

For Immediate Release

New Native Ecological Corridor on the Elizabeth River Trail

Norfolk, VA (December 28, 2022)

Dramatic changes have occurred on the ERT this Fall. The Garden Club of Norfolk, with a variety of local partners and community volunteers, has transformed what once was a barren swale collecting stormwater into an exciting showcase of native trees and plants, creating an ecological corridor where only barren soil once existed. The location of this parcel, next to the Weyanoke Bird Sanctuary, has exponentially increased the wildlife support of this urban space and lent it beauty for visitors of the trail to enjoy throughout the seasons.

This project was inspired by the Garden Club of America's challenge to local garden clubs to enhance a public park to celebrate the 200th Birthday of our country's most famous landscape architect, Frederick Law Olmsted. Olmsted designed Central Park, the grounds of the US Capitol, Emerald Garden in Boston, and the Biltmore Estates along with 700+ other public parks projects throughout the US. He believed in the healing power of nature to restore the spirit and that parks were the great social equalizer. The Garden Club of Norfolk accepted this challenge, giving birth to the Olmsted Initiative at Jeff Robertson Park.

The Garden Club of Norfolk's chairpersons for the Olmsted Initiative, Mary Beth Horton and Liz Paiste, also saw an additional opportunity to meet this challenge. Their vision was to transform a public park, to not only provide respite to the public, but also support wildlife suffering scarcity of habitat in the urban setting. With only 3% of Norfolk's land being greenspace, it is critical to make the most of this parcel which serves to join fragments of habitat together along a highly visible part of the trail. As the famous conservationist, Doug Tallamy said, "All plants are not created equal, particularly in their ability to support wildlife. Most of our native plant-eaters are not able to eat alien plants, and we are replacing native plants with alien species at an alarming rate in our suburban gardens on which our wildlife increasingly depends. Unless we restore native plants to our suburban ecosystems, the future of biodiversity in the US is dim."

With Tallamy's directive in mind, the Garden Club of Norfolk set its sights on Jeff Robertson Park. Due to the size of the project, the Olmsted Initiative was divided into 3 phases. Phase 1, the planting of 15 native trees east of the Weyanoke Bird Sanctuary was completed in November 2021. Phase 2, the Olmsted Tribute Garden began Fall 2022 with the goal to be completed by yearend 2023. The objective is to create a beautiful native plant garden featuring plants most impactful to the local ecosystem. The 10,000 square foot tribute garden, over 2/3rds the length of a football field, showcases purely southeastern native trees and plants. It creates a habitat for pollinators and a myriad of insects; hence, all higher forms of indigenous wildlife. Seventeen trees (8 different species) including Sweet Bay Magnolia, Redbud, Tulip Poplar, Black Tupelo, semi-endangered Longleaf Pines, American Fringe Tree, an American Hornbeam and a Southern Live Oak are among some of the diverse tree species planted, each with their specific ecological benefit. "I cannot say enough about the importance of the oak

genus”, stated Mary Beth Horton. “In our area alone, it supports a total of 534 different species of caterpillars critical for the survival of our birds; that is why we included two live oaks and a chinquapin to our garden. Our choices have all been very intentional.” Liz Paiste added “Planting a garden like this will help educate the public on why native plant choice is important for everyone’s yard. As 86% of the land east of the Mississippi is privately held, we hope to encourage our neighbors to create native habitats on their property.”

To complete the mission, 124 native shrubs (10 different species) such as Oakleaf Hydrangeas, Winterberry Hollies, Beautyberries, Viburnum, Sweetspire, as well as 1,850 native perennials were installed to provide a four-season visual impact to the site. (A Spring planting of 600 additional perennials to complete the garden is targeted for March/April 2023). The Garden Club of Norfolk hopes this display will offer the community the opportunity to personally see and touch some of our finest native plants. Future educational signage will identify each species so visitors can learn about their benefit to our ecosystem and be inspired to add them to their residential and commercial properties.

Additional features of the Jeff Robertson Park improvements include the Parkour course, a fun and challenging play experience for kids of all ages and the Glowline, an 800-foot luminous path that wraps around the northwest playing fields of the park. This path is the first-of-its-kind on the East Coast and brings light to one of the least illuminated sections of the trail. Still to come are a trailhead shelter and hydration station.

The Garden Club of Norfolk, in partnership with the Elizabeth River Trail Foundation, is currently raising funds for the much-needed hydration station on the corner of the path around the tribute garden. “This is the perfect place for the hydration station,” stated Kindra Greene, Executive Director of The Elizabeth River Trail Foundation, “It has always been the vision of our Foundation to have hydration stations for people and pets at each Trailhead, and access to water is the most requested amenity by trail users. We hope, with the City’s cooperation, we will be able to raise the funds to connect water and establish our first hydration station at this mid-point of our trail. The proposed hydration station will offer a place to refill water bottles as well as provide a pet fountain for the many dogs that travel with their owners to the park.

The Elizabeth River Trail (ERT) Foundation has recently been awarded a Retain Your Rain Grant from the City of Norfolk’s Office of Resiliency, for the Olmsted Tribute Garden. “The Elizabeth River Trail Foundation is grateful for the work the Garden Club of Norfolk has put into beautifying this section on the trail. We share their vision in educating visitors about the importance of our native plants and the benefits of green space,” said Kindra Greene, who was one of the 70 community volunteers who physically participated in the enhancement of the park this Fall. “The Garden Club of Norfolk is grateful for this grant and for all the overwhelming support from the city, local businesses and community volunteers who donated their labor, time and supplies to this endeavor,” stated Liz Paiste. “This has been a great partnership and group effort,”

added Mary Beth Horton.

Once Phase 2 has been completed, the Garden Club of Norfolk will begin work on Phase 3, which is currently in its developmental stage.

Please consider making a donation in support of the Olmsted Initiative:

<https://thegardenclubofnorfolk.org/olmsted/>

For more information about this project, including the plant varieties installed and the names of the partners contributing to the Olmsted Initiative, please visit:

<https://thegardenclubofnorfolk.org/olmsted/>

Press inquiries, please contact Liz Paiste at 484-634-2144 or email egmpaiste@gmail.com.