

CHARTING THE FUTURE: FRANKLIN PARK CONSERVATORY'S NORTH STAR MASTER PLAN

Bruce Harkey

Franklin Park Conservatory and Botanical Gardens has undergone significant transformations over its long history. With the Columbus, Ohio, metro area experiencing rapid population growth, the Conservatory's leadership and its Board members recognized the need for a renewed vision for the future. Translating that vision into a universally embraced master plan requires community input, continuous collaboration with stakeholders, and essential partnerships. Here's how the bold and ambitious Franklin Park Conservatory's North Star Master Plan is taking shape and gaining support.

BUILDING ON A RICH HISTORY

Franklin Park Conservatory was first established in 1895 with the construction of the iconic Palm House and Showhouse, which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

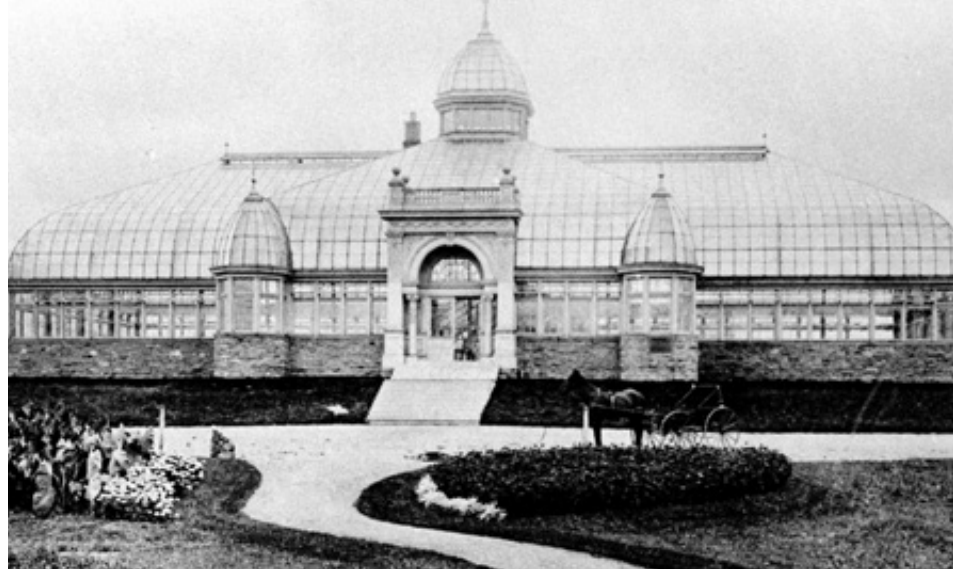
To enhance the visitor experience, biomes were added in the 1990s to showcase plants from different climate zones. The *Blooms & Butterflies* exhibit debuted in 1994, making Franklin Park Conservatory the first in the nation to showcase a tropical butterfly exhibition. Additionally, after the successful *Chihuly at the Conservatory* exhibition in 2003–2004, the Conservatory acquired the largest collection of glass art by renowned artist Dale Chihuly held by any botanical garden, further enriching its attractions.

To expand community outreach and education, the Conservatory introduced the Wells Barn, repurposing a 200-year-old Ohio barn into a vibrant venue for classes, camps and events. The venue can accommodate up to 320 guests for cocktails and 250 for a sit-down dining experience.

In 2018, the Conservatory transformed its outdoor space with the opening of the Scotts Miracle-Gro Foundation Children's Garden and the enclosure of the Grand Mallway. This secure space enables popular family-focused exhibitions like *Pumpkins Aglow* and *Holidays Aglow*. It also reinforced the impact capital projects can have on community engagement: membership increased by 68% and attendance by more than 55% in the five years following the opening.

While these and other improvements focus on enhancing the visitor experience and supporting financial sustainability, leadership and Board members have turned their sights to taking the Conservatory's offering to a new level—a level that matches that of its burgeoning metropolitan area.





