

Brownfields Success Story

Attracting Wildlife to a Former Dumping Ground Town of Coventry, Rhode Island

In the late 1990s, Coventry officials decided that a vacant property in the middle of town needed a serious makeover. The property at 100 Sandy Bottom Road was a staging site for construction projects that left behind asphalt spoils, concrete, rock, soil, machine parts and metal, among other debris. Discarded material had piled up at the dumping ground for decades, releasing contaminants into the environment.

Local officials saw greater potential for the blighted, neglected plot. They envisioned a sustainable resource that could enhance the community and protect local wildlife—a public park and a restored wetland habitat where people could escape the hustle and bustle of their daily lives.

“There was never a question of what we would do with the Sandy Bottom property,” said Guy Lefebvre, town director of parks and recreation.* “We acquired it to protect an open space in the heart of town.”

Though their vision was strong, funding was tight. It took many years of hard work and collaboration to pull off the project, but by working with federal, state and local partners, the town saw its vision come true on October 12, 2013, the day it opened the Sandy Acres Recreation Area.

The Opportunity

In the 1980s and 1990s the town began forming a plan to connect the Merrill S. Whipple Conservation Area it owned with the Sandy Bottom property and a nearby meadow to form a large, contiguous open space along the Pawtuxet River. Nestled between two state highways, the Sandy Bottom property is located along the main road that runs through the town’s business area. “The idea was to create an oasis and green space in the middle of all the commercial properties in that area,” said Lefebvre. The town acquired the Sandy Bottom property in March 2000.

*Guy Lefebvre passed away on May 16, 2015. As director of the Coventry Parks and Recreation Department for almost 38 years, he dedicated his career to the development and maintenance of parkland.



Early excavation revealed concrete, asphalt, car parts and a stump dump.

EPA Grant Recipient:
Town of Coventry

Grant Type:
EPA Brownfield Community-Wide
Assessment

Former Use:
Vacant Property Used as an
Unofficial Dumping Ground

Current Use:
Sandy Acres Recreation Area



Crews redistribute screened soil to prepare the site for landscaping.



A Parks and Recreation Department staffer makes final preparations before seeding.

“ Located between two busy highways, the park is a showcase welcoming visitors to the area. ”

*Guy Lefebvre
Director
Coventry Parks and
Recreation Department*



The completed wetland basin now provides an expanded flood plain.

The Funding

Lefebvre and his team knew that getting the funding together to redevelop the property was going to be a challenge. It might have taken much longer to do so without assistance from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS). At that time, FWS was involved in remediating a nearby Superfund site, the Picillo Farm, where hazardous waste was disposed in several unlined trenches. As part of a settlement, the parties responsible for the contamination were required to pay restitution to several agencies involved in the cleanup. FWS wanted to use those restitution funds to help protect the environment in Coventry, and so the agency awarded \$40,000 to the town to help restore the Sandy Bottom property.

With this news, the town applied to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) for funding to assess the site in 2008. The Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management (RIDEM) awarded funds for wetland restoration and park construction, and FWS awarded an additional \$143,000 grant to support flood plain expansion. The town also received funding to remediate the property from its sewer commission, which wanted to install a new sewer pumping station on the property.

The Cleanup

In 2010, RIDEM conducted a series of environmental assessments and identified contamination that required remediation using its EPA Brownfields Assessment and 128(a) grants. The state agency also prepared a remedial action work plan for the property, which the town was required to follow.

Site improvements began in 2012. The town's department of public works and department of parks and recreation cleared trees and removed contaminated soils and solid waste. The town encapsulated a specific area of contaminated soil in response to an environmental land use restriction instituted by RIDEM. To restore two acres of wetland, workers first removed material that was dumped next to the river and then constructed a storm water retention basin for runoff from the road. Next they hired a contractor to mitigate Phragmites, a common, rapidly growing reed that chokes waterways and can displace native wildlife.

