Our Beginnings


The Council’s Plan started with a focus on the estuary, the downtown commingling of the three rivers as they flowed into the harbor. The Riverwalk concept was developed and is still in the process of being built. This hardscape amenity has added much value to the downtown business districts and helped spur residential development along and near the estuary.

In order to bring these plans to fruition the Council helped form River Revitalization Foundation in 1994. The Foundation continued its focus on our rivers. The Foundation was formed by members of two of Milwaukee’s largest service clubs, Rotary Club and Kiwanis Club, both having representation on the Board of Directors. At large members fill the remainder of the Boards slots. Presently Kevin Shafer, Executive Director of MMSD is our president. MMSD’s Greenseams program has helped greatly in our land acquisitions.

Upstream Vision for the Milwaukee River

Eventually the development moved upstream on the Milwaukee River and approached the old North Avenue dam. The Commerce Street residential development and subsequent restructuring of Kilbourn, Reservoir and Kadish parks on the slopes of the Milwaukee River has changed what was once a post industrial wasteland into an area with an increased population of these census tracts after many years of decline. This perception of the river as an amenity rather than a forgotten polluted artery in the center of our city now holds sway.

As the vision for the river reached the old North Avenue dam so did the approach to river restoration. A group of “River Rats” began meeting on a regular basis to develop a plan. The dream was in the making and implementation of the vision would follow to the present in 2014. A series of meetings were held to gauge public opinion on what we could do to improve the Milwaukee River from an ecological perspective and a human use perspective. Many folks wanted it to be the wild and somewhat unruly place it had evolved into. Others wanted improved access and all wanted improved habitat for all living things in a remarkably long but thin environmental corridor that extended upstream for 800 acres.

What emerged was a first draft of a plan for the river lands. This was called Milwaukee’s Central Park and was spearheaded by River Revitalization Foundation. The publication was supported financially by the late Pieter Godfrey, was distributed widely in the area and gained public notice from the broader media and government officials as well. The three groups who developed this vision were RRF, Friends of Milwaukee’s Rivers — now known as Milwaukee Riverkeeper and the Urban Ecology Center.

The Central Park vision was fine tuned through further meetings with stakeholders and evolved into what we now call the Milwaukee River Greenway. First the Milwaukee River Workgroup helped define boundaries and with a coalition of resident groups and nonprofits began the consensus process for planning. One of the original ideas was to support zoning regulations that would impact river land development in the corridor. This was passed in Shorewood and Milwaukee, resulting in the entire river corridor within city limits...
having protection for the riparian habitat. The concept of a viewshed was also included in the zoning language to minimize the visual intrusion of tall buildings to river valley visitors.

Implementing the Plans

As an urban rivers land trust, RRF faces daunting issues related to land acquisition that differ greatly from more rural land trusts. The number of stakeholders is large. The cost of land, especially along our rivers, which were becoming to be seen as an economically valued resource, was high.

RRFs first acquisition, the Beerline parcel, had its challenges. A local developer had purchased part of the Beerline Rail corridor before we could secure funding. The results we hoped for, after long years of negotiation, pushing to get the section we did buy, swapping parcels to gain a path down steep slopes to the river, were all eventually accomplished. Funding was awarded by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources Knowles Nelson Stewardship Fund with matching funds raised through MMSD Greenseams and private donations.

After securing a path from Gordon Park to Riverboat Road, a multi use bicycle and pedestrian path was built using CMAC funds (Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality — an alternative transportation incentive) in partnership with Milwaukee County Parks. There is now a connection to trails upstream, paved and unpaved, down to the river and soon to be connected to the hardscape riverwalk, thus down to the harbor.
While in that process RRF also developed land management plans for the Milwaukee and Menomonee Rivers, formalizing its role as a land trust. We began an evaluation process of all river land parcels along both rivers. We ranked these parcels using criteria that evaluated each by its conservation value, as an asset from an ecological perspective including human values related to use and access in the river valley.

Opportunities arose that allowed us to assemble easements on the east side of the river that resulted in the East Bank Trail. This crushed stone trail lead from the old dam bridge to Riverside Park. Subsequently it has been extended to Shorewood's Hubbard Park and linked to Milwaukee County's Oak Leaf Trail. This trail loop has greatly improved public access and links Milwaukee County parks by trail on both sides of the river from Locust Street to Riverboat Road and beyond.

