

QUINNIPAC RIVER FUND FINAL REPORT- 2014

Please complete and submit completed form as a PDF via e-mail to dcanning@cfgnh.org at The Community Foundation for Greater New Haven by March 31, 2015.

Date: March 17, 2016

Group/Organization Name: New Haven Urban Resources Initiative

Address: mailing: 195 Prospect Street; physical location: 301 Prospect Street

City, State, & Zip: New Haven, CT 06511

Telephone #: 203-432-6570

Project Name: An Urban Wildlife Refuge in Fair Haven: Community-Based Land Stewardship to Benefit Wildlife and Waterways

Grant Number: 20140146

Name & title of person completing this form: Colleen Murphy-Dunning, Executive Director

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Please respond to the following statements:

1. List the specific objectives (intended outcomes) of the program and tell how they were met during the grant period. Also, provide an update on any special conditions of the grant (if applicable).

We were able to accomplish our intended objectives with the support from the Quinnipiac River Fund grant. We reduced storm water runoff, restored riparian buffer habitat and created habitat for migratory birds along the Quinnipiac River by succeeding in the following objectives:

1. We forged a strong network of community groups, local businesses, environmental non-profits, and city government officials from the Parks & Recreation department, the Livable City Initiative, and Mayor Toni Harp, the CT Department of Transportation, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Led by the local residents' vision, this group worked collaboratively to recover a blighted area adjacent to the Quinnipiac River and its public park in Fair Haven. The collaboration was a huge success and culminated in a community celebration at the transformed urban oasis with attendance from all the involved parties, the mayor, the press, and more than a hundred community members.

2. Along with our collaborators, we recovered the blighted area by upgrading the fence, establishing native vegetation selected for bird habitat, and planting a pollinator garden. The old, damaged and unsightly fence was replaced by DOT with a new fence, and based on community input, featured a ten foot setback nearest the traffic intersection to showcase the pollinator garden. Drawing on community input and expert opinion, a series of cedar trees and a diversity of shrubs were planted on the southern portion of the underpass area, all selected to provide food and shelter to birds while also addressing sight lines and safety concerns. This was done after community volunteers and URI's high school summer interns did extensive work to reduce invasive plants on-site. The area adjacent the road under the underpass, historically plagued by dumping, now features large rocks that prevent potential litterers from pulling over to offload their trash and a series of enlarged photographs along the concrete stanchions. Half of the images are of Fair Haven residents restoring the riverside habitat, recreating on the river, or working on the river while the other half are of birds photographed on the Quinnipiac River. The images were captured by a local photographer (Ian Christmann) and installed on the stanchions by a local business. The pollinator garden is designed to be multi-functional in that the garden supports bees and other pollinators while also providing a beautiful welcome to residents and visitors alike to Fair Haven. The burst of color from the flowers in the pollinator garden at the north eastern entrance to Fair Haven are both ecologically important and of social value, restoring pride to the Fair Haven community.

We raised community awareness of environmental values of Quinnipiac River and deterred negative environmental behaviors by creating artistic river-themed site enhancements, mounting interpretive signage, and organizing public events. All of the images that decorate the underpass stanchions are river-themed, featuring the people and the wildlife that enjoy the Quinnipiac River. We mounted interpretive signage mounted on the southern end of the site in the park area adjacent to the underpass that explains the USFWS urban oasis designation and the importance of restoring habitat for birds. Two events at the site further enhanced community engagement in the restoration of the blighted area. The first event created an opportunity for the community volunteers, the high school interns, and local residents to learn about how the Quinnipiac River provides habitat to its resident osprey. The Audubon Society brought a telescope to allow anyone who was interested to observe the osprey, which created an interactive and enjoyable experience for all. Our second event was a celebration of the completion of the summer's work, with a site tour of the pollinator garden and the urban oasis of native trees and shrubs. Participants interacted with birds of prey, enjoyed pizza donated by Kitchen Zinc, heard the perspectives on the transformation from the neighbors, the partner non-profits, the DOT, and the mayor. An abandoned, littered, and overgrown space became a restored, celebrated, and adored riverside habitat. This success is part of a larger story emerging in which New Haven reclaims and restores its rivers.

2. Please share your successes, challenges and any lessons learned through the implementation of your program. Were there any unintended consequences or lessons learned that may affect how you operate your program moving forward?

This project allowed for an incredible amount of learning for our organization. We affirmed that engaging volunteers in spaces not immediately adjacent to their homes can be challenging, but that those who do volunteer their time are often the most committed stewards. While it was logistically challenging to coordinate among the many groups – the various departments of the City, the CT Department of Transportation, the USFWS, the Audubon Society, the Peabody Museum, Common Ground High School, local businesses, and individual volunteers – the results were palpable at our summer’s end celebration. By organizing an event to showcase the restoration work, we were able to galvanize support from our partners in the weeks leading up to the event. Our relationship with community members provided us with insights about how greatly the local residents valued the project, allowing us to lead with confidence. Using an ethic of ‘lead by example,’ it was clear that our own investment of time and resources paved the way for others to do the same. Notably, the CT DOT and city government agencies both saw their investment of resources as a more secure investment after observing that we as a community organization were confident and enthusiastic that the local community members would steward this space for years to come. We do anticipate stewardship challenges ahead, namely the continued presence of invasive species and the lack of water on-site. Although we successfully removed most of the invasive vegetative material above ground, we expect Oriental bittersweet and Tree of Heaven, among others, will return this season. It will take continual work on behalf of the community to manage these invasive plants so they do not overtake the native plants. In the long-term, we can expect the native trees and shrubs to grow root extensive root structures, but in the intervening years, we rely on community volunteers to haul water on-site to help them successfully establish.

3. What are the opportunities and needs of your organization as it continues to move forward with its work to positively impact the Quinnipiac River?

URI is well positioned to continue to engage residents in New Haven to care for and value the Quinnipiac River through our Community Greenspace program. We plan to continue to work with community groups in Fair Haven, both at Quinnipiac River Park and at the underpass site just north of Dover Beach Park. Our work planting trees along the water’s edge will draw residents to enjoy the view, sitting in the shade of an elm or a maple, building a direct relationship with the river. As New Haven residents grow their relationship with the river, we can celebrate the renaissance of river recreation, appreciation, and community support. Our organization would benefit from future support from the Quinnipiac River Fund on an as needed basis. Our urban oasis site at the underpass would benefit from additional native trees and shrubs, and depending on what we learn from our monitoring, support for additional site upgrades to abate erosion.