

WASHTENAW SOCCER COMMONS

A collaborative framework for access, development, and lifelong participation in soccer across Washtenaw County

An early-stage vision for discussion, testing, and collective refinement

Executive Summary

Youth soccer in Washtenaw County is rich in participation and commitment, yet fragmented in structure. Families are frequently forced to choose between programs that do not fully reflect their needs, values, or life circumstances. Clubs often operate independently, even when missions align, leading to duplicated effort, higher costs, and limited visibility into viable pathways for players.

The Washtenaw Soccer Commons proposes a different approach: a shared coordination layer that supports clubs without replacing them. The Commons is not a governing body, a league, or a “super club.” It is a cooperative framework designed to help families find the right soccer experience at every age and level, while enabling clubs to collaborate where doing so reduces friction and improves outcomes.

The core intervention is shared stewardship: coordinated sporting direction and coaching support, neutral guidance for families navigating options, and centralized services that reduce duplication and lower costs for participating organizations. Through pilot collaborations over an initial 1–2 year period, the Commons will test whether intentional alignment can reduce drop-off, increase access, and strengthen long-term engagement in the sport.

The Washtenaw Soccer Commons is proposed as a time-bound, learning-oriented experiment grounded in local relationships and shared accountability.

1. Preamble: Why a Soccer Commons

Soccer is one of the most widely played and loved sports in Washtenaw County. Children are introduced to the game early, families invest significant time and energy, and participation spans every age, background, and ability level. Yet despite this broad engagement, the overall structure of soccer participation in the region has evolved in ways that increasingly limit access, continuity, and long-term connection to the game.

As a result, many players disengage not because they have lost interest in soccer, but because the available structures no longer fit their lives. Participation frequently drops during the middle school and early high school years, precisely when young people are navigating new academic pressures, social changes, and opportunities in other sports and activities. Families are often forced to “re-shop” for soccer environments every few years, without a clear sense of how programs relate to one another or how movement between them might occur.

The Washtenaw Soccer Commons emerges from a simple question:

What would it look like to design a local soccer ecosystem that supports lifelong participation, flexible pathways, and inclusion—without requiring organizations to give up their identity or autonomy?

This document outlines an early-stage vision for such a framework. It is not a mandate, a merger proposal, or a finished plan. It is an invitation to think collectively about how soccer in Washtenaw County might be organized as a commons—one that supports players and families over time, respects the diversity of existing organizations, and creates space for collaboration where it adds value.

2. The Problems We Are Trying to Solve

The challenges facing soccer participation in Washtenaw County are not the result of any single organization, league, or philosophy. They are structural issues that have emerged over time as programs have grown independently, responding to demand without a shared framework to guide coordination, access, or long-term participation.

Several interconnected problems stand out.

Fragmentation Across Age, Level, and Organization

Soccer opportunities in the region are often organized in silos. Programs are typically designed around specific age groups, competitive levels, or seasonal offerings, with limited coordination across organizations or stages of development.

As players age, this fragmentation increases. Pathways between youth, adolescent, and adult participation are rarely explicit, and transitions often depend more on personal networks than on transparent structures.

The “Missing Middle” of Participation

Between recreational soccer and highly competitive environments, there are relatively few options that balance quality coaching, meaningful competition, and manageable commitments. Many families seek experiences that are developmentally appropriate and engaging without requiring year-round travel, escalating costs, or early specialization.

Pressure Toward Early Specialization

In the absence of flexible pathways, families often feel pressure to specialize earlier than they would prefer. While higher-intensity environments can be appropriate and beneficial for some players, early specialization is not necessary—or healthy—for all. Over time, this pressure contributes to burnout, injury risk, and inequitable access.

Underutilized and Overstretched Community Resources

Across Washtenaw County, fields, coaches, volunteers, and facilities are both underutilized and overstretched—sometimes simultaneously. Programs compete for the same narrow windows of time and attention, while other opportunities go unexplored due to a lack of coordination or shared planning.

Without a common framework, it is difficult to align resources intentionally, test new models, or learn collectively from what works and what does not.

3. What We Mean by a “Commons”

The Washtenaw Soccer Commons is not a new club, league, or governing body. It is a shared framework that allows independent organizations to relate to one another in more intentional, transparent, and collaborative ways—without requiring loss of identity, autonomy, or control.

At its core, the Commons is about **coordination rather than consolidation**.

Organizations participating in the Commons continue to operate independently. They retain their own governance, branding, competitive ambitions, and internal cultures. Participation is voluntary, and the depth of alignment can vary widely based on each organization’s goals, capacity, and comfort level.

