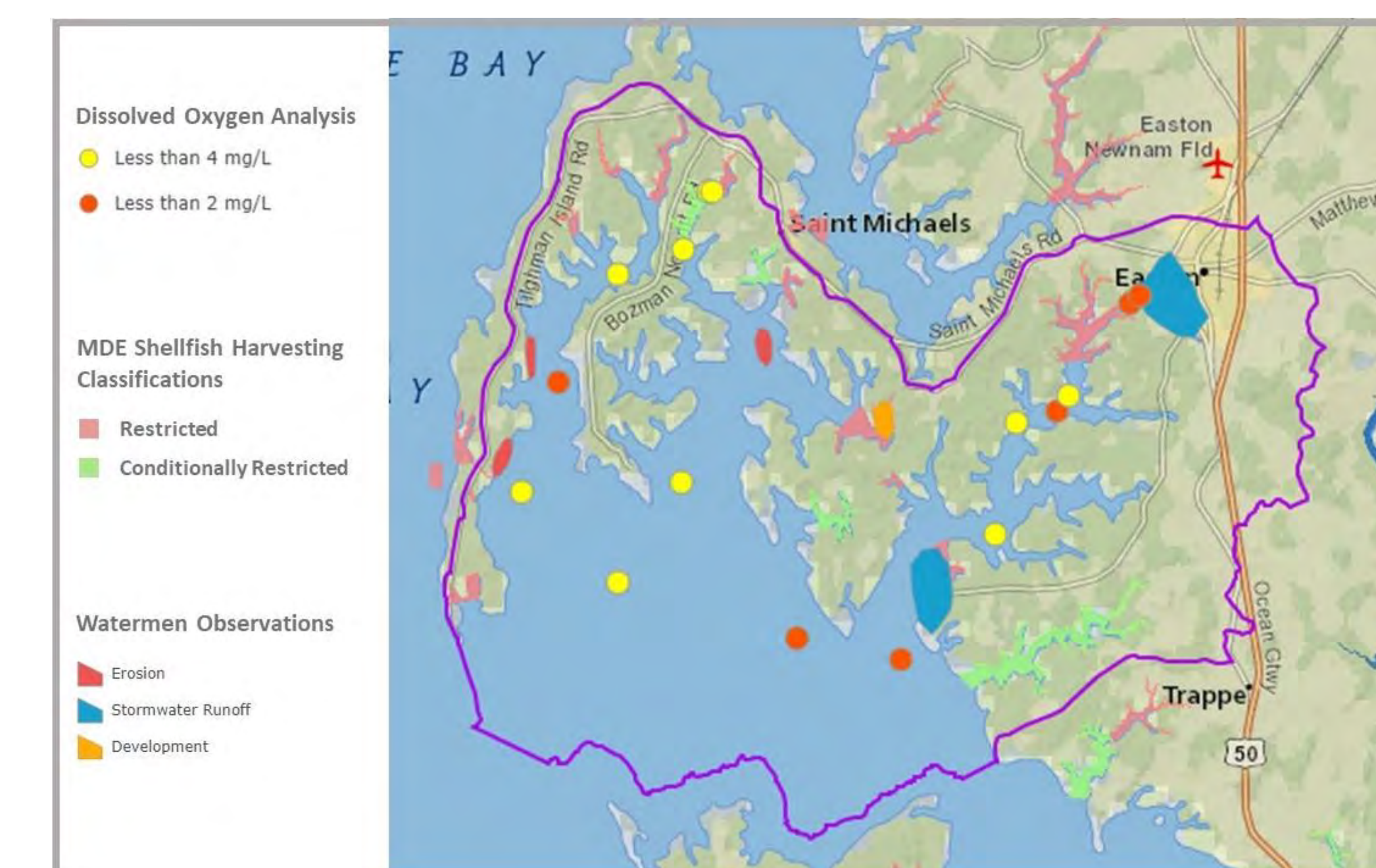
Shared Landowner Assistance Coordinators: Hiring individuals to serve as brokers, providing one-on-one assistance to landowners and connecting them with the right resources and partners to fully understand and implement agricultural and residential best management practices (BMPs).

Incentive Programs: Developing and piloting privately funded incentive programs as current agricultural cost-share program payments are not providing enough of an incentive to implement some of the most effective BMPs (e.g. buffers) and no cost-share programs or consistent funding exists for certain BMPs (e.g. living shorelines).

Capacity-Building: Developing restoration demonstration sites and trainings to provide local governments with the skills and connections needed to carry out their own projects; and working across jurisdictions to provide the tools and information to better inform local planning efforts.

Engaging New Audiences: Reaching out to audiences identified as less connected to the environment and engaging sectors not typically engaged in restoration in order to identify actions that meet multiple needs.

Evidence-Based Prioritization: Using the best available data, research, and local knowledge to identify the locations where restoration activities will be most effective at improving water quality. For example, 300,000 data points on dissolved oxygen, bacteria data, flow path analyses, and observations from watermen were combined to identify priority locations for implementing BMPs within three key tributaries (image below).

Lessons Learned

Engage a Diversity of Partners. Combining the strengths, resources, perspectives, and technical expertise of the many organizations and individuals involved has enabled the group to take on more complex and larger-scale projects.

Develop Actionable Goals and Strategies. Envision partners have used the strategies developed to keep the group focused on the core mission and have found funders receptive to projects that contribute to the goals of a larger plan.

Incorporate a Decentralized Network Structure. Creating a structure that enables smaller, working groups to take on various responsibilities and projects has increased the work accomplished; allowed partners to engage in topics they're most interested in; and stimulated the creation of new ideas.

Move at the Speed of Trust. Taking the time to build meaningful relationships and listen to the needs and concerns of each partner is necessary to sustaining a collaboration over the long-term.

Hire/Assign a Dedicated Coordinator. Having someone whose sole responsibility is to grow, mature, and maintain the collaborative has been key to the initiative's success.