



# Strategic Plan Update Partner Feedback

Summary Report | Summer 2024

# Introduction & Background

The GOCO board embarked on an exciting journey when they approved the [2020 Strategic Plan](#) back in June 2020. Now, as we gear up for the final stretch of this visionary five-year plan, it's time to infuse it with fresh energy and insight. Building upon the momentum of our past successes, we're gearing up for an exciting strategic plan update.

Instead of crafting an entirely new strategic plan, we're homing in on a targeted refresh, covering the next five years from 2026 to 2030. Why? Well, there are several compelling reasons:

- The core values embedded within the 2020 Strategic Plan remain as vital today as they were at its inception. Concepts like resource conservation, outdoor stewardship, community vitality, equitable access, and youth connections are timeless pillars guiding our mission.
- The unforeseen challenges posed by COVID-19 prompted us to recalibrate our strategies, causing some delays in the plan's full implementation.
- Our transition to a regional staffing model, alongside the adoption of the 2020 Strategic Plan, requires further nurturing to reach its full potential.
- Both our staff and partners have been adapting to the evolving landscape of our strategy and grant-making approach. It's been a journey of growth and adjustment that merits reflection and refinement.

## Introduction & Background

As a values-driven funding organization serving all of Colorado, GOCO emphasizes the critical role of community and partner input across all facets of our operation. With this priority in mind, an important aspect of the Strategic Plan update process involves soliciting targeted feedback from GOCO partners like you – to understand awareness, interests, needs, concerns, and opportunities related to GOCO's grant programs, spending decisions, and ongoing processes for partner engagement.

**This slide deck provides an overview of engagement initiatives carried out between March and May 2024.**

Our goal in sharing this feedback with you is to promote a collective understanding of partner perspectives related to GOCO's approach to grantmaking and spending, while simultaneously advancing the discussion of how these perspectives can help shape GOCO's Strategic Plan update.



## Objectives of the Partner Feedback Initiative Included:

- Gather feedback on GOCO's new programs and framework
- Inform potential refinements to GOCO's funding approaches, processes, and decision-making
- Understand barriers that partners face in their pursuits of GOCO funding opportunities
- Gather partner input regarding the highest and best use of GOCO funds in the advancement of GOCO's values and constitutional mandate

**NOTE:** To promote candid feedback, all engagement activities were designed and facilitated by a neutral third-party facilitator working in consultation with GOCO staff.





# Participation

# Engagement Participation

**Engagement for this phase included 1 Partner Survey, 16 Partner Interviews, and 4 Partner Focus Groups.**

## Survey

- 1 survey
- Distributed to 448 GOCO partners
- 148 total participants
- Statewide participation

## Interviews

- 16 total interviews
- 7 Land Conservation and Open Space partners
- 4 Outdoor Stewardship Organizations
- 5 Community Impact Partners

## Focus Groups

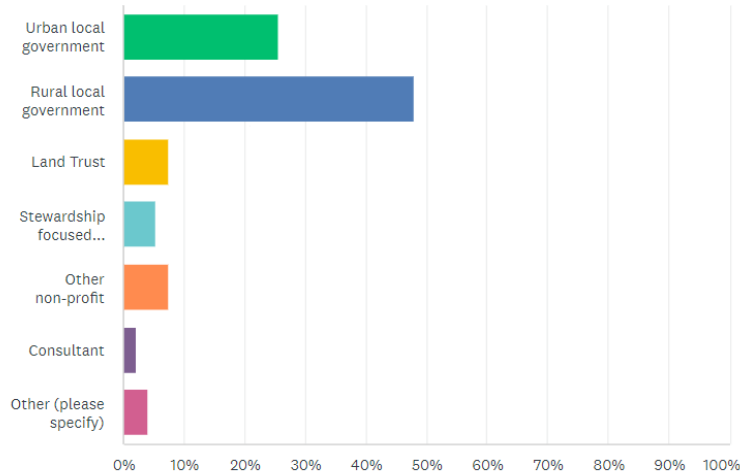
- 4 total focus groups (35 total participants)
- 9 Stewardship participants
- 9 Small Community participants
- 10 Large Community participants
- 7 Resource Conservation participants



# Survey Representation

What type of organization do you work for?

