Dear Friends,

It goes without stating (but here I go anyway)—last year marked several moments in human antiquity that will forever be etched in global history books. Moments that rocked us to our very core, and made us examine ourselves in a unique and profound way. When we look back at 2020, I pause to reflect on how Friends of the Rouge reacted to two life-altering global events: the COVID-19 pandemic and the racial justice movement spurred by a national reckoning with systemic racism and violence toward Black Americans. I would like to provide this letter as a way to communicate the action that Friends of the Rouge has taken this year to advance our mission.

I am extremely proud of our ability to adapt, in response to the pandemic, by making a seamless transition to remote work, and pivoting critical programs to a virtual format. This included social channel-led campaigns like #NatureIsOpen, #RecreateResponsibly and #TakemetotheRiver—which we took viewers to a different location on the Rouge River every Tuesday from April through August. We opened our computer cameras to virtual coffee hours, and re-shaped Rouge Rescue at home activities to do safely with quarantined households via our new WeSpire interactive platform to help residents “Rescue the Rouge, every day.” Through these efforts, we tipped the earned media scales, increasing our media hits from 171 in 2019 to 440 in 2020—which, paired with nearly doubling our impressions to 206 million, made for an earned value equivalency of $1.9 million.

The jump to virtual came with a unique silver lining: we built a bigger “tent,” widening our coverage, providing access to many who may not have otherwise been able to attend. Participation in our Rain Gardens 101 course, which usually attracts around 100 participants, instead attracted over 1,500. Our classic fundraiser event, Rouge Cruise, shifted to a five day series over a five week period we renamed the Rouge “UnCruise,” taking viewers on a virtual paddle up the most downstream eight miles of the Rouge River. This virtual platform removed the historic cost barrier and space limitation; we hosted over 1,600 viewers during the five weeks whereas we usually only have space for 160 at a one-time-only event. These virtual activities came with significant positive feedback from users. Many participants in our virtual Master Rain Gardener course let us know that they preferred the virtual format, removing the need to drive long distances or find childcare.

In past years Friends of the Rouge has recognized the importance of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion work, though with little to no thoughtful progress on the matter within the organization. Yet, some significant horrific events of racial injustice occurred in 2020 which brought a spotlight on the undeniable evidence of shameless, violent abuse of power that could no longer be quietly discussed. The Desmond Tutu quote, “If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor,” rang particularly in tune for me while watching the news of two life-altering global events in a unique and profound way. When we look back at 2020, I pause to reflect on how Friends of the Rouge reacted to two life-altering global events: the COVID-19 pandemic and the racial justice movement spurred by a national reckoning with systemic racism and violence toward Black Americans. I would like to provide this letter as a way to communicate the action that Friends of the Rouge has taken this year to advance our mission.

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The need to pivot with intentional creativity due to both of these challenges during the past year seemed to come seamlessly from the Friends of the Rouge board and staff. I am inspired by the tenacity with which our board and staff have embraced the difficult yet absolutely critical justice and equity work. They come to the table each day with their own new ideas, conversation they had or story they read. They ask to reflect on new ways of moving forward, which just a year ago were not considered. Our eyes, ears and hearts have opened as we have accepted our own role in working to undo the injustices so many of our fellow community members have lived with for a lifetime. This is just the beginning. The hard work has just begun.

Words do not convey the overwhelming sense of pride I feel for this group of people. While the “numbers speak for themselves” in the following report—they don’t always tell the full story. As we process this moment and reckon with the global paradigm shift the pandemic and racial inequality has affected within each of us, we recognize that we each have a story to share—stories that shine light on how we each came to this moment of reflection. Perhaps as we shift from one mindset to another, we can move from reflection to action on this profound moment and consider the kind of story we hope others will tell about this moment. History has its eyes on us. What kind of story do you want to share?

With great hope for the future, respectfully,

Marie McCormick
Executive Director

THE MISSION OF FRIENDS OF THE ROUGE IS TO RESTORE, PROTECT AND ENHANCE THE ROUGE RIVER WATERSHED THROUGH STEWARDSHIP, EDUCATION AND COLLABORATION

ON THE COVER—Rain garden participants at Bandhu Gardens in Detroit. These gardens connect neighbors and build community in Banglatown.
The City of Detroit. Garden hosts were on site to share stories and answer questions about their rain gardens. Land + Water WORKS!

