Decision-making at RMBL

A visual guide

Using this guide

The objective of this guide is to equip the active scientist community and other interested stakeholders to **effectively engage in and shape decision-making** at RMBL

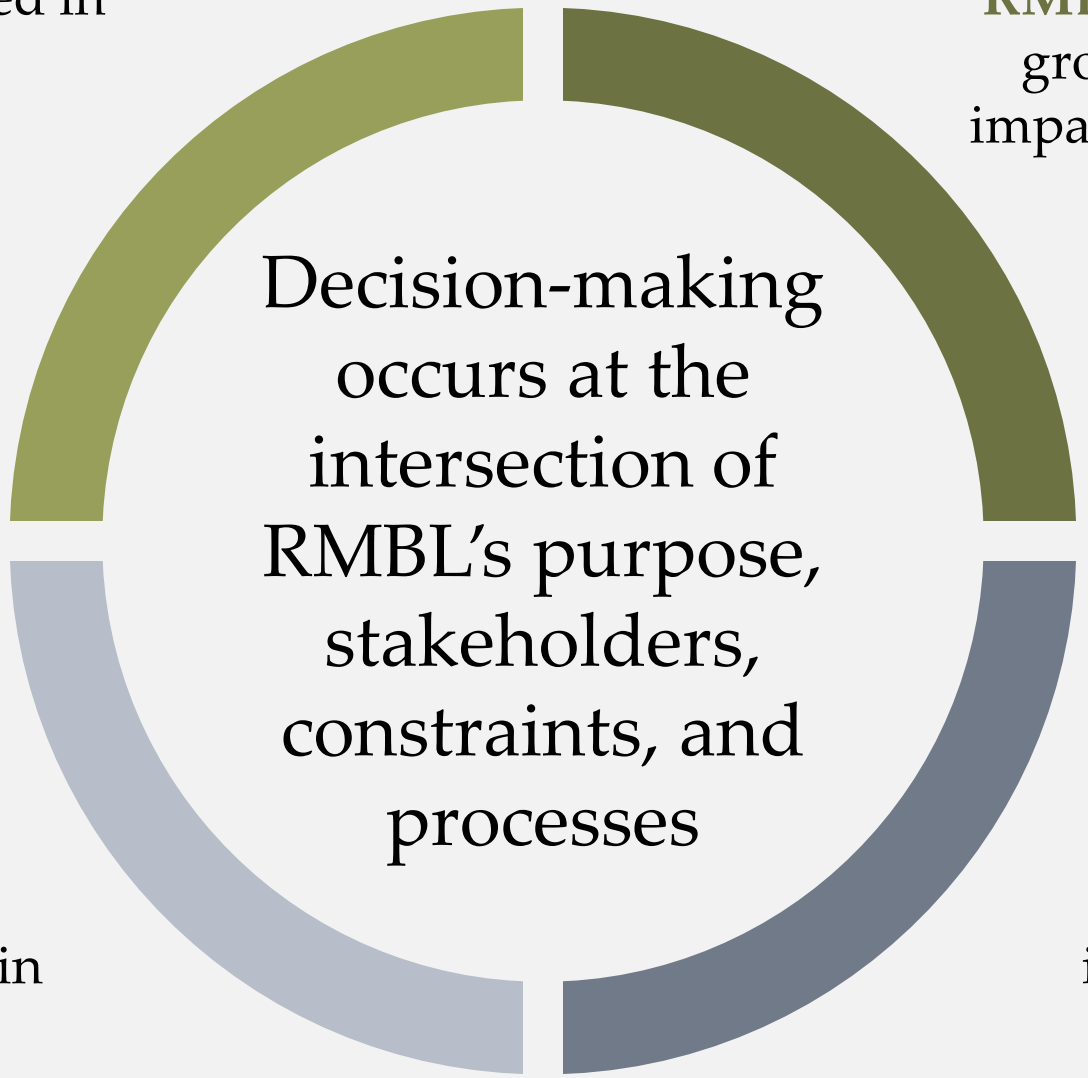
The following pages explore **four key elements of decision-making** at RMBL – purpose, stakeholders, constraints, and process

While primarily intended for **RMBL's scientist community,** this guide may be valuable to any stakeholder seeking to understand how decisions are made at RMBL

These pages are current as of **Summer 2020**

RMBL's purpose, outlined in its mission and vision, is demonstrated by its key activities – all of which promote scientific research and knowledge

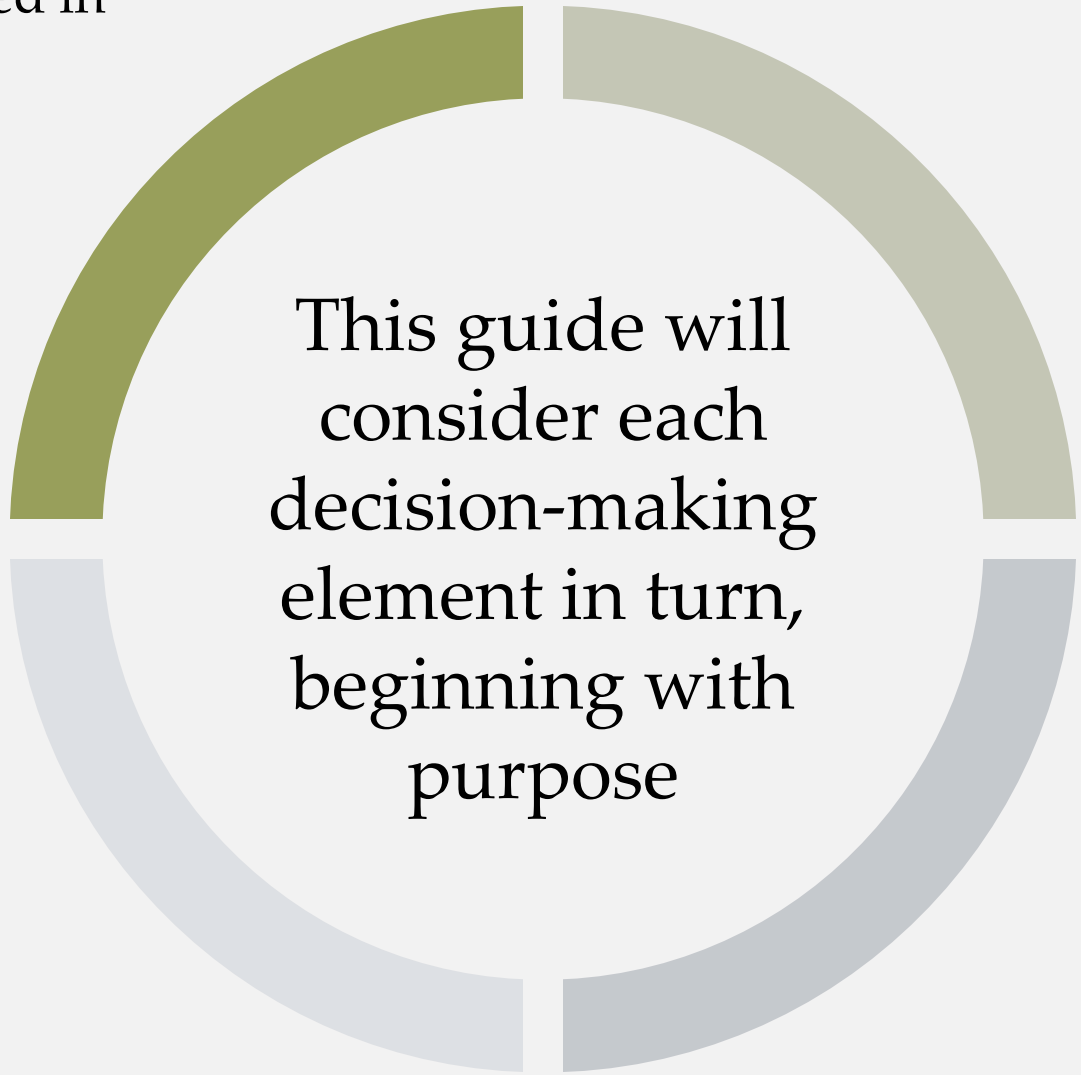
RMBL's stakeholders are the groups who impact and are impacted by RMBL decisions, whether through the formal organizational structure or otherwise



