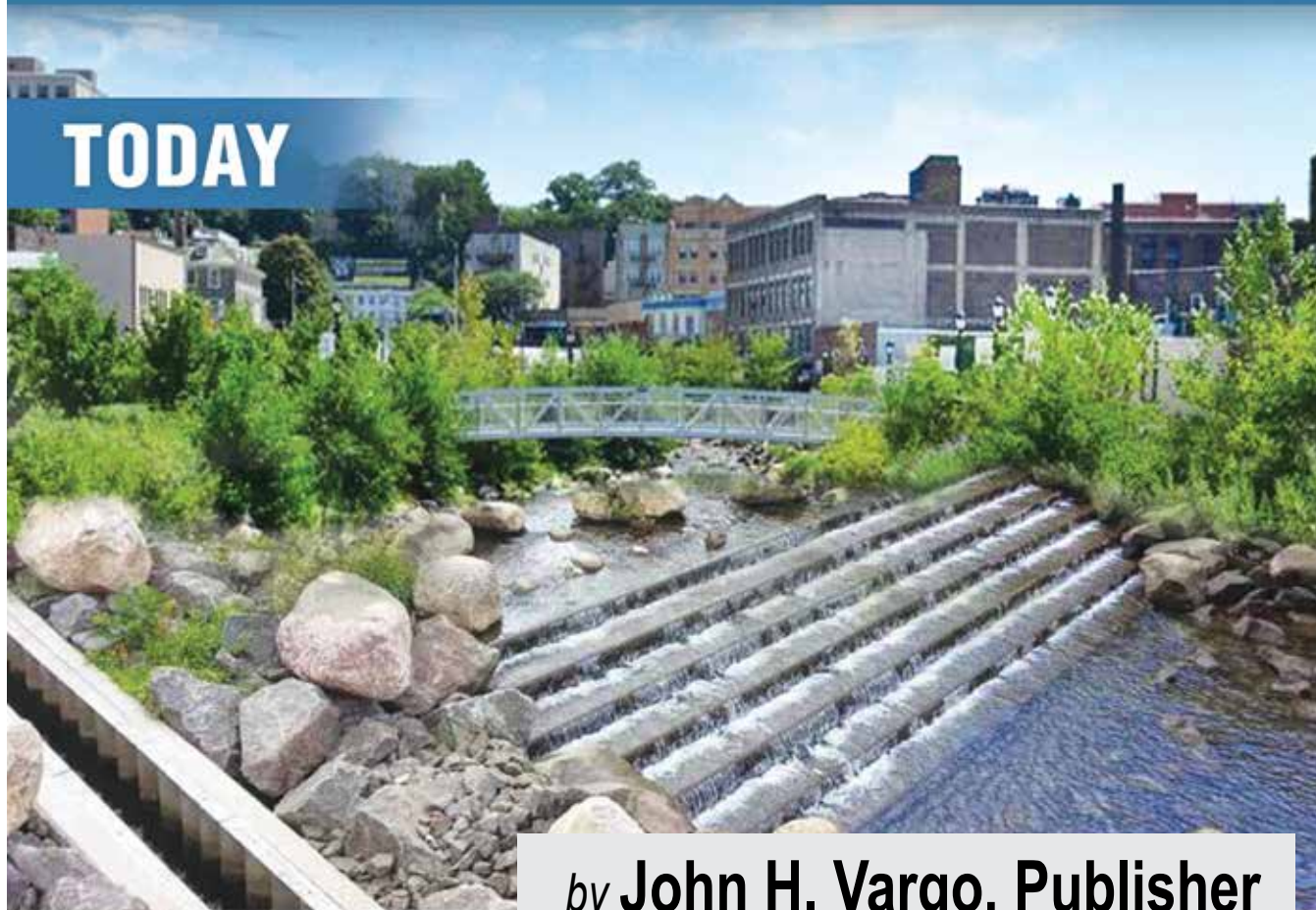


Yonkers

TODAY



by **John H. Vargo, Publisher**

YESTERDAY



The word Daylighting takes on a whole new meaning in Yonkers!