Through the Land + Water WORKS! Coalition, Friends of the Rouge and Sierra Club work with Detroit-based nonprofits and faith organizations to create larger-scale rain gardens to demonstrate what these organizations can do to manage rainwater and reduce their drainage fees. A series of workshops focused on rain gardens were held in partnership with Bandhu Gardens, In Memory of Community Garden, and the Hope House of Meditation Missionary Baptist Church. Each site also received a rain garden. The 3 gardens total 2,000 sq. ft. in size and store 4,000 gallons of rainwater. One hundred fifty-six people were involved with the program from across the city, including Hamtramck High School students, members of the Bengali neighborhood, Warrendale, and the heart of the city.

**Rain Gardens to the Rescue**

The Rain Gardens to the Rescue program, coordinated by Friends of the Rouge and Sierra Club, resulted in 12 Detroiters completing the five-part training course where they learned of the critical need for everyone—individuals and businesses alike—to manage rainwater and engage 146 people with the installation of 11 rain gardens. These rain gardens store and infiltrate up to 12,650 gallons of rainwater and provide habitat and beauty within the community. Two previous years’ cohorts put their knowledge to power by initiating others to incorporate rain gardens on their property. They supported the process from concept to final plan and co-lead the garden installations with Friends of the Rouge and Sierra Club. A self-guided tour was organized to raise awareness and connect the 30+ participants to rain gardens and stormwater practices installed by us and partners across the city of Detroit. Garden hosts were on site to share stories and answer questions about their rain gardens.

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**Rain Barrels**

Rain Barrels & Native Plant Sales 2020 saw Friends of the Rouge launch its inaugural year with the Rouge Store, bringing low-cost rain barrels, native plants, composters, and more to Rouge residents. All told, 400 southeast Michigan residents purchased 420 rain barrels and 4,400 plugs of native plants. The sales brought in roughly $50,000 in revenue to support Friends of the Rouge’s efforts, and the advertising efforts for the sales showed nearly 450,000 positive environmental messages to over 100,000 residents.

**Rouge Rescue**

Rouge Rescue was vastly different this year due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The annual stewardship event quickly shifted from planning in-person activities to an online platform that provided a fun and easy way to keep people engaged while at home and empowered them to take steps to be a river steward and Rescue the Rouge every day. Over 300 individuals from across Southeast Michigan logged on to participate in a variety of educational, creative and action-oriented programming they could do from home, in their own backyard, or in their community. Participants earned virtual badges along the way. An estimated 984 gallons of trash, 790 gallons of invasive garlic mustard and other invasive species were collected and 8 trees were planted.

In 2020, we teamed up with the National Wildlife Federation’s Sacred Grounds Program to expand our rain garden work with houses of worship in Detroit. The first of 3 large-scale rain gardens went in at Gesu Catholic Church and School. The project removed 10,900 sq. ft. of impervious runoff from the combined sewer system and stores 34,800 gallons of rainwater. Two additional large-scale projects are to be installed at Victory Outreach Detroit and Bethany Lutheran Church and School as well as 6 smaller projects in 2021.

**Master Rain Gardener Training**

In 2020, Friends of the Rouge trained 41 residents through two five-part Master Rain Gardener Training Programs, held in Livonia and Southfield. Nine graduates have built their rain gardens (or committed to maintaining a public rain garden for a year) and earned certification as a Master Rain Gardener in 2020.

**Restoration Efforts Still Successful in 2020**

FOTR’s Restoration Programs armed 1,381 people with information and simple, low cost solutions that can be taken to reduce polluted rainwater from flowing into the Rouge River, Detroit River and Lake Erie. A total of 14 rain gardens were installed in 2020. These gardens will prevent as much as 250,000 gallons of rainwater from entering Detroit’s combined sewer system annually.

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Opposite page: Denise Kennedy works to inspire the Voices for Earth Justice rain gardens; This page, top: The Minnock-Whitlock Park, created by In Memory of Community Gardens, was enhanced with a rain garden in 2020; Bottom: Volunteers with the Plymouth YMCA help out at Rouge Rescue
“My butterfly rain garden brings a smile to my heart every time I look out my window.”

–Loretta Powell, Detroit, RGtR Participant
Monitoring Report

Bug Hunts
Bug Hunts (Benthic Macroinvertebrate Monitoring) are used to track stream health by assessing the type and abundance of aquatic insects, clams, snails, etc. that live in the stream bed. Volunteers participate in Bug Hunts held in the spring and fall and a Winter Stonefly Search. Experienced volunteers are trained as Team Leaders to lead at individual sites. Additional sites are sampled by Wayne County, Susan Thompson and Schoolcraft College. FOTR data is used by the state and local communities.

