

# URBANWATERS

## FEDERAL PARTNERSHIP

*Restoring Urban Waters, Revitalizing Communities*

### Middle Rio Grande Watershed (Albuquerque, New Mexico)



#### Co-Leads

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### Overall Assessment of the Partnership Since the Beginning

Over the past three years, the Middle Rio Grande Urban Waters Partnership has measurably increased its capacity and membership. Today, the partnership is an integral part of the work planning process for its many member organizations. Collaboration with entities once considered “non-traditional” is now the norm. Organizations, which previously struggled to find common ground, have come to realize they have much to share. For instance, health clinics are partnering with natural resource managers. Housing developers have partnered with stormwater management agencies, rather than viewing them as an adversary. Further, government and community nonprofits have merged their effort.

During its inaugural year, the Middle Rio Grande Urban Waters Federal Partnership took steps to develop community relationships, leverage funding opportunities, and support local priorities as identified by the partnership at the kick-off meeting. These priorities initially included three

broad themes: 1.) water and storm water management, 2.) community and economic development, and 3.) environmental education and employment.

Specific projects identified in the initial work plan included: the Valle de Oro National Wildlife Refuge, Bridge Boulevard Redevelopment Plan, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) Middle Rio Grande Restoration project, the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) MS4 Watershed-based pilot permit, South Valley transportation projects, and the Climate Change Scenario Planning project. During the second year of partnership activities, an EPA-funded Urban Waters Ambassador worked to advance the partnership projects, engage additional community representation, and increase communication.

Through these efforts, notable on-the-ground progress has been achieved, including:

- Furthering development of the Valle de Oro National Wildlife Refuge, the first urban National Wildlife Refuge in the Southwest;
- Advancing community development through the Bridge Boulevard Corridor; and
- Planning construction of the South Valley Community Commons Project, a gathering place that seeks to address unmet needs for underserved populations in the South Valley

## Members of the Partnership

The initial partnership kick-off meeting, held in December 2013, generated robust participation from state and local government entities, particularly those engaged in stormwater or natural resource management. Since the kick-off meeting, the partnership has expanded to include a significant number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community-based organizations working in a broad variety of fields, including health care, economic development, and veteran services.

The goal of the partnership is to create a “1+1=3 environment,” meaning that all can contribute to and benefit from synergies by leveraging resources through sharing information and establishing common goals.

The partnership has three primary forms of engagement:

- Partnership meetings (including affiliate group meetings);
- Email distribution lists; and,
- Community events and workshops

There are over 200 discrete names in our primary partnership email listing. More than 80 people associated with 40 different organizations have participated in the four full partnership meetings

that have occurred over the past 12 months. Further, the Middle Rio Grande E3 (Environment, Education, Employment) Alliance, a spin-off from the initial partnership structure, meets monthly with regular attendance from 20-30 individuals, representing 30 organizations.

## **Nature of the Partnership**

Initially, the partnership met monthly as the federal leads conducted outreach to new partners, identified potential projects, and gathered input from the stakeholders about their needs and goals. For the past two years, the full partnership has met on a quarterly basis. Subgroups, such as the stormwater technical advisory group and the MRG E3 (Environment, Education, and Employment) meet monthly. Special events and workshops are scheduled as needed based on community input. New projects are added to the workplan with the consensus of the group at the quarterly partnership meetings.

## **Major Actions Taken Since the Beginning of the Partnership**

Noteworthy successes and major actions of the Middle Rio Grande Urban Waters Partnership include the following projects and priorities detailed below.

### **Valle de Oro National Urban Wildlife Refuge**

The first urban wildlife refuge in the southwest celebrated its 4th anniversary in September 2016. Over the past four-and-a-half years, the refuge has completed the land acquisition process, completed the design phase on refuge development concepts, developed a first-of-its-kind Environmental Justice Plan for the refuge, and received an EPA Environmental Justice (EJ) grant to implement the Plan. Construction on the visitors' center is expected to begin within the year. In 2016, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) announced that Valle de Oro had been awarded an annual budget authority of \$1 million for education programs.

On October 15, 2014, Secretary of Transportation Anthony Foxx came to the Valle de Oro National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) to announce the award of an \$8 million Federal Lands Access Program grant to Bernalillo County. The County partnered with USFWS to obtain the funding for a multi-modal transportation project that will improve residents' access to this natural asset.

