

# **STRATEGIC PLAN**

**2004-2007**

Prepared by:  
Council of Community Services of NYS, Inc.  
272 Broadway  
Albany, New York 12204  
1-800-515-5012  
[www.ccsnys.org](http://www.ccsnys.org)

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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In early 2003, the board of directors of the Watershed Agricultural Council (WAC) finalized its commitment to conduct a strategic planning process with the goal of developing a 3-5 year plan, contracting with the Council of Community Services of New York State Inc. (CCSNYS) to serve as its strategic planning consultant.

WAC's strategic planning process followed a standard planning pattern, starting with a review of the mission of the organization, the development of vision and values statements, and examination of data generated through an environmental scan or SWOT analysis. Data was collected from WAC board members and staff; staff of key partnering organizations involved in WAC activities; New York City Department of Environmental Protection leadership and staff; agricultural, forestry, and easement partner organizations located throughout the watershed; farmers; foresters; and funders. Through this data collection process, key strategic questions were identified that led to the development of broad goal statements and recommendations for action.

The planning process resulted in the following recommendations:

- WAC's mission statement should be revised to more fully reflect the wide range of activities encompassed by the organization, as follows:

*The mission of the Watershed Agricultural Council is to support the economic viability of agriculture and forestry through the protection of water quality and the promotion of land conservation in the New York City Watershed region.*

- The following values should be inherent in WAC's pursuit of its mission:
  - *WAC balances the economic viability of agriculture and forestry with protecting water quality.*
  - *WAC advocates for natural resource conservation within the context of the working landscape.*
  - *WAC promotes comprehensive natural resource planning and best management practices.*
  - *WAC promotes the development of partnerships that serve to enhance its mission.*
  - *WAC strives to serve its clients well.*
- WAC's vision for the future is *to be a leader in conserving the agricultural and forestry landscape in the New York City Watershed region by proactively supporting:*
  - *Agriculture and forestry as viable economic lifestyles in the watershed;*
  - *Efforts that protect water quality;*
  - *Implementation of management plans throughout the wide geography of the watershed on farms and forests of all sizes and types;*

- *Utilization of a science-based approach to the application of Best Management Practices;*
  - *Land conservation through procurement and stewardship of agricultural and forestry easements;*
  - *Long-term financial stability for the organization;*
  - *Continued organizational and programmatic flexibility; and*
  - *Responding to new needs as they arise.*
- WAC will work to achieve its mission by pursuing the following goals:
    1. *WAC should solidify its existing funding base while also diversifying its revenue sources to protect its long-term fiscal viability.*
    2. *WAC should engage a broader range of constituents, both within and outside of the watershed, in activities that help advance its mission.*
    3. *WAC should maintain its strong programmatic emphasis on implementing agricultural and forestry structural, management, and behavioral Best Management Practices.*
    4. *WAC should maintain and/or develop working partnerships with service providers that are essential to its ability to achieve mission based goals.*
    5. *WAC should develop a marketing plan that increases visibility and support for its programs and services.*
    6. *WAC should continue to play an advocacy role on regional, state, and national policy areas that affect its mission.*
    7. *WAC should continue to invest in applied research and development activities that support its ability to achieve its mission.*
    8. *WAC should modify its governance structure to enhance its ability to achieve its organizational goals.*
    9. *WAC should seek to increase its effectiveness through targeted programmatic enhancements.*
    10. *WAC should strengthen its organizational capacity to support programmatic activities.*

The completed plan includes broad recommendations for WAC action relative to each goal. As a next step, the WAC board and staff will develop specific implementation strategies to establish the framework necessary for these recommendations to become reality and for WAC to achieve its vision.

# INTRODUCTION

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## **Background and Overview**

In early 2003, the board of directors of the Watershed Agricultural Council (WAC) finalized its commitment to conduct a strategic planning process with the goal of developing a 3-5 year plan, following through on an objective established in WAC's 2001 contract with the New York City Department of Environmental Protection. The WAC board led the planning process by creating a strategic planning committee comprised of board members, staff, and employees of key partner organizations. This committee met several times over the course of the process to select a strategic planning consultant, approve the design of the strategic planning process, evaluate collected data, develop strategic priorities, and recommend a plan for board approval.

