

URBANWATERS

FEDERAL PARTNERSHIP

Restoring Urban Waters, Revitalizing Communities

Middle Blue River (Kansas City, Missouri)



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Our Community Needs

The geographic focus area for this partnership has suffered from frequent and serious flooding, degraded water quality, habitat loss from channelization and urban development, and economic disinvestment and blight. Yet, the area is rich with redevelopment and restoration potential. Sitting in the shadow of Kauffman and Arrowhead stadiums, the largely unused, multiple brownfields site - Municipal Farms - is envisioned as a hub of connectivity for urban agriculture, ecological restoration, and outdoor recreation. This former corrections facility also has connectivity to riparian (riverside) greenways, conservation opportunity areas, and restoration sites along the Blue River and Brush Creek, its main tributary. Collectively, these sites connect with a network of vacant and abandoned residential properties, which have the potential to be revitalized in ways that bring social, health, and economic benefits to residents, through open space and connectivity. The partnership is committed to addressing the needs local residents and leaders have identified. These parties want assistance creating connected, livable neighborhoods, outdoor recreation and river access, economic development, sustainable jobs, and access to fresh food.

Overall Assessment of the Partnership Since the Beginning

The Middle Blue River Urban Waters Partnership formed in June 2013 around four core existing projects with overlapping geographies in the middle reach of the Blue River. By working with existing plans and projects, and by responding to identified local needs, the partnership quickly built trust and core goals. Leaders have structured the partnership to have the capacity to respond organically to opportunities for collaboration, projects and funding that rely on internal and external partners. The partnership's flexible capacities continue to serve it well, and have resulted in multiple collaborative projects.

Core Project Areas

The four core projects of the partnership serve as the foundation of its work and are leveraged with each other and related projects and activities. The partnership works throughout neighborhoods and districts in the river's middle reach to meet core goals.

Municipal Farms

The partnership catalyzes the implementation of Kansas City, Missouri's city council adopted, integrated, sustainable reuse and concept plans, resulting from EPA-funded Area Wide Brownfields Planning for the 445-acre multiple brownfields site near the confluence of the Blue River and Brush Creek. The vision is for a hub of urban agriculture, ecological restoration, and outdoor recreation.

Blue River Greenways Ecosystem Restoration

Another core project area is implementing the Army Corp of Engineers (ACOE) and Kansas City, MO, Water Services concept plans for restoration of ecosystems at the Blue River/Brush Creek confluence and the western half of Municipal Farm. Plans include significant acres of bottomland hardwood forest, wetlands, and upland prairie at the convergence of multiple regional greenway and trail systems.

Brush Creek Restoration Sites

The partnership is also mobilizing the building of restoration alternatives that have been planned for two reaches of Brush Creek via an ACOE and local sponsor feasibility study and community engagement process. The Brush Creek Coordinating Committee- a partnership of watershed stakeholders – has also created a habitat model unique to this urban watershed and is developing a watershed management plan. There are also ongoing studies and training to implement

restoration: invasive species studies and removal, native plant community restoration techniques, and natural resources mapping.

Upper Blue River Conservation Opportunity Area

The Blue River and Brush Creek Confluence area is the only urban state-designated Conservation Opportunity Area (COA) in Missouri, and the partnership is working on enabling restoration in these priority sites, which overlap the three other project sites. A large area of the COA is undergoing active restoration through grants and volunteer action through conservation partnerships, and those successes with volunteer engagement and public education are transferrable to the confluence site and Municipal Farm.

Members of the Partnership

The Middle Blue River Urban Waters Federal Partnership exists as a steering committee with membership across multiple organizations that have a stake or jurisdiction in the middle reach of the Blue River in Kansas City, Missouri. The partnership broadens its reach by joining existing partnerships that align with vision and goals of the partnership.