Constraints on decision-making include financial resources and the regulatory environment in which RMBL operates

Decision-making processes, including the mechanisms that incorporate stakeholder input and feedback, vary based on decision type

RMBL's purpose, outlined in its mission and vision, is demonstrated by its key activities – all of which promote scientific research and knowledge



Overview of RMBL's purpose

RMBL supports its scientist community and furthers understanding of its local ecosystem…

… with the aim of promoting understanding of life-sustaining environmental processes

RMBL mission

"RMBL is a high-elevation station whose principal purpose is to provide **quality research** for biologists and biology students of all disciplines who can benefit professionally and intellectually from studying at this location. An important further purpose of RMBL is to **promote the understanding and protection of the high-altitude ecosystems of Colorado and the watershed of the Gunnison River** through the professional activity of its members." - RMBL by-laws

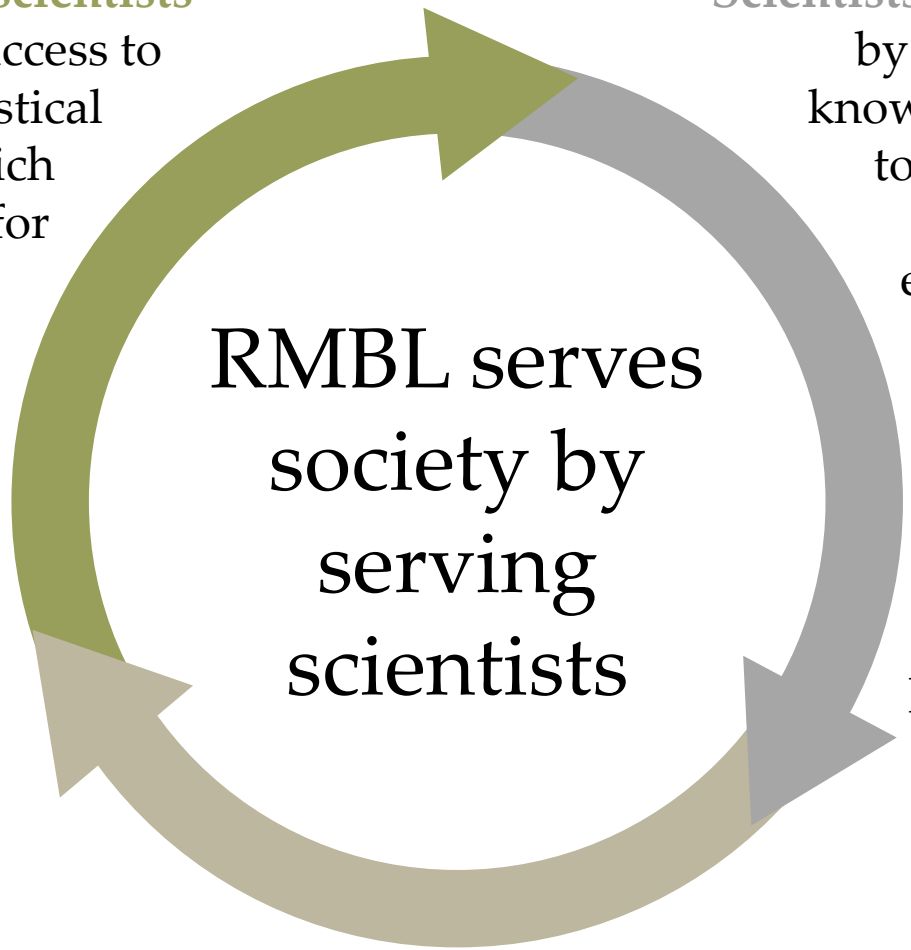
RMBL vision

"RMBL will unleash the power of place to transform how we understand the world and provide the **scientific knowledge** needed to maintain the environmental processes that support **food security, air and water quality, and human health**."
- RMBL strategic plan, 2019

Note that the mission can be changed only by the voting membership, whose roles and responsibilities are defined in the RMBL by-laws.

RMBL serves scientists by providing access to field sites, logistical support, and rich opportunities for collaboration. RMBL also serves student scientists through experiential education.

Scientists serve society by providing the knowledge needed to maintain life-sustaining environmental processes. RMBL educates the public and translates research to public benefit.



Society supports RMBL research and operations with federal and home institution grants, philanthropic gifts, and 501(c)(3) tax benefits.

Scientists are at the core of RMBL's purpose

To achieve its mission, RMBL focuses first and foremost on understanding and meeting the needs of its scientist community

In doing so, RMBL attracts high caliber scientists from across the nation, whose research meets the highest standards of scientific achievement and discovery

RMBL's key activities are an outflow of its purpose – every activity directly or indirectly benefits scientific research and is influenced by scientist input

Overview of RMBL's key activities

Each directly or synergistically serves the scientist community

RMBL generates knowledge through core **research activities**

- Coordinate **access to research sites** (e.g., permitting, private land, RMBL property)
- Facilitate **collaboration** among global scientists and students
- Provide **staff support** including site mgmt., spatial datasets, and geospatial analyses
- Provide **logistical support** (e.g., housing, dining, lab space) to scientists
- Maintain shared **research equipment** and modern lab space
- Provide **financial support** to scientists where applicable

Knowledge generates impact through **education** and **translation activities**

- Offer **undergrad programs,** promoting research education especially among underrepresented groups
- Manage and educate visitors through the **Visitor's Center and public tours**
- Offer **youth programs**, promoting science education and increasing local goodwill for RMBL research
- Communicate RMBL research through **newsletters and media engagement**
- Engage in **personal outreach** with community members

