

## Environmental Justice for South Wilmington, Delaware

Clean Air Council  
Delaware Valley, Delaware

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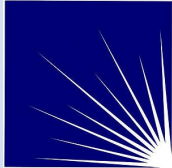
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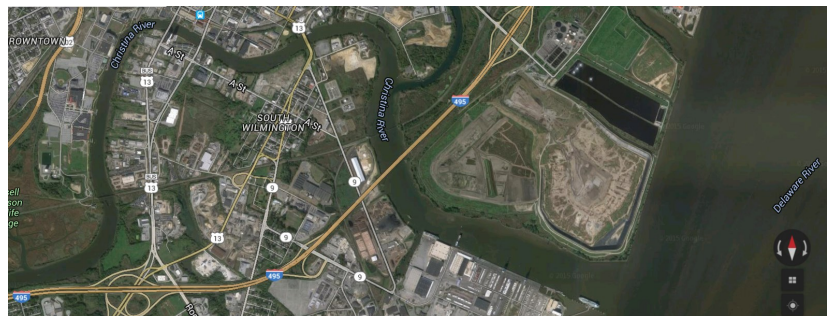


### About the Organization:

Clean Air Council is a member-supported environmental organization serving the Mid-Atlantic Region. The Council is dedicated to protecting and defending everyone's right to breathe clean air. The Council works through a broad array of related sustainability and public health initiatives, using public education, community action, government oversight, and enforcement of environmental laws.

### The Setting

Surrounded by highways, railroads, and full of industrial facilities, South Wilmington also includes an unexpected pocket of residences. At the center of South Wilmington, this residential cluster is known as Southbridge. The neighborhood as a whole is isolated from the rest of the city and is uniquely situated in an oxbow of the Christina River just as it flows into the Delaware River.



*Image of South Wilmington surrounded by Christina River. Credit: Google Earth*

### History

South Wilmington is rich in history. The first independent African-American church in the United States was established in the neighborhood in 1812. Throughout the 1800's a mix of European immigrants settled in South Wilmington and while the percentage of African Americans historically stayed between twenty and twenty five percent, today South Wilmington is predominately African American. South Wilmington was mostly agricultural until 1870 when the transformation to industry began.

### Environment

Flooding in South Wilmington neighborhood is a severe and well documented issue. South Wilmington is situated in a 100-year flood plain and surrounded on three sides by the Christina River. Frequently throughout the year, the high tide of the Christina River exceeds South Wilmington's land elevation. Residents in this area have reported losing multiple cars in one year due to flooding. In addition to flooding, contaminated lots and storage of industrial waste is also a major issue and concern for residents.

Knowing the extent of these issues, the City of Wilmington applied for and received funding in 2013 to repurpose three brownfields sites into a wetlands park in order to alleviate flooding. This is where the Clean Air Council (CAC) comes in.

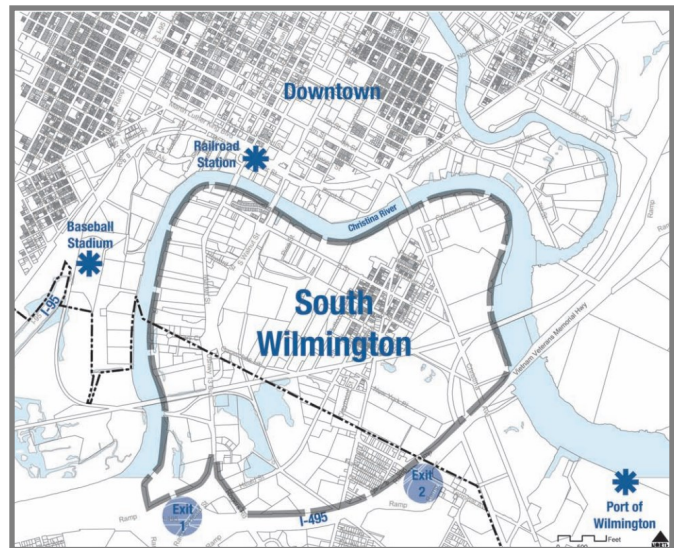
CAC has an established relationship with the South Wilmington neighborhood. In 2012, the organization received an EPA Environmental Justice grant to examine air quality in South Wilmington. They learned of the city's plan to address three sites during their presentations to South Wilmington residents. Because of CAC's familiarity with the various issues burdening the neighborhood, they knew that there were a total of seven brownfield sites that would need to be addressed to solve the issue of

## Clean Air Council

CAC learned of the city's plan to address three sites during city-led presentations to South Wilmington residents. Because of CAC's familiarity with the various issues burdening the neighborhood, they knew that there were a total of seven brownfield sites that would need to be addressed to solve the issue of flooding in South Wilmington. Unfortunately the city had funds to address only three sites. CAC decided to act.

