

**Groundwork Hudson Valley
Public Green Space Restoration Initiatives
Request for Funding from Yonkers CDA – Year 44**

EXPERIENCE AND RESOURCES:

Groundwork Hudson Valley (GWHV) was established 17 years ago through a partnership with the Mayor, the National Park Service, EPA Brownfields, and local environmental leaders. The organization works to restore environmental conditions of local neighborhoods and business districts, primarily in Southwest Yonkers and the CDA Target area. Projects are highly collaborative and involve stakeholders at every level, including residents, businesses and public agencies. When stakeholders are invested in the process, they help steward improvements over time. Through its projects, GWHV improves quality of life, strengthens local business, and renews environmental resources, such as rivers, trails, parks and gardens. GWHV is a leader at the national level as well. It launched Groundwork USA in Yonkers a decade ago, received the Partners in Conservation Award from the Secretary of the Interior in 2016, with Yonkers' youth on-stage in D.C., and won the Omega Institute's Sustainability Education Award the same year for its youth and education programs, most notably the Science Barge. Major projects include:

- The Science Barge and Ecohouse
- The Saw Mill River Coalition
- Daylighting of the Saw Mill River
- Yonkers Rail Trail
- Yonkers Youth Conservation Corps and Yellowstone experience
- Get Fresh Yonkers farmers market, coop, and urban farms

In this proposal, GWHV seeks support from CDBG to continue to restore public green space on the Saw Mill River and in the Smith, O'Hara Levine Park adjacent to the proposed Yonkers Greenway.

The Saw Mill River restoration work involves an ongoing partnership with the City of Yonkers, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Scenic Hudson, Riverkeeper, Westchester County, and Beczak. Groundwork worked with the City for nearly two-decades to open up the river and restore it back to health with new parks, plantings, and public amenities as a means of revitalizing the CDA Target area. Groundwork established the Saw Mill River Coalition, a watershed alliance, and worked in tandem with the City on daylighting, including ecological planning, community engagement, interpretation and public art. With the river's revival, millions of dollars have been invested in downtown Yonkers over the last 10 years, spurring economic and social change. For this project, Groundwork will carry out new restoration and stewardship projects along the Saw Mill River in Yonkers with its network of volunteers, its Coalition partners, and its paid youth corps. The youth program developed a special partnership several years ago with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for Saw Mill River-specific improvements. Additional funding for this work will be provided by the State's Hudson River Estuary Program (\$48,769) and anticipated grants from the Westchester Community Foundation (\$28,187), and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (\$50,000).

The Yonkers Greenway restoration work involves constructing a community garden in the adjacent Smith, O'Hara Levine Park for low-income residents in Southwest Yonkers' Lowerre community. This project will be part of a bold new initiative to create the first ever Yonkers Greenway – a new urban trail designed for walking, running, and bicycling along a branch of the abandoned Putnam Railroad. The Yonkers Greenway will eventually stretch from New York City's Van Cortlandt Park to the downtown Yonkers waterfront, reinvigorating the neighborhoods that declined after the railroad stopped running. Groundwork led an extensive community

engagement process involving residents, community leaders, and government officials in planning and design decisions.

The City of Yonkers, in partnership with Groundwork Hudson Valley, is set to break ground in 2018 on a new state of the art playground in the Smith, O’Hara Levine Park, adjacent to the route of Yonkers Greenway. The proposed community garden will be located adjacent to the playground. Taken together, the new playground, and the adjacent community garden will 1) promote physical activity to combat obesity through active play on the new playground and 2) provide healthy, local food options for better nutrition through the community garden, 3) empower local residents as environmental change agents through our paid youth corps employment program. Additional funding for this park is provided by Impact 100 (\$80,000), The Ronald McDonald House Charities (\$20,000) and New York State Parks (\$300,000).

BOARD OF DIRECTORS:

The Executive Director will oversee all projects listed in this application. Quarterly reports will be prepared and reviewed by the Groundwork Board of Directors. We will submit these reports to the Commissioner of Planning and Development. A list of current board members (2017-2018) is attached, along with an updated organizational chart.