If you have a concept or ideas you really believe in, and have others that are listening, and acting on that dream it can happen in your lifetime.

Fred Danback, a member of the Hudson River Fisherman's Association, Andy Hudak and Bob Walters, inspired by Fred Danback, had such a dream, somewhat independent of each other. They kept finding ways to bring up the idea of "daylighting" whenever they could. The daylighting of the Saw Mill River or "bringing the river back to the light of day" which was once a parking lot, has created a unique, one of a kind dramatic change to the overall betterment of Yonkers that no one could have imagined thirty years ago.

The earliest mention in print for the idea of uncovering the Saw Mill comes from a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Reconnaissance Study for Flood Control & Ecosystem Restoration in September 1999, which lists one of the options for restoration was "daylighting the covered reach in Larkin Plaza." These Army Corps studies are years in the making and are directed by local input. Someone had to have given them the idea!

One of the most significant reasons daylighting occurred was due to a group of citizens when they responded to a US National Park Service grant opportunity to establish a "Groundwork Trust" in Yonkers in 1999. With their proposed focus on daylighting, these board members of the "old" Beczak Center with Bob Walters at the helm captured the attention, the imagination, and the funding to establish

February 2018, Phase 3, Chicken Island location of the Saw Mill River. Note the round vertical pipes in the bank of the Saw Mill they are for the over flow during high water. The concrete structure in the foreground is the flume for the waterwheel.



Groundwork Yonkers in 2000 with the City as a co-partner. Rick Magder was hired as the Executive Director and started initial steps to bring to fruition the first project—daylighting. He engaged Lee Weintraub's CUNY design program to provide a vision for what the river park would look like. With vision in hand, Rick met with the City. At that moment, the City's focus was on a large development project at "Chicken Island" (a parking lot also covering another section of the Saw Mill River); they felt Larkin Plaza daylighting was really a pipe dream (no pun intended!).

Groundwork, however, was not letting go of the idea. Bob Walters, now a board member, insisted there needed to be a river program. With funding from the State Hudson River Estuary Program, Groundwork established the Saw Mill River Coalition to work from Chappaqua to Yonkers. The Coalition was led first by Carol Capobianco (now at the Native Plant Center), and since 2004 has been led by Ann-Marie Mitroff.

From 2004 through the groundbreaking in 2010, many concurrent and separate steps and events have brought about the evolution of the daylighting in Yonkers. Great projects involve a lot of people and a lot of twists and turns. Some, but not all, are described here:

A gathering of officials which brought then Gov. Pataki to Yonkers where Scenic Hudson's Steve Rosenberg, Groundwork's Rick Magder, and Philipse Manor Hall's Lucille Sciacca managed 2-3 minutes of conversation with the Governor about the covered over Saw Mill River. He

was amazed that it had been buried.

Ned Sullivan of Scenic Hudson held follow up meetings with the Governor's office, as did Nick Spano. Diligence paid off when Governor Pataki earmarked a total of \$33 million for daylighting.

Scenic Hudson also received funding for an initial feasibility study for daylighting the Larkin Plaza site 2003-2004, and they funded Groundwork to facilitate a set of citizen-engagement workshops.

At a Saw Mill River Coalition meeting Scenic Hudson's landscape consultant, Ray Curren, proposed a different footprint for the Chicken Island project, which would allow the daylighting of the Saw Mill River at that site!

