



## West Atlanta Watershed Alliance Engages Communities to Protect Three Creeks

West Atlanta's Proctor, Utoy, and Sandy Creek watersheds have been challenged by pollution from combined sewer overflows for decades. Combined sewer overflows result from sewage treatment systems that also contain stormwater from rain and wet weather events. When an overflow occurs, sewage and stormwater is discharged into creeks creating environmental and health hazards. The West Atlanta Watershed Alliance was formed to empower community residents to stand up for clean watersheds when they were burdened by the pollution and flooding from the combined sewer overflows.

**ABOVE:** Local youth participate in outdoor activities hosted by WAWA and its partners.

In June 2011, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) entered into an agreement with *Groundwork USA* and the *River Network* and awarded a \$66,000 grant to the *West Atlanta Watershed Alliance* (WAWA). The agreement is part of the *Urban Waters Learning Network* to assist WAWA develop new partnerships, address new local issues, and develop a three-year strategic plan. The strategic plan will outline WAWA's expected growth in fundraising, community outreach activities, and public advocacy. WAWA is a nonprofit community organization that has worked in West Atlanta's watersheds since 1995. WAWA works with communities in the Proctor, Sandy, and Utoy Creek watersheds that total 33,413 acres. In May 2013, the *Urban Waters Federal Partnership* selected Proctor Creek for the partnership to repair water quality, increase public access to waterways, and create economic opportunities.

### Project Highlights

WAWA is:

- Engaging communities in West Atlanta, where the population is predominately African-American, to participate in watershed protection activities.
- Educating community youth and residents through its outdoor activity center on environmental concepts, including health, social behaviors, and pollution.
- Creating partnerships to ensure protection of the Chattahoochee River and its watersheds to create sustainable communities.
- Organizing volunteer activities to maintain green outdoor space in an urban environment.

### West Atlanta's Underserved Communities Impacted by Pollution

Since WAWA's inception, it has worked to protect West Atlanta residents from sewage pollution and it has become a trusted community ally. WAWA works in some of Atlanta's most disadvantaged communities who have been overburdened by pollution from Atlanta's combined sewer overflow system.



**ABOVE:** WAWA science, technology, engineering and mathematics (S.T.E.M.) education classes teach youth about the properties of and future career paths in science.

WAWA works to empower communities to be considered in decisions that will reduce pollution that negatively impacts community health and water quality. The pollution from the old sewage treatment system has filled the watersheds with debris and caused health concerns such as high rates of West Nile Virus and presence of *E. Coli* bacteria. EPA has a consent decree with the City of Atlanta in place to address the combined sewer overflows.

West Atlanta's communities are also impacted by 11 landfills and four Superfund sites. The community population is approximately 94% African-American and 32% of the inhabitants live below the poverty level. Through partnerships, outdoor activities, and education, WAWA seeks to eliminate environmental hazards which unfairly affect the community and to be an advocate for environmental justice to improve the quality of life in and around the watershed.

## WAWA Partnerships Develop Green Infrastructure Projects

WAWA works with approximately 20 partners, including the federal government, foundations, conservation groups, church congregations, community associations, and watershed alliances. Recent new partners include *Trees Atlanta* and the *Georgia Conservancy*. WAWA has delivered presentations to various local churches, a rotary club, local high schools, and universities. In coordination with the City of Atlanta, the State of Georgia and federal agency partners, WAWA completed a green infrastructure rain garden demonstration project at a local fire station. The project highlighted how residential scale stormwater runoff could be diverted from entering combined sewers in the Proctor Creek Watershed.

In partnership with community associations, WAWA will work with *Park Pride*, an Atlanta parks advocacy group, as well as governments and businesses to design 200 acres of green infrastructure improvements. Green infrastructure absorbs and redirects heavy flows of stormwater from rain events to reduce flooding and pollution. The plan will create new public greenspace, such as parks, and improve the quality of life by reducing the negative impacts of stormwater flooding.

## WAWA's Outdoor Activity Center Promotes Youth Environmental Education

Located five miles from downtown Atlanta, the Bush Mountain Outdoor Activity Center is a 26-acre nature preserve that includes two miles of walking trails, a children's playground, and an obstacle course. WAWA has signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the City of Atlanta Department of Parks, Recreation, and Cultural Affairs to operate and maintain the center. Through partnership with other organizations, WAWA seeks to make the center open to the surrounding community via community and school-based environmental programs.

Environmental education programs engage local youth, ranging from elementary to college age, and seek to impact the visitor's attitudes and behaviors about nature through hikes and hands-on activities. Community service projects help spark engagement of high school and college students who, in exchange for their work, receive community service credits. These projects have removed approximately 1,000 tires and five tons of trash. Future plans include completion of the *Proctor Creek Stewardship Council* plan to connect nine watersheds and 20 neighborhoods and take on issues related to the building of a new city football stadium.

### Measuring Progress

WAWA determines success of its projects by:

- The number of residents who attend hands-on activities and education workshops
- The number of volunteers who participate in watershed cleanup activities
- The amount of debris and tons of trash removed
- The number of activities held with partners
- Funding support received from partners