2021 Raleigh Environmental Award Winners

This year, Raleigh's Environmental Advisory Board recognized the best in climate action, community engagement and corporate stewardship in our city. These winners represent the hard work of dozens of community members to make Raleigh a healthier, greener and more sustainable city.

Raleigh Environmental Stewardship Award (RESA)

Each year, the RESA recognizes an individual or organization that has shown environmental leadership and recognizes the relationship and continuity of the environment, economics, and equity or social justice aspects of human society.

Amin Davis

Figure 1: Amin Davis

This year's RESA winner is Amin Davis. Amin spends his professional and personal life working to conserve and promote Raleigh's green spaces and engage the community in their protection. Amin works for the NC Department of Environmental Quality in the Division of Water Resources managing state and local projects. In this work he coordinates with communities throughout the state to improve and restore waterways, enhance water-based recreation and education opportunities and manage water resources for the betterment of communities. Amin's free time is also devoted to protecting natural resources. He works tirelessly to improve wetlands in the Carolinas as Outreach Coordinator and Program Committee Chair for the Carolina Wetlands Association. He helped to spearhead the Walnut Creek Watershed Action Team, a group of individuals, organizations and governments working to improve water quality in the Walnut Creek Watershed. Amin is also a member of the Board of Directors of Partners for Environmental Justice (PEJ). In his work with PEJ he has documented the history of the organization and its work to establish the Walnut Creek Wetland Park. He has secured funding for the Walnut Creek Watershed Learning Network, a community learning and action group made up of residents of the watershed who come together to learn about watershed management and civic engagement. This program gives residents the tools and know-how to take action to protect their neighborhood watersheds and engage local officials on stormwater issues. Amin's colleagues refer to him as "a hero" and "someone who gets things done" by bringing people to the table to address issues they care about. Amin's work is a prime example of how one person's efforts through networking and developing partnerships and meaningful collaborations can truly make a difference in the lives of the community.

Climate Action Awards

Each year, the Environmental Advisory Board recognizes a number of awardees for their contributions to climate action in Raleigh. The Climate Action awards recognize the work of residents, organizations and businesses in Raleigh that advances the goals of Raleigh's Community Climate Action Plan. The plan's objectives are to reduce greenhouse gas emissions 80% by 2050, build community resilience to climate change impacts and support climate equity. The winners of these awards are making meaningful contributions to awareness, action and equity in our community.

Transportation: Wake Tech Community College

Wake County Technical Community College has partnered with GoTriangle to remove transportation barriers to education and reduce GHG emissions from student transit. The FRX bus route connects the GoRaleigh downtown terminal to Wake Tech's South Campus. Wake Tech South Campus' dedicated park and ride lot is the first dedicated park and ride lot in the GoTriangle system. GoTriangle is using the lot as an example for future park and rides. Wake Tech offers students enrolled in at least one on-campus class a free GoPass. The benefit extends to employees as well. "Providing equitable access to education is central to our mission," said Wake Tech President Dr. Scott Ralls. "Our students commute from all across Wake County to pursue degrees and credentials that can change their lives, and we want to do all we can to ensure that transportation issues don't stand in their way." "Wake Tech GoPasses are valid on all GoRaleigh, GoTriangle, GoDurham, and GoCary bus routes seven days a week. Transit routes serve five of six Wake Tech campuses, as well as the Beltline Education Center on Bush Street in Raleigh." This encourages students not only to use GoTriangle buses to get to school, but for other trips as well.

Figure 2: Wake Tech GoTriangle partnership (image credit: https://www.waketech.edu/post/wt-news-story/3996)

Equity: Southeast Raleigh YMCA and Elementary School

The Southeast Raleigh YMCA and Elementary School is the result of exemplary collaboration between the YMCA of the Triangle, Wake County Public School System (WCPSS), the City of Raleigh, Southeast Raleigh Promise, and many planners, designers, and contractors. The Elementary School and YMCA share spaces that serve students and YMCA members. The building has a number of environmentally friendly features, including rainwater cisterns and rooftop and ground-level gardens. This facility is being recognized because of the way it serves students and the community of Southeast Raleigh.