STATEMENT OF NEED

A. PROBLEM DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS:

The City of Yonkers grew up around the Saw Mill River and the stream is a major environmental resource within the CDA Target Area. Yet, the river was treated poorly for more than a century, with major portions buried under city streets in the CDA Target Area. A legacy of industrial pollution made the stream one of the most contaminated tributaries to the Hudson River, fecal coliform spiked during rain storms, and, excessive trash and floatables (downtown Yonkers is at the bottom of the Saw Mill’s 26-mile watershed), turned the river from an asset into a liability. The health of the river became a major impediment to city’s revitalization efforts. Fortunately, the City of Yonkers and its partners, including Groundwork, made great progress in recent years to revitalize the river, turning it into a catalyst for renewal and an ecologically sound resource. Progress was iterative and remarkable involving 3-major daylighting parks, upstream restorations by the Saw Mill River Coalition, a 4-year monitoring program funded by EPA, an annual Great Saw Mill River Cleanup, and much more. As a result of these efforts, the river’s health is returning, with American eel populations on the rise and other species returning, such as night herons and eastern box turtles. At the same time, the river continues to face many challenges. Ongoing efforts are needed to improve, maintain and expand habitat areas; to address water quality problems, such as fecal coliform spikes; for creating green infrastructure to reduce runoff from urban streets; and to maintain diligence on litter and trash.

The Smith, O’Hara Levine Park faces similar pollution problems as the Saw Mill River. For over 60 years until the onset of WWII, the Putnam Rail spur line coursed through a large, green space in a once thriving, middle-class community. Today the low-income Lowerre Street community is subject to multiple residual environmental hazards. Emissions from the now defunct Putnam Rail spur have resulted in the EPA’s designation of this area as a Brownfield. The emissions permeated the ground along the rail line to the point that children could not safely play along the abandoned line, and food certainly could not be grown in this contaminated soil. Additionally, apartment residents with windows and doors that back up to the trail routinely discard their garbage on the slope leading to the trail, including rotting food, toxic cleaning agents, and infected needles. Further exacerbating this situation, rodents and raccoons rummage through this waste, increasing risk of disease. Finally, the area has a lack

of healthy food alternatives and the highest rates of diabetes, heart disease, and obesity in the County. We expect the project, with its focus on healthy food and community use of the playground will help reverse this trend. The project also runs through one of the City's highest crime precincts. With a well-lit park and more eyes on the location, we expect crime and dumping will decrease as public programming and facilities increase.

B. TARGET POPULATION:

Residents and businesses within the CDA target area are the target population for these green spaces and are the people served most by the restoration of the Saw Mill River and the Smith, O'Hara Levine Park. Hundreds of youth from the CDA area have participated in Groundwork's conservation corps over the years, playing a central role in green space stewardship efforts. Of the 80,000+ residents of Southwest Yonkers, two-thirds are Hispanic or African-American, and one-third live below the poverty line. Further, Southwest Yonkers has 6,000 units of subsidized housing and an unemployment rate 50% greater than the rest of the city. The population is relatively young as well, with 30 percent of residents under 18 years of age, compared to 22% in Westchester County. Given the high proportion of young residents, the need for safe and welcoming outdoor environments is great. And given the shortcomings of the public-school system and high unemployment rates, the need for youth leadership, training, and employment programs is significant as well.

C. GEOGRAPHIC AREA/EXISTING SERVICES/FACILITIES:

Project activities will take place throughout Southwest Yonkers in various locations in the City of Yonkers along the Saw Mill River and in the Smith, O'Hara Levine Park.

SERVICE METHOD:

Under this project, Groundwork Hudson Valley will carry out an array of restoration, monitoring, and clean-up projects to support the ongoing health and revival of Southwest Yonkers' green spaces. These projects will be led by GWHV's paid Youth Conservation Corps and a project coordinator, with support from the Center for the Urban River and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The work will be coordinated with the City of Yonkers and will include:

- The implementation of the Great Saw Mill River cleanup in the spring at 5 sites in Yonkers, involving over 100 volunteers and the removal of several tons of trash and debris;
- Invasive vine removal and native plant restoration activities at 2-3 sites along the river involving 25+ youth from Yonkers and partnering agencies.
- An effort to collect and monitor American eel populations in the daylighting parks in partnership with New York State, involving 20+ volunteers;
- An effort to remove debris and prepare the Smith, O'Hara Levine Park for a new community garden space;
- Building and constructing a new community garden in the Smith, O'Hara Levine Park adjacent to the new playground.

Through these projects, nearly 200 volunteers will support the City's efforts to restore the Saw Mill River and the Smith, O'Hara Levine Park in Yonkers, demonstrating a commitment to community engagement that has been a hallmark of Groundwork Hudson Valley's restoration projects since its inception. All of these activities require facilities and materials to carry them out, including a place for youth and volunteers to be trained and organized;

storage facilities for equipment and tools; vehicles to transport volunteers and youth to program activities; and an array of landscape materials to restore sites with vegetation and green infrastructure.