

WOONASQUATUCKET RIVER GREENWAY PROJECT

Providence, Rhode Island

The Woonasquatucket River Greenway Project in Rhode Island is an attempt to use the clean-up and revitalization of a river corridor as a catalyst for change in the economically depressed communities near the river. The Project is working to develop a greenway along the Woonasquatucket River, along with related opportunities for recreation, education, conservation, and community and economic development.

The Woonasquatucket runs through some of Providence's poorest neighborhoods and represents a potential recreational resource for these communities, which are sorely lacking in recreational outlets for their children. Olneyville, the neighborhood that most of the river corridor passes through, is designated as a federal Enterprise Community (EC) area, and will receive economic development grants from the federal program. Only half of local residents have graduated from high school, and over 36 percent of children live in poverty.

While there is evidence of people occasionally walking along sections of the river, there is little active use of the river by community members, and there is no formal programming of events or activities in the river corridor. Two of the three publicly owned greenspaces along the river are closed and undeveloped.

The focus of the project will be the development of a 4.4-mile greenway and bicycle/pedestrian path stretching from the Johnston/Providence border to Waterplace Park in downtown Providence. Within a ten-minute walk of the proposed Greenway, there are only 2.1 acres of park space per 1000 residents, no soccer fields and four basketball courts. The project will provide visible and physical access to the now hidden river.

The goals of the Woonasquatucket River Greenway Project are to:

- increase the recreational and green space available to local residents;
- promote business development and reduce crime;
- promote river conservation and environmental action; and,
- increase awareness of local history and river ecology.

The Greenway Project is an effort of The Providence Plan, a not for profit corporation and joint venture of the City of Providence and the State of Rhode Island, created "to address the fundamental causes of urban decline, to create hope and new opportunity for the people of Providence, and to revitalize the city's neighborhoods." The Providence Plan is funded one-third by the City, one-third by the State and one-third from other sources.

Rediscovering a hidden community resource

Jane Sherman, Director of the Greenway Project, calls the river "a trashed and hidden natural resource. People aren't even aware that the river is in their neighborhoods." The Greenway Project is attempting to change this by educating local residents about the river.

In February 1994, The Providence Plan and two other local organizations implemented an educational outreach program at six elementary and three middle schools in the Olneyville, Manton and Hartford neighborhoods. Armed with a large tri-panel map of the river and its neighborhoods, along with teacher resource packets filled with river facts, history and classroom ideas, outreach volunteers opened their sessions by asking, "Did you know that there is a river in your neighborhood? Who can tell me its name?" They shared some of the river's history, led discussions about water pollution and talked about creative ideas for what could happen along the river. Several teachers followed up by developing related classroom projects—murals, display boards, a "living map" of the river and an activity workbook—which were displayed at the Olneyville Library and the Woonasquatucket River Greenway Festival. During the summer of 1995, the Greenway Project worked with five community centers and the Olneyville Public Library to set up youth environmental groups that did their own mini-clean-ups in their communities as well as lead testing of paint and soil.

The Greenway Project recently hired a bilingual community outreach coordinator to work with the residents of the neighborhoods along the river. In addition to awareness and planning activities, the coordinator will continue the environmental awareness programs, which are partially funded by an Environmental Justice Grant, awarded to The Providence Plan by the EPA.

River Festivals are annual events that have been created to draw attention to the river. On June 17, 1995, over 750 people attended the Second Annual Woonasquatucket

River Greenway Festival. An area business provided at least 500 free canoe rides for local residents, many of whom had never seen a canoe before. The first Woonasquatucket River Greenway Festival was held in Olneyville's square on June 11, 1994, and attracted over 250 people.

River clean-ups

The water in the Woonasquatucket is relatively clean for an urban river—carp and ducks live in it. However, there has been a tremendous amount of trash dumped in the river, including tires, shopping carts and entire automobiles. The Greenway Project has begun organizing river clean-ups to reverse this problem. In May 1994, the Woonasquatucket Neighborhood Cleanup involved over 50 participants from the area. Volunteers picked up litter and debris from various sites along the Woonasquatucket River. On August 9, 1995, there was a neighborhood cleanup, with 118 children from 14 to 17 years old from local community centers, and the statewide anti-litter program, sponsored by the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management.

Collaborations with other groups and agencies

In January, 1994, the National Park Service announced the adoption of the Woonasquatucket River Greenway Project as part of its Rivers and Trails Conservation Assistance Program. In November, 1994, the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund announced its Urban Parks Initiative, and awarded a total of \$859,632 in grants over four years to the Trust for Public Land and The Providence Plan for developing greenspace along the Woonasquatucket River. Of the total, \$419,432 will be disbursed to The Providence Plan for its community involvement efforts in the planning, design and implementation of the project. The Trust for Public Land (TPL), a national nonprofit conservation group and a partner in the Greenway Project, will receive the balance to work on land acquisition and easements. TPL will use most of the funds for environmental assessments of "brownfields," site assessments, legal fees and other aspects of land transactions. They will use \$20,000 to create a revolving loan fund for small businesses near the river corridor.