2020 Winter Stonefly Search: We held our second “Stonefly Refresher” to prepare volunteers in the FOTR Bosch Lab with 16 people in attendance. The January 25 Stonefly Search, held at the Plymouth Cultural Center, had sixty-five volunteers who sampled 25 sites in 12 teams. Stoneflies were found at sixteen of the 34 sites (47%). All sixteen sites had slender winter stoneflies (Capniidae). One site also had Perlodids. The program was funded by the Alliance of Rouge Communities.

2020 Spring Bug Hunt: The Spring Bug Hunt was not held in 2020 due to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and the governor’s stay at home order that prohibited travel outside of the home for non-essential workers. Instead, FOTR’s staff Sally Petrella conducted an online live demonstration of a Bug Hunt that attracted 1300 viewers. Several team leaders visited sites on their own.

2020 Fall Bug Hunt: After the development of a volunteer re-engagement protocol, FOTR held the Fall Bug Hunt. All participants pre-screened and agreed to wear a face mask and social distance. Rather than meet at a central location, Team Leaders picked up and returned equipment and volunteers met on site. There were 58 participants who sampled 21 sites in 11 teams with additional sites sampled by Sue Thompson from Wayne County and volunteers. A total of 30 sites were sampled. Site scores showed 80% of sites stable; 3% improving and 16% declining. Johnson Creek had a significant positive trend and Middle 1 had no significant trend. The Lower 1, Main1-2 and Upper subwatersheds all had significant negative trends. The program was funded by ten Rouge communities (Beverly Hills, Farmington, Livonia, Novi, Plymouth, Southfield, Troy, Northville Township, Plymouth Township and Washtenaw County) and the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes and Energy, and a donation from Lynn DeGrande and Stuart Steel.

Frog & Toad Survey
The Frog & Toad Survey is a listening survey in which volunteers track frog and toad presence through listening surveys. Volunteers are assigned blocks where they keep track of what species are calling. Two training workshops were scheduled for 2020. Seventy-nine people attended the first workshop in Livonia on March 7. The second workshop had to be canceled due to COVID-19 but most registered volunteers (61) agreed to self-train and 126 veteran volunteers signed up for a total of 228 assigned blocks.

Seventy-three survey teams submitted data for a total of 184 survey blocks. An average of 3.4 species was heard per block. Seventy-three survey teams submitted data for a total of 184 survey blocks. An average of 3.4 species was heard per block. Seventy-three survey teams submitted data for a total of 184 survey blocks. An average of 3.4 species was heard per block. Seventy-three survey teams submitted data for a total of 184 survey blocks. An average of 3.4 species was heard per block. Seventy-three survey teams submitted data for a total of 184 survey blocks. An average of 3.4 species was heard per block. Seventy-three survey teams submitted data for a total of 184 survey blocks. An average of 3.4 species was heard per block. Seventy-three survey teams submitted data for a total of 184 survey blocks. An average of 3.4 species was heard per block. Seventy-three survey teams submitted data for a total of 184 survey blocks. An average of 3.4 species was heard per block. Seventy-three survey teams submitted data for a total of 184 survey blocks. An average of 3.4 species was heard per block. Seventy-three survey teams submitted data for a total of 184 survey blocks. An average of 3.4 species was heard per block. Seventy-three survey teams submitted data for a total of 184 survey blocks. An average of 3.4 species was heard per block. Seventy-three survey teams submitted data for a total of 184 survey blocks. An average of 3.4 species was heard per block. Seventy-three survey teams submitted data for a total of 184 survey blocks. An average of 3.4 species was heard per block. Seventy-three survey teams submitted data for a total of 184 survey blocks. An average of 3.4 species was heard per block. Seventy-three survey teams submitted data for a total of 184 survey blocks. An average of 3.4 species was heard per block. Seventy-three survey teams submitted data for a total of 184 survey blocks. An average of 3.4 species was heard per block. Seventy-three survey teams submitted data for a total of 184 survey blocks. An average of 3.4 species was heard per block. Seventy-three survey teams submitted data for a total of 184 survey blocks. An average of 3.4 species was heard per block. Seventy-three survey teams submitted data for a total of 184 survey blocks. An average of 3.4 species was heard per block. Seventy-three survey teams submitted data for a total of 184 survey blocks. An average of 3.4 species was heard per block. Seventy-three survey teams submitted data for a total of 184 survey blocks. An average of 3.4 species was heard per block. Seventy-three survey teams submitted data for a total of 184 survey blocks. An average of 3.4 species was heard per block. Seventy-three survey teams submitted data for a total of 184 survey blocks. An average of 3.4 species was heard per block. Seventy-three survey teams submitted data for a total of 184 survey blocks. An average of 3.4 species was heard per block. Seventy-three survey teams submitted data for a total of 184 survey blocks. An average of 3.4 species was heard per block. Seventy-three survey teams submitted data for a total of 184 survey blocks. An average of 3.4 species was heard per block. Seventy-three survey teams submitted data for a total of 184 survey blocks. An average of 3.4 species was heard per block. Seventy-three survey teams submitted data for a total of 184 survey blocks. An average of 3.4 species was heard per block. Seventy-three survey teams submitted data for a total of 184 survey blocks. An average of 3.4 species was heard per block. Seventy-three survey teams submitted data for a total of 184 survey blocks. An average of 3.4 species was heard per block. Seventy-three survey teams submitted data for a total of 184 survey blocks. An average of 3.4 species was heard per block.
Education Programming Adapts and Expands