The refuge has successfully supported the activities of four Urban Waters Small Grant recipients, hosted over 1,000 school children, held monthly open houses, hosted career fairs, and employed dozens of Youth Conservation Corps members. Further, the refuge has become an integral part of a community that has long suffered from the impacts of heavy industry and a severe lack of infrastructure.

### Stormwater Management Innovation

In January 2014, the Middle Rio Grande Urban Waters Federal Partnership hosted a water planning workshop at the Bureau of Indian Affairs complex in Albuquerque to address stormwater issues and challenges. The event was attended by approximately 30 representatives from federal, state, tribal, local, and non-governmental organizations. The purpose of the workshop was to identify roles and responsibilities for water management entities in the Middle Rio Grande, while improving communication and facilitating efficient implementation of government programs. In August 2015, the partnership collaborated with the MS4 permittees to host a Green Infrastructure charrette. The 2-day charrette was attended by over 40 state, local, and NGO practitioners, and resulted in potential development concepts for several flood-prone parcels of land in the Albuquerque area.

### Bridge Boulevard Redevelopment Plan

In February 2015, Bernalillo County, through its South Valley Main Street Initiative, began a series of community meetings to examine cultural identity, place making, and public art. The concepts and priorities identified will be incorporated into the implementation of the Bridge Boulevard Redevelopment Plan. The County is in the engineering phase of the road redevelopment plans approved through the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)/ Department of Transportation (DOT)-funded Community Challenge Planning Grant.

### South Valley Health Commons

The South Valley Health Commons project embodies core principles of the Urban Waters initiative. The project will have a significant impact through job creation, education, and access to needed services. The 10-acre site will provide a platform from which to launch five health promoting enterprises: an early childhood development center; a health professions charter high school/workforce training center; an 'aging well' wellness center; a community farm/local food hub; and a farm-to-table-style restaurant that also serves as the commons commissary. The project aids in stormwater management by utilizing an existing 2.5-acre storm drainage pond for an orchard with walking trails and natural, edible landscaping. The proposed project will incorporate energy-saving, water-conservation, and building material reuse/recycling strategies in the design and construction.

Agriculture is a central focus of the South Valley community history, and the project will result in restoration of the land for that purpose. The farm will teach the community to utilize their water resources using a sustainable, productive approach, which will create significant economic benefits through job creation and small business activity.

The Wellness Center and walking trail accomplish the critical need to re-connect people to their outdoor environment. Just one block from the project site, there are 75 HUD-subsidized low-income housing units for the elderly and mobility impaired, as well as a Head Start program, an elementary school, and a middle school nearby. The project seeks to improve the health and well-being of people at all ages, during all phases of life by connecting the community to its natural resources for living, learning, working, and playing.

An independent economic analysis shows the project will create 181 direct and indirect jobs, with total salaries of \$77 million over the first 10 years, pumping \$135 million into the New Mexico economy during the first 10 years.

First Choice Community Healthcare as well as owners and developers of the South Valley Health Commons have actively engaged with the Urban Waters Partnership in support of this project. Currently, key partners include the U.S. Forest Service, Centers for Disease Control, Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Park Service, and Economic Development Administration.

#### [South Valley Transportation Improvements](#)

Currently, there are over 20 separate transportation-related projects underway in the South Valley. These projects emphasize multi-modal transportation, pedestrian safety, and stormwater management. The partnership is working to support the New Mexico Department of Transportation (NMDOT) and Bernalillo County with communication and education efforts to inform the public about all proposed construction projects, and their potential impacts.

#### [Environmental Education and Employment](#)

In 2012, the need for a collaborative effort dedicated to environmental education and employment was identified when then-Department of Interior (DOI) Secretary Salazar commissioned the Middle Rio Grande Conservation Initiative report. This report served to establish a comprehensive development plan for the region. When the plan emerged, the three E's (education, employment, and environment) were articulated as core principles for the region to promote.

The development plan, once finished, was sent to Secretary Salazar and later became the catalyst for a new urban wildlife refuge in Albuquerque. At the Urban Waters kick-off event in December 2013, environmental education was again raised to the forefront of the partnership activities. USFWS, which had just open the gates on the new Valle de Oro NWR in Albuquerque's South Valley, took the lead on the youth employment and education initiative. In April 2014, USFWS gathered a broad group of partners in what became known as the first Middle Rio Grande: Education, Employment & Environment Alliance (MRGE3) meeting.