List of Partners

- Mid-America Regional Council (MARC), Regional Planning Organization and Urban Waters Ambassador Grantee
- Heartland Conservation Alliance (HCA), Alliance of more than 30 urban conservation partners, and Middle Blue River Urban Waters Federal Partnership Ambassador
- Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Region 7 Urban Waters
- National Park Service (NPS), Midwest Region's Rivers and Trails Conservation Assistance (RTCA) Program
- US Forest Service (USFS), Midwest Region's Watershed Forester
- US Geological Survey (USGS), Missouri Water Science Center
- Missouri Department of Natural Resources (MDNR), Our Missouri Waters Regional Lead
- Missouri Department of Conservation (MDC), Kansas City Region, Urban Forester
- City of Kansas City, Missouri (KCMO), Planning Department
- City of Kansas City, Missouri, Brownfields Team
- City of Kansas City, Missouri, Parks and Recreation Department
- City of Kansas City, Missouri, Water Services Utility

Partnership Meetings

The partnership steering committee meets monthly, in pragmatic gatherings organized to handle whatever is relevant at the time. Typically, the steering committee shares organization and project updates, and works on next steps for specific projects or new opportunities. Occasionally, the meetings are full-on working meetings, in order to best respond to a grant or partnership opportunity. The steering committee regularly forms ad hoc subgroups to work on projects and respond to opportunities, joins teams convened by partners leading projects, and works with aligned collaborations.

How We Work

The partnership works across sectors on multiple projects for the Blue River, in three goal areas. The partnership generates relevant collaborations for each of these unique efforts. Other partnerships that align with goals of Urban Waters are also built and supported by the partnership. Furthermore, while the partnership focuses its actions on the middle segment of the Blue River, it takes the whole watershed into account and encourages strategies that address regional watershed issues holistically. The partnership frames the issues we are working to solve as complex social issues that require considerations across community, economic, and environmental frameworks.

LEADERSHIP

EPA Region 7 staff led, convened, and coordinated the partnership from June 2013 until February 2016. In late 2015, MARC in partnership with HCA, received a two-year Urban Waters Ambassador Grant from EPA Region 7. Under this funding, HCA has assumed leadership as the Ambassador for the partnership, and MARC is catalyzing projects developed by the partnership. Having consistent, reliable leadership and coordination has been essential to the partnership's success. This work could not have been accomplished with volunteer leadership.

VISION

The partnership envisions a vibrant, resilient Blue River ecosystem that boasts healthy riparian corridors, diverse plant communities, urban forests and prairie grasslands, with abundant habitat for wildlife. The envisioned Blue River offers a variety of recreational opportunities that promote healthy activities- including a network of hiking and biking trails, places to boat, float or swim. The improved river system would link to a larger system of trails and greenways, and provide access to cultural activity centers. The river would be a centerpiece of revitalized neighborhoods

and a community asset that is valued and maintained by residents and visitors alike. The envisioned river would be an important part of the region's history and future.

GOALS

- Restore riparian forests, upland habitats, and wetlands
- Revitalize brownfields and urban neighborhoods through connections to the river
- Engage the community and connect people to the river

ALIGNED COLLABORATIONS

- Heartland Conservation Alliance – Blue River Watershed Convening, Conservation, and Education
- Kansas City Native Plant Initiative – Native Landscape promotion at all scales, across sectors
- Urban Neighborhood Initiative – Vacant to Vibrant Initiative for vacant lots, which includes a Greening Vacant Lots and Urban Farms committee
- Ecological Places in Cities – Technical Advisory Group to Fish and Wildlife Service's, Eastern Tallgrass Prairie and Big Rivers Large Landscape Cooperative
- Let's Move Outside – a Department of Interior initiative working through the YMCA network to encourage healthy behavior by helping urban dwellers access the outdoors for exercise and recreation
- Regional Green Infrastructure Planning – MARC in convening regional stakeholders to explore how to create a comprehensive plan for integrated green infrastructure, across scales and jurisdictions

Major Actions Taken Since the Beginning of the Partnership

This partnership has focused on projects and aligned partnerships that further the needs of the four core projects, and align with the three goal areas. In addition, the partnership helped HCA develop its capacity as an alliance of more than 30 partners for conservation in the Blue River watershed, which is foundational to the ability of the partnership to reach the conservation sector across organizations and to work directly with communities. Below is a list of the major projects that have been either completed, or are in progress in the partnership, divided by goal area.

Blue River Greenways Capacity Development

Urban Waters Small Grant that allowing HCA to develop collective impact guided alliance of more than 30 partners for conservation, focusing on the Blue River Watershed initially.

Restoration

Climate Change Forest Management Plan

USFS and MDC created a guide for forest management and restoration under observable climate change regimes in the Midwest.

Honeysuckle Study

With funding from the Urban Waters Ambassador Grant, USGS is conducting an analysis of remote sensing data in the COA for the most significant invasive species threats to forest health and resiliency.