Most of the school's population receive free breakfast and lunch on site and a packed meal to take home in the evening. All students take swimming lessons as part of their physical education class, an effort designed in part to combat the disproportionately high rate of drownings among African American children compared to their white peers. The YMCA of the Triangle offers special rate membership pricing to better support residents who live in the

"Neighbor Zone". Throughout the project, the YMCA not only met but exceeded their equity goals. They set out to have a minimum of 30 percent minority participation and a workforce development program. They were able to achieve an impressive 47 percent minority business participation, and they hired approximately 25 people and 17 businesses located in Southeast Raleigh. The Southeast Raleigh YMCA and Elementary School is advancing services to communities in need while at the same time demonstrating environmental action toward Raleigh's climate goals.

Figure 3: Southeast Raleigh YMCA and Elementary School (image credit Southeast Raleigh YMCA)

Energy and Waste: Raleigh Convention and Performing Arts Complex

With over a million guests annually attending conventions, concerts, and theatre performances at the Raleigh Convention and Performing Arts Complex (RCPAC), these venues showcase the City of Raleigh's continued dedication to sustainability on an international, national, and local level. From ongoing reductions in water and energy usage to environmentally sound construction and capital improvement efforts, the RCPAC has demonstrated its commitment to intentional, sustainably-minded choices that protect, conserve, and improve our local and global environment and community. Since 2017, the facility has diverted over 150,000 pounds of food from the landfill, created over 38,000 pounds of compost and avoided nearly 2000 tons of CO_2 emissions from its waste management practices. The 500kW solar array on the Convention Center roof produce enough energy to power 100 NC homes. The facility's use of LED lights both reduces energy use by over 318,000 watts per day and diverts electrical waste from the landfill because of longer-lasting bulbs. Additionally, native plantings and landscaping at the Convention Center complex provide habitat for pollinators and opportunity for public

education about pollinator protection. The RCPAC complexes are dedicated to providing excellent services to Raleigh's visitors and guests and to demonstrating the viability of sustainable business practices.

Land Conservation: Tar River Land Conservancy

Between 2019 and 2021 the Tar River Land Conservancy has protected 9 tracts totaling 391 acres which all protect water flowing into Lake Holt and then into Falls Lake. Another tract of 55 acres was recently declared a public-access conservation area, with a 1.6 mi nature area officially opened to hikers in June 2021. The construction of the trail, done primarily by local volunteers, has garnered strong community support for the Conservancy and its efforts to protect the area's lands and thus the overall water quality. Tar River is working to buy a tenth tract, of 71 acres. The Conservancy's goal in this immediate area is to create a contiguous area adjoining Lake Holt, protecting the watershed while giving residents potential hiking trails down to the water's edge. Local residents see these protection efforts as preserving their quality of life and giving them better recreational opportunities. These projects protect our watersheds and biodiversity while providing outdoor recreation opportunities for our residents.

Figure 5: Conservation Area Sign (image courtesy of Tar River Land Conservancy)

Business Innovation for Environmental Stewardship

The Business Innovation for Environmental Stewardship Award recognizes innovative business practices which protect natural resources, reduce carbon emissions, reduce waste, or increase resilience of our community.

Gateway Plaza

LODEN Properties has created a new model for how to breathe life into older shopping centers. Gateway Plaza has been envisioned as a mixed-use project that celebrates the best of local businesses. Totaling over 77,000 square feet of indoor space on 6.5 acres, the center has been revitalized with a number of environmentally friendly features. The construction of this new shopping center removed nearly 1.5 acres of impervious surface, planted 85 trees, created 7 bioretention devices, and created a large community gathering space in the middle of the center. This model for revitalizing spaces and creating outdoor amenities to improve water quality for neighbors, while improving the social atmosphere of the city.

Figure 6: Gateway Plaza (image courtesy of Loden Properties)

Community Action

The Community Action Award recognizes volunteers, individuals or non-profit organizations working in Raleigh on environmental stewardship, community building, environmental justice, or conservation.

