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# INPAWS Strategic Plan 2013–2016

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# Introduction

On February 23, 2013, members of the INPAWS Executive Committee and Council met at The Nature Conservancy, Indiana headquarters to begin their first-ever strategic planning process. With Karen LaMere facilitating and Fiona Becker taking notes, the group shared personal insights as to the internal strengths and weaknesses of the organization and the external opportunities and threats it faces going forward. It became clear that a visioning exercise was also needed, and the mission statement was revisited to sharpen the focus.

This Strategic Plan presents the revised mission statement, a newly crafted INPAWS vision, a summary of the SWOT analysis, and the priority goals selected for the four-year plan period. Objectives are outlined for each goal, with action steps and in some cases timelines. Additional objectives were incorporated based on a follow-up retreat held March 15, 2014.

It is the Council’s intent that this plan be a living document that will continue to be fine-tuned and added to as goals are implemented.

# Mission

To promote the appreciation, preservation, scientific study, and use of plants native to Indiana and to teach people about their beauty, diversity, and importance to our environment.

# Vision

INPAWS envisions an Indiana whose citizens treasure and protect their native plants and the web of life that relies on them and who use native plants in public and private landscapes.

# State of the Organization

As INPAWS entered its 20th year in 2013, the organization had much to celebrate. INPAWS has good recognition across the state, has earned a reputation for delivering strong educational programs, and has demonstrated that it can make a difference, especially with awareness of invasive species. Thanks to the lessons of Doug Tallamy, we have a new understanding of the crucial role of native plants in the cycle of life, bringing a more dynamic, clearly defined vision of where we want to take Indiana.

## Programs

INPAWS is recognized for staging well-organized events and programs consistently over a period of many years. The annual plant sale and auction, garden tour, and fall conference are staples that members expect and enjoy and that also draw in the general public. Guided hikes take members into the best of Indiana’s nature preserves to enjoy botanizing. A strong youth program includes transportation to natural areas for school-age children and follow-up activities, supported through Letha’s Youth Outdoors Fund.

The downside to INPAWS programs is that some are large and complex, too much for one person to manage, which makes recruiting of chairs difficult. By breaking such programs into manageable tasks and pairing experienced with new volunteers so that mentoring takes place, the work can perhaps be made less overwhelming, in turn making recruiting easier.

## Membership

The high caliber of INPAWS members, many of whom have technical expertise, gives this all-volunteer organization good credibility. The membership and leadership includes a mix of professionals and amateurs among which an attitude of goodwill pervades. All levels of knowledge are welcomed and accepted in a spirit of friendliness, and volunteers enjoy positive experiences when they lend a hand.

Membership in INPAWS has grown to more than 580 families, a group so large that leaders are not well acquainted with the pool of talent available. This has a negative impact, in that leaders do not know whom they can rely on to carry out essential tasks, with the result that leaders take too much on themselves and risk burnout. INPAWS is missing opportunities because there are not enough known volunteers outside the core group. A paradigm shift is indicated, in which there is more task sharing, volunteer coordination, recruiting for time-limited projects, and succession planning.

## State Leadership

The core leadership is small compared to the volume of work INPAWS has undertaken. In the press of mounting many programs with an all-volunteer group, visioning and strategic planning have taken a back seat, with decisions taken ad hoc as issues and opportunities arise. Leaders acknowledge that the organization would benefit from a shared longer term vision—where does INPAWS want to be in 10, 20 years?

A committed core group has provided continuity of leadership over the 20 years since INPAWS’s founding, able to pass on the institutional memory to new arrivals. Some younger members have taken leadership positions in recent years, but as the founding members advance in age, it becomes increasingly urgent to inspire and mentor a whole new generation of leaders. An attempt has been made to capture the institutional memory in writing through the *INPAWS Cookbook*, and this document can be expanded to reflect the collective wisdom of experienced leaders.

The routine responsibilities of membership processing, banking, communications, event registration, and acknowledging donations have grown larger than the organization should reasonably expect volunteers to handle. Clerical support is desperately needed and would free up volunteers to work on advancing the INPAWS mission. The challenge is to sustain and supervise this support over the long term.