Blue River Watershed Flood Inundation Maps

USGS developed web-based maps predicting flood inundation related to various stream gage readings, post-rainfall, on the Blue River and major tributaries.

Wetland Restoration Suitability Index

USGS developed a web-based tool allowing for the identification of lands along the Blue River and selected tributaries that are most suitable for restoration of wetlands.

Blue River Action Plan

A five-year plan being developed by the partnership which will focus on the conservation and restoration of community designated priority areas. It will incorporate recommendations from the Climate Change Forest Management Plan, honeysuckle study, and native plant community experts. It will also include recommendations for community engagement and stewardship.

Wetland Restoration at Municipal Farm

The state of Missouri has granted 500K in Natural Resources Damages Settlement funds to the Heartland Conservation Alliance and the city of Kansas City, MO to restore 18 acres of wetlands at Municipal Farm and create a conservation easement to protect them.

Revitalization of Brownfields and Communities

Kansas City Municipal Farm Restoration and Stewardship Project

With funding from a National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) Urban Waters grant, HCA is working with Boys Grow, an entrepreneurial farming and mentoring program, to add water curriculum and agro-forestry buffers at their annex farm at Municipal Farm.

Parks with Purpose

HCA, via The Conservation Fund, has brought \$200,000 in private funding to assist the Marlborough Coalition of Neighborhoods in adding community and park amenities to a city-block sized Kansas City, Missouri Water Services green infrastructure installation.

Transforming Vacant Lots to Restore Our City's Watersheds

With funding from an EPA Urban Waters grant, HCA worked with the University of Missouri-Kansas City Architecture and Urban Planning Department and community partners to systematically assess vacant lots for green infrastructure, open space, and conservation opportunities, and to conduct workshops to teach and assist three neighborhoods to revitalize a vacant lot as they envision it.

Municipal Farm Sustainable Reuse Plan/Sustainable Cities Design Academy (SCDA) Concept Plan

EPA funded Brownfields Area Wide Planning Grant outcome, and follow-up assistance from SCDA for conceptual planning. Reuse of 445 acre Municipal Farm into a hub of urban farming, ecosystem restoration, outdoor recreation. HyVee and Bright Farms are corporate partners developing agricultural hub components.

Municipal Farm Targeted Brownfields Assistance – Predevelopment Site Characterization

EPA Region 7 has provided assistance to Municipal Farm to conduct pre-development site characterization of some of the brownfields units, in preparation for investment and development.

Municipal Farm Targeted Brownfield Assistance – Integrated Green Infrastructure / Habitat Restoration Planning

EPA Region 7 has provided assistance to Municipal Farm to plan to integrate site-scale green infrastructure with habitat restoration, a unique effort that will prepare the site for effective balance of ecological restoration, urban farming, and building of structures.

Urban Neighborhood Initiative Vacant to Vibrant – Green Spaces and Urban Farms Committee

Several partners working on (and leading) this committee to create a framework and tools to support and scale up neighborhood capacities to transform vacant lots into vibrant greenspace, contextualized within a strategic framework for overall revitalization. Includes creating a field guide for transforming vacant lots based on a similar project in Detroit.

Engaging Communities

Students Teaching River Ecology Around the Metro

Blue River Watershed Association (BRWA) Urban Waters Grant to create youth and professional/education mentor learning pods to monitor water quality and share results with the community.

Communities Protecting Rivers

A National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) Urban Waters grant that assists two neighborhoods in the Middle Blue River Watershed to conduct water quality monitoring, hold community charrettes to determine outcomes, participates in vacant lot cleanups, and convert three vacated lots for native plantings, community gardens, or recreational spaces.

Blue River Stewardship, Conservation, and Restoration

A National Fish and Wildlife Foundation Urban Waters grant to HCA to create hands-on water quality and restoration learning events for youth in urban Kansas City, MO.

Blue Valley Oxbow Stewardship

A National Fish and Wildlife Foundation Urban Waters grant to Healthy Rivers Partnership to engage the community in stewardship actions to restore an oxbow wetland along the Blue River in Blue Valley Park and neighborhood.

Green Guard

DOI funded a VISTA to work with HCA for two years. VISTA functions as partnership coordinator, working to expand reach and diversity of partnership. Also created Green Guard stewardship program to work with East HS students in conservation learning and hands on restoration on school grounds. Recently, HCA was found community funding to have the VISTA one more year, and to expand Green Guard into two neighborhoods.

