

# Nine Mile Run Watershed Association 2011/2012 Annual Report



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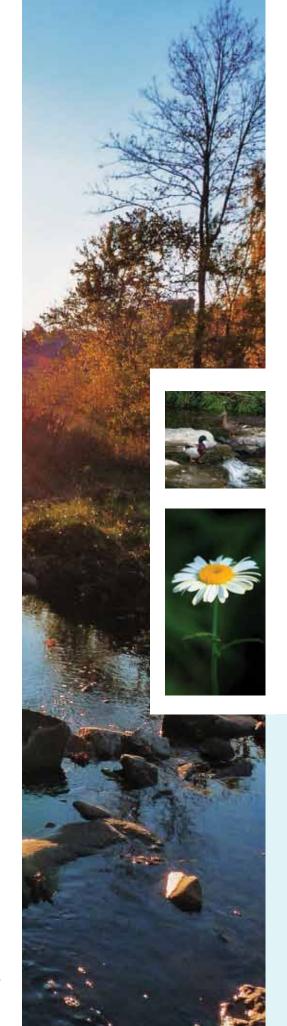
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All photos courtesy of John Moyer unless otherwise noted.



In 2006, a new Nine Mile Run was unveiled. Following decades of neglect and pollution, a three-year project sponsored by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the City of Pittsburgh restored 2.2 miles of the stream running openly through lower Frick Park.

The stream channel was reconfigured and rebuilt, wetlands and floodplains were created, and the ecosystem was enhanced with thousands of native trees, perennials, and grasses.

Today, Nine Mile Run is a jewel to behold, but there is still much work to be done. Excess stormwater runoff and sewage overflows still negatively impact the stream, and improvements in the upper watershed communities are needed to address these problems.

At NMRWA, we believe every watershed citizen and municipality must do their part, and are working to find cost effective solutions that not only help the stream but bring multiple benefits to our communities. We are dedicated to restoring and protecting the long-term health of our watershed and stream.

Thank you for joining us!

#### **Mission**

The Nine Mile Run Watershed Association works to restore and protect the Nine Mile Run watershed. Through outreach and education, we involve local leaders and volunteers in community greening initiatives to foster a healthy urban environment.

#### **Vision**

NMRWA will be a recognized national model of environmental stewardship, urban renewal, public/private collaboration, and intermunicipal cooperation.

#### Letter from Jeaneen

Dear Friends,

If you haven't visited Nine Mile Run lately, you will be delighted by the maturing vegetation and increasingly healthy ecosystem that you will see, from "volunteer" cottonwood trees that line part of the waterway to the garter snake that crossed our path during a recent stream walk. The restoration project's impact is visible, significant and exciting. The Nine Mile Run Watershed Association is proud to continue its stewardship of this effort.

Sadly, though, much work remains to be completed to fully address water quality improvement and to stop trash and sewage from affecting the stream after heavy rainfall. In fact, the Board felt so strongly that we need to focus on crossing the finish line to true restoration that we made this our primary 3-year objective in our recently completed strategic plan: "To reduce the flow of stormwater and sewage into Nine Mile Run." Consequently, we are striving to focus every bit of the organization's activity around this objective and our refreshed mission.

As an urban watershed group, NMRWA faces challenges unlike its rural peers. Our 6.5 mile

watershed spans the borders of four separate municipalities – the City of Pittsburgh, Wilkinsburg, Edgewood, and Swissvale Boroughs – making it a microcosm of all that makes our region both wonderful and challenging from an environmental viewpoint. Differences in social and economic factors affect each community's perspective and ability to address watershed protection.

At NMRWA, we anticipate working ever more closely with those municipal partners. We are striving to understand the trade-offs that they face and plan for issues that affect water quality: from stormwater runoff to the Department of Environmental Protection Consent Orders to which all four communities are subjected, to identifying resources and strategies for mitigation, such as planting street trees or adopting unified regulations regarding curb cuts and drainage. We've even just added a new Director of Policy and Outreach to our staff so that we can specifically assist with these matters as they affect the stream.

We believe that true collaboration with all of our stakeholders is the best way to succeed. Among our long-time partners is the Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy (PPC). With PPC and Community Living and Support Services (CLASS), we are planning for one additional project to cap the restoration area: creating an accessible, attractive anchor entrance to Frick Park at the beginning of the day-lit portion of Nine Mile Run. Like everything in our watershed, this requires lessening the high stormwater flow and sewage overflow that races through this area. Our vision is to transform this flow-damaged section into a showcase starting point.

We appreciate the dedication and work of our many volunteers and members, without whom these projects cannot occur. Please plan to join us for one of our many activities this coming year to both further restore and enjoy the wonderful conservation and parks resource that the transformed Nine Mile Run has become.