This year we celebrate our 20th anniversary in our new office, the Richard L. Schmidt Riverhaus, at 2134 N. Riverboat Road.

When we were evaluating properties, the two parcels next to the downtown Riverwalk were ranked the highest. We never thought we would actually acquire these lands. The lesson, dream big and sometimes your dreams come true.

Truly for all those who participated in the vision for the Milwaukee River Valley, many big dreams have come true and more are in the works. Millions of dollars of public and private money has flowed to these projects. Success breeds success.

RRF has played a key role in what will become a historically significant time in our river lands history. A neglected river, with much land saved by forward thinking ancestors, is now coming back into the fore as a priceless natural resource in Wisconsin’s largest city.
GLOBAL YOUTH SERVICE DAY

Friday, April 11, 9:00 a.m. - 1:00 p.m.
Global Youth Service Day is an annual campaign that celebrates and mobilizes the millions of children and youth who improve their communities each day of the year through service and service-learning. This year, in partnership with UW-Milwaukee, service learning students will be removing invasive species and implementing the final stage in our savannah restoration project! We will be seeding the final segment of a 3.3 acre parcel with a wide variety of native wildflowers and grasses which will mark the completion of our new prairie. Join us for this exciting day! Thanks to our donors for this seeding project: US Fish & Wildlife Service-Partners and the Dutton Foundation!

EARTH DAY, ARBOR DAY

Saturday, May 3, 9:00 a.m. - Noon
Earth Day river cleanup, Arbor Day tree planting and hike – MillerCoors volunteers will meet at the Wheelhouse property on Riverboat Rd. Morning refreshments and lunch provided by MillerCoors – thank you!

NATIONAL TRAILS DAY

Wednesday, June 18, 6:00 p.m.-9:00 p.m.
America’s 200,000 miles of trails allow us access to the natural world for recreation, education, exploration, solitude, inspiration, and much more. Trails give us a means to support good physical and mental health; they provide us with a chance to breathe fresh air, get our hearts pumping, and escape from our stresses. All it takes is a willingness to use them! National Trails Day® will be celebrated locally with a solstice hike along the Beerline Loop, a 2.5 mile trail along the Milwaukee River. Meet at RRF offices at 6:00 p.m. at 2134 N. Riverboat Rd. Wear appropriate clothing, bring a water bottle and a snack and we’ll do the rest!

For more information, call Vince Bushell at 414-588-7281 or visit us online.

RIVER REVITALIZATION FOUNDATION STEWARDSHIP PLEDGE FORM

The River Revitalization Foundation was created to establish a parkway for public access, walkways, recreation and education, bordering the Milwaukee, Menomonee and Kinnickinnic Rivers; to use the rivers to revitalize surrounding neighborhoods; and to improve water quality. Thank you!

Name
Company
Address
City State Zip
Phone Fax
Email

Enclosed is my/our gift of $__________________
Checks should be made out to River Revitalization Foundation.

Please charge my credit card. √ Visa √ Master Card
Account number __________________________
Expiration date ___________________________
Signature _______________________________

$25
$50
$100
$250
$500
$1,000
$0 Other

Please remit to: River Revitalization Foundation, 2134 N. Riverboat Rd., Milwaukee, WI 53212
Give securely online at www.riverrevitalizationfoundation.org – click on the “DONATE” tab.
EARN & LEARN SUMMER CREW

July 1 – August 15
by Ellie Kirkwood

RRF will be partnering up with Milwaukee Area Workforce Investment Board for the Earn and Learn program, which hires youth ages 14 to 21 to gain work experience in a diverse array of positions throughout the city. As natural landscapers, our crew of approximately 10 youth works hard restoring the land around the Milwaukee River — learning how to be natural stewards while gaining transferable job skills. The amount of work completed in the brief seven weeks between July 1 and August 15, 2014 is sure to be remarkable, so be sure to stop by Wheelhouse Park on a sunny day this summer and see what we’re up to! Volunteers are welcome to work alongside the crew on a variety of projects starting July 1st.

Mayor Tom Barrett addresses the Earn and Learn program participants (above). A past RRF crew is shown below.