The Commons provides a **common language and shared reference points**—for families, coaches, and organizations alike—so that participation in soccer feels more coherent over time, even as players move between programs or adjust their level of engagement.

A Cooperative Model in Practice

While not a cooperative in the legal sense, the Commons functions in many of the same ways. Independent organizations choose to participate in shared infrastructure, shared learning, and shared norms where doing so creates mutual benefit. Alignment is opt-in, accountability is relational rather than hierarchical, and collaboration evolves through trust rather than mandate.

In this sense, the Commons behaves like a cooperative of organizations:

- No single entity owns the system
- Participation does not imply subordination
- Value is created through shared effort

The Commons does not seek to standardize outcomes. Instead, it seeks to **make choices visible, transitions humane, and participation sustainable** over the long term.

4. What the Commons Does in Practice (Phase 1)

The Washtenaw Soccer Commons is not a new club, league, or competitive program. Its initial work is deliberately focused on **coordination rather than expansion**, and on **reducing friction rather than adding structure**.

In its first phase, the Commons intervenes in three practical ways:

4.1 Shared Sporting Direction and Coaching Support

Participating organizations retain full autonomy over their teams, coaches, and programs. The Commons supports them by coordinating shared sporting insight, coach education, and mentorship across the ecosystem.

This approach allows grassroots, “rec-plus,” and club-level coaches to benefit from experienced guidance and shared learning without being centralized, standardized, or removed from their local context.

4.2 Cost Reduction Through Coordination

Youth soccer systems often duplicate administrative, technical, and developmental work across organizations. The Commons reduces costs by pooling expertise, aligning where possible, and lowering the overhead required for individual clubs to operate sustainably.

The goal is not to drive growth for its own sake, but to **reduce financial pressure on families and clubs** while preserving flexibility, multi-sport participation, and local identity.

4.3 Deliberate Player Fit and Mobility

Rather than treating movement between programs as a failure or loss, the Commons normalizes mobility as a healthy and expected part of player development.

Families are supported in finding the environment that best fits their needs at a given moment—whether that means remaining within a current program, moving to a different competitive context, or stepping away temporarily to prioritize other sports, interests, or life circumstances.

Where appropriate, the Commons may support families in understanding available options and identifying best-fit environments.

These interventions are intentionally modest, testable, and adaptive. They are designed to evolve through real-world learning rather than through predetermined outcomes or rigid structures.

5. Stewardship and Accountability

The Washtenaw Soccer Commons is designed as a collaborative, non-hierarchical initiative. At the same time, meaningful coordination and learning require clear accountability.

A stewardship team, composed of representatives from participating organizations and named grant signatories, will be responsible for guiding the Commons' early work. This group is accountable for coordination, learning, and transparent communication with participating clubs, funders, and the broader community.

The stewardship team's responsibilities include:

- Convening participating organizations and facilitating collaboration
- Overseeing the use of grant-funded resources
- Ensuring alignment with the Commons' shared values and principles
- Supporting reflection, documentation, and learning across the ecosystem

The stewardship team is not intended to function as a governing board for participating clubs, nor does it exercise authority over individual organizations' programs, staffing, or competitive decisions. Each participating organization retains full autonomy.

Accountability within the Commons is collective and relational rather than hierarchical. Responsibility is shared, expectations are explicit, and learning—particularly from challenges or failures—is treated as a core outcome of the work.

Stewardship roles within the Commons are intentionally time-bounded and subject to periodic review. This structure is designed to prevent concentration of influence, institutional capture, or mission drift, and to ensure that the Commons remains responsive to participating organizations rather than evolving into a centralized authority.

6. Scope, Boundaries, and White Space

The Washtenaw Soccer Commons exists to strengthen and connect existing organizations, not to replace them. Its default posture is to support, coordinate, and amplify the work of participating clubs while preserving their independence, identity, and autonomy.

The Commons does not operate as a club in the traditional sense. It does not own players, run tryouts, or compete with participating organizations for participation or revenue. Families engage with the Commons through its role as a connector, advocate, and source of clarity within a fragmented system.

At the same time, the Commons is intentionally not locked into rigid prohibitions. Where clear unmet demand or structural gaps exist—particularly for age groups, populations, or access points not currently served by participating organizations—the Commons may explore limited offerings **only where no existing organization is positioned to meet that need**, and always with transparency and collaboration.

In some contexts, a Commons representative may be present during evaluation or intake periods hosted by participating clubs. This role is not recruitment, but family support—helping parents and players understand the range of options available across the ecosystem and make informed decisions aligned with their goals, values, and circumstances.