After excavating and remediating the soil, and clearing the wetland basin, crews began landscaping the entire site, installing special wetland plantings, trees, shrubs and evergreens. Crews also constructed a walking path and guard rails, and the town is working to install a 400-foot-long elevated boardwalk that traverses a cedar swamp en route to the Whipple Conservation Area. The town also has plans to install amenities such as park benches and picnic tables by the end of 2015. A parking lot constructed at the entrance to the park can accommodate two dozen cars.

The Benefits

The 20-acre Sandy Acres Recreation Area officially opened to the public for the 2013 Columbus Day weekend. Visitors now can enjoy fishing along the Pawtuxet River, where RIDEM stocks trout in April and October each year. The town also plans to provide for canoe and kayak access from a launch site at the end of the trail.

The park brings people together. Youth groups visit for hikes and to learn about local wildlife and the wetland. Plans are underway to expand community programs that will help maintain the park. Coventry already has an Adopt-a-Spot program to help the Parks and Recreation Department during spring cleaning around town. The town can expand that program to maintain the recreation area, too. The local River Watch group can expand its program to test the water quality at locations throughout the park.

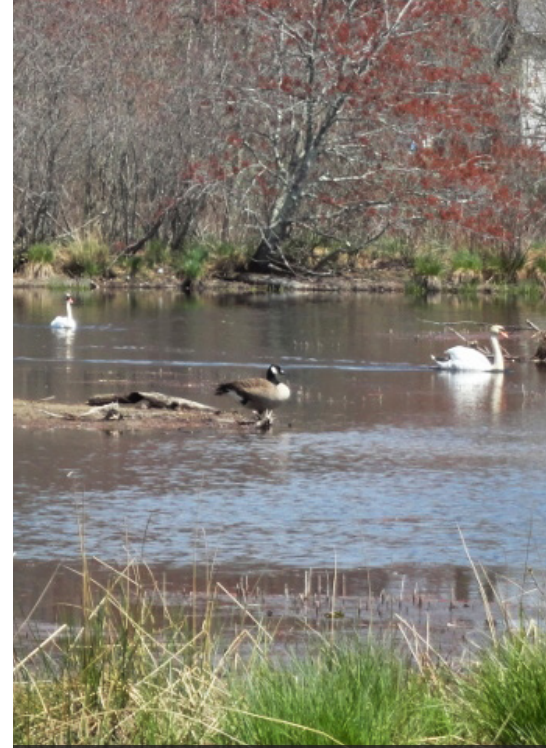
The town met its goal of enhancing wildlife habitat: turkeys, deer, turtles and many species of waterfowl and songbirds all inhabit the park. The Pawtuxet River Authority gave the Town of Coventry a protection award for making the acquisition to protect wildlife.

The completed wetland basin now provides an expanded flood plain—a benefit the town's residents take seriously after a storm in 2010 caused severe flooding in town. "There were 31 inches of water in my basement," said Lefebvre. "Knowing the capacity of the expanded floodplain, residents can rest assured that it will help prevent that type of flooding in town from happening again."

Residents also can be assured by the added security that comes from transforming the formerly vacant property. Before the revitalization, anyone could access the property from any point along the quarter-mile of the adjacent road. Now, entry is limited to one driveway, and the property is sustained for only its intended use. The rules and regulations that govern public parks now govern the site, including curfews.

The park also increases commerce at nearby restaurants and shops. People who come to enjoy the park often stay in the area to have lunch or dinner, and those interested in fishing can stock up on gear at the tackle shop across the street.

For Lefebvre, the best part of the process was in seeing nature restored. "We've given people a beautiful space to enjoy."



Wildlife inhabit the new park along the Pawtuxet River.



Years of hard work and collaboration brought the Sandy Acres Recreation Area to life.

For more information:

Visit the EPA Brownfields website at www.epa.gov/brownfields or contact Jessica Dominguez at (617) 918-1627 or Dominguez.Jessica@epa.gov.