**Jeaneen Zappa** *President, NMRWA Board of Directors* 

#### Letter from Johr

Dear Members and Supporters of the Watershed Association,

The word 'growth' can mean "an expansion or an increase in size or depth." This type of growth certainly describes the work of the Nine Mile Run Watershed Association in 2011. As an organization focused on environmental stewardship and urban renewal, we invested time into growing minds through our ongoing interactive educational programs. As treestewards, we continued growing our urban forest through our GreenLinks program. In 2011, NMRWA partnered with TreeVitalize Pittsburgh and the Borough of Wilkinsburg to begin the planting of 500 trees throughout the neighborhood. We also understand the importance of growing sustainably as an organization, so we launched StormWorks to offer stormwater management products and services to residents throughout Allegheny County, while generating earned income to support our work in the watershed.

But growth from the standpoint of "full development or maturity," is something that requires time, continued dedication and hard work. So while this report may focus on the growth of NMRWA during 2011 and 2012, I'm pleased to have had the personal experience of seeing the growth of this organization and the work it has done in the watershed for many years.

My first exposure to the Nine Mile Run watershed came in the late 1970s as a water pollution program manager for the Allegheny County Health Department. We had dozens of complaints about sewage odors and discharges into what the locals called "stink creek." In response to concerns about the potential health exposure for Frick Park visitors, the Pittsburgh Parks Department was required to post warning signs along the creek about exposure to pollutants. Most people simply stayed away from that part of the park.

In 1998, I became the executive director of a new organization, 3 Rivers Wet Weather, whose mission is to help improve the region's water quality by working with the ALCOSAN customer municipalities to address their wet weather overflow problems. In 2002, 3RWW discovered a unique funding source, through the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, for a \$7.7 million stream restoration project in Nine Mile Run. It became the largest and most successful urban stream restoration to be undertaken in a major metropolitan area in the country.

NMRWA unfailingly supported this project through ongoing education of the community on the elements of the restoration, the progress being made and the importance of this project to enhance the quality of life in Pittsburgh's East End, and by advocating for continued funding when necessary during

the course of the project. NMRWA's work to steward this remarkable restoration continues today.

As my term of office ended in 2012 and I reflected on my 40+ years of work in the environmental field, I will always look at Nine Mile Run as a model success story that shows how solving environmental problems pays back to the community in immeasurable ways. Lower Frick Park is now a favorite destination for walkers, runners, bikers, and family outings. Many species of aquatic life have returned to the stream and are surviving. Our pollution monitoring shows we still have work to do, but with NMRWA's ongoing stewardship efforts, I have no doubt we will see further improvements in the coming years.

It's essential that we all remember the significant investment made in the Nine Mile Run Watershed over the last 11 years, and that we continue to support NMRWA's ongoing efforts. It's one small way we can all be a part of a story of true long-term growth and positive change.

John Schombert Immediate Past President

#### Growing the Watershed's Urban Forest

Did you know that a healthy and vibrant urban forest is a critical part of a city's infrastructure? Pittsburgh's urban forest provides many services to us every day that many people may not realize. Trees filter and clean the air we breathe, absorb rainfall before it runs off into our sewer pipes, provide us with cool shade during the summer, lowering energy bills, and can even help raise property values and reduce crime.

The urban nature of the Nine Mile Run watershed means that every time it rains, Nine Mile Run is inundated with polluted stormwater runoff from roadways, parking lots, and rooftops upstream. Improvements in our local urban forest can play a crucial role in solving this problem!

Beginning in Fall 2011, we launched the Rooted in Wilkinsburg: Wilkinsburg TreeVitalize Project - 500 Trees Initiative. Working with our partners TreeVitalize, the Borough of Wilkinsburg, and the Wilkinsburg CDC, the goal of the project was to plant 500 street trees in the borough of Wilkinsburg over a two year period. Funding for the project was received through the Pennsylvania Infrastructure Investment Authority (PennVest), and this project is part of TreeVitalize's larger goal of planting one million trees across Pennsylvania, including 20,000 in the Pittsburgh region by the end of 2013.

By the end of 2012, 435 of the 500 trees had been planted, including 80 in and around the Penn Avenue Business District corridor. These trees on Penn Avenue help fulfill an important community greening goal in the Borough's recently completed Comprehensive Plan. We will be maintaining all of the trees planted in this initiative for two years from the date of planting – watering weekly from May through October, and weeding and mulching as needed, to give them the best possible chance to survive and thrive in the challenging urban environment.



Former NMRWA staff member, Maeve Rafferty, cares for some of the first trees planted as a part of the 500 Trees Initiative during an August 2012 tree care event. (photo by Alicia Donner)

### **Growing Sustainably**

Sustainability is at the core of NMRWA's mission and programs. In 2011, with the support of the Richard King Mellon Foundation, we launched a new social enterprise called StormWorks to help us reach our goals while generating a stream of earned income for the organization.

StormWorks builds on the urban watershed knowledge base of NMRWA and offers professional stormwater management services to people throughout Allegheny County. Services offered include: property consultations, rain barrels, rain garden design and installation, and sustainable landscape design.

By providing sustainable stormwater solutions, StormWorks helps to further NMRWA's mission of reducing stormwater flow into Nine Mile Run while also giving homeowners and businesses an opportunity to make positive, measurable changes in their communities.