The process was designed to include, to the best extent possible, all of WAC's key constituencies. Data was collected from the full staff and board; staff of key partnering organizations involved in WAC activities; New York City Department of Environmental Protection leadership and staff; agricultural, forestry, and easement partner organizations located throughout the watershed; farmers; foresters; and funders. In addition, the WAC Advisory Committee was also provided an opportunity for input. The board and key management staff came together several times over the course of the project to assess data, identify strategic questions, and approve strategic planning committee recommendations for action.

The strategic planning process followed a standard planning pattern, starting with a review of the mission of the organization and the development of vision and values statements. Because of the extensive number of key constituencies involved, WAC then devoted significant resources to data collection and completion of a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis. Through this data collection process, key strategic questions were identified that led to the development of broad goal statements and recommendations. As a next step, the WAC board and staff will work together to develop specific implementation strategies to make the plan a reality.

# **MISSION, VISION, AND VALUES**

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## **Mission Statement**

*The mission of the Watershed Agricultural Council is to support the economic viability of agriculture and forestry through the protection of water quality and the promotion of land conservation in the New York City Watershed region.*

## **WAC Values**

**The core values that are inherent to all WAC activities are:**

- *WAC balances the economic viability of agriculture and forestry with protecting water quality.*
- *WAC advocates for natural resource conservation within the context of the working landscape.*
- *WAC promotes comprehensive natural resource planning and best management practices.*
- *WAC promotes the development of partnerships that serve to enhance its mission.*
- *WAC strives to serve its clients well.*

## **WAC Vision for the Future**

**The Watershed Agricultural Council will be a leader in conserving the agricultural and forestry landscape in the New York City Watershed region by proactively supporting:**

- *Agriculture and forestry as viable economic lifestyles in the watershed;*
- *Efforts that protect water quality;*
- *Implementation of management plans throughout the wide geography of the watershed on farms and forests of all sizes and types;*
- *Utilization of a science-based approach to the application of Best Management Practices;*
- *Land conservation through procurement and stewardship of agricultural and forestry easements;*
- *Long-term financial stability for the organization;*
- *Continued organizational and programmatic flexibility; and*
- *Responding to new needs as they arise.*

# STRATEGIC GOALS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

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To initiate the data collection phase of the planning process, board and staff surveys and discussions were utilized to develop a preliminary environmental scan outlining WAC's internal strengths and weaknesses as an organization as well as the external opportunities and threats that constitute the environment in which WAC functions. These tools helped WAC identify several issues meriting attention in the strategic planning process.

These issues were then used to guide discussions with WAC's key constituents. Individual interviews were conducted with representatives of the NYC Department of Environmental Protection, Delaware County Soil and Water Conservation District, USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service, Delaware County Cornell Cooperative Extension, USDA Farm Service Agency—Delaware County, Catskill Center; NYS Department of Agriculture and Markets, NYS Department of Health, US Environmental Protection Agency, American Farmland Trust, USDA Forest Service, SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry, NYS Department of Environmental Conservation, NYS Soil and Water Conservation Committee, Catskill Mountain Foundation, and the Catskill Watershed Corporation. Recommendations were also obtained through discussions with the WAC easement, forestry, and East of Hudson committees, focus groups with farmers and foresters in the watershed, and meetings with staff of the WAP subcontractors.

Several key strategic issues of concern for the WAC emerged through the process of completing the SWOT analysis. With board approval, these issues were framed as strategic questions that were then used to guide the development of the specific goals and recommendations that form the core of the WAC strategic plan. The strategic questions, key issues of concern, and the related goals and recommendations that comprise the strategic plan are outlined in the following section.