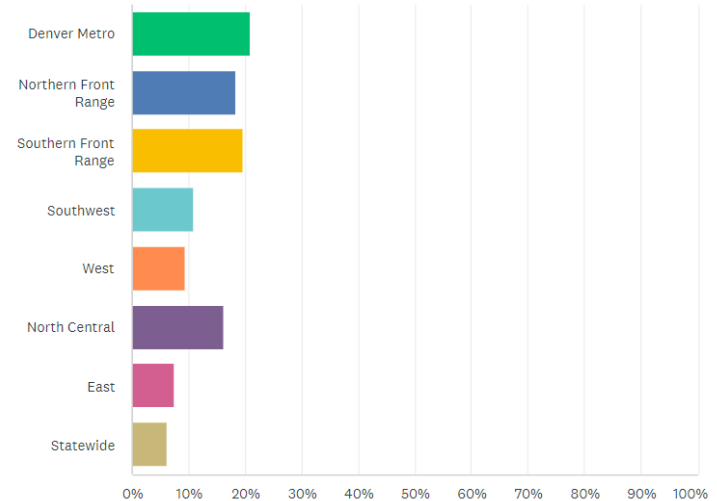
Answered: 148 Skipped: 0



**Organizational Representation (Survey):** Most survey participants were from a rural local government (48%) or an urban local government (26%).

Which region is your work primarily focused in? (select all that apply)

Answered: 148 Skipped: 0



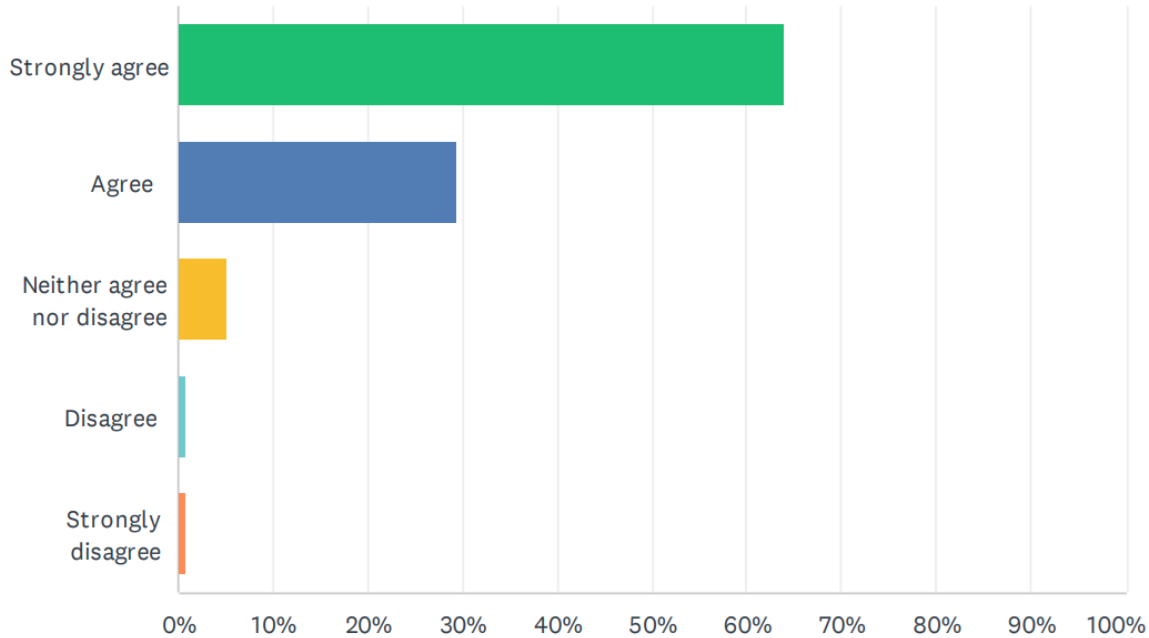
**Geographic Representation (Survey):** Participants primary work focus was spread fairly evenly across the state with the three most represented areas being the Denver Metro area (21%), Southern Front Range (20%), and the Northern Front Range (18%).