Additionally, StormWorks is working to increase the financial sustainability of NMRWA by helping to support NMRWA's education, outreach, and advocacy activities. Over the first nine years of NMRWA's existence, the lion's share of our grant and government funding has been for demonstration projects such as the services that StormWorks now offers. By creating a thriving social enterprise to generate revenue from these types of projects, NMRWA aims to continue accomplishing key goals of our organization in a more sustainably funded way.



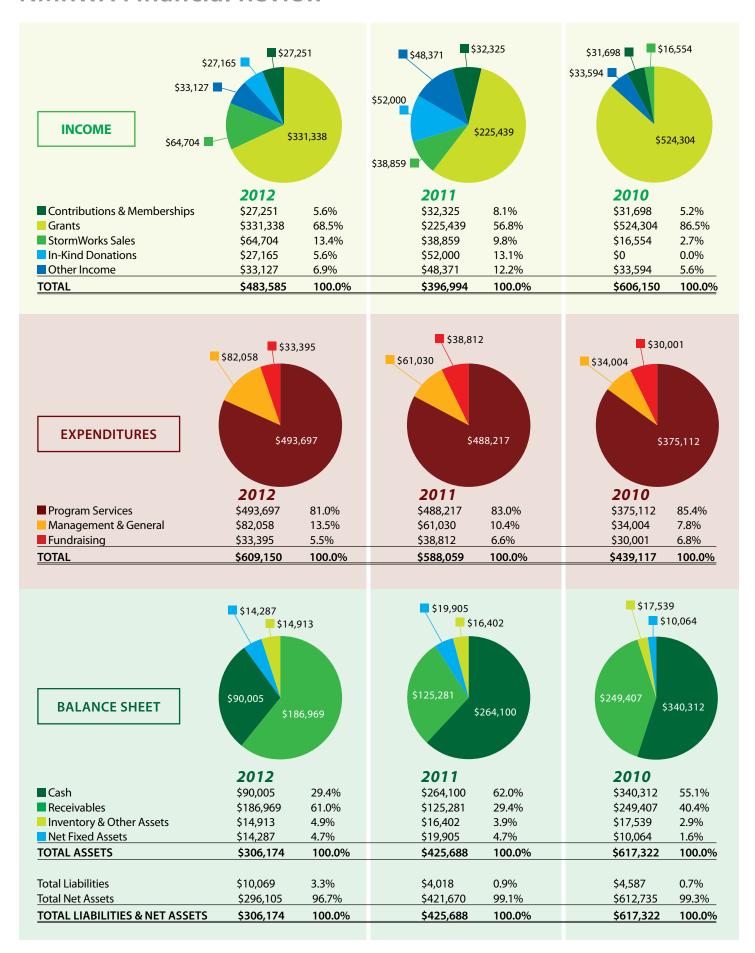
#### Key accomplishments thus far:

- 2011 = installed 72 rain barrels & 7 rain gardens
- 2012 = installed 144 rain barrels & 15 rain gardens
- More than 2.6 million gallons of stormwater diverted from our region's sewers during 2011 & 2012.

StormWorks designed & installed this rain garden in Mt. Lebanon at Main Park during October 2012. (photo by Janet Folajtar)



## NMRWA Financial Review



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#### **Growing a Greener Region**

Over the last two years, NMRWA joined with five other organizations to organize an effort to influence the choice our region will make about the largest public infrastructure investment in its history. The Clean Rivers Campaign (CRC) has worked to educate the public about the Consent Decree that requires ALCOSAN and its 83 customer municipalities to stop sewer overflows into our rivers and streams. We have no choice about spending a large amount of money to clean up our water, but we do have an important choice about how we spend it, and what we get for our money.

Christina &

Ellis Schmidlapp

Jennifer Schnakenberg

Working with Pittsburgh United, Clean Water Action, the Pennsylvania Interfaith Impact Network, Action United, and the Sierra Club, NMRWA has advocated for green solutions that would deal with rain where it falls, before it can reach our sewers. Adding acres of green roofs, bioswales, trees, and permeable paving to our region will give us cleaner air, cooler summer

temperatures, revitalized business districts, and many other community benefits that we won't get from the deep tunnel storage plan being proposed by ALCOSAN.

NMRWA created and maintains the CRC website (cleanriverscampaign.org) and social media accounts, gives presentations around the region, and helped organize the Beyond Tunnel Vision: Good Jobs and Green Communities speaker series.

The series brought experts to Pittsburgh from a variety of cities that have overcome some of the same barriers to green solutions that are often cited as reasons why "we can't do it here": steep slopes, clay soils, etc. The consistently high attendance at the series (60 – 100+) showed the strong local interest in this issue. To date, more than 50 organizations and businesses, and more than 2,500 individuals have endorsed the CRC and our call for green solutions to our sewer problems.





# Our Profound Thanks to our 2011 & 2012 Funders & Supporters:

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