The Rouge Education Project (REP) is a school-based environmental education program involving elementary, middle, and high schools from across southeastern Michigan. Students perform hands-on scientific exploration of the Rouge River to determine overall stream health; including the evaluation of chemical, biological, and physical parameters of water quality. Students are further encouraged to take action to restore and protect the river based on their results.

Despite numerous challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the REP worked with a total of 48 students and six teachers from four schools throughout Metro Detroit in 2020. Monitoring events occurred throughout the spring and fall thanks to these amazing dedicated teachers and implementation of strict COVID-19 prevention protocols at their schools that made this possible.

Even though traditional in-school programming was limited, 2020 provided an opportunity for reflection, partnership-building, and pivoting of content development and delivery. At the onset of the pandemic when everyone needed to stay home to stay safe, staff reminded that #natureisopen through weekly “Take me to the River” video segments on Facebook Live that began as a moment of nature and evolved to more generalized watershed education around the Rouge, highlighting projects and the impacts of stormwater in the watershed. As mentioned elsewhere in this report, our Rouge Cruise became an “UnCruise.” These two series provided educational video content about the Rouge River that did not exist previously.

Collaborating with local and regional watershed and place-based education organizations has been helpful to share resources. Partnerships grew to continue our work with Earth Force, whose mission is to engage young people as active citizens who improve the environment and their communities now and in the future. Using tools from Earth Force, the REP is developing an interactive online self-guided activity using the same platform used for Rouge Rescue last year. Geared towards young people, the general public, teachers and school groups, it will be a step-by-step way to teach about the river and how to be an engaged part of their community—earning points and fun badges along the way. The REP also continued its formal partnership with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s Bay Watershed Education & Training Program, who were supportive of our adjustments.

Our Educational umbrella is expanding and adjusting to changing needs. Not only will we continue our work with school groups, but hope to come up with internal systems to address the needs for informal watershed education on-demand through presentations, online training segments, connecting experts in our community with interested parties as well as municipalities and elected officials, and providing more public education opportunities among all of our programs. We are excited to continue to grow and adapt in 2021.

The videos were edited and posted on the Friends of the Rouge YouTube channel to share this content more widely, making it easily accessible to teachers and school groups as well as the general public.
The Lower Rouge River Water Trail Leadership Committee continued to build the trail with significant progress despite the pandemic. The Committee moved to virtual meetings starting in May, holding five meetings throughout 2020. FOTR promoted the trail in a presentation to the Inkster City Council in February and held separate meetings with officials from Inkster, Westland and Wayne to discuss and explore trail connections in their respective communities. A Woody Debris Management Work Day was organized and held by volunteers at two locations in Dearborn in July with 23 volunteers followed by several smaller work days. On October 24, a public group paddle attracted 42 paddlers with canoes provided by Wayne County Parks and delivered by Jeff Vallender with paddles and PFDs provided by Heavner Canoe Rental. The route was round trip to avoid shuttling people in a pandemic.

A significant stride towards implementing the trail came when the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation approved a grant of $330,000 to support the design and enhancement of the Rouge River Gateway Trail and three trailheads along the Rouge River Trail. This funding allowed FOTR to hire a Trails Program Manager to further the work in 2021.