INPAWS’s state leadership lacks an office and depends on a post office box to receive member communications. Relying on the good graces of The Nature Conservancy to provide a centralized materials storage area, INPAWS also needs decentralized storage and distribution locations where displays, brochures, and other supplies can be made available to the chapters as needed.

## Regional Chapters

INPAWS is spreading geographically to all parts of the state. Strong new chapters have been added recently in the southwest and north, but there remain regions that are hard to organize into chapters because of a lack of critical mass of interested parties.

A goal is to have all seven chapters *actively* supporting the INPAWS mission. To this end, it is recognized that roles and responsibilities of the state organization versus the chapters need to be distinguished and clarified. In particular, the roles of state and Central Chapter are confounded, with the state organization deliberating on many issues that should be handled at the chapter level. A stronger, more active Central Chapter would remove some of the burden from the state organization.

The Bylaws and *INPAWS Cookbook* give little guidance to chapter leaders and should be updated. The state could support chapters by providing more intentional orientation and training to chapter officers and promoting sharing of innovations, ideas, and best practices among chapter counterparts.

## Partnerships

INPAWS partners with a consortium of 30 environmentally focused organizations in the Indiana Conservation Alliance (INCA) to influence legislation benefitting environmental causes. There has been little sharing with and learning from these partners, however. Nor has INPAWS collaborated with groups directly relevant to the use of native plants in landscaping, such as Master Gardener Associations, Indiana Wildlife Federation, Amos Butler Audubon, Keep Indianapolis Beautiful, and park systems. The current budget constraints on governmental units and nature organizations only increase the desirability of leveraging our common interests for a wider benefit to the environment. Unexplored opportunities also exist to form partnerships with college botany and ecology programs.

## Communications

INPAWS publishes the quarterly INPAWS Journal which has earned a reputation for excellence. INPAWS publishes a popular brochure on landscaping with plants native to Indiana, and supports the publication of brochures on invasive plants. A completely overhauled website was launched in November 2011, with an updated logo and new look. An integrated communication strategy has been devised that promotes INPAWS offerings through website content pages, a blog, a Facebook page, press releases, and monthly email updates.

Opportunities abound to spread the word on native plants and lure new members, awaiting only people power and intentional focus to take advantage of them. Tutorials, plant profiles, webcams, quizzes, and other such educational tools could be mounted on line (e.g., YouTube) and promoted through social networks (Facebook, Twitter). Avenues for television publicity have gone largely unexplored. Our collection of speaker’s bureau presentations needs to be brought up-to-date with new topics, new content, new photos, and new scripts. Technology could also facilitate internal communications by bringing together INPAWS leaders from diverse locales through videoconferencing.

## Finances

INPAWS is on a solid financial footing. With more than $75,000 in the bank, it has the financial resources to support projects large and small that could lead to a better informed citizenry and protect Indiana’s rich natural heritage. Indeed, the Council has expressed its intent to spend down some of this money and get it working for INPAWS’s mission, with only modest success. At the same time, there are not enough funds to hire much-needed paid staff and have the position be sustainable.

## Growing Interest

Recent years have seen a growing public interest in conservation, green spaces, and biodiversity especially among young people. Homeowners and churches are asking about native plants for their gardens, seeking the advice of landscapers with native plant expertise, and recognizing the danger of invasive species. The public may be ready to adopt native plants as a sign of Hoosier Patriotism, spurred on by successful efforts to bring retailers up to speed, such as the Go Green – Grow Native program pioneered by MC-IRIS.

Weighing against these positive signs are the many misconceptions about what native and invasive plants are. There is much bad information out there for easy public consumption, and well-intentioned but ill-advised weed ordinances and neighborhood association regulations complicate the lives of those who want to grow natives in their yards.

Major threats continue to be posed by the proliferation of invasive plants around the state, by the relentless march of new development, and by Indiana’s generally poor environmental culture. It comes as no surprise that at the state legislature, environmental issues take a back seat to economic and job issues. But it’s alarming that Indiana tops the scale in bad environmental practices; it has bad laws, and the good ones are not enforced.

INPAWS has many opportunities to address these problems, again, awaiting only sufficient people power and intentional focus. Best practices for creating and maintaining healthy ecosystems are out there, and INPAWS members have the expertise to educate those who need to know: the landscaping and nursery industries; service project leaders (e.g., Lilly Day of Service, Central Canal landscaping); schools; and government agencies. Homeowners always need the most basic knowledge about growing things, and INPAWS could provide that in the context of promoting native plants. Education efforts could also target the current generation of parents who did not bond with nature and are thus ill-equipped to inspire their children to become good stewards of the environment.