# Feedback on Grantmaking

# Q18 "GOCO is a trusted funding partner for the outdoors"?

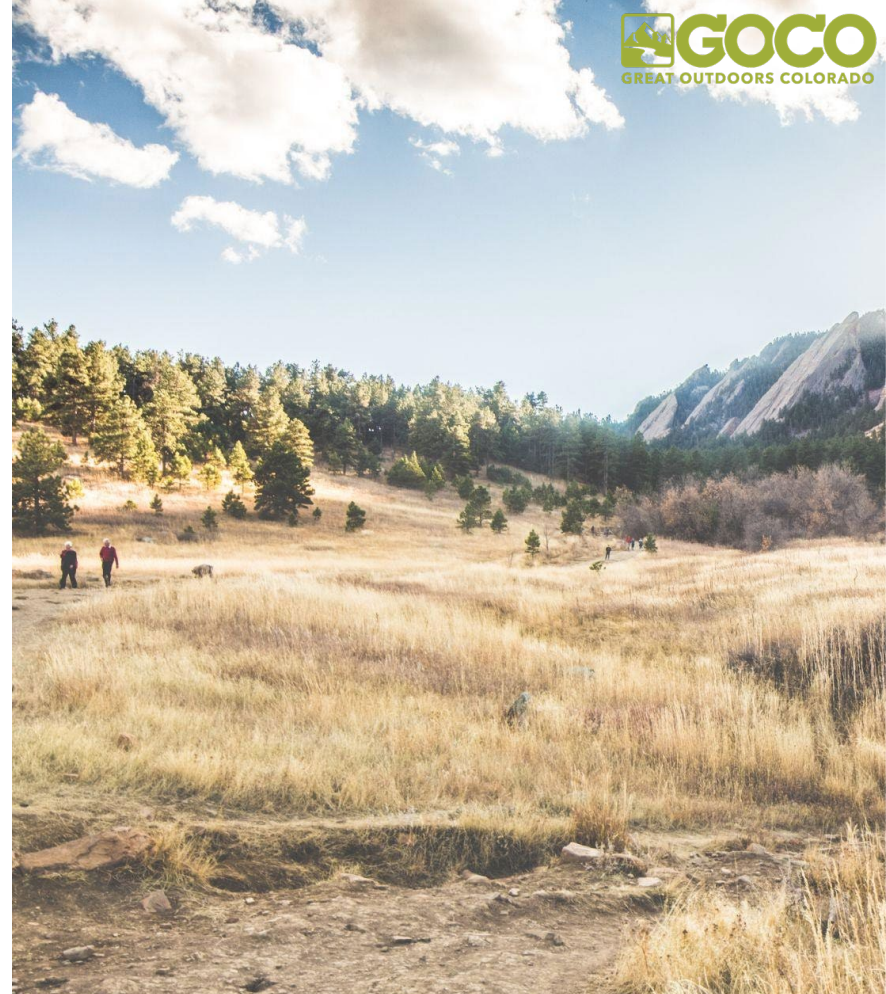
Answered: 119 Skipped: 29



Statement	Sentiment	Analysis & Insights
<b><i>"GOCO works to remove barriers to promote equitable access to funding and make the process clear and efficient."</i></b>	A majority of participants either Agreed (46%) or Strongly Agreed (28%)	Participants voiced appreciation for the concept paper, accessibility of GOCO staff, and the Regional Officer model as their response explanations. 9 total participants disagreed with this sentiment, with the most common rationale being challenges with equitable access requirements or match funding.
<b><i>"GOCO considers the unique culture and needs of each community."</i></b>	A majority of participants either Agreed (53%) or Strongly Agreed (26%)	Participants noted the importance of the Regional Officers' role in understanding unique community needs, with most describing it as a benefit and a small minority describing it as a barrier. Rural organizations noted financial limitations as a specific need for GOCO to consider in grant decisions.
<b><i>"GOCO provides partners with resources, training, and shared learning opportunities to support success."</i></b>	A majority of participants either Agreed (35%) or Strongly Agreed (32%)	This statement resulted in the <u>least</u> "agree" or "strongly agree" responses among survey participants, indicating a potential opportunity for GOCO to develop additional resources and learning opportunities, or enhance communication about those that exist.
<b><i>"GOCO communicates with clear, accessible, and inclusive language and lifts up community stories."</i></b>	A majority of participants either Agreed (53%) or Strongly Agreed (24%)	Many participants voiced support for GOCO's storytelling and communication approach. Regional officers were again touted as key to promoting and solidifying this value.
<b><i>"GOCO is a trusted funding partner for the outdoors."</i></b>	A majority of participants either Strongly Agreed (64%) or Agreed (29%)	This question resulted in the <u>most</u> "agree" or "strongly agree" responses among survey participants, indicating a high level of trust among GOCO partners.