The guiding principle is restraint paired with responsiveness: the Commons intervenes only where coordination adds value, and where inaction would perpetuate exclusion, unnecessary cost, or avoidable attrition.

Equity within the Commons is not limited to urban or traditionally underserved populations. The model explicitly accounts for barriers faced by rural families in surrounding communities, where transportation, time, and access to information often limit participation. By coordinating across geography as well as competitive level, the Commons seeks to expand opportunity without forcing families to relocate, overcommit, or self-select out of the sport.

7. Learning, Documentation, and Field Contribution

The Washtenaw Soccer Commons is conceived not only as a local initiative, but as a learning effort intended to contribute to broader conversations about youth sport, access, and systems design.

A core responsibility of the Commons is to document what is learned through practice—both what works and what does not. This includes successes, failures, tensions between organizations, and the unintended consequences that emerge when coordination replaces competition.

Learning will be shared beyond Washtenaw County through a combination of written reflections, case studies, presentations, and participation in regional and national convenings focused on youth development and sport.

By committing to honest documentation and knowledge sharing, the Commons aims to support other communities, sports, and organizations exploring similar questions—while remaining open to critique, adaptation, and ongoing refinement of its own approach.

8. Complexity, Risk, and Why This Work Is Still Worth Doing

The Washtenaw Soccer Commons does not assume that coordination alone will resolve the structural challenges facing youth sport. The work described in this document is complex, culturally sensitive, and inherently uncertain.

Among the most difficult challenges are:

- Deeply ingrained prestige dynamics that shape parental decision-making
- Mistrust between clubs created by years of competition for players, facilities, and resources
- Misaligned incentives that reward growth and exclusivity over access and retention

These challenges cannot be solved through policy or structure alone. They require trust, patience, and a willingness to learn in public.

The Commons pursues this work not because it is easy, but because existing models have failed to address these tensions at a system level. Incremental, community-rooted experimentation—grounded in real relationships and shared accountability—offers a more promising path forward than continued fragmentation or unchecked specialization.

Acknowledging these risks is not a concession of weakness. It is a commitment to honesty, adaptability, and long-term responsibility to players, families, and organizations.

9. Replication, Transferability, and Appropriate Scale

The Washtenaw Soccer Commons is intentionally grounded in the specific social, geographic, and organizational context of Washtenaw County. It is not presented as a universal solution or a model to be replicated wholesale.

At the same time, the Commons is designed with **transferability in mind**. Its core elements—shared stewardship, deliberate player fit, reduced duplication, and learning-oriented coordination—are framed as principles rather than prescriptions.

The work described here should be understood as a **test case**: an opportunity to explore how cooperative, community-rooted approaches to youth sport function under real conditions, and what adaptations may be required in different environments.

Any replication—whether in other communities or in other sports—would depend on local leadership, trust, and context. The Commons does not seek to scale rapidly or uniformly, but to contribute insight, language, and practical learning that others may adapt in ways that fit their own needs.

10. Relationship to Advanced and Elite Pathways

While advanced pathways may exist within some ecosystems, they are not required for the Commons to operate meaningfully or effectively.

The framework described here is viable at any point along the age–intensity map. A Commons may focus entirely on grassroots, “rec-plus,” or club-level participation while still delivering significant value in access, coordination, cost reduction, and player retention.

Where higher-intensity or advanced pathways do exist, they are understood as **options rather than destinations**. Participation in such pathways is neither assumed nor privileged within the Commons. Players and families are supported in choosing environments that align with their goals, capacity, and interests—whether or not those choices include elite competition.

By decoupling systemic health from elite outcomes, the Commons prioritizes belonging, sustainability, and long-term participation over narrow definitions of success. This ensures that the ecosystem remains inclusive, adaptable, and responsive to the full range of participants it serves.

11. The Ecosystem: How Participation Is Organized

To understand how the Washtenaw Soccer Commons functions in practice, it is helpful to look at the full landscape of soccer participation as it exists—and should exist—across the region.

Rather than defining a single pathway or progression, the Commons organizes participation along two simple dimensions:

- **Age**, reflecting the natural progression of players over time
- **Competitive intensity**, reflecting differences in time commitment, training load, and performance expectations

Taken together, these dimensions describe the full range of soccer experiences available to players and families, from early introduction to the game through lifelong participation.

The Age × Competitive Intensity Map

The map below illustrates this landscape.