Work has begun on meeting the demand for good information. A newly formed Landscaping Support committee seeks to address the informational needs of the gardening public, and the North Chapter is pioneering a process for influencing local weed ordinances, aiming for a statewide vision that could be shared with cities and towns everywhere.

# Priority Goals for 2013-2016

1. Establish a robust volunteer orientation and engagement process.
2. Improve the quality of information available concerning native plants and invasives.
3. Expand the youth outreach program to nurture more of tomorrow’s stewards of the environment.
4. Pursue partnerships and collaborations with other agencies, organizations, and schools that could promote native plants as essential to healthy ecosystems.
5. Develop a long-term financial and supervision plan that would allow for paid administrative support.

# Additional Goals

1. Revisit governance structures to clarify state officer roles and distinguish between state and regional chapter responsibilities, resulting in seven *active* regional chapters of INPAWS in the state and updated bylaws.
2. Expand the use of communications technology to establish audio/video conferencing, improved use of social networking, and increased publicity of all sorts.

# Volunteer Orientation & Engagement

GOAL: **Establish a robust volunteer orientation and engagement process.**

RATIONALE: INPAWS welcomes a varied mix of members. Some bring enthusiasm but little technical knowledge; others bring professional expertise or years of experience. We need to know our pool of talent better to more effectively engage their drive and skills in pursuit of our mission.

INPAWS’s core leadership is committed and hardworking. Future leaders need opportunities to lead programs and receive mentoring from these experienced members.

Volunteers have little time to engage in time-consuming projects, and many belong to related environmental organizations that also demand their time. Volunteers may more readily accept small manageable tasks to get them started on the path to engagement.

Those present at the March 2014 follow-up retreat recommended that the next Vice President be charged with oversight of this goal.

OBJECTIVES & ACTION PLAN:

**1. Reach out to new and current members to determine interests and expertise.**

1a. Chapters will designate a person responsible for reaching out to members to determine interests and expertise. This could be one of the officers or a special volunteer coordinator. (February 2014)

1b. State and chapters will collaborate on a vehicle for logging and sharing this information. Information to come from a variety of sources (e.g., personal contacts, Facebook activity, past leadership). Vehicle should include a way to log who volunteers for what. (May 2014)

1c. Distribute the information-sharing vehicle to all concerned, with instructions on how to use it. (August 2014)

**2. Encourage volunteering by making the time commitment manageable.**

2a. State and chapter leadership will develop lists of projects, both short (two or three hours) and long (sustained time commitment) that could engage individual members. They will use as a basis the task analysis in the *INPAWS Cookbook* and analysis of their own special projects. (May 2014)

2b. State and chapter leadership will establish a process for making at least one contact per year with every person who checked their respective volunteer interest on the membership application form, inviting them to help on a specific project. (August 2014)

2c. State and chapter leadership will implement the contact process and provide for feedback on the information-sharing vehicle and through volunteer coordinators. (November 2014)

**3. Groom enthusiastic, capable, reliable volunteers for leadership positions through engagement and mentorship.**

3a. A state-level Volunteer Coordinator will be designated to facilitate this activity. This could be assigned to the Cheerleader function in Membership.

3b. State and chapter leadership will keep notes on volunteers who have proven enthusiastic, capable, and reliable, using the vehicle developed for logging and sharing member outreach findings. (beginning August 2014)

3c. State and chapter leadership will make a special effort to engage promising volunteers in planning and leading for which they are suited, acting as mentors to teach them the fine points. (beginning February 2013)

3c. By the end of year two, every level of leadership will have identified and groomed two candidates to replace themselves. (August 2015)

**4. Ensure that available volunteer recruitment tools are known to and useful to officers and chairs.**

4a. State will alert chapter leadership of recruitment tools available on the website (*INPAWS Cookbook*, Volunteer Opportunities) and ask for feedback to continuously improve the tools. (February 2014)

4b. State Membership will continue to circulate the membership database sorted by chapter and by interest area on a quarterly basis. (ongoing)

4c. State Membership will show chapter leaders how to download up-to-the-minute membership lists from Google drive as needed. (ongoing)

4d. The *INPAWS Cookbook* will continue to be updated based on feedback from state and chapter leaders, with the aim of compiling the wisdom of past chairs, codifying best practices, and providing a leadership recruitment tool. (ongoing)

**5. Make certain that volunteers feel appreciated for the work they do.**

5a. State and chapter volunteer coordinators will plan and implement some form of yearly recognition or benefit that acknowledges the effort put in by volunteers. This could be a handwritten thank you note or public recognition at a local member event or a special gift such as a rare plant.