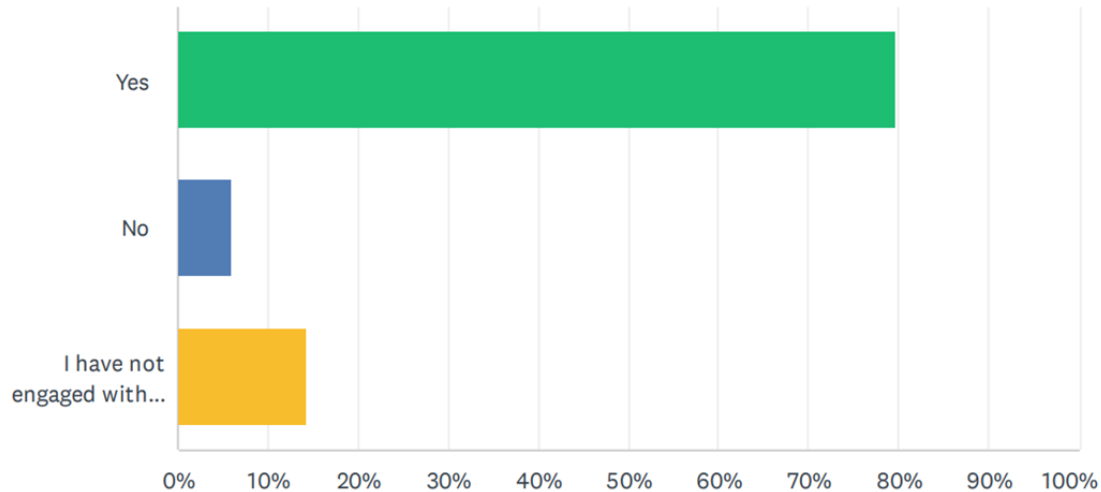
## Overarching Feedback Themes

- Strong support and enthusiasm for GOCO overall, sense among partners that GOCO is “moving in the right direction”
- Sense that communication of the new plan and approach has continued to improve since the initial rollout
- Appreciation for increased flexibility within grants and applications, which reduces barriers and allows for more creativity and innovation
- **Most prominent critique:** The more flexible values-based approach instituted in 2020 is generally viewed positively. While partners appreciate the flexibility, many expressed interest in a more comprehensive understanding of expectations, criteria, and how grant decisions are made, both prior to and post application.



Q6 GOCO now operates with a regional program officer model to better meet communities where they are at. Do you believe this model has been successful?

Answered: 119 Skipped: 29





## Regional Officer Model: Benefits

- Increased knowledge of and familiarity with community values and needs
- Stronger working relationships with local staff
- Improved responsiveness and feedback on grant applications
- Widespread support and appreciation for Regional Officers

## Regional Officer Model: Drawbacks

- Turnover and regional staff transitions create challenges and require time to develop community understanding and relationships
- Partners want the confidence that Regional Officers take a statewide perspective and engage in collaborative decision-making