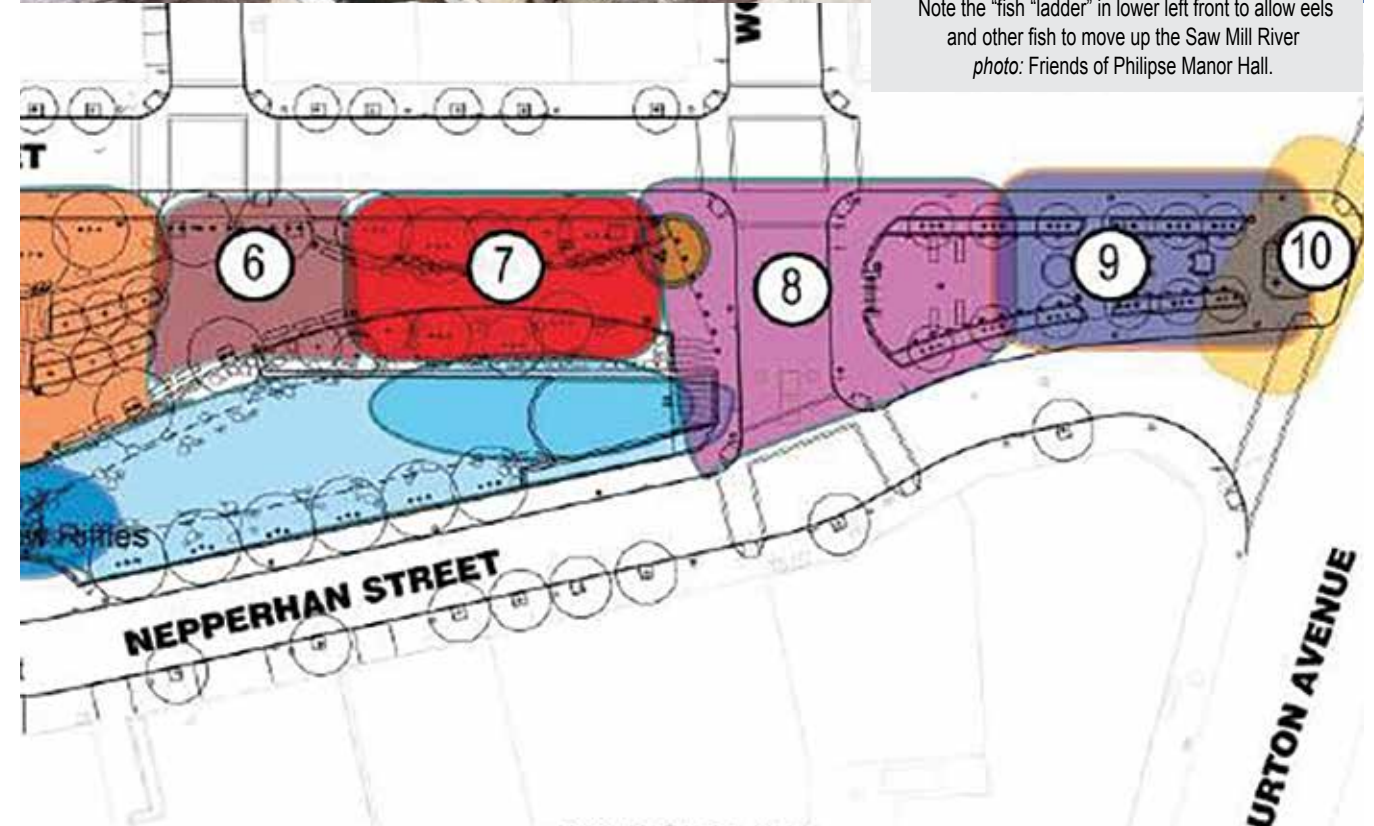
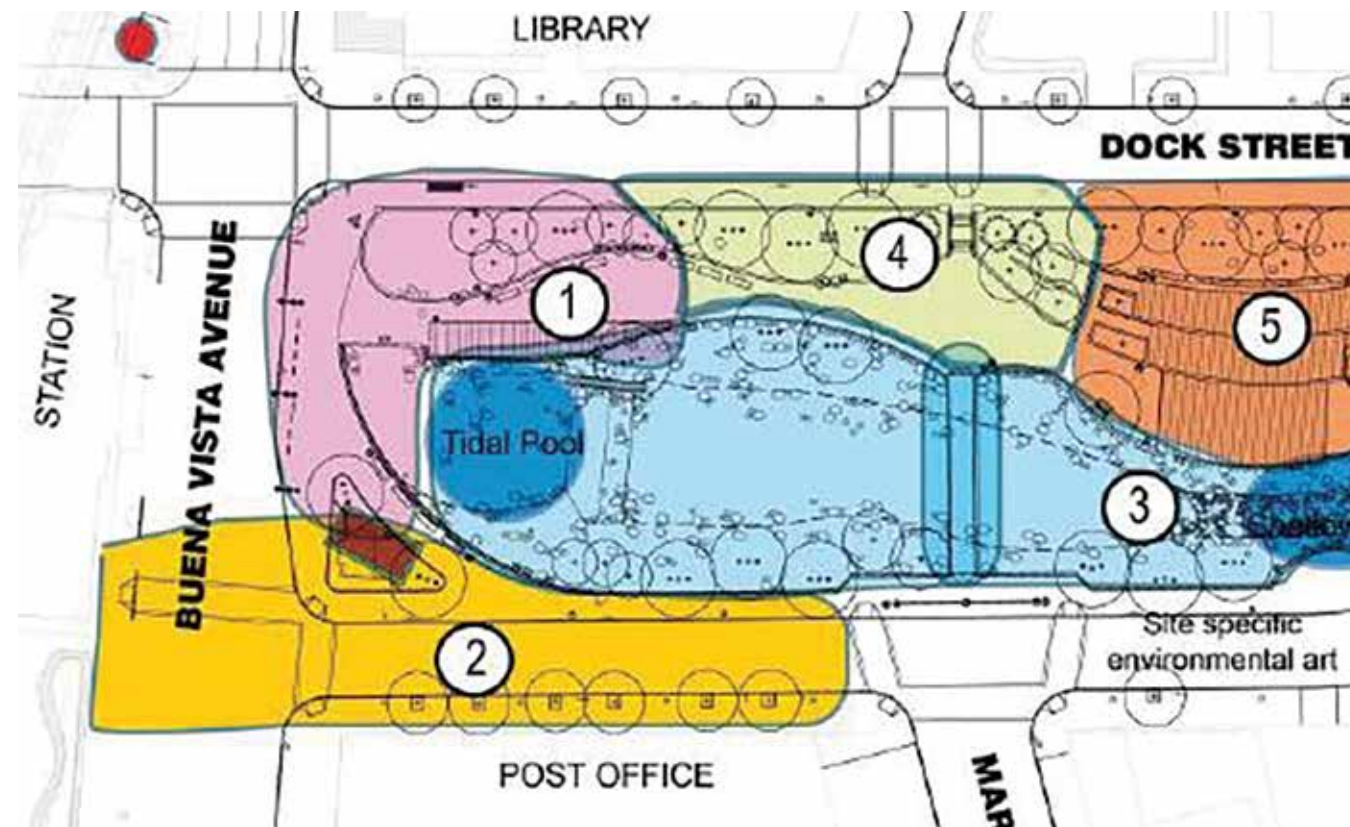
The developers of Chicken Island added another partner—Streuver—with experience in river features. The project was renamed River Park Center with the Saw Mill River as an attribute. They began underground studies of the river all the way to the Hudson. The City began purchasing property along the site to be able to enhance the river. (now Phase 3)