5b. Leaders will work toward a culture of making volunteers (including each other) feel appreciated.

# Native Plant Information

GOAL: **Improve the quality of information available about native plants and invasives.**

RATIONALE: The growing interest in using native plants in the landscape demands good information for gardeners, nurseries, plant sellers, and landscape professionals, yet the available resources continue to present much inaccurate information.

The Invasives Education committee has evaluated the Purdue Extension–Horticulture offerings, which is a prime source of information for gardeners and landscapers in Indiana. Numerous current horticulture publications reference or promote known invasive species and also species that have not yet been assessed for invasiveness but are believed to be a problem.  The Invasives Education committee’s position is that invasive plant recommendations should be removed, and invasive plant references should have a warning statement included.  In addition, errors need to be corrected—for example, *Celastrus scandens* is listed as invasive but is actually the non-invasive American bittersweet—and there is room for better incorporating native plant recommendations and improving the layout.

Municipal ordinances and home association regulations need attention as they tend to be based on inaccurate information about native plants. There is great potential for informing such regulations with solid scientific information and reassurances that native plantings need not detract from neighborhood orderliness.

INPAWS has provided much-needed guidance for gardeners and landscape professionals but could be more intentional about providing detailed guidance for incorporating native plants into conventional landscapes. Our brochures and web information need to be scrutinized to identify where additional helpful information could be provided.

INPAWS also needs to be more effective in promoting the benefits of native plants and their crucial role in the ecosystem. Many of our own members have the necessary expertise, and ways need to be found to share that expertise and bring focus to advocacy issues.

OBJECTIVES & ACTION PLAN

**1. Work with Purdue to remove invasive species recommendations from their existing publications.**

1a. Enlist the support of Indiana Nursery and Landscapes Association leadership (Rick Haggard) as a partner in this project.

1b. Obtain Purdue Extension–Horticulture’s consent (Kyle Daniel, Bob Joly) to update their publications.

1c. Implement the updates following the agreed-upon process.

**2. Assist in creating a new horticulture publication that focuses on native landscaping.**

2a. Offer to collaborate with Purdue Horticulture in determining content and writing one or more publications.

2b. Offer to sponsor the printing and/or distribution.

**3. Promote native plant–friendly municipal weed ordinances.**

3a. Assemble a team to collect examples of weed ordinances from throughout Indiana.

3b. Review the template for weed ordinances prepared by the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center and regional environmental groups (e.g., Conservation Law Center in Bloomington).

3b. Develop plans to roll out a model weed ordinance for Indiana that supports citizens wishing to grow native plants in residential and commercial settings.

**4. Evaluate and improve the landscaping information provided by INPAWS.**

4a. Inventory and analyze information provided on the INPAWS website and in INPAWS brochures to locate gaps.

4b. Determine the best methods to fill those gaps and implement them.

4c. Develop a process for validating landscape designers with the goal of placing a list of recommended designers on the INPAWS website.

**5. Promote the expansion of the “Go Green, Grow Native” retail incentive program**,on the model of MC-IRIS (Monroe County Identify and Remove Invasive Species).

5a. Launch a trial program in Indianapolis as a project of Central Chapter (April 2014).

5b. Expand to the greater Indianapolis area (April 2015).

5c. Launch trial programs through at least two other regional chapters (April 2016).

**6. Explore the feasibility of a certification program for Certified Native Plant Designers** to meet the growing demand for native plant expertise in landscape design.

6a. Work with INASLA and INLA to determine the nature of such certification programs.

6b. Develop criteria for a Certified Native Plant Designer.

6c. Roll out the program.