**STRATEGIC QUESTION #1: WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN TO ENSURE WAC'S LONG TERM FISCAL VIABILITY?**

**Background and Key Issues**

Formed in partnership with New York City in a mutual effort to protect the quality of the NYC water supply while maintaining the economic viability of the watershed region, WAC receives the majority of its funding through contracts with the New York City Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), with DEP funding supplemented by other government contracts. This funding has been essential to WAC's success in establishing a structure that supports the ongoing design and implementation of agricultural Best Management Practices and has provided the base for expansion into the forestry and easement programs. WAC's working relationship with DEP historically has been close and mutually beneficial. However, heavy reliance on a single funding source potentially makes WAC vulnerable to changes in New York City's economic and political climate, focuses a significant portion of WAC's efforts on activities that specifically address DEP's concerns, and creates some confusion on the part of the general public about whether WAC is an independent organization or an arm of DEP, which in turn creates challenges for WAC public relations and fund raising efforts.

Some of these concerns apply to WAC's other sources of governmental support, as well. As government contracts and grants are time limited and specifically focused on achieving goals established by the funder, it will be necessary for WAC to access sources of unrestricted funding both to support programmatic priorities that fall outside of the interests of current funding sources and to provide a hedge against the potential reduction or loss of government funding streams.

<p><b>Goal #1: WAC should solidify its existing funding base while also diversifying its revenue sources to protect its long term fiscal viability.</b></p>
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**Recommendations:**

- A. WAC should maintain its long term partnership with the NYC DEP and other local, state, and federal agencies to deliver programs that protect water quality in the watershed, formally identifying those aspects of WAC's current programs that are appropriately supported primarily by government and those in which government funding may have a more limited role.
- B. WAC should pursue additional funding streams to enhance its programmatic flexibility.
- C. WAC should create a fund development plan that identifies potential revenue producing activities and develops related business plans for each program area.

**STRATEGIC QUESTION #2: SHOULD WAC SERVE A BROADER RANGE OF CONSTITUENTS? IF SO, WHO ARE THEY AND HOW CAN THIS BE ACCOMPLISHED?**

**Background and Key Issues:**

WAC has been highly successful in engaging the participation and cooperation of the majority of large farm owners in the West of Hudson region of the watershed and its programs targeting small farms and forestland owners are growing. WAC has developed loyal relationships with its participating landowners and is committed to nurturing and maintaining this strong base of support. It has proved more difficult, however, to locate and engage farm owners in the East of Hudson region. Additionally, there are several potential constituencies, such as other landowners, miners, and recreational users of the watershed, who potentially have an impact on the watershed environment and/or economy and therefore represent an "untapped market" both for WAC services and as potential sources of revenue generation. WAC also has developed a wealth of experience and expertise that could be of benefit to regions outside of the watershed that could be marketed to generate additional revenue.

<p><b>Goal #2: WAC should engage a broader range of constituents, both within and outside of the watershed, in activities that help advance its mission.</b></p>
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**Recommendations:**

- A. WAC should maintain its core constituency within the watershed.
- B. WAC should develop criteria, establish priorities, and build its capacity for expanding its constituent base within the watershed.
- C. WAC should pursue customer bases in regions that overlap or are outside of the watershed to the extent that their interests are in alignment with the WAC mission.

**STRATEGIC QUESTION #3:      WHAT IS WAC'S ROLE IN THE ONGOING  
PROCESS OF IMPLEMENTING BMPS?**

**Background and Key Issues:**

WAC's core programs focus on helping farmers and forest land owners plan and implement Best Management Practices. Forested land comprises the majority of the watershed, making non-industrial private forest landowners key to watershed protection. To date, the greatest resources have been directed toward the implementation of structural BMPs on large dairy farms in the West of Hudson region, 95% of which now have Whole Farm Plans in some stage of development or completion. Currently, the approval process for Whole Farm Plans is perceived by many to be cumbersome and overly bureaucratic and there is no plan in place to provide support for the long term maintenance or replacement of the structural BMPs as they age. Additionally, there is concern that increased emphasis needs to be placed on providing the education and support necessary for land owners actively engaged in farming or forestry to fully incorporate both behavioral and management best practices in their day-to-day operations.

In many ways, WAC is now at a watershed period in its own growth and development, as it nears completion of a major phase of Whole Farm Planning. It must now address how to best sustain the accomplishments of the past ten years while continuing to expand its scope of activities. This will require establishing a mechanism for prioritizing both ongoing implementation as well as replacement of BMPs, identifying and pursuing alternative sources of funding to support replacement of structural BMPs, and exploring economically viable options for collective action, while maintaining support for activities targeting individual farm or forest land owners.