While attending their EJ grantee orientation meeting, CAC heard about EPA's Urban Waters grant program. They decided to submit an application for funds to address the remaining four sites in South Wilmington.

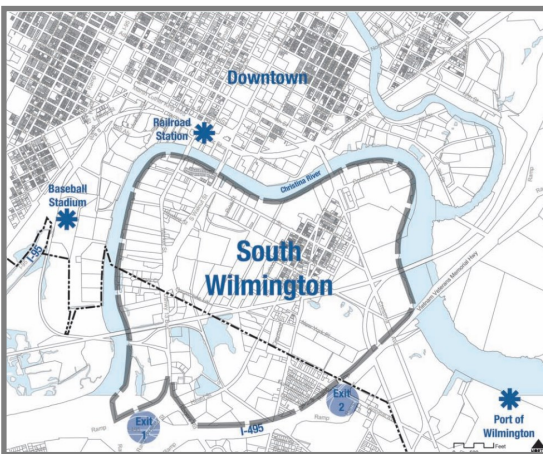
A prime example of integrating equity into brownfield redevelopment processes, the Clean Air Council met with residents *prior* to applying for funds. Rather than coming up with a proposal, in a silo, for how to reuse these brownfields sites, CAC worked with residents to develop the proposal and submitted an application to the EPA Urban Waters Program in 2012.



## Impact of Urban Waters Funding in South Wilmington

EPA's urban waters funding enabled CAC to do extensive door to door outreach and education with residents about the concept of green infrastructure and the technical details of the flooding in their neighborhood. A workbook was created for the neighborhood that explained green infrastructure and the idea for the urban waters project. This workbook was taken around door to door to aid in discussions with residents.

After the extensive educational effort, CAC began engaging residents in the design of four brownfield sites. There is a desire in the neighborhood to increase green space and social connectedness. CAC is working with residents to figure out how these four sites can be repurposed to not only provide flood control, but to address other community needs and desires. This design and priorities identification phase is being supported by graduate engineering students from nearby Jacksonville University. In the coming months CAC will host, in partnership with the community, a series of workshops to gather feedback on design alternatives. Four designs for each of the four brownfields sites have been created. The designs reflect the input and ideas from residents coupled with flood data and modeling to help determine the extent of stormwater runoff on each site.



## Successes

This project pushes the boundaries of what the Clean Air Council knows and works towards and as a result CAC has had to build their own knowledge internally in order to genuinely respond to residents needs. This is an important gain for CAC and for the neighborhood. Along these same lines, residents in South Wilmington are much more knowledgeable about the issues impacting them and that there are various approaches which can be used to address these issues. In addition CAC has been able to bring the best minds, working on green infrastructure, to this very small and neglected area of Wilmington. This is significant because these folks could easily devote their time to larger cities such as Philadelphia; which is a leader in green infrastructure work. However they have chosen to work with South Wilmington and the expertise they bring is having a tremendous impact.

## Lessons Learned

It became clear in the very beginning that many more hours would need to be spent educating residents in order to help set them up for success. In order for residents to be able to participate meaningfully, CAC had to conduct more outreach than anticipated. This is a win for both the community and for CAC because it helped build an even stronger relationship between them. Another important lesson learned for CAC was that they needed to be flexible; specifically when scheduling neighborhood workshops and conducting their outreach. For instance they moved the neighborhood workshops to the Spring months because they found out that many residents were hesitant to leave their houses at night. So instead of hosting workshops over the winter, they waited until the days stayed lighter, longer.

For more information about the Learning Network visit [www.UrbanWatersLearningNetwork.org](http://www.UrbanWatersLearningNetwork.org)

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