**7. Support INPAWS members in being ambassadors for native plants and biodiversity within their circles of influence.**

7a. Develop a brief spiel (“elevator speech”) that members can memorize and use to encourage individuals they encounter at garden centers and events to use native plants in their landscapes (November 2014).

7b. Make sure members know of resources available on the website and in printed materials (February 2015).

**8. Mine the expertise of INPAWS members to bring forward advocacy issues.**

8a. Invite experts to write for the INPAWS blog (e.g., their views on issues, their “elevator speech,” things they feel strongly about), creating a special category for this series of posts.

8b. Supports collaborative research clarifying issues that could engage the public and especially college students (e.g., pollinator research).

# Expanded Youth Outreach

GOAL: **Expand the youth outreach program to nurture more of tomorrow’s stewards of the environment.**

RATIONALE: Letha’s Youth Outdoors fund was created in 2008 to make it possible for children to travel to natural areas and complete nature-related projects. The program has grown steadily and donations for the Fund are coming in, but the Youth Outreach committee has wanted to do even more.

A retreat held in late 2011 described ambitions to “increase awareness about the importance of environmental education and support activities that encourage life-long appreciation of the natural world, aligning with research based best practices of youth education.”

Ideas for youth programs abound. The challenge is how to fill the many leadership roles that they entail.

OBJECTIVES & ACTION PLAN:

**1. Designate a person responsible for Youth Outreach in each chapter.**

**2. Maintain steady growth in Letha’s Fund applications, grants, and donations.**

2b. Maintain awareness of Letha’s Fund within INPAWS membership through annual conference presence, quarterly reports in INPAWS Journal, donation option on application, etc.

2c. Pursue opportunities to present information about Letha’s Fund on youth-focused websites and within the educational and youth-serving community.

2d. Monitor and pursue opportunities for interested parties to become donors and to affiliate with corporate giving.

**3. Develop and pilot a youth Patch Program for ages 7 to 11 that can be proliferated statewide.**

3a. Develop nature-engaging youth activities for a variety of ages and levels of adult guide expertise.

3b. Pilot the patch program through cooperation with Holliday Park Nature Center.

3c. Develop a plan for publicizing and expanding the program throughout the state.

3d. Implement the expansion plan to 10 sites.

**4. Cultivate relationships with youth organizations where INPAWS might have an outreach opportunity.**

4a. State develops and chapters refine a master list of such organizations (e.g., 4H, junior master gardeners, schools that require service hours, church groups, Girl Scouts/Boy Scouts, gifted/talented programs, camps, naturalist programs) with contact information for local leaders.

4b. State or chapter volunteers contact leaders of these youth organizations to determine where INPAWS information could fit in (e.g., supported internships, badges on native plants or invasive species, providing information, guides for hikes).

4c. Pursue chapter collaborations with at least two youth organizations (e.g., participate in Boy Scout Garden at the State Fairgrounds, employ youth as short-term volunteers on INPAWS projects, collaborate with Keep Indianapolis Beautiful in KIB Kids Clubs, inform school gardening projects, advise environmental studies magnets like Cold Spring School).

4d. Make existing guided hike programs geared to kids and families more widely known.

# Partnerships and Collaborations

GOAL:  **Pursue partnerships and collaborations with other agencies, organizations, and schools that could promote native plants as essential to healthy ecosystems.**

RATIONALE: INPAWS is not the only organization whose mission involves native plants. Numerous other entities have missions that, whether they realize it or not, also depend upon native plants. Many of our members belong to these related organizations, such as Indiana Wildlife Federation, Amos Butler Audubon, Master Gardeners, and Keep Indianapolis Beautiful, and Indiana land trusts. But INPAWS has not been intentional in seeking to share information with and learn from these organizations.

Although schools and universities have been invited to INPAWS events, intentional collaborations with departments of botany, ecology, and environmental science have not been pursued.

There is great unexplored potential to expand INPAWS’s reach and wisdom by partnering with all these entities. In particular, active partnership with Master Gardener Associations could lead to much greater sharing of the essential role native plants in the context of gardening advice. Current budget constraints on governmental units and other nature organizations make it likely that they will want to collaborate to extend their reach as well.

OBJECTIVES & ACTION PLAN:

**1. Pursue active partnership with Master Gardener Associations.**

1a. State obtains addresses and contact information for MGAs all over Indiana.