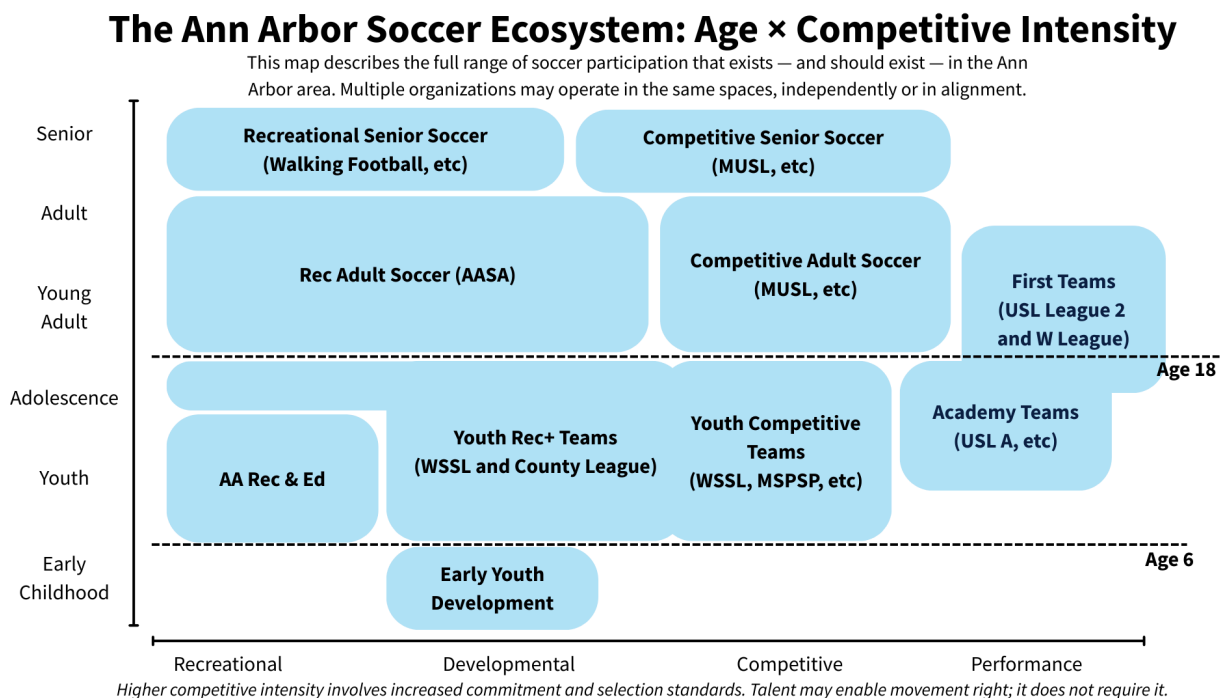


Figure 1. Conceptual map of soccer participation across age and competitive intensity. The map illustrates the full landscape of participation in Washtenaw County and supports multiple forms of engagement over time.

It is intentionally **descriptive, not prescriptive**. It does not dictate how players should move, which options are “better,” or which organizations belong in which spaces. Instead, it provides a

shared reference that helps families, coaches, and organizations understand how different forms of participation relate to one another.

Several principles are embedded in this framework:

- **Multiple organizations may operate in the same spaces**
The map does not assign ownership of any area. Different clubs, leagues, and programs may serve similar age groups and intensity levels, each offering distinct cultures and approaches.
- **Competitive intensity reflects commitment, not belonging**
Moving to the right on the map typically involves increased time, training, and performance expectations. It does not imply greater worth, legitimacy, or inclusion.
- **Talent enables movement; it does not require it**
A player's ability may open opportunities for higher-intensity participation, but it does not obligate them to pursue those options.
- **Aging is universal; intensity is a choice**
All participants move upward over time as they age. Movement across intensity levels is variable and personal, shaped by interests, life circumstances, and goals.

A Landscape, Not a Ladder

The Commons rejects the idea that soccer participation must follow a single upward trajectory. Instead of a ladder or funnel, the map represents a **landscape** in which players can:

- Remain at a consistent level of intensity over many years
- Move toward higher commitment when appropriate
- Step back or shift focus without stigma
- Re-enter the game after time away

By making this landscape visible, the Commons reduces the sense that families must constantly “trade up” or start over. It affirms that sustained participation—at any appropriate level—is a valid and valuable outcome.

12. How People Move Through the Commons

The Age × Competitive Intensity Map describes the full landscape of soccer participation, but the lived experience of players and families is defined by how they move within that landscape over time. The Washtenaw Soccer Commons is designed to support movement that is **flexible, dignified, and responsive to real life**, rather than rigid or transactional.