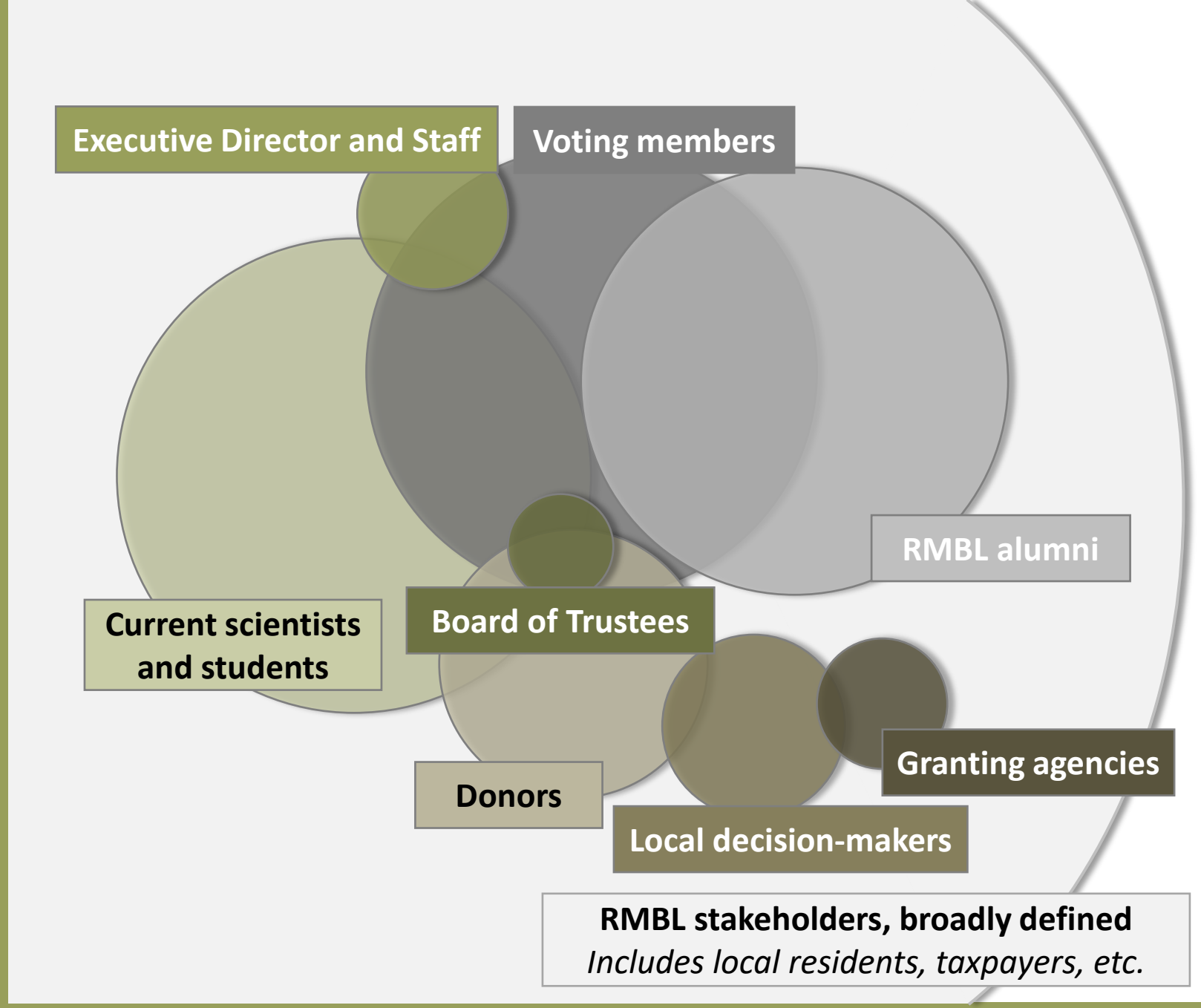
Impact generates support for RMBL through **funding-related activities**

- **Fundraise** in support of RMBL's mission
- Receive and handle **federal grants**, collecting indirect income
- Generate revenue through **Gothic store, Coffee Lab, weddings, and conferences**

Next, we turn to RMBL's stakeholders and organizational structure

RMBL's stakeholders are the groups who impact and are impacted by RMBL decisions, whether through the formal organizational structure or otherwise

RMBL is comprised of overlapping stakeholders



Governs and oversees… | *Are members of and/or provide input to…*

Overview of RMBL's organizational structure

Voting members confirm election of Trustees

Board of Trustees governs RMBL and oversees Executive Director

Executive Director and Staff oversee strategy and operations

See **RMBL activity map** (p. 7)

Current scientist community

Includes 200+ faculty and students from institutions across the country

Users and beneficiaries of RMBL facilities, logistical support, and collaboration opportunities

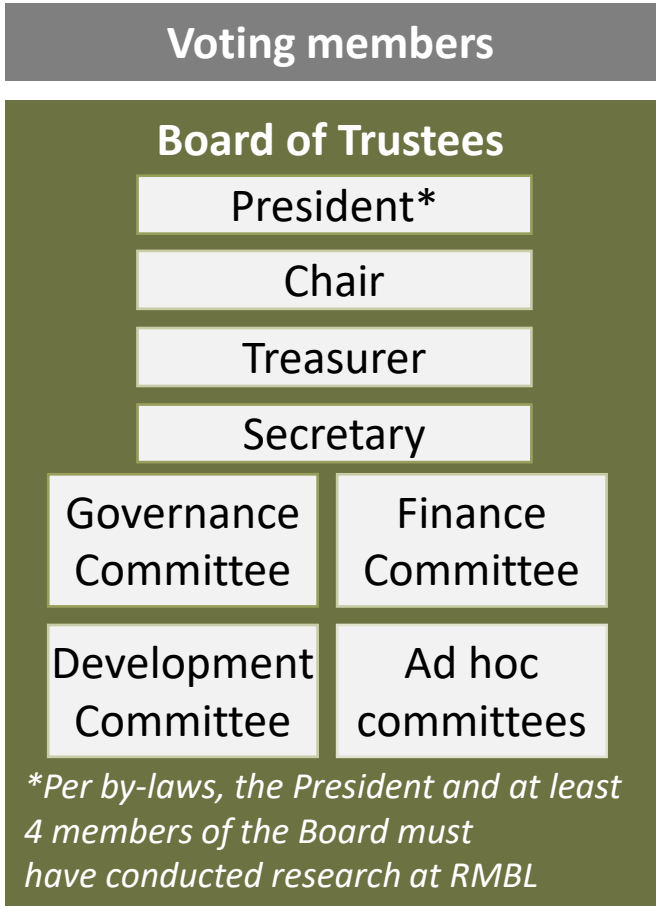
Provides critical input to RMBL decision-making

Other community members

Includes local residents, RMBL alumni, donors, granting agencies, land managers, adult program participants, and taxpayers

Indirectly promotes and enables scientific research

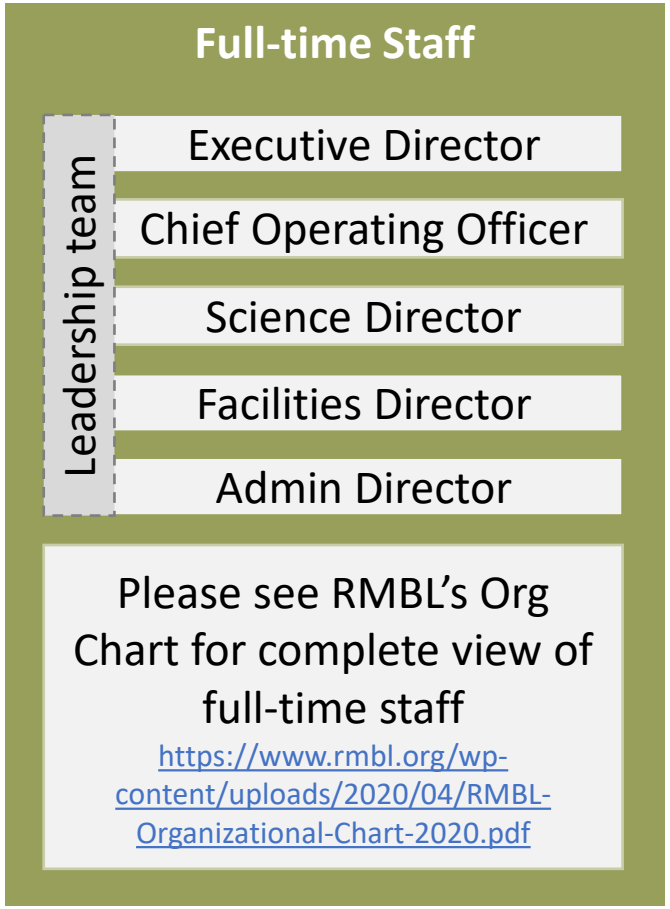
Trustees are elected by voting members to govern RMBL and promote its mission



- Like all 501(c)(3) nonprofits, **RMBL is governed by a Board** entrusted to provide oversight, promote the organization's interests, and ensure that activities are consistent with organizational mission and legal regulations. All trustees are **elected to three-year terms** by the voting membership.
- RMBL's Trustees are **enthusiastic ambassadors who volunteer time and resources to promote RMBL's mission**. Responsibilities include a) helping develop the strategic plan and overseeing its implementation, b) expanding RMBL's philanthropic base through fundraising and personal giving, c) assessing risks and monitoring the budget, and d) hiring and evaluating the Exec. Director.
- Per RMBL by-laws, the **Board consists of 8-15 trustees, at least 4 of whom have conducted research at RMBL.** Historically, non-scientist trustees are drawn to the Board by their passion for science and desire to use business and professional expertise to give back to their community.