The Providence Departments of Parks and Planning and Development have been active participants in the Woonasquatucket River Coalition and have contributed staff time and expertise to this project. The Rhode Island Department of Administration, Division of

Planning, has awarded funds to The Providence Plan for parcel based GIS (Geographic Information System) mapping of the Woonasquatucket River Greenway Corridor. Funds for preliminary engineering studies of the corridor for a bike and pedestrian path have been allocated by the Department of Transportation through the Congestion Mitigation Air Quality Program.

“We have benefited from the strong support and participation of non-profit organizations and institutions, including universities in Rhode Island, the Rhode Island Audubon Society, Save the Bay, and many local community organizations,” says Jane Sherman. “Professor Harold Ward from Brown brought in his class to do studies along the river. University of Rhode Island graduate students conducted neighborhood surveys on housing, recreation and other indicators of neighborhood needs. A Johnson and Wales professor is looking at access points along the river. A representative from the Rhode Island Audubon Society gave a nature walk in an abandoned park along the river. It’s a real collaborative effort.”

Community participation key to project’s success

According to Jane Sherman, one of the greatest current challenges for the Project is to solicit citizen opinion, and then go out and find mechanisms for developing and maintaining the project. “It is the people whose daily lives are and will be affected by the river and its environment who must have a strong voice in what, when, where and how the overall project will develop,” stresses Sherman.

There were about 17 meetings in the community during 1995 with attendance ranging from three to 30 people. Sherman feels that it is sometimes difficult to draw participants to these meetings because residents are already involved in efforts to improve their community and their own quality of life. “You find in many of these neighborhoods that people have many meetings to attend.”

Sherman says that after raising awareness of the river, the Greenway Project is entering a new phase “where we’ll be going to the community and talking to them about the role of the river and what they would like to see along it. So rather than ask the community to come to us, it is very important for us to talk to the community where they are. We want to talk to them about how they would

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Scope: Providence neighborhoods along the Woonasquatucket River
Inception Date: 1993

Participants: Community groups, statewide conservation organizations, educational institutions, city, state and federal agencies, and residents from communities along the Woonasquatucket River

Project type: Greenways, public education, restoration/cleanup

Methods used: Environmental education, river clean-ups, community-wide events

Lessons learned: Take one step at a time. It is important to maintain strong lines of communication among the people and organizations working on the project

like to use the river as a resource in their neighborhoods.”

A key element in the early success of the Woonasquatucket River Greenway Project has been the effectiveness of efforts to raise awareness of the river in local communities. According to Jane Sherman there has been a noticeable change in awareness of the Woonasquatucket River. Before the Project began, most area residents didn’t even know the name of the river and referred to it using the name of a local supermarket that was near the river. On August 15, 1995, Sherman attended an Olneyville Celebrates Olneyville meeting which included a game of historical and geographic questions about Olneyville. She said that when there was a question asking for the river’s name, “There was a chorus of kids answering the name of the river — Woonasquatucket.”

—Jobs & Environment Campaign



UPDATE

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The Greenway project continues to develop and gain support. This year they held the fourth annual Greenway Festival, and more than a thousand people attended. The city has pledged \$3 million for the project and the Trust for Public Lands has agreed to match this amount. The Providence Plan recently completed a master plan for the entire project. The plan was developed with extensive community input, including 18 community meetings, attended by more than 300 residents.

Work is proceeding on many specific aspects of the project. The Providence Plan is working with the U.S. National Park Service’s Rivers and Trails Conservation Assistance Program, EPA Region 1, and the Natural Resources Conservation Service. Community centers continue to be active in local efforts, and several centers have “adopted” different sections of the river. In one project, student volunteers planted 2,000 tulip and daffodil bulbs, and an Americorp team spent six weeks trailblazing a path and pruning trees along several sections of the river.

The EPA has provided a pilot grant of \$210,000 to conduct environmental assessments along the Woonasquatucket and Blackstone rivers, including two brownfield sites which are critical to the Greenway project. Citizen’s Bank has pledged \$125,000 over five years to the Providence Plan for community outreach along the river.

The State Department of Transportation has allocated \$1.3 million for design and construction of the bicycle/pedestrian path. Final design should be completed within one year. Plans are underway to restore a 34-acre state park on the river, with a community garden and a wetlands nursery. The challenge now is to keep up the momentum and move steadily toward completion of the project.

—Community Sustainability Resource Institute