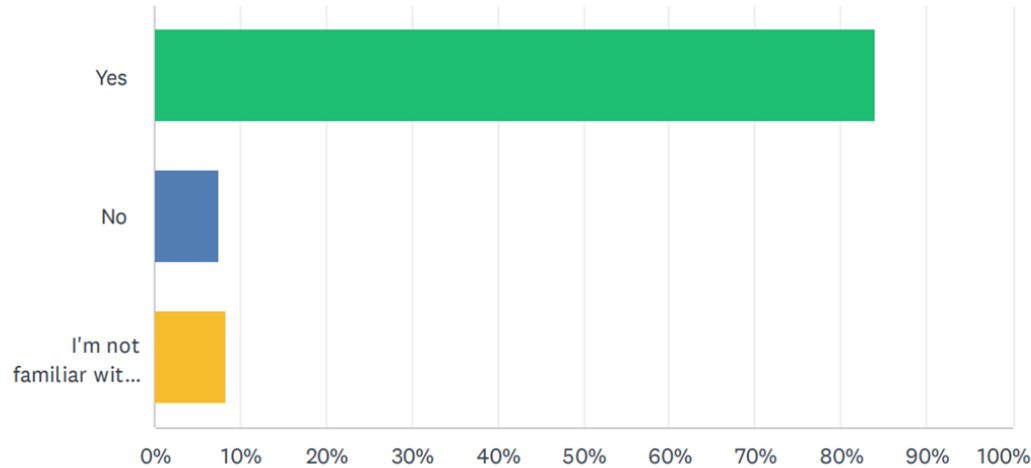
## Regional Officer Model: Participant Quotes\*

- *"It's nice to have a regional contact that may be more familiar with what is happening and priorities in our area."*
- *"It's great to have a local representative who understands the particularities of our region and can help tie statewide issues to local ones."*
- *"The challenge that I have seen with the model is it is highly dependent on the person filling the regional role. We have largely had good experiences but there has also been a lot of education on land trust roles and work that has needed to be done."*

*\*Quotes have been anonymized and paraphrased for clarity*

Q8 Do the current programs offered by GOCO (Community Impact, Land Acquisition, Planning & Capacity, Stewardship Impact, Generation Wild, Conservation Service Corps, RESTORE, ECO/Transaction Cost Assistance, and Centennial) fit your priority projects?

Answered: 119 Skipped: 29



## Concept Paper: Benefits

- Provides a more efficient and equitable process
- Reduces barriers in application process
- Provides a more cost-effective application process, particularly for organizations with less grant-writing capacity
- Allows for improvement through iteration

## Concept Paper: Drawbacks

- Challenging to summarize complex projects in only 3 pages
- Quick turnaround between concept paper deadline and full application deadline

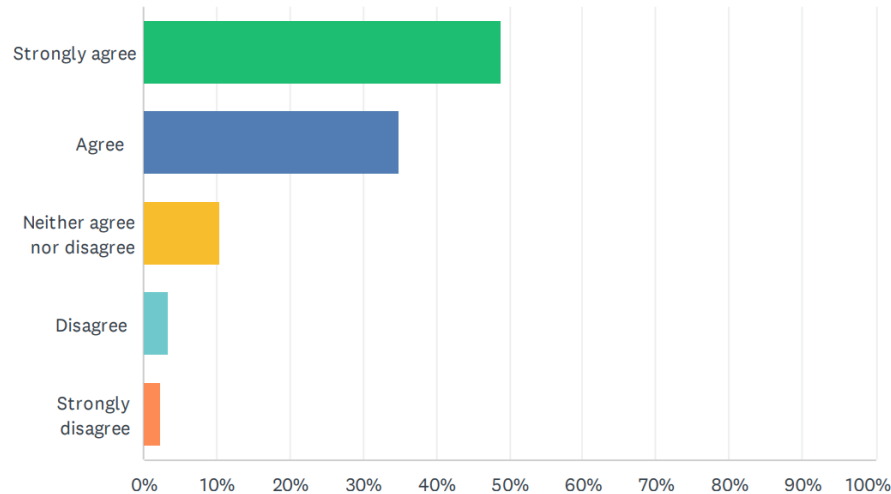
## Concept Paper: Participant Quotes\*

- *"I have very much appreciated the shift to initial concept paper and upfront consultation, which is helpful in understanding how things fit (or don't)!"*
- *"The concept paper stage allows an applicant to present a new idea and then work with GOCO to fine tune it for the application stage."*
- *"The concept paper makes the initial application fairly low in terms of time commitment / effort / resources-invested. This reduces organizations "wasting time" with lengthy applications if they won't have a chance of getting funding."*