Note: The RMBL by-laws define and empower the Board of Trustees and voting membership. Current Trustees can be found on the RMBL website.

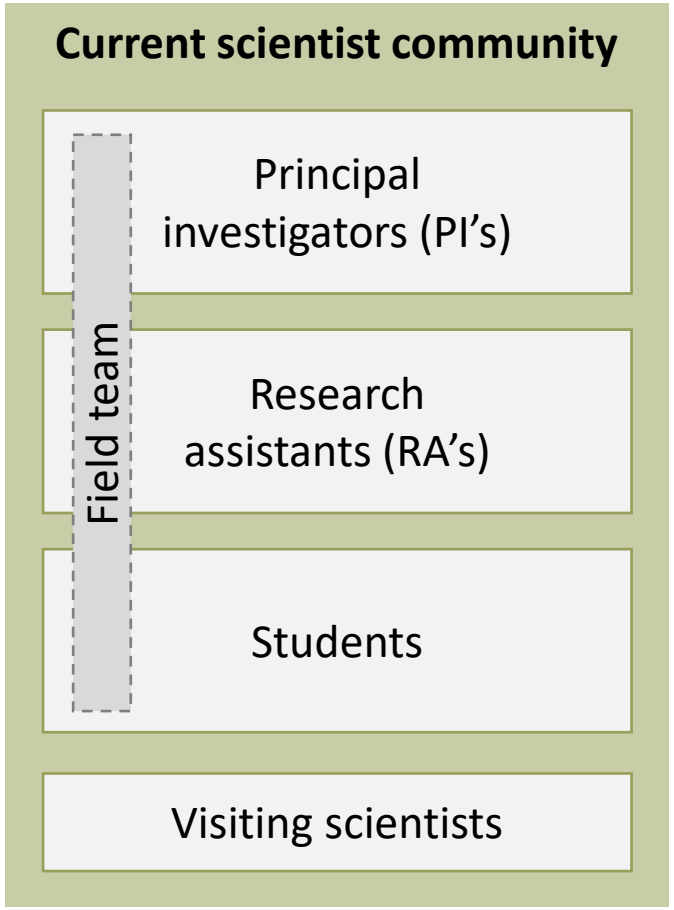
Under the Executive Director's leadership, RMBL staff carries out day-to-day operations



- **The Executive Director (ED) leads the development and execution of RMBL's mission, vision, strategic plan, and annual goals.** A significant part of the ED's role includes positioning RMBL within the larger landscape of national scientific and societal trends to effectively meet the changing needs of the RMBL scientist community, which are critical inputs into the strategic plan. The ED ensures that operations reflect strategic priorities, and hires and evaluates the Chief Operating Officer (COO). The ED also supports fundraising efforts and manages outward-facing communications.
- **The COO, along with the Directors of Science, Facilities, and Administration, are responsible for operations and staff, ensuring operational excellence** to achieve RMBL's mission and vision. They are supported by dedicated staff across administration (coordinating visits and space assignments, contracts / HR, food services, Visitor's Center), facilities, science (spatial ecology, GIS / GPS, education), development, finances, and special projects.

The scientist community is the core of RMBL

All RMBL programs directly or indirectly support scientists

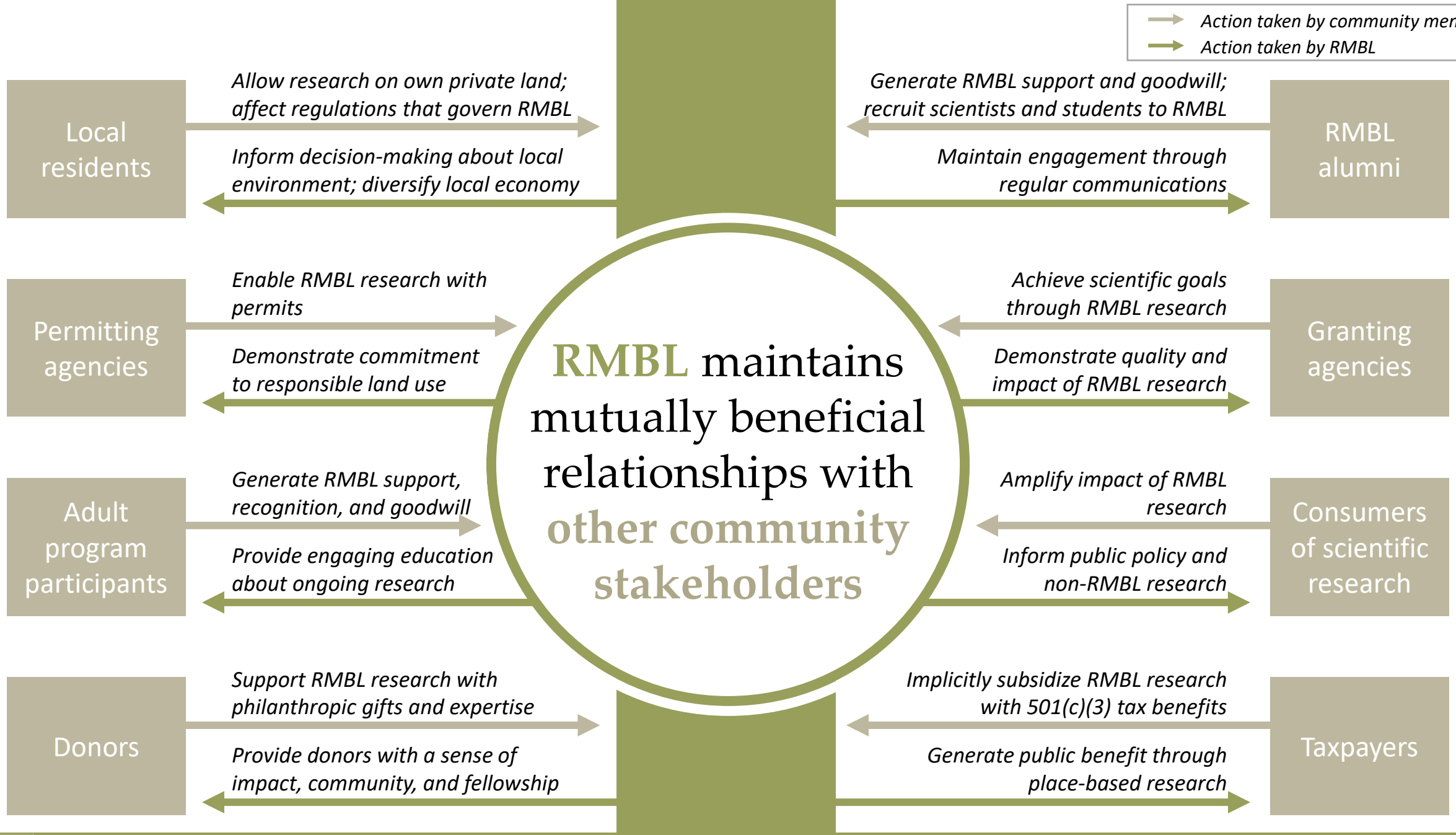


- With nearly 200 active scientists and 100 diverse ongoing research programs, the **volume and intensity of research at RMBL** provide incredible opportunities for scientific discovery and collaboration. RMBL is unique in that it primarily serves scientists from other institutions across the nation and world.
- **Scientist designations at RMBL (e.g., PI, RA) do not map 1:1 to traditional academic roles.** PI's include faculty, post-docs and grad students; RA's include post-docs, grad students, post-grads, and undergrads.
- RMBL's **education programs** promote active engagement by students in research. Supported by NSF and donors, the undergraduate research program is a primary mechanism by which RMBL is able to diversify its community.
- RMBL evaluates research proposals based on the promise or fulfillment of **quality scientific achievement**. A secondary consideration is whether the proposed research will benefit from, or add benefits to, ongoing RMBL research.