In addition, FOTR joined the Fort Rouge Gateway Partnership (FRoG) in cutting the ribbon on the new Fort Street Bridge Park on October 22, 2020. Executive Director, Marie McCormick was invited to speak to honor major donors who financially supported the project along with other notable speakers like Congresswoman Debbie Dingell, Detroit Deputy Mayor Conrad Mallatt and Councilwoman Raquel Castaneda-Lopez. FOTR will be the fiduciary for Phase II of the project which will enable river access via a universally accessible kayak launch and a boardwalk for fishing and observation.

Advocacy has steadily increased over the past year with the FOTR Board of Directors formalizing the Advocacy Committee in August 2020. This Committee assists the Executive Director in making more informed decisions regarding response and participation regarding FOTR’s comments around environmental issues. This new committee worked on submitting formalized statements in opposition to a permit from Advanced Disposal to discharge leachate in Johnson Creek, near headwaters of Middle Rouge and another to Wayne County recommending alternatives to future land development and sale.

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DID YOU KNOW?

A few fun facts about the Rouge River

✓ The Rouge drains approximately 467 square miles of land in the counties of Oakland, Wayne and Washtenaw in southeast Michigan
✓ Comprised of four major branches with 126 river miles: Main, Upper, Middle, and Lower
✓ Contains over 400 lakes, impoundments, and ponds in 48 municipalities
✓ Inhabited by 1.35–1.5 million people
✓ Land use: more than 50% urbanized, less than 25% remaining undeveloped

Fundraising Report

THE 2020 ROUGE UN-CRUISE was a huge success, raising over $27,000 with 983 live Zoom users and an estimated live event participant count of 1,475.

Thank you to our 2020 Un-Cruise Funders:
AK Steel Corporation, Ann Ivory Studios, Burns & McDonnell, Cardno, Carmeuse Lime & Stone, Environmental Consulting & Technology, Inc. (ECT), Giffels Webster, Honeywell, Inland Lakes Landscaping Corporation, Mannik & Smith Group, Marathon Petroleum Company LP, Marine Pollution Control (MPC Environmental), Michigan State University, Midwestern Consulting LLC, NJ Electric, LLC, Natural Community Services, OHM Advisors (Orchard, Hiltz & McCliment, Inc.), SmithGroup, TSP Environmental, and Waste Management

...and to our 2020 Un-Cruise Supporters:
Alice Ann Bailey, John Barker, Bill Craig, Mike Darga, Kenneth L. Gurnow, Mary Geraldine Grunow, Bill Hazel, Kathleen A. Klein, Judy & Bart Lessin, Stanislaw Lisica, Robert D. Muller, James Sunstrum, Theresa Tejada, Sue M. Thompson, Paula Trilety, Mary Kathryn Trzeciak, Laura Wagner, Steve J. Weis, and Kathleen A. Wight

Other Events—

CAPITAL CAMPAIGN
$5,500

DETROIT FREE PRESS MARATHON
$1,845

VALENTINE BUG APPEAL
$578

COVID-19 EMERGENCY APPEAL
$16,648

YEAR-END APPEAL
$32,542
Financial Report

Fiscal Year 2020

TOTAL REVENUES = $1,839,902

- Government Grants $657,702 36%
- Foundation Grants $625,921 34%
- Other Grant Support $148,572 8%
- Corporate Support $61,793 3%
- Community Support $48,167 2.5%
- Membership $36,644 2%
- Fundraising $142,738 8%
- Other Revenue $103,553 5.5%
- Gain on Investments $14,810 1%

TOTAL REVENUE BY SOURCE $1,839,902 100%

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<th>Amount (in $)</th>
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STAFF
Executive Director Marie McCormick
Operations Director Karen Hanna
Education Manager Erin Cassady
Monitoring Manager Sally Petrella
Trails Manager Herman Jenkins
Restoration Manager Cyndi Ross
Restoration Coordinator Matthew Bertrand
Restoration Assistant Jaclyn Heikkila
Fund Development Coordinator Lara Edwards

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Treasurer Drew Hoffman · PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP

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David Maurice · Canton Township Public Works
Mike McNulty · ITC Holdings
Dave Norwood · City of Dearborn
Betsy Palazzola · City of Detroit
Brandy Siedlaczek · City of Southfield
Alan VanKerckhove · Detroit Water & Sewerage Department (retired)