*\*Quotes have been anonymized and paraphrased for clarity*

Q27 GOCO values a community-centered approach to prioritize, design, and/or implement projects. This can include engaging with hard-to-reach populations and going beyond traditional surveys and public meetings to develop deep community connections with the project. To what extent do you agree with/support GOCO's expectation of a community-centered design process that drives the outcome?

Answered: 86 Skipped: 62



### Community Engagement Requirements: Benefits

- Perception that community engagement requirements are important for meeting community needs, advancing equitable outcomes, and improving projects overall
- Partners are supportive of a community-driven approach to project development

### Community Engagement Requirements: Drawbacks

- Community engagement can be time-consuming and expensive, requiring outside support for organizations with less capacity and expertise
- Traditional engagement methods are still appropriate for some projects and extensive engagement is not appropriate for all projects
- Interest in finding ways to improve efficiency and right-size engagement requirements
- Partners would appreciate resources (i.e. examples, case studies, and best practices of successful community engagement initiatives)

### Community Engagement Requirements: Participant Quotes\*

- *“As park and recreation service-providers, we should prioritize projects that the community prioritizes. This GOCO value aligns with that approach and pushes communities to do thorough engagement to move forward projects that the community will most value.”*
- *“Traditional outreach methods should not be overlooked, such as surveys and public meetings. Engaging with hard to reach populations is still very important but it should not overshadow other more traditional methods.”*
- *“It would be great to see a step-by-step handout and example of a GOCO-funded community-centered approach that was successful and why.”*

*\*Quotes have been anonymized and paraphrased for clarity*



# Community Impact Themes

## Community Impact: Feedback Themes

- **Limited capacity and funding** were cited as the two most prevalent barriers to project implementation.
- **Dual perceptions of disadvantage among larger and smaller communities:** Some smaller communities described a sense of disadvantage due to less resources, capacity, and funding compared to larger communities, noting an inability to meet matching funds and engagement requirements. Meanwhile, some larger communities feel they are penalized if they have an existing funding source.
- **Lack of technical support** for grant writing, particularly in smaller communities.
- **Rising costs** particularly in more urban settings.
- **Challenges with prioritization:** Both small and large Community Impact partners struggled with selecting their highest priority project.

## Community Impact: Trends and Issues

- *Emphasis on regional connectivity*
- *Necessity to improve outdoor accessibility*
- *Increased need for fire mitigation funding*
- *Landscape scale open space conservation and acquisition was noted by many to be the highest and best use of GOCO funds.*
- *Interest and need in repurposing and/or rehabilitating older facilities*
- *Representatives of smaller communities repeatedly stated that GOCO-funded projects are transformational for rural areas, and without GOCO funds these projects would often be impossible.*