Note: Current RMBL scientists and ongoing research projects can be found on the RMBL website.

Other community members plays an important role in promoting and enabling scientific research

- RMBL enjoys, and works hard to maintain, strong relationships with local residents and governments of the **Crested Butte / Gunnison community.**
- RMBL maintains connections with scientist and non-scientist **alumni**, many of whom still support and engage with RMBL (some as voting members).
- RMBL coordinates with local **land permitting agencies** on special use research permits and with **granting agencies** on funding for scientists' research.
- RMBL offers **adult education programs** to community members and tourists.
- **Policymakers & non-RMBL scientists** benefit from RMBL scientific discoveries.
- The generosity of **donors** enables RMBL to invest in capital-intensive projects and provide services to scientists below cost.
- As a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, RMBL enjoys several tax exemptions. **Taxpayers** "pay" for these benefits, and RMBL thus has an obligation to deliver public benefits.


Action taken by community member
Action taken by RMBL
Local residents
Allow research on own private land; affect regulations that govern RMBL
Inform decision-making about local environment; diversify local economy
RMBL alumni
Generate RMBL support and goodwill; recruit scientists and students to RMBL
Maintain engagement through regular communications
Permitting agencies
Enable RMBL research with permits
Demonstrate commitment to responsible land use
Granting agencies
Achieve scientific goals through RMBL research
Demonstrate quality and impact of RMBL research
Adult program participants
Generate RMBL support, recognition, and goodwill
Provide engaging education about ongoing research
Consumers of scientific research
Amplify impact of RMBL research
Inform public policy and non-RMBL research
Donors
Support RMBL research with philanthropic gifts and expertise
Provide donors with a sense of impact, community, and fellowship
Taxpayers
Implicitly subsidize RMBL research with 501(c)(3) tax benefits
Generate public benefit through place-based research
RMBL maintains mutually beneficial relationships with other community stakeholders

Constraints on decision-making include financial resources and the regulatory environment in which RMBL operates

Decision-making at RMBL is bounded by financial resources and the regulatory landscape

RMBL must operate within its financial means…

Four revenue streams support RMBL: operating income, philanthropic gifts, federal grant income, and non-mission related income

Within a given year, RMBL is constrained by conservative estimates of annual revenues, with the goal being to achieve a revenue-neutral operating budget

In the long term, RMBL can enhance its revenues with strategic investments that increase revenue streams

… while complying with local, state, and national regulations

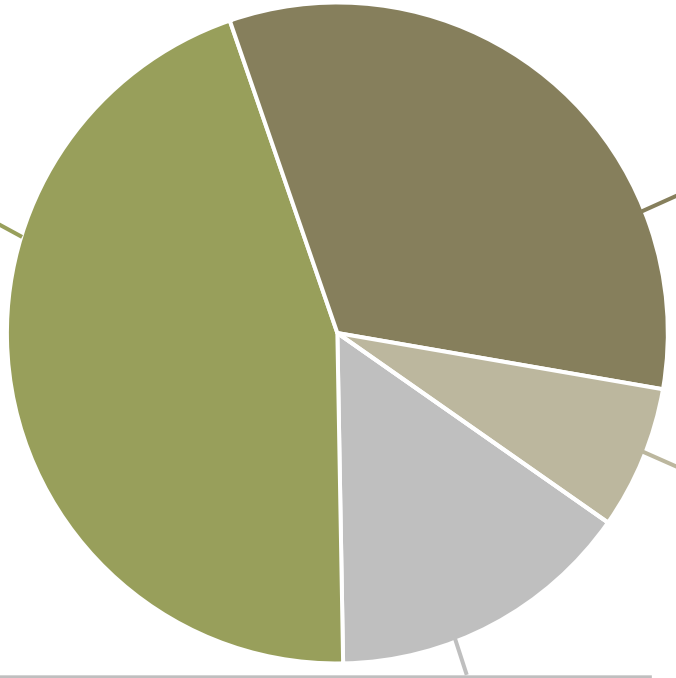
Over time, the regulatory landscape in which RMBL operates has grown increasingly complex

Three categories of regulations are most pertinent to RMBL's operations: health and safety within physical facilities, financial and audit-related, and land use

Through investments in compliance, RMBL positions itself for long-term success while allowing scientists to focus on research

Four key revenue streams comprise RMBL's financial resources

*Illustrative breakdown of RMBL's annual revenue streams**



Operating income

Includes housing and station fees from scientists on-site, tuition from student programs, and program fees for youth and adult education programs

Philanthropic gifts

Fundraising efforts are largely driven by RMBL's Board and Development staff

Financial and personnel services

Includes the indirect income RMBL receives through federal grant handling

Non-mission related

Includes the taxable income RMBL earns from the Gothic store, Coffee Lab, private conferences, weddings, etc.

*Illustrative breakdown is approximate and based upon data from FY 2017 - 2019

Philanthropic gifts, **financial and personnel services**, and **non-mission related income** are increasing year-over-year as a proportion of RMBL's total revenues…

… allowing RMBL to provide research services (e.g., facilities, permit support, staff support) to the scientist community significantly **below true operating cost.**

Financial resources constrain RMBL's annual budget and are enhanced by the strategic plan

Annual budget cycle

Set according to priorities identified by the Board (via the strategic plan), staff, and the scientist community (via feedback surveys)

Constrained by conservative estimates of annual revenues, with the goal being to achieve a revenue-neutral budget. In other words, bounded by the existing financial model

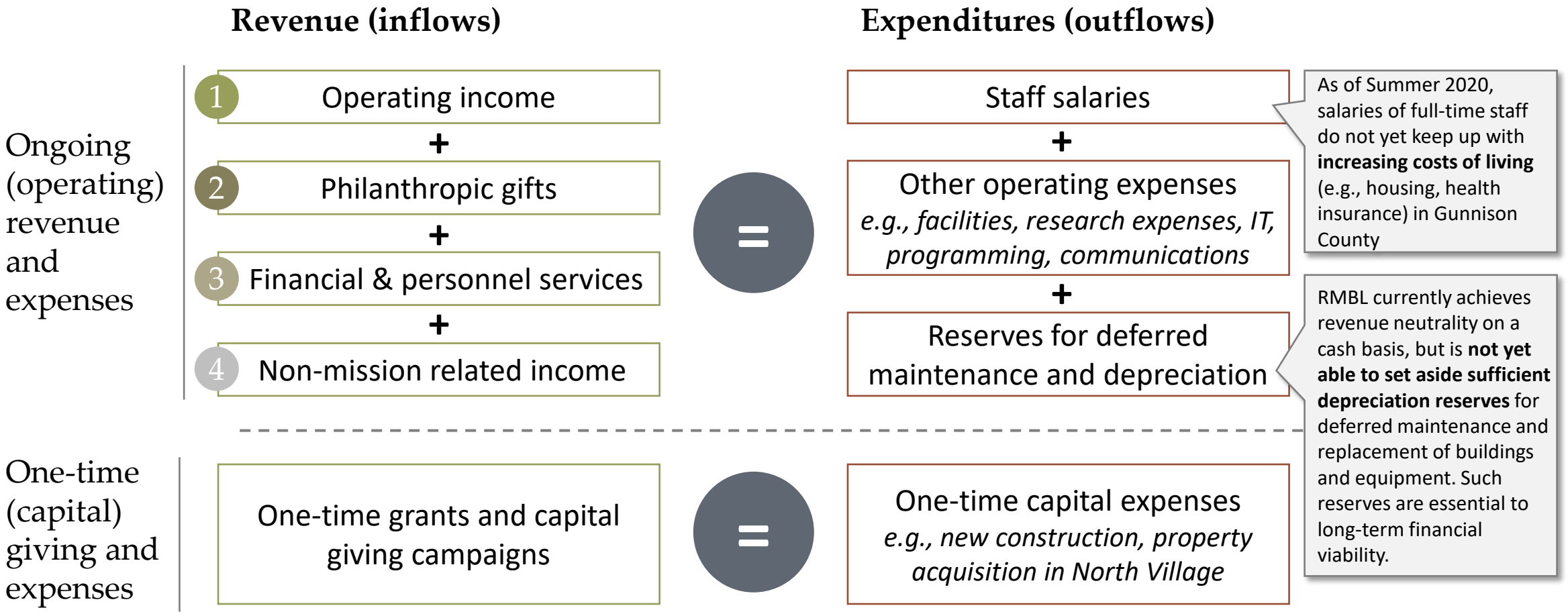
Strategic planning cycle

Not constrained by existing revenues, but rather **includes investments to increase revenue streams.** In other words, can enhance the financial model

