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Contact Information:

Ann-Marie Mitroff
Groundwork USA & Hudson Valley
annmarie@groundworkusa.org
www.groundworkhvh.org
(914) 375-2151

Donna Somboonlakana, EPA Region 2
somboonlakana.donna@epa.gov
(212) 637-3700

About the Organization:

Dedicated to changing places and changing lives, **Groundwork USA** is a national environmental justice organization with local roots, engaging local businesses, residents and government officials to revitalize neighborhoods and transform community liabilities into community assets. Trusts are initially established with EPA brownfields funds and administered by the National Park Service Rivers, Trails & Conservation Assistance. Trusts become independent non-profit organizations.

Groundwork Hudson Valley was established in 1999 in Yonkers, NY. River work has included daylighting, annual river cleanups, invasive plant programs, stewardship, recreation access, & water quality sampling. Community programs include youth Green Team, CSA, farmers market, citizen farming, rail-trail restoration, floating educational hydroponic Science Barge, community arts, parks & community improvements.



Reclaiming Urban Waterways— Daylighting the Saw Mill River

Groundwork Hudson Valley, Yonkers, NY

Overview Few environmental projects focus community attention as dramatically as those that seek to create (or retrieve) parks and trails along urban waterways. The Groundwork network has achieved significant success on such projects, including the Saw Mill



River Daylighting Park in Yonkers, NY; the Spicket River Greenway in Lawrence, MA; the Elizabeth River Greenway in Elizabeth, NJ; and the Mill Creek Greenway in Cincinnati. Park projects along urban waters can be modest to large and complex. They may include docks, fishing piers, canoe trails, playgrounds, greenways, and riverfront improvements—all providing public access to the river. River parks become venues for events, education, recreation, and contemplation. They can also be catalysts for neighborhood revitalization and, in some instances, drivers of major economic redevelopment in distressed cities.

Setting The Saw Mill River's water power made Yonkers a booming industrial town starting with grist mills in the 1650s. Over time, because land was in short supply, the river was squeezed and covered over in places. Finally, in the 1920s, the last bit of river in downtown was covered by a parking lot (renamed Larkin Plaza). In the 1960s, industry started to move elsewhere, and by 2000, empty and boarded up buildings surrounded the parking lot and downtown.

The Project Many circumstances converged to make daylighting a reality. The US Army Corps identified "daylighting the covered reach in Larkin Plaza" as a valid restoration project (1992). EPA and the National Park Service launched Groundwork Yonkers, with City buy-in, to focus on environmental projects (1999). "Daylighting" was a priority project and Groundwork enlisted Columbia University design students to create a vision (2002). Scenic Hudson provided funding for Groundwork to hold community input sessions (2004). And, the City began courting redevelopment to revive the economy.

EPA Funding Critical to Habitat Outcomes & Community Involvement Having a non-profit partner deeply involved in community engagement *and* environmental details was a boon for the City. Local foundation funding (Westchester Community, Hudson River) funded staff to begin a larger planning effort. Critical multi-year funding from the EPA Office of Water and the NY-NJ Harbor Estuary Program sustained the community process, a habitat plan, and on-the-ground work with the City's Downtown and Waterfront Development Office and the engineering design and construction team. While Groundwork began the partnering work, the effort grew to involve local businesses, numerous community partners, and state and federal funding agencies. These have evolved into long-lasting working relationships.



Voila!—A New River is Created One of the coolest things about this project is that a *new* path was created for the river. The underground river channel was left in place for “overflow” in heavy rainstorms—which otherwise would have flooded the park. A chamber was built around the underground river channel to divert part of the river flow into the new river path. Because of historical contaminants on the site—a “brownfield”—the new path was lined with heavy vinyl. In April 2012, within 6 months of water flow, the river was teeming with life! **Ecological Impact:** 14,000 square feet of new aquatic habitat, including tidal pool and two freshwater pools, support many species (turtle, ducks, blue crab, black-nosed dace, the endangered American eel, and more); native plant species planted as riparian habitat

attract beneficial insects to encourage food chains. **Cultural Impact:** The park *attracts* human beings with the sound of water and its beauty. The park hosts tours, art shows, events, music, public art, and a seasonal farmer's market (also run by Groundwork). The American Eel Outdoor Classroom, complete with a mosaic showing the Eel's Journey from the Sargasso Sea to the river, is used by local educators. **Economic Impact:** The City has already credited the new park with triggering redevelopment including a \$7 million renovation of a tech firm with 180 jobs, a \$43 million historic redo of 5-7 buildings, and an apartment tower and mixed-used complex to replace abandoned buildings along one side of the park.

What we learned along the way

- ⇒ Establish a big vision early and make sure the vision is shared, not created in isolation by your organization or by “absent” planners. Plans that do not involve the whole community often lead to flawed designs and contentious public meetings.
- ⇒ Keep the vision alive through events (often over many years) that connect with diverse audiences.
- ⇒ Publicize the health, economic, ecological, educational, and employment value of the project.
- ⇒ Encourage partnerships as you will need community, political, economic, and business support.
- ⇒ Bring resources—funding, time, experts—to the table.
- ⇒ Have your legislators be cheerleaders—they love being involved in bold projects.
- ⇒ Involve youth, as they can sell the project better than you.
- ⇒ Provide reliable technical information on costs, design, cleanup, and habitat issues.

Ongoing challenges

- ⇒ Secure a seat at the table to plan and design the park once funding is in place.
- ⇒ Ensure that the design actually *enhances* aquatic habitat and water quality.
- ⇒ Ensure that you have organized programs for the park to begin as soon as it is completed.
- ⇒ Anticipate and deal with crime, vandalism, and unwanted after-hour activities.



Next Steps & New Partnerships The City has moved ahead with Daylighting Phase II—Mill Street and Daylighting Phase III—Chicken Island. While these are very modest (50 feet, 100 feet, 400+ feet), they bring interest to the history of covering rivers, amazement that nature can respond quickly to daylight, interest in where the river still runs underground, and enjoyment of the rushing sound of water in a “dry” environment. Groundwork has used the work on the park and river as a catalyst with its area youth and residents to engage them in stewardship. In August 2014, the US Fish & Wildlife Service designated their collaboration with Groundwork, to foster urban river stewards, as an Urban Wildlife Refuge Partnership. Groundwork also received an Urban Waters Small Grant to build an “Eyes on the River” stewardship program.

Resources (available for download at www.UrbanWatersLearningNetwork.org)

Lessons Learned: Reclaiming Urban Waters Across the U.S., May 2012, Groundwork USA.

Daylighting: New Life for Buried Streams, 2000, Rocky Mountain Institute

For more information about the Learning Network, visit www.UrbanWatersLearningNetwork.org
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