With the Governor Patterson's and Mayor Amicone's support, Groundwork's grant-writing team, Rick and Ann-Marie, applied for and received the rare EPA Targeted Watersheds grant which allowed Ann-Marie, as River Program Director, to expand her concentration on the daylighting, as well as begin Manhattan College's 3-year water quality study from top to bottom of the watershed, to work with municipalities on water quality "hot spots", to support stormwater education, and continue the annual Great Saw Mill River Clean-ups as well as Free-A-Tree vine cutting, among other projects.

To keep up the momentum for the Larkin Plaza project, Groundwork approached the Hudson River Foundation to



Lower pool of the Saw Mill River at Larkin Plaza. Note the "fish ladder" in lower left front to allow eels and other fish to move up the Saw Mill River
photo: Friends of Philipse Manor Hall.



fund an in-depth community engagement project. The Chicken Island developer—SFC (Streuver-Fidelco-Capelli)—was a critical partner in helping set the stage, as their early underground investigations played a crucial part in knowing what was actually underground.

The group met over the course of a year to come up with a list of opportunities and possibilities for a daylighted park. Participants included people from state parks, Philipse Manor Hall, the downtown BID, the Beczak, Greystone, the historical society, businesses, high schools, and City staff from parks, planning and, importantly, the City’s Waterfront Development Director, Jim Pinto.

Then the Economic Downturn of 2008 happened. The River Park Center development collapsed. The City reassessed what was possible to do. They had money left from the state (for daylighting). They had preliminary investigations of the underground river. They “owned” as City property Larkin Plaza. They needed an economic “win.” And, through all of Groundwork’s community-engagement meetings, they had broad community support.

The City of Yonkers, Mayor and City Council, were gutsy enough in the middle of a downturn in the economy to risk going forward with a daylighting project that committed City tax funds even though some funding was ultimately reimbursed (with grant funding) by state and federal funds.

Once the City decided it wanted to move ahead, they moved

with incredible speed. With Jim Pinto, the redevelopment director at the helm, a bid went out for an engineering design firm. PS&S won the bid and Joseph Fleming led a masterful team in the engineering design. The brilliant design left the underground river path in place to serve as flood protection and created an entirely new river path alongside. In 2013, PS & S won the New York State Society of Professional Engineers (NYSSPE) Outstanding Engineering Achievement Award)

The City welcomed Groundwork’s role in providing expertise in ecological design for the project. With funding from the New England Interstate Water Pollution Control Commission (NEIWPCC) the design now included the salt water tidal basin, the fish ladder, native plantings along the river’s edge, and specially designed passages for the American eel to continue its migration up the Saw Mill River.

PS&S’s landscape design firm, Saratoga Associates used the information from Groundwork’s charrettes of what would be welcomed by the community in the final design specifically choosing natives that show year-round color and interest..

Now the push was on to augment the City’s funding for the project. Peter Boodell, a private citizen, offered support and brought together a “Daylight Yonkers” business stakeholder group. Working with Scenic Hudson and

Groundwork, the group worked with the Project for Public Spaces to enhance the business opportunities of the park as well as provide support for public grants.

On December 15, 2010, Mayor Philip Amicone, Scenic Hudson’s President, Ned Sullivan and Groundwork’s Ann-Marie Mitroff led off with remarks about partnerships to City, state and federal officials and local stakeholders at a groundbreaking ceremony marking the start of a project to uncover -- or “daylight” -- the historic Saw Mill River where it flows through Larkin Plaza in downtown Yonkers.

After the groundbreaking, the work began in earnest. With oversight from Jim Pinto and Jacobs Engineering’s Jay Greene, ELQ Industries did amazing work and the park’s new river path was opened to the Saw Mill River within one-year! Water flowed into the park in November 2011 with a formal celebration with Mayor Amicone in December 2011.

The transition of power changed some personnel, but did not change the support for the project. Under Mayor Spano and his new redevelopment director (now Planning Commissioner), Ms. Wilson Kimball, the advantages of the daylighting for the city economically, has been very positive. Full speed ahead—Phase 2 & Phase 3!

On September 8th, 2012 the grand opening of Van Der Donck Park under the name of Riverfest 2012 officially dedicated the first section that was daylighted.

Weather wise the day turned out to be very bad with severe thunderstorms that led to the cancellation of the event. Not everyone got the message and for some, the low turnout, and lack of fanfare was a disappointment, however the developers and planners of the project did exactly what was intended, created a tranquil, care free environment, right in the heart of Yonkers. Since opening day of the new park, pride, enthusiasm, volunteers and politicians have all proclaimed that the concept is a game changer! It has set an example for others to follow in cities worldwide.

While the opening of the Saw Mill River was a dramatic change there were other changes as well, including X20, Peter Kelly Restaurant, a local Yonkers Chef who developed a world class restaurant, real estate developers and most importantly the original partners that all compliment the general direction of constantly improving what has changed Yonkers into a dynamic showroom for city development.