Past enhancements include investments in development (to increase giving); grant handling (to increase indirect income); and increased capacity for year-round scientific use and conferences (to increase operating income)

Such investments allow **enable revenues and operations to grow**

RMBL seeks to maintain a revenue-neutral budget



Note: Due to the timing of inflows and outflows, RMBL is at times constrained its cash reserves, which can dip to 5-10% of annual expenses.

An increasingly complex regulatory environment further constrains decision-making

Health and safety within physical plant

Includes maximum occupancy limits in all buildings, residential fire code requirements in cabins, and regulations surrounding water quality and waste management throughout Gothic

Land use

Includes regulations around the use and protection of public lands, including restrictions (which RMBL can at times negotiate) on types of field research that can be conducted

Financial and audit

Includes requirements for financial systems and controls, particularly for federal funding

Decision-making processes, including the mechanisms that incorporate stakeholder input and feedback, vary based on decision type

Decision-making at RMBL ranges from operational to strategic

Operations means "doing things right." With input from primarily the Gothic community, the ED and staff seek to ensure that RMBL operates smoothly.

Operational goals are:

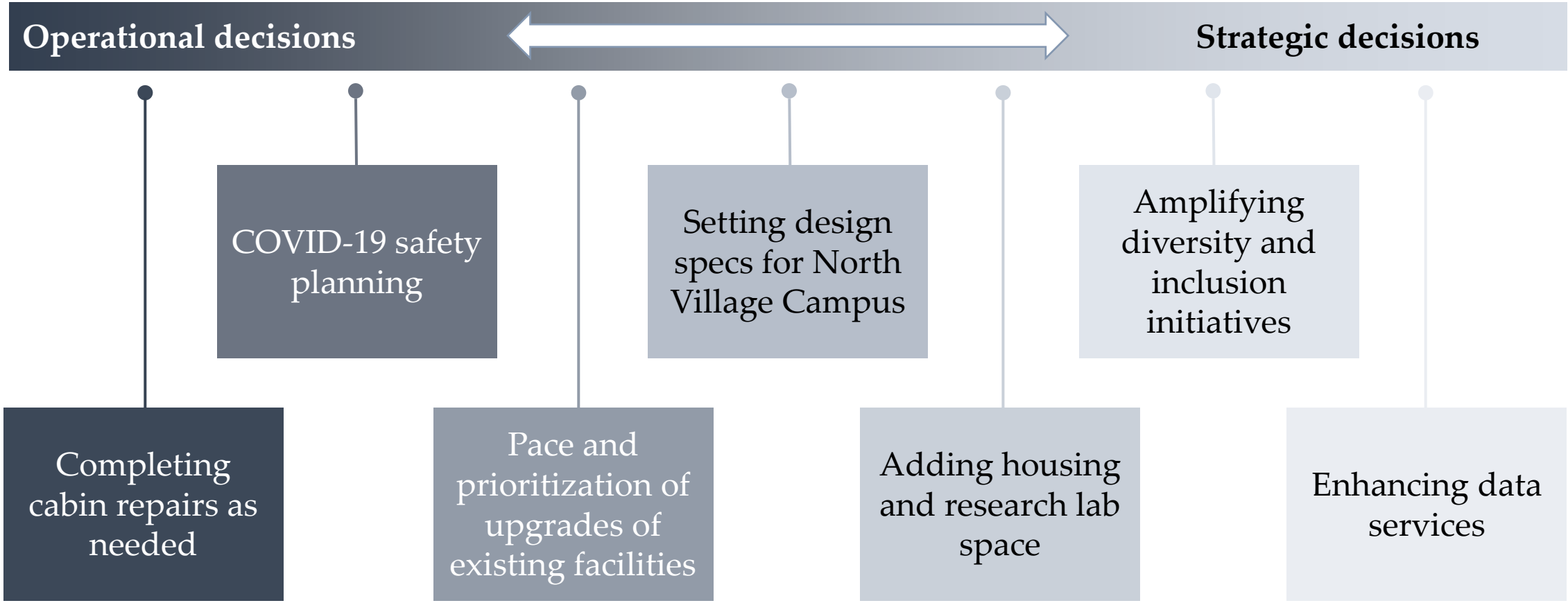
- Shorter term (<1 year)
- Tangible and measurable
- Narrow in scope
- Constrained by existing financial model (via the annual budget)

Strategy means "doing the right things." With input from all stakeholders, the Board and ED define and support financing of strategic goals in line with RMBL's mission and vision.

Strategic goals are:

- Longer-term (3 - 5 years)
- More abstract, with measurable milestones
- Broad in scope
- Supported by enhancing financial model (via the strategic plan)

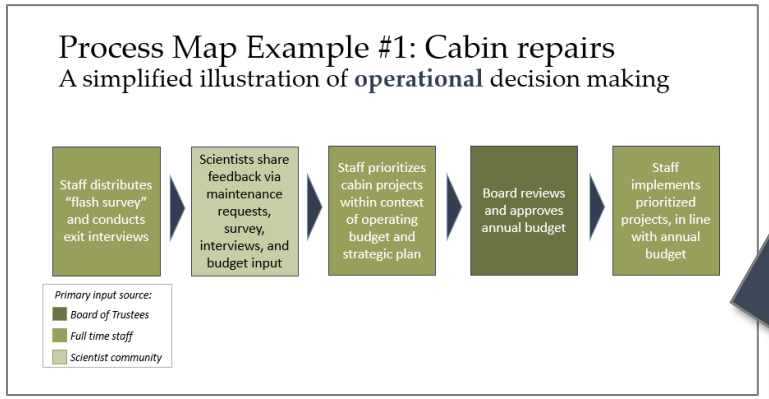
Examples of recent RMBL decisions map across the range



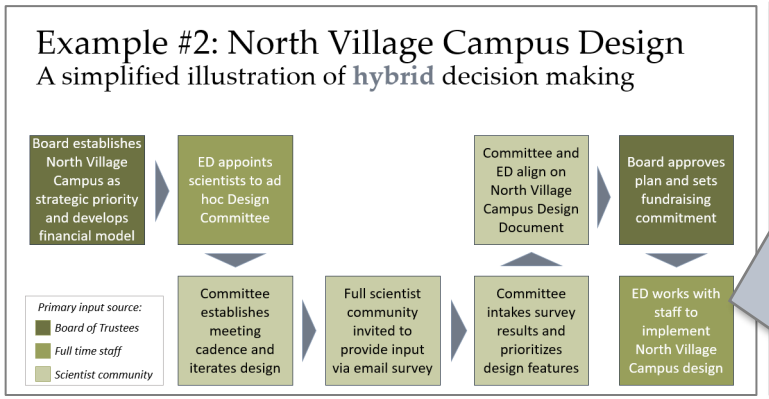
Stakeholder input varies with decision type