Movement Is Variable, Not Linear

Participation in soccer does not follow a single, predictable path. While age progresses in one direction, competitive intensity does not. Players may increase their level of commitment during certain phases of life, maintain a steady level for many years, or step back temporarily as interests and circumstances change.

The Commons explicitly recognizes that:

- Movement toward higher intensity is **optional**, not assumed
- Stepping back does not represent failure or loss of status
- Re-entry after time away should be expected and supported

By making this variability explicit, the Commons removes the pressure to treat every decision as permanent or consequential beyond the present moment.

Talent, Interest, and Life Circumstances

A player's talent may open doors to higher-intensity environments, but it does not obligate them to walk through those doors. Interest, enjoyment, health, academic demands, family resources, and participation in other sports all play legitimate roles in shaping choices.

The Commons allows these factors to coexist without judgment. It affirms that:

- Players can prioritize enjoyment or balance without being “left behind”
- High-ability players are not required to specialize early
- Development can occur across a wide range of participation models

Reducing Friction Between Programs

In many current systems, moving between programs requires families to navigate opaque processes, rebuild relationships, or start over entirely. The Commons seeks to reduce this friction by creating shared reference points and norms across participating organizations.

While programs remain independent, the presence of a common framework:

- Makes options more legible to families
- Normalizes conversation about fit and transitions

- Encourages referrals based on player needs rather than competition

This approach treats movement as a natural part of participation rather than an exception.

Supporting Lifelong Engagement

By validating multiple forms of participation and recognizing that intensity can ebb and flow, the Commons supports long-term connection to the sport. Players who might otherwise disengage entirely are more likely to remain involved—as participants, coaches, referees, volunteers, or supporters—when they feel there is always a place for them.

13. The Role of Organizations Within the Commons

The Washtenaw Soccer Commons is designed to support organizations, not replace them. Clubs, leagues, programs, and informal groups remain the primary points of identity, trust, and delivery for players and families. The Commons exists to help those organizations operate within a clearer, more connected ecosystem.

Participation in the Commons does not require organizations to give up autonomy, alter their mission, or conform to a single operating model. Instead, it offers a shared framework that organizations may engage with in ways that align with their goals, capacity, and values.

A Spectrum of Participation

Engagement with the Commons is intentionally flexible. Organizations may choose to participate lightly or deeply, and that level of participation may change over time.

Examples of participation along this spectrum include:

- Informal alignment around shared language and expectations
- Participation in shared learning or coach development opportunities
- Coordination around referrals or transitions between programs
- Co-designed pilots or shared initiatives in specific areas
- Deeper structural alignment where it creates clear mutual benefit

There is no “default” or “expected” level of participation. Alignment is opt-in and earned through trust and demonstrated value.

Collaboration Without Competition

The Commons seeks to normalize collaboration in ways that do not undermine healthy competition or organizational independence. By making the broader participation landscape visible, organizations are better able to:

- Serve players whose needs fall outside their core offerings
- Have transparent conversations with families about fit
- Refer players or families without stigma or loss of legitimacy
- Focus resources where they are most effective

Integration Over Time

While participation in the Commons does not require merger, rebranding, or consolidation, the framework does not preclude deeper integration where organizations choose it. In some cases, long-term collaboration may naturally evolve into shared operations, formal partnerships, or unified structures.

Such outcomes, if they occur, are understood as **emergent**, not predetermined. The Commons creates the conditions for alignment to grow organically, guided by shared experience and mutual trust rather than external pressure.

A Shared Responsibility

Organizations participating in the Commons share a responsibility to uphold its core principles: clarity, dignity, flexibility, and inclusion. This does not mean uniform practice, but it does imply a commitment to honest communication, respect for participant choice, and willingness to learn collectively.

Participating organizations engage with the Commons to gain access to shared capacity, clearer pathways for families, and reduced duplication of effort. The Commons exists to strengthen the local soccer environment as a whole, allowing clubs to focus more fully on what they do best while remaining connected to a broader, coordinated system.

14. What Collaboration Can Look Like in Practice

The Washtenaw Soccer Commons is intended to support collaboration that is **practical, voluntary, and responsive** to real needs. Rather than prescribing a single model of alignment, the Commons creates space for organizations to explore collaboration in ways that are proportionate, testable, and mutually beneficial.

Especially in its early stages, collaboration is best understood as a series of **small, learnable experiments** rather than large structural commitments.