Over the past three years, the MRGE3 Alliance has developed an impressive list of local, state, regional, and national partners. The staff distributes bi-monthly newsletters, maintains a comprehensive website that includes an employment tutorial and jobs board, and coordinates monthly meetings. The meetings are thematic and focus on closing the gaps identified by the assessment process completed in the inaugural year.

In conjunction with the YMCAs Let's Move Outside! Initiative, the group has created a Youth Ambassador program. Four high-school students were trained in storytelling and interpretation to better advocate for the E3 movement. In early 2016, the Ambassadors successfully moved a Senate Joint Memorial through the New Mexico legislative session. The E3 Alliance has worked with the South Valley community on Bridge Boulevard to establish the La Entrada Pop-Up Visitors Center. Most recently, MRGE3 partnered with Nature Explore to bring a free educator workshop to Albuquerque and has just opened the first certified Nature Explore classroom.

#### Coalition Building

On a quarterly basis, HUD and EPA host an Urban Waters Partnership meeting. Participants have included Congressional representatives, state/tribal/local government officials, NGO staff, and community members. Attendees received updates on the status of federally-funded projects; engaged in networking; and provided input for the Middle Rio Grande Urban Waters web site, future Middle Rio Grande Urban Waters events, and workshop topics.

#### Community Outreach and Education

On November 7 - 8, 2014, the partnership hosted three public information workshops on the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process, including the status of projects in the Urban Waters Federal Partnership project area. Materials were provided in English and Spanish, and a bilingual facilitator and translator service were provided. Participants included Congressional representatives, federal/state/local government officials, NGO staff, and community members. In April 2015, the partnership hosted another workshop focused on writing comments in response to a Draft Environmental Assessment.

#### Climate Change Scenario Planning

In July 2014, HUD and EPA hosted an Urban Waters Federal Partnership meeting at the Mid-Region Council of Governments (MRCOG) to view a presentation on the Central New Mexico Climate Change Scenario Planning Project. Participants included: Congressional representatives, state/tribal/local government officials, NGO staff, and community members. The project assessed the costs and benefits of a series of growth scenarios to determine how best to manage congestion, reduce emissions, and adapt to the impacts of climate change. The project coincided

with the development of the Futures 2040 Metropolitan Transportation Plan (MTP) and utilized transportation and land use scenarios to assess the region’s resiliency to the impacts of climate change. The project was a partnership between Mid-Region Council of Governments (MRCOG), the Federal Highway Administration, DOT Volpe Center, and federal land management areas, including the Bureau of Land Management, National Parks Service, and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.

### Isleta Pueblo Island Removal Project

Following a request for assistance to sample the sediment collected from the Isleta Pueblo Island Removal, the federal members of the Urban Waters partnership team in Albuquerque provided technical support to coordinate the development of the sampling plan and sample collection. The EPA Houston Laboratory committed to support the sampling exercise with lab space and necessary sampling containers. Other federal partners include: Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), and Isleta Pueblo.

## Major Impacts of the Partnership

The partnership has become known as a “pathway to yes.” Previously, Albuquerque-based organizations, which are part of the partnership, have been stymied by a system that tells them no at every turn.

By bringing players to the same team and focusing on a common goal, the partnership has created a variety of new opportunities, changing the “no” system to a “yes” system.

“The intent is to begin the catalyst, and get the community to see that through networking, of not just one type of group, or one type of theme, that you can actually get a whole lot of different things accomplished – that actually will have merit for not just individual groups, but for the community at-large”

- Adele Cardenas, UWFP Co-lead, US EPA

## Major Actions Planned for the Future

The next three years will bring substantial visible changes to our project locations and partners. A tremendous amount of time and effort has been expended on project planning, funding, and community engagement. Partners have been successful at obtaining resources and approvals to start construction on catalytic projects. Many groundbreaking activities have already occurred; and others are planned to progress over the next few months.

By 2019, the partnership expects to see substantial progress towards completion of the Valle de Oro Visitors' Center, South Valley Health Commons, Bridge Boulevard reconstruction, 2nd Street reconstruction, and numerous other bike/hike trail improvements.

## **Major Challenges in the Future**

The primary challenges anticipated for our partnership location are: 1.) funding for continued development of these projects, and 2.) continuity of partnership staff at the federal and local level.