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About the Organization:



FRESHWATER
LAND TRUST

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Freshwater Land Trust is a non-profit organization whose mission is the acquisition and stewardship of lands that enhance water quality and preserve open space.

Since 1996, they have worked to acquire, conserve, and connect lands that are critical for the protection of rivers and streams and that provide recreational opportunities for the community.

The Freshwater Land Trust owns and manages more than 5,000 acres, making it one of the largest owners of private nature preserves in the state of Alabama.

Connecting Residents to Village Creek

Freshwater Land Trust

Birmingham, AL

Setting

Village Creek, which flows through the heart of Birmingham, was once considered one of the most polluted streams in Alabama. Today, thanks to the Freshwater Land Trust, and with significant support from the U.S. EPA, there is new hope. The Freshwater Land Trust has gathered together community, non-profit, city and business leaders who are working together to transform Village Creek into a community asset.

Freshwater Land Trust (FLT) has led the effort to mobilize community, non-profit and business leaders around Village Creek. This group calls itself Champions for Village Creek Greenway, and it is directing efforts to create a system of greenways, parks and trails that will improve the water quality and the quality of life for residents in the Village Creek watershed.



*Village Creek Pedestrian Bridge.
(Photo courtesy/ Freshwater Land Trust)*

Leveraging Funding for Action

FLT has successfully implemented trails adjacent to Village Creek, improved access to the creek, and secured a variety of funding sources to make these projects happen.

A combination of funding from the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT), the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF), and the U.S. EPA Brownfields program has made it possible to create trails, bridges, and on-street bike lanes that make it easier for residents to access the creek and allow young kids to get to and from school without having to walk on the street. FLT has also engaged long-time local civil rights activists in the design and installation of historic signage to help tell the story of the local community and again link residents with their environment much like the trails and bike lanes do.

Revitalizing Brownfields

Funding has also made it possible to assess brownfield sites adjacent to Village Creek and begin revitalizing some of these sites with the help of local residents volunteering to clean up. Most recently, the U.S. DOT awarded FLT and its partner agencies funding to purchase a former industrial site that lies along the banks of Village Creek. NFWF has provided funds to improve this site through native plantings and habitat restoration. The site is a major connector for a planned greenway system that will connect two communities in Birmingham, Alabama. Once improved, this parcel of land will link residents to the creek, to existing parks, and to a future walking trail being built by the City of Birmingham using TIGER funding from the U.S. DOT.



Celebrating the extension of the Civil Rights Trail in Enon Ridge. The trail runs along Village Creek. (Photo courtesy/ Freshwater Land Trust)

Lessons Learned

Strong community partnerships have been critical to Freshwater Land Trust efforts. This organization highlighted the importance of reaching out in advance to community members who were interested in working on Village Creek with Freshwater Land Trust. FLT engaged presidents of neighborhood associations, city council members, and business owners. As a result they have ambassadors from the neighborhoods who show their support for FLT and give credibility to the organization and the visioning efforts that have taken place in the community. The community ambassadors also help with outreach. Freshwater Land Trust did not approach the community to just ask for their help, they developed relationships in the community and developed an understanding of what the community would consider to be an improved Village Creek.



Canoe trip on Village Creek led by Freshwater Land Trust. (Photo courtesy/ Joe Songer/AL.com)

Also, engaging federal partners by taking them on tours of brownfield sites and the proposed greenway system was critical. It was one thing to show the federal partners a plan on paper, but it brought the planning process full circle by helping the federal partners visualize exactly where their resources would go in the community.

FLT also highlights the importance of having a plan; something physical that people can look at to help spark interest and imagination. Without some kind of plan it was difficult for the community and others to imagine what Village Creek could look like and how

they might benefit from improvements. For more information about the Freshwater Land Trust and its work on Village Creek, please visit: www.freshwaterlandtrust.org.

For more information about the Learning Network visit www.UrbanWatersLearningNetwork.org

Coordinated by Groundwork USA and River Network.

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