Light-Touch Collaboration

At the most basic level, collaboration within the Commons may involve shared understanding rather than shared operations. Examples include:

- Using a common language to describe levels of participation and commitment
- Normalizing conversations about fit and transitions between programs
- Informal referrals that help families find appropriate options without stigma
- Shared visibility into the broader participation landscape

These forms of alignment require minimal coordination but can significantly reduce confusion and friction for families.

Shared Learning and Capacity Building

A second layer of collaboration focuses on learning and support across organizations. This may include:

- Shared coach education or mentorship opportunities
- Cross-club conversations around player development, retention, and inclusion
- Access to clinics, workshops, or guest coaching experiences
- Shared reflection on what is working and where gaps remain

These efforts allow organizations to strengthen quality while respecting differences in philosophy and structure.

Programmatic Pilots

Where there is shared interest, organizations may choose to co-design and test specific initiatives within the Commons. Potential examples include:

- Rec-plus or bridge programs that sit between traditional recreational and competitive offerings
- Middle-school retention initiatives aimed at reducing drop-off
- Modified formats that support multi-sport participation and seasonal flexibility

- Inclusion-focused pilots for adaptive, senior, or late-entry participants

Pilots are intentionally time-bound and learning-oriented. Their purpose is not to scale immediately, but to understand what creates value for participants and organizations alike.

Evolving Collaboration Over Time

As trust builds and shared experience accumulates, collaboration may deepen in ways that make sense for the organizations involved. This could include:

- Shared roles focused on coordination, access, or pathways
- Co-branded initiatives or jointly operated programs
- Longer-term alignment in areas where missions and needs overlap

Importantly, these outcomes are **possible but not assumed**. The Commons supports evolution based on demonstrated benefit rather than predetermined end states.

An Invitation to Explore

Collaboration within the Commons is best understood as an invitation rather than an expectation. Organizations engage not because they are required to, but because participation offers clearer pathways, stronger relationships, and improved experiences for players and families.

By starting with small, intentional steps, the Commons creates space for collaboration to grow organically—guided by learning, trust, and shared purpose.

15. Why Start Now

The Washtenaw Soccer Commons is not a response to a single moment or challenge. It reflects a growing recognition that the existing structures of soccer participation—while built with good intent—are increasingly misaligned with how families live, how young people develop, and how communities sustain sport over time.

Several conditions make this an appropriate moment to begin exploring a Commons-based approach.

Existing Relationships and Trust

Across Washtenaw County, organizations, coaches, and volunteers already share informal relationships and a common concern for the health of the local soccer ecosystem. While programs operate independently, there is a growing openness to dialogue about coordination, retention, access, and long-term development.

The Commons does not attempt to create trust where none exists. Instead, it builds on relationships that are already present, offering a structure within which collaboration can be explored thoughtfully.

Visible Gaps in the Current System

Patterns of participation drop-off, early specialization pressure, and confusion around transitions are increasingly visible to families and practitioners alike. These challenges are widely felt, even when their causes are not always named.

Beginning this work now allows the community to respond proactively—before further fragmentation hardens into accepted practice.

A Window for Design, Not Disruption

Importantly, the Commons is being explored at a time when the local soccer ecosystem remains flexible. No single model has become so dominant that alternatives are impossible, and organizations still have room to adapt without undoing deeply entrenched systems.

Capacity to Learn and Adjust

The Commons is explicitly framed as an early-stage effort focused on learning. Starting now allows participating organizations to:

- Test ideas at small scale
- Gather feedback from families and participants
- Adjust approaches based on real experience
- Share learning transparently across the ecosystem

By beginning with exploration rather than implementation mandates, the Commons prioritizes understanding over speed.

A Moment for Collective Imagination

Finally, this moment offers space to ask a different kind of question: not simply how to optimize existing programs, but how soccer might function as a **long-term community asset**—supporting health, belonging, and development across the lifespan.

Starting now signals a willingness to engage that question collectively, with humility and care.

16. Early Governance and Stewardship

The Washtenaw Soccer Commons is not envisioned as a new governing body or centralized authority. Instead, it requires **light stewardship** to hold shared principles, coordinate learning, and ensure that participation remains voluntary, transparent, and values-aligned.

In its early stages, governance is intentionally **minimal and adaptive**, designed to support exploration rather than impose structure.

Stewardship, Not Control

The primary function of early governance is stewardship of the Commons itself—its language, principles, and shared understanding. This includes:

- Maintaining clarity around the purpose and scope of the Commons
- Ensuring that participation remains opt-in and non-coercive
- Holding space for dialogue across organizations
- Supporting documentation and shared learning

Stewardship does not extend to decision-making authority over individual organizations, player movement, or competitive programming.