<p><b>Goal #3:      WAC should maintain its strong programmatic emphasis on implementing agricultural and forestry structural, management, and behavioral Best Management Practices.</b></p>
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**Recommendations:**

- A.      WAC should streamline the whole farm plan review process in order to enhance implementation of BMPs.
- B.      WAC should support continuing implementation of BMPs.
- C.      WAC should monitor existing structural BMPs and develop a plan to address the need for their maintenance and/or replacement.
- D.      WAC should provide ongoing consultation and training to ensure implementation of management BMPs.
- E.      WAC should provide the appropriate level of education necessary to ensure ongoing implementation of behavioral BMPs.

**STRATEGIC QUESTION #4: ARE SUBCONTRACTING PARTNERS ESSENTIAL IN PROVIDING WAC SERVICES, OR ARE THERE ALTERNATIVE MODELS THAT SHOULD BE EXPLORED?**

**Background and Key Issues:**

Since its inception, WAC has subcontracted the major work associated with the development and implementation of Whole Farm Plans to a partnership comprised of the Soil and Water Conservation District, the Natural Resource Conservation Service, and Cornell Cooperative Extension. WAC has a close working relationship with these partners and some WAC staff are co-located with staff of the partner organizations. WAC also subcontracts with several individuals and organizations for assistance in the development of forestry management plans. These partnerships have provided WAC with a significant level of technical expertise that has helped enhance its credibility in the watershed. The partnership relationships are somewhat complicated by the fact that some of the subcontractors also sit in an advisory capacity on WAC committees, which can create difficulties in addressing performance and accountability issues. Additionally, there is some concern that differing perspectives between WAC and some of its partners limit WAC's potential for creativity and innovation.

Expansion of WAC's partnership base through the development of working relationships with other organizations addressing environmental or economic issues in the watershed offers potential for both new programming and new funding opportunities.

<p><b>Goal #4: WAC should maintain and/or develop working partnerships with service providers that are essential to its ability to achieve mission based goals.</b></p>
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**Recommendations:**

- A. As WAC bears the ultimate responsibility for program accountability, final decisions with regard to program delivery should be made by WAC in accordance with WAC standards.
- B. WAC should affirm and maintain its historical and institutional connections with its current partners in accomplishing its goals through the planning and implementation of BMPs.
- C. As other opportunities for partnerships arise, WAC should maintain its flexibility in selecting partners that can best address programmatic needs as well as cost constraints.

**STRATEGIC QUESTION #5: HOW AND TO WHOM SHOULD WAC BE MARKETED?**

**Background and Key Issues:**

The diversity of WAC programs and its expansive geographic territory present significant challenges to the organization's public relations and marketing efforts. Constituents tend to be more familiar with individual WAC programs than with the organization as a whole, and the split between the East of Hudson and West of Hudson regions of the watershed is more than merely geographic, with each region containing significantly different audiences for WAC's public relations messages. These challenges are exacerbated by a common lack of understanding that WAC is a separate organization from DEP and its partner organizations in Walton.

WAC also presents significant marketing opportunities. As a nationally recognized program, WAC has a unique success story that can be capitalized on with expanded public relations efforts. This story can be used to support a well designed marketing plan that addresses many of WAC's interests and concerns, including the need for expansion of outreach and educational activities, fund development activities, market development for watershed farm and forest products, and establishment of broad based grass roots support for WAC's mission and programs.

<p><b>Goal #5: WAC should develop a marketing plan that increases visibility and support for its programs and services.</b></p>
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**Recommendations:**

- A. WAC should build upon its existing constituency among affected water users with the goal of enhancing its advocacy support base as well as support for all program areas.
- B. WAC should build on existing relationships with the environmental advocacy community as well as other organizations whose missions focus on the watershed.
- C. WAC should reach out to local constituents to promote its positive economic and environmental impact within the watershed.
- D. WAC should reach out to potential client bases both within and outside of the watershed.
- E. WACs promotional materials should clearly identify all WAC programs and demonstrate how they are integrated under the WAC umbrella.