Above: Franklin Park Conservatory has been a fixture in the Columbus community for more than 100 years.

Left: Franklin Park Conservatory is home to the largest collection of glass art by artist Dale Chihuly at a botanical garden. The integration of the glass art with nature throughout the Conservatory create stunning visual contrasts and luminous interplays of glass and light.

Photo: Dale Chihuly, Niijima Floats (detail), 2003, Sunset Chandelier, 2019, and Anemones, 2019, Franklin Park Conservatory and Botanic Gardens, Columbus, Ohio, © Chihuly Studio.

Below left: The addition of the Scotts Miracle-Gro Foundation Children's Garden was a major milestone, increasing membership and attendance at Franklin Park Conservatory.

All photos (except of Chihuly glass): Franklin Park Conservatory and Botanic Gardens

ADAPTING TO AN EVOLVING COMMUNITY

The population of the Columbus metropolitan area increased by 32% between 2000 and 2020, and a 2024 study by the Bank of America Institute ranked Columbus as the fastest-growing city in the United States. That growth is expected to continue as the company Intel develops a massive semiconductor manufacturing plant in the adjacent Licking County. The City of Columbus is preparing for this growth through ambitious projects such as the Capital Line, a two-mile urban pathway connecting Licking County to the downtown city attractions.

This rapid population growth, combined with increasing community demand for green space and educational opportunities, underscores the necessity for a visionary master plan. As Columbus expands, Franklin Park Conservatory must evolve to meet the needs of a growing and changing community.

CREATING THE VISION

The first step toward developing a master plan began with creating a community-centered vision for the future. After interviewing multiple consultants, the Board engaged Gallagher Consulting to facilitate the vision-creation process.

The firm sought input for the vision through a community survey and interviews with community leaders, staff, and Board members. Feedback from these stakeholders identified opportunities to expand the Conservatory's audience, connect more deeply with the community, and elevate the plant collection to world-class status.

Previous capital campaigns laid a solid foundation by focusing on enhancing the guest experience, event spaces, and family education. With those elements in place, the community and key stakeholders turned their attention to the next stage: elevating the Conservatory's international stature and strengthening connections between the Conservatory, the surrounding park, and the community. Achieving these objectives would require expanding and diversifying garden spaces and an intensified focus on horticulture.

This input informed the development of a clear and concise vision for the garden's future: *to become a premier botanical garden destination.*



That vision is supported by three pillars that serve as guiding principles for the successful realization of the vision:

- ❖ Inspire a connection to nature
- ❖ Create life-enhancing experiences
- ❖ Cultivate belonging for all people.

Leadership then conducted a national search for the partners best-suited to bring the vision to life through a master plan. MKSK, a Columbus-based landscape architecture firm with a national footprint, was selected to lead the development of the plan, supported by infrastructure partner AECOM, garden design and horticulture partner Phyto, and event experience partner Thinkwell.

With a vision defined and partners selected, the foundation was in place to develop a master plan for the Conservatory's long-term future.

A PIVOTAL DECISION LEADS TO THE NORTH STAR MASTER PLAN

Because of the way the Conservatory has evolved physically, the signature John F. Wolfe Palm House entrance is currently positioned at the back of the site, making it less visible upon arrival. In addition, while gardens are present, they are not the primary focus of the initial visitor experience. Re-imagining the visitor experience would be a bold but essential step in realizing the Conservatory's vision of more connectivity with the community and the adjacent public park.

To accomplish this revisioning, the North Star Master Plan (NSMP) aims to move the main entrance from the Conservatory to a more central location, changing how visitors experience the Conservatory upon arrival. Thus, the John F. Wolfe Palm House will become one of the first structures visitors see. The Grand Gardens will then be added at the entrance to ensure a garden-forward, immersive visitor experience.