# Resource Conservation Themes

## Resource Conservation: Feedback Themes

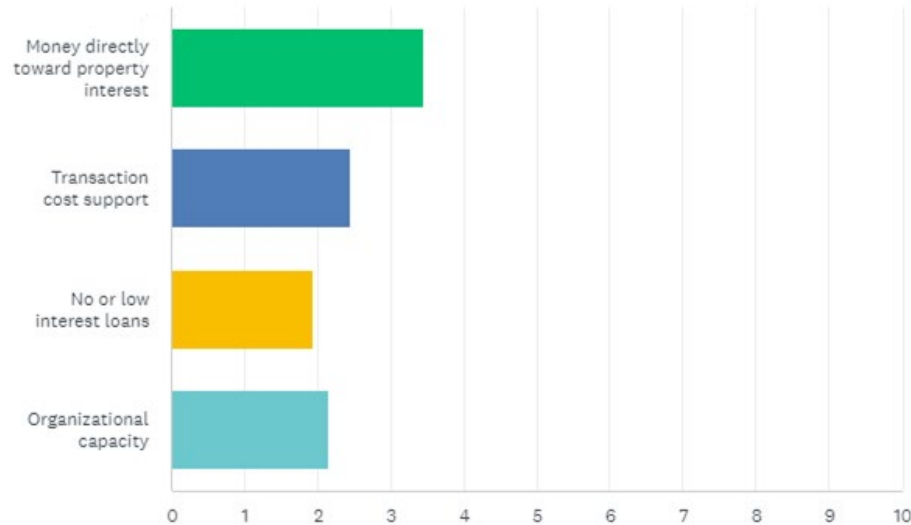
- **Development pressure:** In many places, entities may be in competition with developers for parcels of land. This highlights the need for expedited transaction processes when acquisition opportunities arise.
- **Sense of urgency:** Partners emphasized “the time is now” for large scale land acquisition across the state – and individual acquisitions must often act quickly to make a purchase.
- **Rising cost of land and transactions:** The price of land in Colorado is rising, requiring additional funds and/or the inclusion of escalation clauses. There is also a sustained need for conservation easement transaction cost assistance (TCAP), with some advocating for bolstering TCAP funds.
- **Additional clarity:** Land trust participants voiced desire to have more clarity on GOCO's funding priorities as well as some processes and criteria related to land acquisition.

## Resource Conservation: Trends and Issues

- *Increased Costs: Land, housing, and material costs are all increasing. This has led to challenges with recruiting staff, purchasing land, and stewardship/maintenance costs.*
- *Trend toward focusing on affordable housing: Growing emphasis on working to pair affordable housing and conservation, versus viewing these two as in competition.*
- *Water as a critical issue: Water and land projects are increasingly connected.*

How can GOCO best support your acquisitions? Please rank the options below.

Answered: 56 Skipped: 92



***GOCO Support for Acquisitions (Survey Responses):*** Participants ranked “Money directly toward property interest” as the top way GOCO can support acquisitions, followed by “Transaction cost support,” “Organizational capacity,” and “No or low interest loans.”



# Stewardship Themes

## Stewardship: Feedback Themes

- **Rising costs:** Rising costs for crews and staff necessitate more funding for stewardship initiatives.
- **Different Definitions of Stewardship:** GOCO's definition seems to focus primarily on restoration activities, while partners advocate for a broader definition (e.g. capital projects that support ecological health).
- **Limited staff capacity and expertise:** Critical restoration work demands crews with greater technical expertise and more expensive equipment.
- **Grantee eligibility:** Some 501(c)(3) organizations face challenges due to constitutional constraints making them ineligible to directly receive GOCO funds. Reliance on partner entities can increase administrative burden.
- **Coalitional emphasis:** Partners support coalition building, but face challenges with the time and coordination required.
- **Continue to expand investment in Youth Corps and programming.**

## Stewardship: Trends and Issues

- *Growing emphasis on longer-term initiatives over event-based models.*
- *Increased diversity and equity in the stewardship space.*
- *Growing education and awareness of climate resiliency in the stewardship community.*
- *Natural and Built Environment Interface: Stewardship considerations increasingly include areas adjacent to built environments.*
- *Shift from trail work and maintenance to a focus on ecological health.*
- *High visitation areas present ongoing stewardship challenges.*

# Next Steps

## Next Steps

The previous slides represent a high-level overview of the feedback received from GOCO partners throughout this phase of engagement activities. While not every theme that partners shared is reflected in this summary deck, GOCO staff is undertaking a detailed review of all the input received.

Is there any additional feedback you would like to share with GOCO at this time? Are we on the right track? Is there anything we missed?

**Please let us know! Use [this form](#) to either share your thoughts directly or schedule a one-on-one listening session.**

### Next Steps:

- GOCO staff will update its Strategic Plan and Spending Plan based on the partner input received and lessons learned
- Additional feedback may be sought as concepts are developed
- GOCO staff will present and review update opportunities for the Strategic Plan and Spending Plan with the GOCO Board in fall/winter 2024
- A draft FY 2026-2030 Strategic Plan will be shared for public comment in early 2025



**Thank You!**

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