

# Greenway Renewal Project Urban Wildlife Refuge Partnership

*Elizabeth, New Jersey*



*Nature-based Programming*

A community's effort to reconnect its residents to their unseen river has grown into a nationally recognized partnership. A partnership between Groundwork-Elizabeth and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will help restore habitat along the Elizabeth River and foster connections between residents and natural areas both within the city center and at Great Swamp National Wildlife Refuge.

By the middle of the 19th century, lands along the Elizabeth River had transformed from agricultural uses to being highly industrialized. Manufacturers such as the Singer Sewing Machine Company occupied block-long textile-style buildings along the river's edge. As farms turned to paved streets, flooding became a major problem. Though a riverfront trail had been designed for the city by Frederick Law Olmsted as early as 1912, river access became increasingly rare as flood control necessitated the river's channelization through densely populated parts of the city, and the construction of berms and dikes which further separated the people from their river. By the 1980's many of the factories were shuttered, leaving many abandoned structures (brownfields) and introducing the challenges of a distressed urban area.

In 2003 Groundwork-Elizabeth resurrected the riverfront trail idea, desiring to draw residents to the river's banks. In coordination with stakeholders from the private and public sectors and the larger community,

the organization leveraged over \$850,000 in funding from federal, State, and County programs to create The Riverwalk. Constructed in 2011, the 25-acre Phase I area is now used by thousands of people, connecting a 0.2-mile stretch of the river to Elizabeth's urban center and its schools, residential neighborhoods, and the Trinitas Regional Medical Center. Groundwork has also established a space within the Peterstown Community Center (a mile downstream of The Riverwalk) to provide nature-based programming to hundreds of students and families throughout the year. Here the banks of the Elizabeth River, molded into earthen dams, provide the opportunity to support demonstration gardens and native landscaping for pollinators, birds, and other native wildlife that usually escape the eye of the Elizabeth public. Rather than acting as a barrier, the berms may one day serve to draw both wildlife and people back to the river for respite and recreation.

The new Urban Wildlife Refuge Partnership will utilize Groundwork youth and USFWS expertise to:

- Improve The Riverwalk with native plantings to benefit pollinators and songbirds, improving the value, aesthetics, and enjoyment of the park for both wildlife and people.
- Provide interpretive training and technical expertise to help Groundwork staff expand environmental programming and establish ecologically-minded landscaping at the Peterstown Community Center.
- Support the creation of wildlife-dependent recreation and interpretive opportunities at the Travers Branch Nature Preserve, the last remaining stand of eastern deciduous forest within all of Elizabeth and surrounding a tributary of the Elizabeth River.

The Travers Branch Nature Preserve harbors native songbirds, salamanders, woodpeckers, and other species that are common throughout most of the State but relatively uncommon within Elizabeth.

The heart of the partnership centers around the idea of bringing USFWS expertise and resources into the urban environment, as well as introducing urban youth and residents to natural areas both within and beyond their communities. To this end, USFWS staff at Great Swamp National Wildlife Refuge (just 14 miles away) will host Groundwork youth and residents on field trips, training opportunities, and as volunteers, fostering connections with nature not possible in Elizabeth's urban center. While the partnership effort will provide the City with sustainable assets connecting residents to their river, it will also provide the opportunity to foster a sense of stewardship and pride in what can be created and shared when communities work together in conservation.

## Partners

Partners include, Great Swamp National Wildlife Refuge, Groundwork Elizabeth, and Friends of Great Swamp.



For more information, contact:  
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