Throughout the years, Groundwork Hudson Valley

engaged its local youth conservation corps in the effort, brought The daylighting on the Saw Mill was highlighted in the documentary feature film, Lost Rivers, which has been shown throughout the world, featuring Ms. Mitroff and Jim Pinto. The City has continued the project through the center of Yonkers, completing phase II at Mill Street and is now on Phase 3 and Phase 4. Groundwork continues to contribute by writing the stories that appear in the interpretive signs at each location and working with the Downtown BID on programming.

Most interesting about all these years of change is that Bob Walters withstood the test of time and politicians, and to this day has witnessed his original idea develop into reality beyond his wildest dreams. Bob Walters has been able to work on the Hudson River as Director of the Groundwork Hudson Valley’s Science Barge, brought to the waterfront in 2008, and the development re-birth of the Saw Mill River into a cleaner, interesting waterway as it now runs openly through the downtown and empties into the Hudson River.

It is the combination of Groundwork Hudson Valley, Scenic Hudson and the Yonkers administration, in combination with vast community support and engagement, and with a single goal of bringing the quality of the Saw Mill River itself back to environmentally set standards that makes this daylighting project so unique.

Sometime the stars do align, events happen, and people get together, time allows for ideas to percolate, thinking changes based on more information, relationships grow, and a process evolves. This allowed the creation of and create a phenomenal project event that dramatically changed forever their dreams into reality.

CURB is located just north of the Science Barge on the banks of the Hudson River and includes a 4,000

sq ft center used for environmental education, research, and community programs. The building is situated on a 2 acre county-owned park and features an accessible sandy beach and constructed tidal marsh.

CURB annually delivers approximately 200 environmental education programs focused on the Hudson River and urban watersheds for 5,000 local K-12 and college students plus hundreds of teachers, and hosts 3,000+ residents for community programs and special events, most free and open to the public.

In addition to those programs, CURB research and monitoring programs include include county-wide monitoring of sewage contamination and water quality, river seining and the study of biodiversity trends, participation in a state-wide study tracking the migration patterns of the American eel, and long-term tracking of real-time weather and river parameters.



People in the park.



In the Saw Mill, every other week in season CURB samples 16 sites from Yonkers to Chappaqua with the help of a team of citizen-science volunteers. The team is on the lookout for the fecal-indicator bacteria enterococcus, which can enter our waterways from sewer leaks and runoff.

The data are reported to City of Yonkers, DEC, and EPA, and CURB's studies have led to the identification of sewage hot spots and remediation efforts.

Recent sightings of wildlife including fish such as carp, eels, and other fishes have returned to the river pool and above of the daylighted Saw Mill River. A beaver was seen a few years ago in the lower Saw Mill River pool.

To this writer the entire project, under the three entities, Groundwork Hudson Valley, Scenic Hudson and the City of Yonkers administrators working in complete cooperation, is an example for other cities to emulate. Further the eye opening enthusiasm that volunteers who support Groundwork Hudson Valley have to keep the Saw Mill River as clean and neat as they do is amazing. Not a piece of garbage, paper or anything else is left anywhere in the park!

Bob Walter's, as Director of the Groundwork Hudson Valley Science Barge, anchored right at the mouth of the Hudson River, continues to be the quiet man behind the scenes, witnessing all that is happening, the ultimate environmentalist!

ABOUT THE COVER:

From the publisher, John H. Vargo

Bob Walters is one of the last of a breed of Hudson River men that lived for the Hudson River! These men, and especially "Bob" belonged to the original Hudson River Fishermans Association which played and important part in developing the motivation to clean up the river.

I am as amazed as anyone else that "Bob"has withstood the test of time, and is still going strong in his dreams. Bob Walters is truly unusual in that he has lived in one location all his life and followed his passionate regard for the Hudson River.

Today as part of GroundworkHV he is Director of the Science Barge, anchored right at the mouth of the SawMill River on the Hudson River. Hundreds, if not thousands of children visit the Science Barge every year. What a career living his dreams he has had!

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