Stacie Hagwood and the Walnut Creek Wetland Park Trash Task Force

Litter and illegal dumping have long been a problem in the Southeast Raleigh neighborhood that is home to Walnut Creek Wetland Park. In Spring of 2021, Stacie Hagwood the park manager convened City of Raleigh staff and neighbors of the park to talk about ways to address the issue. Over the course of 8 weeks, this group met, learned about the history of the park, the types of environmental initiatives that have been done previously, including stream cleanup activities and Big Sweep, and then started brainstorming ideas to stop littering and dumping. Residents and staff worked together, shared resources and ideas and generated a list of potential solutions which has been shared with City management and residents. Their plan is the jumping off point, but it shows that bringing people together solve problems will generate creative solutions. In the coming year, work of the Trash Task Force will be taken forward by Partners for Environmental Justice.

Figure 7: Walnut Creek Wetland Park

Drinking Watershed Protection Awards

Each year, Raleigh Water presents these awards to any person or organization that has taken steps to protect and preserve water quality within the Falls Lake and/or Swift Creek drinking watersheds. Improvement efforts can include litter removal, reestablishing a riparian area beside a stream, stream bank restoration, working with landowners to preserve areas with streams on their property, or installation of a stormwater Best Management Practice. The goal of the award is to encourage public recognition of critical drinking water resources and the need to protect them.

Caterpillar Foundation

In September 2020, Caterpillar Foundation donated $250,000 to Conservation Trust for North Carolina to support watershed protection projects in the Upper Neuse. Preserving forests and wetlands can help protect water supply watersheds by allowing natural systems to filter water and reduce stormwater impacts. But with the rising cost to acquire land in and around the Triangle, protecting these places has become increasingly costly for nonprofits and public agencies. The Caterpillar Foundation is one of the first corporate foundations to develop a dedicated program to support this new approach. Caterpillar Foundation provided much needed funding to complete two critical watershed protection projects.

Little Beaverdam Phase 2021 received $140,000 from Caterpillar Foundation. This acquisition of 229 acres project sits in very close proximity to the Beaverdam impoundment of the Falls Lake and protects almost five miles of stream. The Triangle Land Conservancy facilitated this project and will eventually open the property to the public as a nature preserve. Caterpillar Foundation's $140,000 helped leverage $3,967,500 of funding from the Raleigh Watershed Protection Program, Wake County, and the private landowners. The Caterpillar Foundation also contributed $100,000 to the Boling/Singletary assemblage in Garner, NC. This fee simple acquisition permanently protects 90.25 acres and 5,782 feet of stream frontage just upstream from Lake Benson, which is the City of Raleigh's secondary drinking water source. Caterpillar Foundation's $100,000 leveraged $1,237,500 from the Raleigh Watershed Protection Program, Town of Garner, Wake County, and the private landowner. Lastly, Caterpillar Foundation donated $10,000 to cover overhead expenses.

Figure 8: Little Beaver Dam (image courtesy of Caterpillar Foundation)

ECU Environmental Health Sciences Program

Faculty with the Environmental Health Program and Coastal Studies Department at East Carolina University used funding from an NC DEQ 319 grant to help improve water quality in the Lick Creek portion of the Falls Lake Watershed. Excess sediment in Lick Creek has degraded aquatic habitat and resulted in water use impairment. Nutrient transport from Lick Creek to Falls Lake contributes to algal growth, some which produce harmful toxins. To improve water quality in Lick Creek and Falls Lake, eroding segments of streams and drainage ways were stabilized via removal of loose sediment, tapering of the banks and placement of erosion control fabric and rip rap along the banks. Overall, approximately 225 linear feet of stream bank and 320 feet of additional drainage way were stabilized. Faculty worked with watershed residents to identify failing septic systems that were contributing nutrients and pathogens to water resources. Septage was pumped from 15 septic tanks and 4 malfunctioning septic systems were repaired, thus reducing nutrient and bacteria transport. Combined, these efforts have resulted in a reduction of sediment, nutrient, and bacteria transport to Lick Creek and Falls Lake.

Figure 9: Installing new drainfield trenches at site with malfunctioning septic system (image courtesy of ECU EHSP)