A Neutral Coordinating Role

As collaboration develops, a small coordinating function may be necessary to support communication, learning, and pilot efforts. This role is envisioned as **facilitative rather than directive**, focused on enabling others rather than leading them.

Key characteristics of this coordinating role include:

- Accountability to the Commons' principles rather than to a single organization
- Transparency in process and communication
- Responsiveness to participant feedback
- A bias toward experimentation and iteration

In early phases, this coordination may be hosted by an existing nonprofit entity or a purpose-built organization, depending on what best supports neutrality, trust, and administrative capacity.

Evolution Through Participation

Governance within the Commons is expected to evolve as participation grows and deepens. Rather than defining long-term structures in advance, the Commons prioritizes learning what forms of stewardship are actually needed.

As organizations engage more deeply, they may collectively determine:

- Whether more formal coordination is useful
- What forms of shared decision-making, if any, are appropriate
- How responsibilities should be distributed or rotated
- What accountability mechanisms best serve the ecosystem

Any evolution in governance would be guided by consent, transparency, and demonstrated need.

Guardrails for the Commons

Regardless of structure, several guardrails are essential:

- No organization is required to participate
- Participation does not imply loss of autonomy or identity
- No single entity owns or controls the Commons
- Deeper integration occurs only by mutual agreement

These guardrails ensure that the Commons remains a shared space rather than an instrument of consolidation or control.

17. Capacity and Resourcing

Building and sustaining a collaborative ecosystem requires more than shared intent. Coordination, learning, and inclusion-focused design are forms of work that demand time, continuity, and accountability. For the Washtenaw Soccer Commons to function effectively, it must be supported by **dedicated capacity**, especially in its early stages.

Coordination as Infrastructure

Much of the value of the Commons comes from work that is currently under-resourced or informal across the ecosystem. This includes:

- Helping families and organizations navigate the participation landscape
- Supporting dialogue and trust-building across independent programs
- Coordinating learning from pilots and shared initiatives
- Documenting insights and adapting the framework over time
- Attending to access, inclusion, and retention intentionally

Without dedicated capacity, these responsibilities tend to fall unevenly on volunteers or individual organizations, limiting sustainability and equity.

Early Roles and Functions

In its initial phase, the Commons may benefit from one or more paid roles focused on enabling collaboration rather than delivering programming. These roles are not envisioned as executives or decision-makers, but as facilitators and builders of shared capacity.

Examples of early functions may include:

- Coordination of collaboration and pilot efforts
- Stewardship of the Commons framework and shared language
- Support for inclusion-focused initiatives and access strategies
- Communication with participating organizations and families
- Documentation and learning for replication

These functions may be combined or distributed depending on available resources and the scale of activity.

The Role of Philanthropic Support

Philanthropic funding plays a critical role in enabling this work, particularly during early exploration and testing. Grant support allows the Commons to:

- Invest in coordination without burdening participating organizations
- Test ideas at appropriate scale before institutionalizing them

- Center access and inclusion without relying solely on fee-based models
- Learn openly and adjust based on evidence and experience

Importantly, philanthropic support is not intended to replace or subsidize existing programs. Instead, it underwrites the **connective tissue** that allows the broader ecosystem to function more coherently.

Sustainability Over Time

As the Commons matures, questions of long-term resourcing will evolve. Some coordination functions may be absorbed by participating organizations, supported through shared contributions, or sustained through hybrid models.

At this stage, however, the priority is not to define a permanent funding structure, but to ensure that early work is adequately supported so that learning, trust, and alignment can develop responsibly.

18. Replicability Beyond Soccer and Beyond Washtenaw

While the Washtenaw Soccer Commons is grounded in the specific context of soccer in Washtenaw County, the underlying framework is intentionally **not sport-specific** or place-bound. The challenges it seeks to address—fragmentation, early specialization pressure, access barriers, and limited pathways for lifelong participation—are common across many youth and community sports, and across many regions.

A Place-Based Model With Transferable Principles

The Commons is designed as a **place-based system**, shaped by local assets, relationships, and needs. At the same time, it is built on a set of principles that can be adapted elsewhere:

- Organizing participation across age and intensity rather than rigid tiers
- Treating inclusion as a design lens rather than a separate program
- Supporting movement that is flexible, dignified, and non-linear
- Enabling collaboration without requiring consolidation
- Investing in coordination as shared infrastructure

These principles can be applied in different communities without replicating the specific organizations, governance arrangements, or programming models present in Washtenaw County.