**STRATEGIC QUESTION #6: SHOULD WAC PLAY A LARGER ADVOCACY ROLE ON STATE AND NATIONAL POLICY AREAS THAT AFFECT THE ECONOMIC VIABILITY OF AGRICULTURE AND FORESTRY?**

**Background and Key Issues:**

What WAC is able to achieve at the local level is significantly impacted by national economic and market trends that threaten the long term economic viability of farming and forestry, as well as by the rapid land development that is converting farm and forest lands in the watershed region to less desirable uses, particularly East of Hudson. Extensive advocacy efforts directed at the state and national level will be necessary to counter or lessen the negative impact of these trends. The outcome of the anticipated reauthorization of the U.S. Farm Bill in 2007 will also be of critical importance to WAC and its constituents. While WAC is not positioned to devote resources to intensive advocacy efforts, it historically has been sought out as a source of information and advice by those in decision making roles. It can potentially expand its role in this arena by affiliating itself with other advocacy organizations whose activities are in alignment with WAC's mission and goals as well as by sponsoring community educational activities such as farm and forestry awareness days. As a first step, WAC will need to identify the specific issues that merit its attention and the alliances that offer the most potential for supporting WAC's interests and concerns.

**Goal #6: WAC should continue to play an advocacy role on regional, state, and national policy areas that affect its mission.**

**Recommendations:**

- A. WAC should continue to respond to requests for information from legislative personnel and other policy makers.
- B. WAC should play a more proactive role around issues specifically related to water quality and economic viability, primarily through affiliation with other environmental, agricultural, and forestry advocacy organizations.

**STRATEGIC QUESTION #7: WHAT IS WAC'S ROLE WITH REGARD TO RESEARCH?**

**Background and Key Issues:**

Research based methodologies provide the foundation for all of WAC's services, guiding the design and implementation of Best Management Practices and providing data that assists in the evaluation of program effectiveness. As the initial Whole Farm Planning process begins to approach completion, research will become more important as WAC must make choices about how to most appropriately direct its resources to both sustain its accomplishments and expand its scope of services. Scientific research will be essential to evaluating program delivery while market research can help target the development of new program areas. Currently, WAC utilizes the assistance of subcontractors to conduct its research activities and has experienced some difficulty in monitoring their work and holding them accountable to expected time frames for project completion. As a nationally recognized model, WAC also frequently finds itself in the position of being approached by researchers who are interested in utilizing it as a "living laboratory" for their own research purposes.

Given the multiple possibilities for integrating research into WAC's day-to-day operations, it is important for WAC to more fully identify and prioritize its research needs and define its role as a living laboratory.

<p><b>Goal #7: WAC should continue to invest in applied research and development activities that support its ability to achieve its mission.</b></p>
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**Recommendations:**

- A. WAC should develop a strategic plan for research that supports WAC's ability to prioritize its programmatic activities.
- B. WAC's research activities should include both market and scientific research.
- C. Cost/benefit analyses should be included as a component in all research activities.
- D. WAC should continually monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of its Best Management Practices in protecting water quality.

**STRATEGIC QUESTION #8: DOES WAC'S PRESENT GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE NEED TO BE MODIFIED IN ANY WAY TO ACHIEVE ORGANIZATIONAL GOALS?**

**Background and Key Issues:**

WAC prides itself on having a knowledgeable and committed Council (board of directors) comprised of individuals who give the organization a high level of credibility among farmers in the watershed. Historically, a considerable portion of Council members' time has been allocated to the review and approval of Whole Farm Plans and the Council structure has been established to support this process. As the organization moves to expand both its constituency and its programs, the Council is challenged to recruit members who represent the diversity in the region and can provide appropriate direction and oversight for the full range of programs that operate under WAC's auspices. It is also challenged to structure its operations in a way that makes it feasible for individuals who are still actively farming or have other full time occupations to fulfill their responsibilities as Council members.