Informal feedback gathered from the donor community found broad acceptance of the NSMP to reorient the Conservatory. Multiple community feedback sessions were then held with various audiences, including neighbors, civic leaders, donors, volunteers, and members. The emphasis on synergy with the community and guest amenities, a substantial increase in immersive gardens, and the renovation of the John F. Wolfe Palm House were met with great enthusiasm and a push to see the vision come to life sooner rather than later.

The NSMP addresses this feedback through proposals for the new Grand Gardens and flanking Signature Gardens. It will prioritize restoration of the Palm House with a new visitor center that will house a restaurant and gift shop, centralized underground parking with rooftop gardens, two new biomes, modernizations of existing buildings, and an expanded Greenhouse Operations Complex to support the significant increase in garden acreage.

MAKING IT HAPPEN

An unveiling of the full NSMP was held for over 100 stakeholders on May 8, 2024. The plan received accolades for its bold vision. Financial support from The Columbus Foundation was announced that day, further supporting credence to the Plan's feasibility.

This positive reaction led the Conservatory to further explore the community's appetite for the Plan's projects through a feasibility study. After a national search, Benefactor Group was selected to conduct a feasibility study to determine the funding threshold for the Plan.

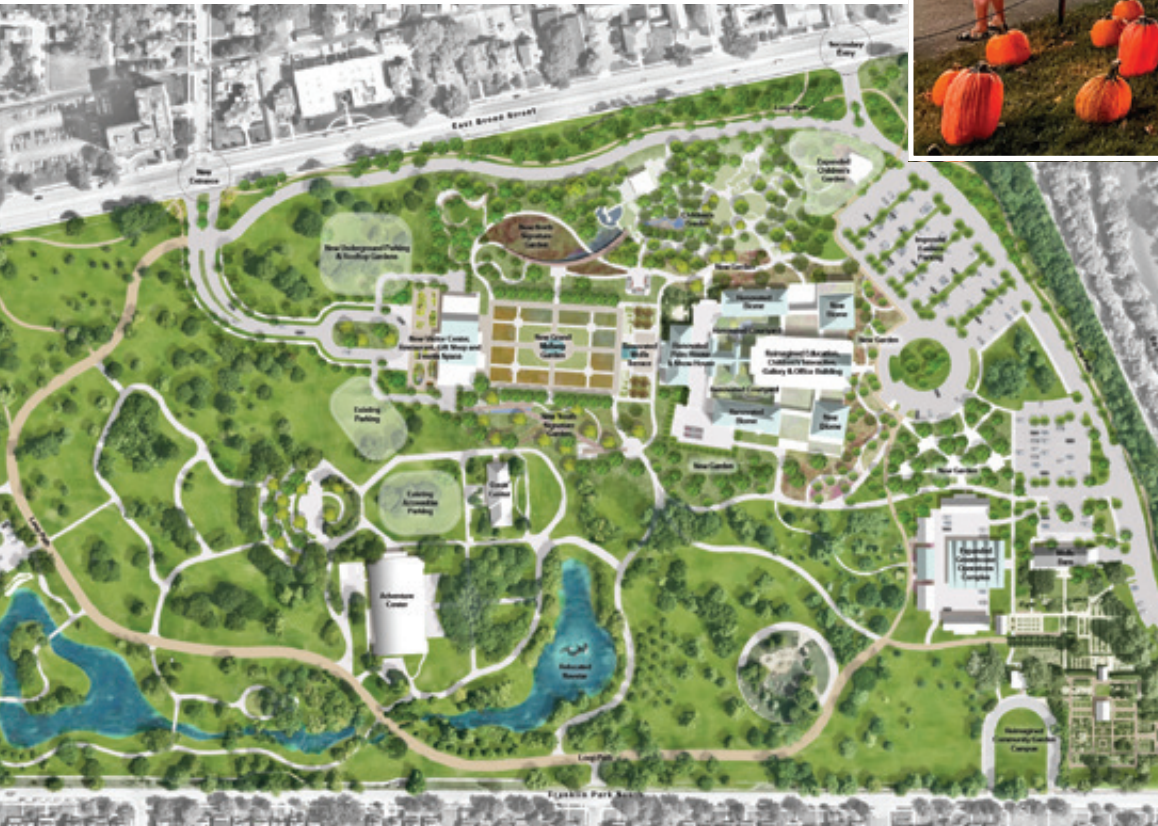
Benefactor Group conducted interviews with the Board and potential donors and found an exceptionally strong response: all study participants agreed that the proposed vision will take the Conservatory in the right direction. The feasibility study also identified a sense of urgency around key components of the Plan and a willingness by study participants to serve as volunteers in the fundraising campaign. In addition, each of the vision's pillars was ranked as a top priority by select study participants, indicating that each might inspire its own champions. Finally, when asked to rate and rank the campaign components, participants offered nearly unanimous support for all components.