Soccer as a Pilot, Not a Limit

Soccer serves as a natural pilot sport for this work. It is widely played, spans all ages, and includes both recreational and high-performance pathways. These characteristics make it a useful testing ground for a broader approach to organizing sport participation.

Over time, similar frameworks could be explored for other field-based or team sports such as lacrosse, rugby, field hockey, or ultimate. In those contexts, the Commons model could support shared infrastructure, reduce duplication, and create more inclusive participation landscapes—while respecting the distinct cultures of each sport.

This evolution would be **additive, not substitutive**. The intent is not to collapse sports into a single system, but to apply a common way of thinking about access, development, and lifelong engagement across disciplines.

Learning for the Field

An important aspect of the Commons is its emphasis on learning and documentation. By treating Washtenaw County as a test case, the work can generate insights that are useful beyond the local context.

These may include:

- Practical lessons about coordination and trust-building
- Evidence about participation retention and re-entry
- Models for funding shared capacity
- Language and visuals that make complex systems legible

Sharing these learnings openly allows other communities to adapt the framework thoughtfully, rather than starting from scratch.

An Invitation to Adapt, Not Copy

The Washtenaw Soccer Commons is not intended as a template to be copied wholesale. Instead, it offers a way of thinking about how communities might organize sport differently—centering human development, flexibility, and inclusion alongside performance and competition.

Its broader value lies not in scale for its own sake, but in demonstrating that **alternative structures are possible**, practical, and worth exploring.

19. What Success Looks Like

The success of the Washtenaw Soccer Commons is not defined by the growth of any single organization, the dominance of a particular pathway, or the production of a specific number of elite players. Instead, success is understood as a set of **qualitative and structural outcomes** that indicate a healthier, more resilient ecosystem over time.

Sustained Participation Over Time

A core indicator of success is whether more people remain connected to soccer across longer stretches of their lives. This includes:

- Reduced drop-off during middle school and early high school years
- More visible and supported re-entry points after time away
- Continued participation into adulthood through playing, coaching, officiating, or volunteering

Success is reflected not in constant upward movement, but in **durable engagement**.

Clarity and Dignity in Choice

In a successful Commons, families and participants experience less confusion and anxiety when making participation decisions. Options are clearer, transitions feel less consequential, and stepping back does not carry stigma.

Indicators include:

- Families reporting greater confidence in finding appropriate fits
- Normalized movement across programs without social or reputational cost
- Language that affirms choice rather than implying failure or regression

Dignity is preserved when participation decisions are understood as contextual and personal.

Stronger Relationships Across Organizations

Success is also reflected in the quality of relationships across the ecosystem. Participating organizations demonstrate:

- Greater openness to dialogue and shared problem-solving
- Willingness to refer participants when needs fall outside core offerings
- Increased trust that collaboration strengthens rather than weakens individual programs

Over time, this relational strength becomes a form of infrastructure in its own right.

Inclusion as a Lived Reality

An inclusive Commons is one in which marginalized and historically excluded participants are not only welcomed, but able to participate meaningfully across the landscape.

Success includes:

- Participation opportunities that reflect a wide range of bodies, identities, and life circumstances
- Reduced barriers related to cost, geography, and rigid scheduling
- Adaptive and modified formats that are normalized rather than exceptional

Inclusion is evidenced not by statements of intent, but by who is present—and who stays.

Capacity for Learning and Adaptation

Finally, success means that the ecosystem becomes better at learning from itself. This includes:

- Regular reflection on what is working and what is not
- Willingness to adjust structures based on participant experience
- Documentation and sharing of insights with the broader field

A successful Commons does not assume it has arrived at a final form. It remains responsive, iterative, and open to change.

20. An Invitation

The Washtenaw Soccer Commons is not a finished plan, a binding proposal, or a model to be adopted wholesale. It is an early articulation of how a community might organize soccer participation differently—more coherently, more inclusively, and more sustainably—over time.

This document is offered as an invitation:

- To reflect on how current structures serve players, families, and organizations
- To imagine how coordination might reduce friction without reducing autonomy
- To explore collaboration where it creates genuine value
- To learn together through thoughtful experimentation

Participation in the Commons does not require agreement on every element, nor does it presume a single future outcome. Its strength lies in creating shared language, shared reference points, and shared responsibility for the health of the broader ecosystem.

The next steps—if any—are intentionally modest. They may involve further conversation, small pilots, or simply continued dialogue. What matters most is the willingness to engage with the questions this framework raises and to approach them collectively, with curiosity and care.

In that spirit, the Washtenaw Soccer Commons remains open: open to adaptation, open to critique, and open to the many forms that meaningful participation in sport can take.