Stakeholder group	Operational decisions	Strategic decisions
Board of Trustees	• Approves operating budget, but **not involved** in operational decisions	• **Guides strategy** and financial model; monitors performance
Executive Director & Staff	• **Assumes responsibility** for operational decisions within budget and Board-established boundaries	• **Shares responsibility** with the Board for framing strategic planning and defining the financial model
Current scientist community	• Provides **structured input** through online surveys, exit interviews, informal conversations, and ad hoc committees (often during or immediately following summer)	• Provides **open-ended input** through discussions with the ED and Board (often early in the decision process) • **Consulted** throughout implementation • May also **originate** strategic ideas
Other community members	• Gothic residents, including family members, provide **feedback** on residential issues. Non-residents provide **input** on programming.	• **Consulted** by Board and ED, depending upon expertise and interest • Provide input to **align** scientific activities with societal benefit

Visual process maps illustrate the steps typical of various types of decisions at RMBL

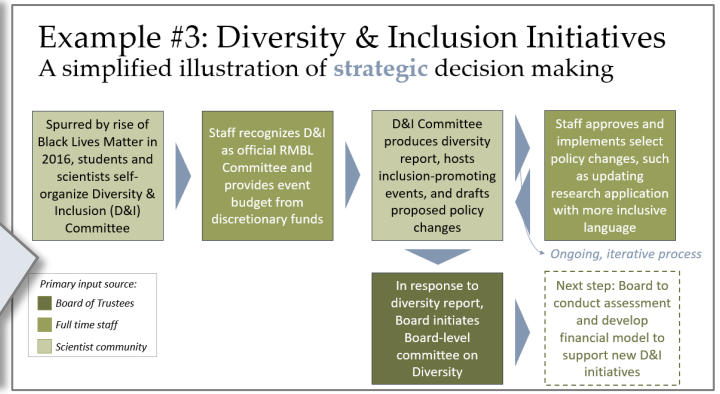


Example 1 shows steps typical of operational decisions

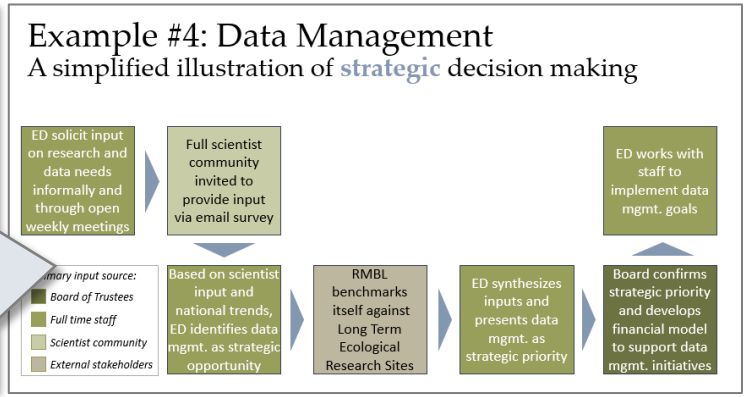


Example 2 shows steps typical of hybrid decisions (with operational and strategic elements)

Example 3 shows steps typical of strategic decisions *that originate with the RMBL community*

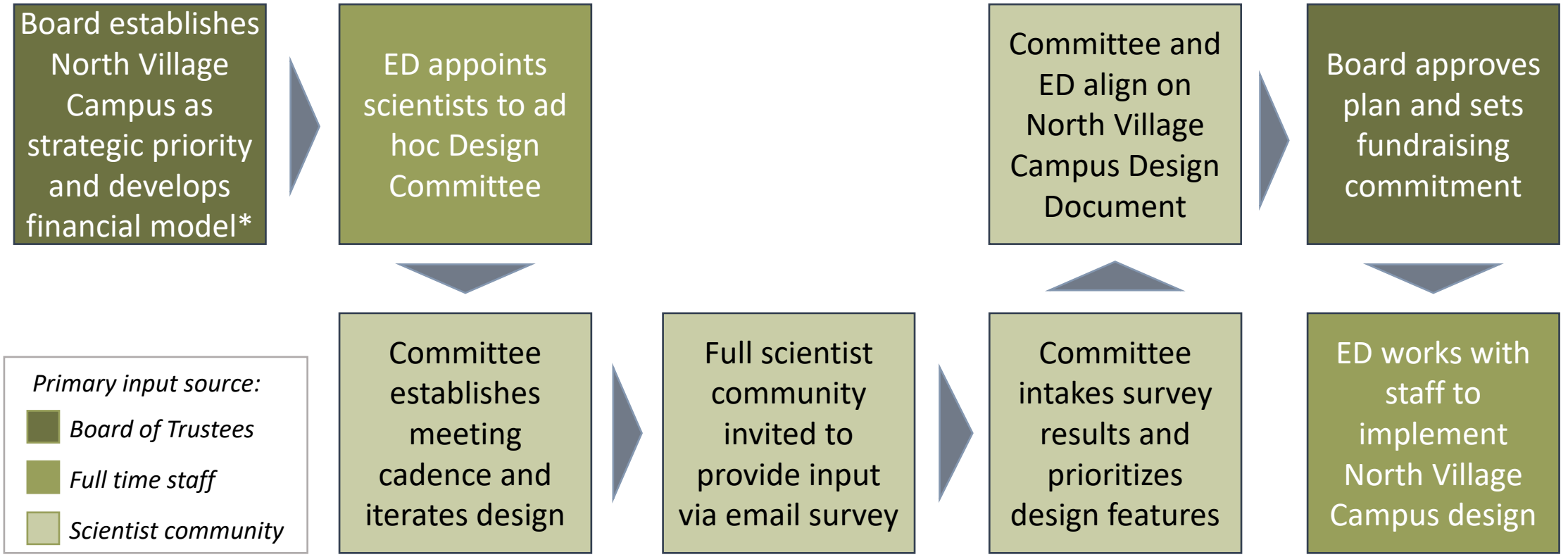


Example 4 shows steps typical of strategic decisions *that originate with RMBL leadership*



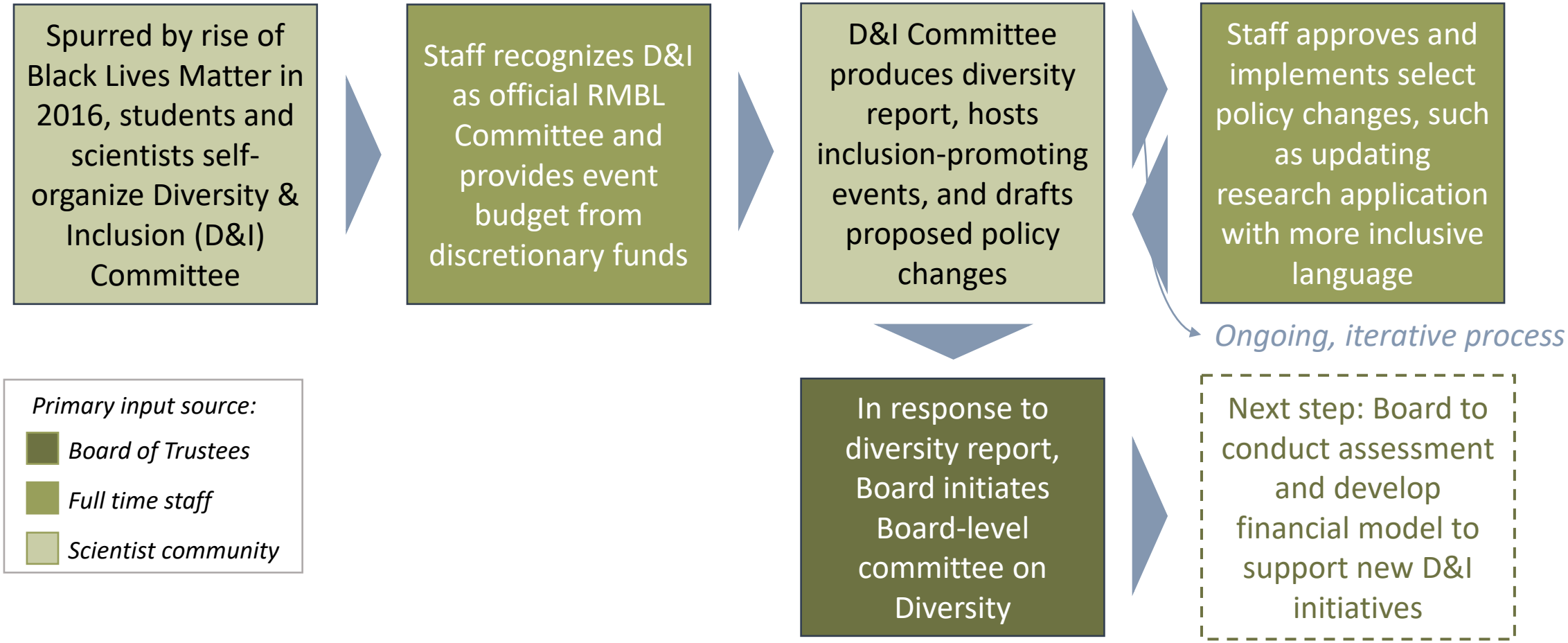
Process Map Example #1: Cabin repairs
A simplified illustration of **operational** decision making