National Park Service – Rivers and Trails Conservation Assistance Technical Assistance

NPS staff have assisted the partnership in creating a community engagement logic model and will help design and implement five community engagement meetings with communities along the river to explore how neighbors perceive of and use the river and nature.

Unified Messaging for the Blue River

Supported by EPA UW Contract, the MBRUWFP and partners effort to create a unified brand and messaging for Blue River efforts that increase the visibility and connectivity of ongoing efforts and community access points, and assist in marketing the rivers' future.

Ecological Places in Cities (EPIC)

Partnership is engaged in Midwestern Technical Advisory Group to Fish and Wildlife Service that is developing strategies and tools to connect urban people to large landscapes and nature in cities via best practices for restoration, community revitalization, and community education and stewardship.

Major Impacts of the Partnership

The Middle Blue River Partnership has made a major impact on the capacity of its community to convene partners, and plan for and enact restorative activities in the Blue River watershed. Partners often praise the collaborative power of the partnership, attributing many projects and successes to it. The partnership may not be the only reason behind these achievements, but it has often been cited as a base that enabled projects to develop, funding to be received, and/or a necessary regional effort. For example, operationalizing regional green infrastructure planning, has often been brought up as a need within the context of the partnership, to support conservation and watershed planning efforts across the metropolitan region. The partnership supported efforts to initiate this planning and is now participating in it with professional green infrastructure stakeholders, decision makers, and policy makers to identify the best ways to integrate and implement all the regional landscape planning and tool development in the watershed.

The partnership has also made a major impact by providing small amounts of funding to various projects that have allowed for foundational actions that will produce offspring of the original investment. The capacity building for HCA is an example of how a small amount of funding for building an organization well, enables an organization to grow exponentially. Another example is the funding of multiple rounds of Targeted Brownfields Assistance to Municipal Farm. This assistance has performed hazardous clearance for the majority of the brownfields units on the 445-acre site, and pre-development site characterization for some of the units. Without these foundational tasks, Municipal Farm would not be able to attract investors and developers, the therefore be unable to accomplish any planned restoration.

Finally, joining allied organizations has helped support the larger picture objective of restoring the watershed in a madder which the Urban Waters Partnership would not have been able to do alone. These alliances also help build a network that understands that a healthy watershed provides benefits for both nature and people, and tend to the links between community well-being, economic revitalization. Joining the Urban Neighborhood Initiative and the Let's Move Outside campaign allows the partnership to assist more people and neighborhoods transform the spaces that they live in and spend more time outdoors.

Major Actions Planned in the Future

Unified Messaging for the Blue River

The partnership will continue to market and implement the use of the “Renew the Blue” brand through the partnership and networked alliances, and will implement its strategic communications plan.

Field Guide

EPA Region 7 is partially funding the translation of a field guide for transforming vacant lots designed by Detroit Future City, for Kansas City neighborhoods. The Urban Neighborhood Initiative is seeking funding to make the field guide web-based, and do develop a program of technical assistance and mini-grants to help neighborhoods implement transformation on vacant lots. The partnership’s goal is to have the guide ready by fall for use in a demonstration block revitalization program.

Blue River Action Plan – Revitalizing Communities with River Corridors

The partnership, via HCA, submitted a proposal to the USFS Urban and Community Forestry program, to fund the beginning of implementation of the Blue River Action Plan by creating a connected forest corridor between a patch forest in the Palestine neighborhood and Municipal Farm, via a corridor of contiguous vacant lots.

Major Challenges in the Future

The major challenge for the partnership will be finding funding to sustain the momentum of the cross-cutting projects it has been involved in. Currently, the majority of funding has been grant or federal program based, which will hopefully continue but is very competitive. As partners continue to develop networks of action that can have significant impact on revitalization of the river corridor and its communities, the partnership will need to find stable funding for ongoing operations across networks.

The nature of the partnership’s work in Kansas City has complex connected networks. While this is a necessary and impactful way to work, it can also be very consumptive. It demands having exceptional leadership with network management skills. The skillset of the government sector does not match the skillset and work style of the non-profit sector, that carries out the bulk of environmental and community engagement work. Therefore, finding ways to assist all networks in learning better network management skills, and funding their cross cutting efforts, will have the most impact.