

The Watershed Project: Richmond Greenway Bioswale and Native Plant Garden

An Environmental Justice Grant Success Story

Project Overview

The Watershed Project built a bioswale at the Richmond Greenway, a nascent park whose boundaries form one side of the Iron Triangle Neighborhood in the City of Richmond. The bioswale and native plant garden helped to address the issues of water quality and environmental literacy in the underserved community.

The Community

The community of focus for the bioswale project, which was funded by a \$25,000 [Environmental Justice Small Grant from EPA](#), was the Iron Triangle neighborhood of Richmond, California. Located in central Richmond, the Iron Triangle is the heart of Richmond's African American community.

The neighborhood derives its name from the three major railroad tracks that define its triangular boundaries. Due to its connectivity to multiple transit networks, the Iron Triangle was once Richmond's center of industrial activity. Hosting several industrial and chemical manufacturing facilities has also contributed to the community witnessing numerous social and environmental hardships.

Today, the Iron Triangle deals with substantial unemployment, increasing school dropout rates, and lack of access to living wage employment options. Moreover, the neighborhood's toxic air, soil, and water have negatively affected the community's health and well-being. While the concentration of environmental burdens and lack of economic assets seem overwhelming, the Iron Triangle neighborhood has a strong tradition of community organizing and advocacy that is helping to change the neighborhood and its natural environment.

Project Description

With the support of a \$25,000 [Environmental Justice Small Grant from EPA](#), funding leveraged from other sources and through project volunteers, the Watershed Project engaged community members in activities that enabled them to build a community-based project that transforms the toxic laden eighth and 6th street sections of the Richmond greenway into a transportation, education, and recreational resource. This project provides this once forgotten community with a chance to learn about and participate in environmental stewardship as a lifestyle choice.

"Every day that I go to the bioswale site, I meet new people that stop me and tell me how appreciative they are of the improvements this project has brought to the Richmond Greenway."

Matt Freiberg, the Watershed Project



Image depicting the bioswale site after a typical storm event. (Photo courtesy of the Watershed Project)

The Results

Spanning the course of twelve months (June 1, 2010 – June 1, 2011) The Watershed Project has made a positive impact within the Iron Triangle neighborhood.

Through hosting workshops, attending community group events, neighborhood council meetings, and reaching out to youth, the Watershed Project was able to spawn a strong community movement that was instrumental in helping to transform the previously abandoned section of railroad property into a lush green open space.

During this timeframe, Greenway Project members, interns, and volunteers replaced over 2,000 cubic feet of hard packed clay and weeded over 1,500 square feet of brush. This clearing action helped the Watershed Project build a habitat garden that contains close to 800 native grasses, forbs, shrubs, trees, and a drip irrigation system that serves as an education tool to highlight the quantity of water used when irrigating the greenway landscape.

Moreover, Watershed Project staff and interns worked hard to develop a series of interpretive signs that spotlight the bioswale site history, the bioswale itself, and information on how the site provides the community with numerous environmental benefits.

This project has offered the Iron Triangle community an incredible opportunity to come together to work to improve their local environment.

Reflection

While the Greenway project did not encounter any major setbacks, the organization did experience issues that included a lack of sufficient funding and getting appropriate authorization and support from the local government. To alleviate these obstacle Greenway Project staff came up with creative solutions to leverage the EPA EJ Small Grant program for assistance.

Opening New Doors

The successful outcome of the Richmond Greenway Bioswale has enabled the Watershed Project to leverage many new opportunities. Thanks to word of mouth and local media news coverage, the Watershed Project was approached to begin other Low Impact Development Projects. Recently, The Watershed Project collaborated with the City of Oakland to manage the Departments of Public Works Rain Barrel program.



What's Next For The Watershed Project

Though the grant period has concluded, the Richmond Greenway Bioswale project continues. The Watershed Project is currently seeking funding to initiate a monitoring and assessment program. It is the hope of The Watershed project to use the program as a means to evaluate the swale's ability to remove, sequester, and degrade contaminants from storm water. The Watershed Project is also working to boost the public's exposure to this project so they can further educate them on the benefits of using Low Impact Development strategies to manage storm water, improve community aesthetics, and promote micro-wildlife habitat.



The bioswale site in Spring 2011. Photo courtesy of the Watershed Project)

RICHMOND GREENWAY BIOSWALE PROJECT KEY RESULTS

- Informed Greenway users of the problem of urban runoff pollution
- Restored wildlife habitat in the heart of the Iron Triangle community
- Encouraged people to use the Greenway and provide users a beautiful resting place
- Educated the surrounding community about urban agriculture and its benefits
- Demonstrated how local native habitats can reduce the need for pesticides in adjacent vegetable & fruit gardens
- Helped city officials show developers how they might incorporate a low-impact, biological and cost-effective way of removing storm water pollutants into their projects

To learn more about the Richmond Greenway Bioswale and native Plant Garden, please visit The [Watershed Project](#) or contact Matt Freiberg, Greening Watershed Program Manager at (510) 213-8897 or matt@thewatershedproject.org.