1b. State creates a direct mail package explaining INPAWS’s vision and mission and inviting collaboration.

1c. Chapters follow up by seeking one-on-one contacts with MGA leaders to explore possibilities (presentations, invasives removal, informational resources, etc.) reporting on the process and outcomes. (Gift idea: *Bringing Nature Home*, by Doug Tallamy)

1d. Chapters conduct at least one collaborative activity with their local MGA.

**2. Raise awareness of INPAWS’s vision with environmentally focused organizations and invite collaboration.**

2a. Chapters review and update existing list of potential partners and obtain addresses and contact information for the most relevant leaders.

2b. State creates a direct mail package explaining INPAWS’s vision and mission and inviting collaboration.

2c. Chapters follow up by seeking one-on-one meetings with contacts to explore possibilities, reporting on the process and outcomes.

**3. Investigate creating an INPAWS presence on college campuses.**

3a. Each chapter inventories local schools of higher education and obtains contact information for relevant faculty.

3b. Chapter representatives meet with faculty at two local schools to present INPAWS’s vision and explore how they might collaborate (e.g., lecture series, seminars, one-day certification programs, funded intern position, support of existing environmental clubs).

3c. Chapters share the ideas gained through these meetings with each other and with state coordinator (designated clearinghouse and support person).

3d. Chapters pursue at least one idea with at least one school, reporting on the process and outcomes.

# Paid Administrative Support

GOAL: **Develop a long-term financial and supervision plan that allows for paid administrative support.**

RATIONALE: An organization of INPAWS’s size calls for more than an all-volunteer “office” staff (with no office). Paid administrative support could go a long way toward relieving the burden of routine processing of memberships, registrations, donation acknowledgements, and the like and would free up volunteers to pursue INPAWS’s priority goals.

Since its founding, INPAWS has had only one paid position, that of the first webmaster, which required technical knowledge that few had at that time. As time went on such payment seemed less justified, considering the technical knowledge for other routine tasks that volunteers were performing such as membership processing (spreadsheets) and publications (graphics and design programs). Considering how hard the core group of volunteers work, there was also a concern that those not paid might lose their enthusiasm and focus.

Occasional Council discussions on the idea of paid staff have centered on whether INPAWS needs an executive director or simply clerical support, and how INPAWS could achieve sustainable funding for such a position. The concern was expressed that the organization should not rely too much on an “outsider” to conduct essential operations without careful oversight and a contingency plan should that person choose to leave. It seems clear that redundancies need to be built into the membership management system to lower the risk.

With new technology solutions available for direct mail, some of the brute force methods that volunteers have had to endure (stuffing and mailing hundreds of envelopes prepared for bulk mail, for example) are farmed out to external vendors at reasonable cost.

INPAWS has also adopted technology solutions for online payment and registration with automated acknowledgments. In September 2013, INPAWS implemented an online payment system through Network for Good, which handles memberships, donations, and event registrations. Meshing the online payment system with the customary paper applications and checks remains a challenge, and it is hoped that at time goes by more people will be willing to make their payments online.

The impetus for creating the *INPAWS Cookbook* was to capture the multitude of tasks volunteers were performing so as to see where clerical support might make sense. With that analysis in hand, it should now be possible to devise a job description to which one can attach a price tag and begin realistic financial planning.

OBJECTIVES & ACTION PLAN:

**1. Develop administrative support wish list in the form of a job description.** (February 2014)

1a. Analyze volunteer tasks in *INPAWS Cookbook* to determine which could reasonably be handled by support staff.

1b. Write a preliminary job description with estimated time devoted to each task.

1c. Submit job description to existing clerical services that support non-profits and request availability and cost estimates.

**2. Develop a financial plan for sustainably compensating support staff.** (May 2014)

3a. Explore eligibility for foundation support and large philanthropic funds.

3b. Talk with other organizations that have hired paid staff (e.g., CILTI) to see how they make the position sustainable, any problems they have encountered.

3c. Consider the effect of raising member dues to cover the cost.

3c. Report to Council on what INPAWS would have to do to support such a position sustainably.

**3. If Council decides it is feasible, hire paid staff.** (August 2014)

3a. Develop a plan for supervising staff and overseeing functions outlined in the job description.

3b. Recruit paid staff using the supervisory cadre to evaluate candidates.