WAC currently has no formal process for recruiting, orienting, or providing ongoing training and support for Council members and experiences some difficulty in maintaining a full complement of board members who can adequately support the existing committee structure. Recruiting non-Council members to serve on WAC committees could provide additional support for committee activities while serving as a "feeder system" for the board. Additionally, streamlining the committee structure could lessen the demands on Council member time. Another concern is related to the fact that Council members receive stipends for the time they spend at WAC Council and committee meetings. While this helps sustain Council membership, it increases the level of liability individuals assume as members of the board of directors of a non-profit organization, since the stipends make them ineligible for the full level of protections afforded to volunteer board members under state law.

<b>Goal #8: WAC should modify its governance structure to enhance its ability to achieve its organizational goals.</b>
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**Recommendations:**

- A. WAC should restructure its committee structure to integrate program oversight functions and enhance efficiency.
- B. WACs bylaws should be reviewed and revised as necessary to be in alignment with organizational goals and processes.
- C. WAC should recruit new Council members with an eye toward broadening the types of constituencies represented on the Council.
- D. WAC should establish a formal process for conducting ongoing board development, orientation, and training activities.

**STRATEGIC QUESTION #9: DO WAC'S PROGRAMS NEED TO BE MODIFIED TO ACHIEVE ORGANIZATIONAL GOALS?**

**Background and Key Issues:**

Initially focused solely on designing and implementing Whole Farm Plans for large farms in the watershed region, WAC now encompasses a diverse array of programs with a well established base in the West of Hudson region and a growing program East of Hudson. This programmatic diversity, combined with the widely disparate characters of the two distinct regions in the watershed, make it difficult for the organization to function as a unified whole rather than as individual programmatic or geographic “islands.” The fact that some program areas are supported by significantly higher levels of funding also presents challenges to organizational unification. Additionally, WAC’s heavy reliance on government contracts currently limits its ability to enhance existing services or explore new program directions. WAC is moving toward developing an internal structure that supports unified, organization wide planning on an ongoing basis. Once in place, this structure should better address individual program goals and needs in the context of overall organizational goals and resources.

<p><b>Goal #9: WAC should seek to increase its effectiveness through targeted programmatic enhancements.</b></p>
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**Recommendations:**

- A. WAC’s current programs should be structurally integrated to ensure that they are working in concert to enhance WAC's ability to achieve its overall mission.
- B. WAC should seek funding for enhancement of programs beyond what is currently supported by existing government contracts.
- C. WAC should establish a process for ongoing program planning and evaluation for each WAC program area.
- D. WAC should establish a prioritization process for allocating resources to each of its programs.
- E. WAC should explore opportunities to reduce duplication of efforts by consolidating services with organizations conducting similar programs.

**STRATEGIC QUESTION #10: WHAT INFRASTRUCTURE NEEDS MUST BE ADDRESSED IN ORDER FOR WAC TO ACHIEVE ITS GOALS?**

**Background and Key Issues:**

WAC has a creative and talented staff that is highly committed to helping it achieve its mission in the watershed. The staff's ability both to perform at optimal levels and work effectively together to bridge programmatic and geographic service divisions would be enhanced by upgrades in its existing communications technology, establishment of regular communications mechanisms and protocols, and access to technological supports such as well developed data bases and fiscal monitoring systems. Currently, both internal and external communication is impeded by the fact that the staff is scattered among several office locations and has limited access to voice mail, the internet, and email. Similarly, updating and maintaining existing databases would enhance their usefulness as management tools to track program progress and guide decision making.

Program and administrative staff would also benefit from the assistance of additional ancillary and support staff, including individuals who can assume agency wide responsibility for database development, technology management, fund development, and clerical support. Staff expansion will also require planning for space adjustment as the growth of WAC programs and staff over the past few years has already stretched the limits of the present office locations.

**Goal #10: WAC should strengthen its organizational capacity to support programmatic activities.**

**Recommendations:**

- A. WAC should upgrade and better manage its existing databases.
- B. WAC should review CCSNYS recommendations with regard to its fiscal policies and procedures and make adjustments, as necessary.
- C. WAC should improve both its internal and external communications mechanisms.
- D. WAC should assess space needs and make plans as appropriate.
- E. WAC should assess its staffing needs and make plans as feasible and appropriate.