Example #2: North Village Campus Design
A simplified illustration of **hybrid** decision making

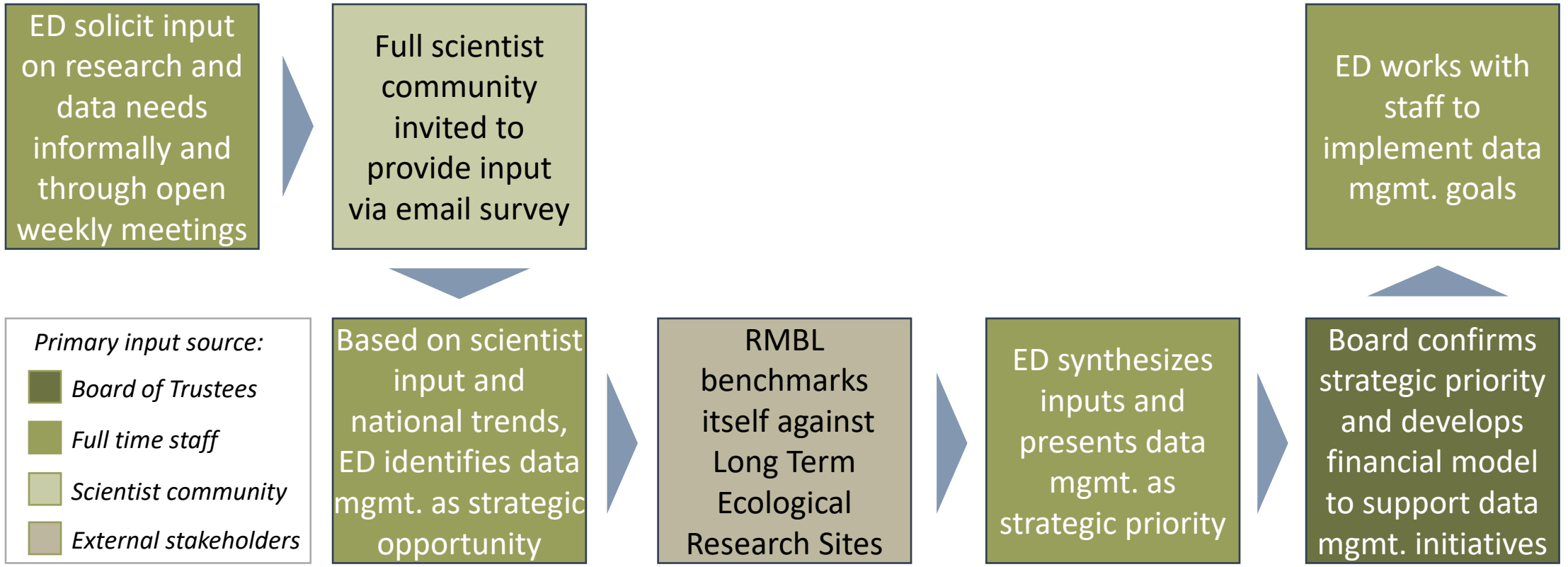


*The steps leading up to establishing North Village Campus as a strategic priority could themselves constitute an entire (strategic) decision process map. They include reviewing peer organizations, evaluating the RMBL financial model, identifying scientists' concerns, and intaking scientists' feedback.

Example #3: Diversity & Inclusion Initiatives
A simplified illustration of **strategic** decision making

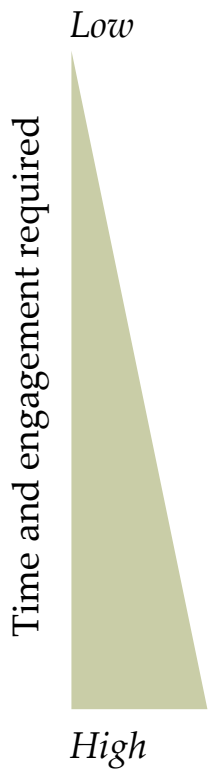


Example #4: Data Management
A simplified illustration of strategic decision making



Want to get involved?
Scientists are encouraged to share ongoing input and ideas

Recognizing the criticality of scientist input and feedback, the Board and staff have developed a variety of mechanisms through which you can contribute your perspective:



1. **Join existing listservs** to stay abreast of ongoing events at RMBL and opportunities to provide input.
2. **Complete periodic assessment surveys** distributed throughout the summer via email. Staff assess these surveys, develop action plans, solicit feedback on prioritization, and report back to the community.
3. **Attend topical meetings and social events**, such as informational sessions and field trips with the Board and staff.
4. **Reach out to Trustees and staff,** who deeply value the input and opinions of the community they seek to serve. The active scientists on the Board provide an especially effective means for such communication as they work in Gothic.
5. **Become a voting member** and cast your ballot to elect new Board members. See details on the RMBL website.
6. **Serve on a Director's Committee,** such as Research, Animal Care, Fellowship, and other ad hoc committees**.** Appointed by the ED, these committees provide important input into key operational policies and practices.
7. **Serve on the Board and/or Board Committees,** many of which include a small number of non-Trustee members. Appointed by the Board, non-Trustee committee members bring diverse input to contribute to Board decision making.
8. **Organize and lead a grassroots initiative** by building alignment for an idea at the community level. Successful past examples include the Diversity and Inclusion Committee.

Appendix: A closer look at Director's and Board Committees

Director's Committees

Research
Reviews and evaluates all research proposals. Comprised of RMBL scientists, alumni, and others with background in science; collaborates with Science Director.

Animal Care
Evaluates the effectiveness and appropriateness of animal use methods. Includes RMBL scientists, a veterinarian, and others with background in science.

Fellowship
Reviews and prioritizes applications for fellowship support. Comprised RMBL alumni scientists / students and others with background in science.

Ad hoc
Chartered as needed (e.g., North Village campus design)

For questions or to express interest in joining, please contact the Executive Director

Board Committees

Governance
Assesses Board needs and performance; recruits and evaluates Trustees; oversees risk management. Comprised of Trustees and non-Trustees; chaired by President.

Finance
Evaluates financial reports; oversees audit, budget, and endowment; recommends budget to Board. Comprised of Trustees and non-Trustees; chaired by Treasurer.

Development
Assists the Board and ED in raising the revenue needed to sustain RMBL and accomplish its mission. Comprised of Trustees and non-Trustees.

Ad hoc
Chartered as needed (e.g., Diversity, Communications)

For questions or to express interest in joining, please contact to the Board President

Photo by Laurel Runcie from the RMBL Archives