With the feasibility of future plans secured, the Board expressed their confidence in moving forward with continued development of the NSMP's ambitious designs. The first priority will be the full renovation of the John F. Wolfe Palm House and Dorothy M. Davis Showhouse, which is slated to begin in early 2026.

The new Visitor Center aims to inspire visitors to the Conservatory and the adjacent public park with a welcoming entrance and a clear view of the John F. Wolfe Palm House, a grand Victorian-style glass greenhouse that has long been central to the identity of the Conservatory.



Right: The expanded visitors experiences makes possible extravagant and popular exhibitions such as *Pumpkins Aglow*, which features more than 1,000 pumpkins carved by staff, members and volunteers creating moments of awe for families throughout October.



The North Star Master Plan took the bold step of reimagining the visitor experience by changing the main entrance location while incorporating more than 15 capital projects that include a Grand Mollusks, new biomes, an underground parking garage with rooftop gardens, and a new a visitor center, restaurant and gift shop.

OTHER KEYS TO SUCCESS

Regular updates to public officials play a crucial role in maintaining transparency and garnering political support and funding for the Plan. Equally important, is the need to foster close connections with the Columbus Recreation and Parks Department and civic groups to ensure the Conservatory's vision and Master Plan align with the broader community needs and aspirations. Supporting positive and meaningful experiences for visitors to Franklin Park—the park in which the Conservatory resides—is a major priority for all.

Strategic use of social media, proactive media relations, and public speaking engagements aim to help build public support, excitement, and understanding of the Plan's goals and potential impact on the community. The result of these efforts have led to word-of-mouth excitement and early interest in financial support for the garden. This financial support will be crucial for implementing the bold vision outlined in the North Star Master Plan, which includes over 15 transformational capital projects, the Conservatory's largest capital endeavor to date. Early signs indicate fundraising will surpass previous garden revisioning efforts at similar stages.

The Conservatory is also working with a consulting firm to formalize its sustainability program, which is informed by staff input and national best practices. Furthermore, a research foundation has been engaged to conduct an economic impact study on the proposed designs to project expected internal and external financial impacts of the North Star Master Plan.

Through these garden projects and guest amenities, the Conservatory aims to exemplify next-generation sustainable horticulture, double its annual attendance, inspire the next generation of green industry leaders and environmental stewards, and provide the region with an internationally unique civic asset that draws the community together. Ultimately, these changes aim to elevate quality of life for residents who need it most and provide visitors from across the globe with an unparalleled garden experience. 🌸

Bruce Harkey is the President and CEO of Franklin Park Conservatory and Botanical Gardens, where he led the 2018 campaign that added the Scotts Miracle-Gro Foundation Children's Garden. He worked with the Board and community to develop the North Star Master Plan, a 25-year plan with over 15 transformational projects to establish the conservatory as a premier botanical garden destination. Harkey also serves as Board President of the American Public Gardens Association and as a board member of the Friends of the Ohio Governor's Residence and Heritage Garden.