



Letter from the Executive Director

Last year marked another step in our commitment to authentically working with Rouge Communities and our many partners to find the best solutions to our most pressing watershed issues. The idea that nothing for community happens without community continues to be at the forefront of how we do our work.

Friends of the Rouge has always worked to protect, restore and enhance our neighborhood river: Unchecked suburban sprawl, systemic regional flooding, failing stormwater infrastructure, and lack of access continue to persist as threats to our watershed, yet our stewardship focused work has made progress in addressing these challenges. In this report, we will share some of our work over the past year that shows, with your support, how we are working to reduce the impacts of these threats and to steward future generations of environmentalists.

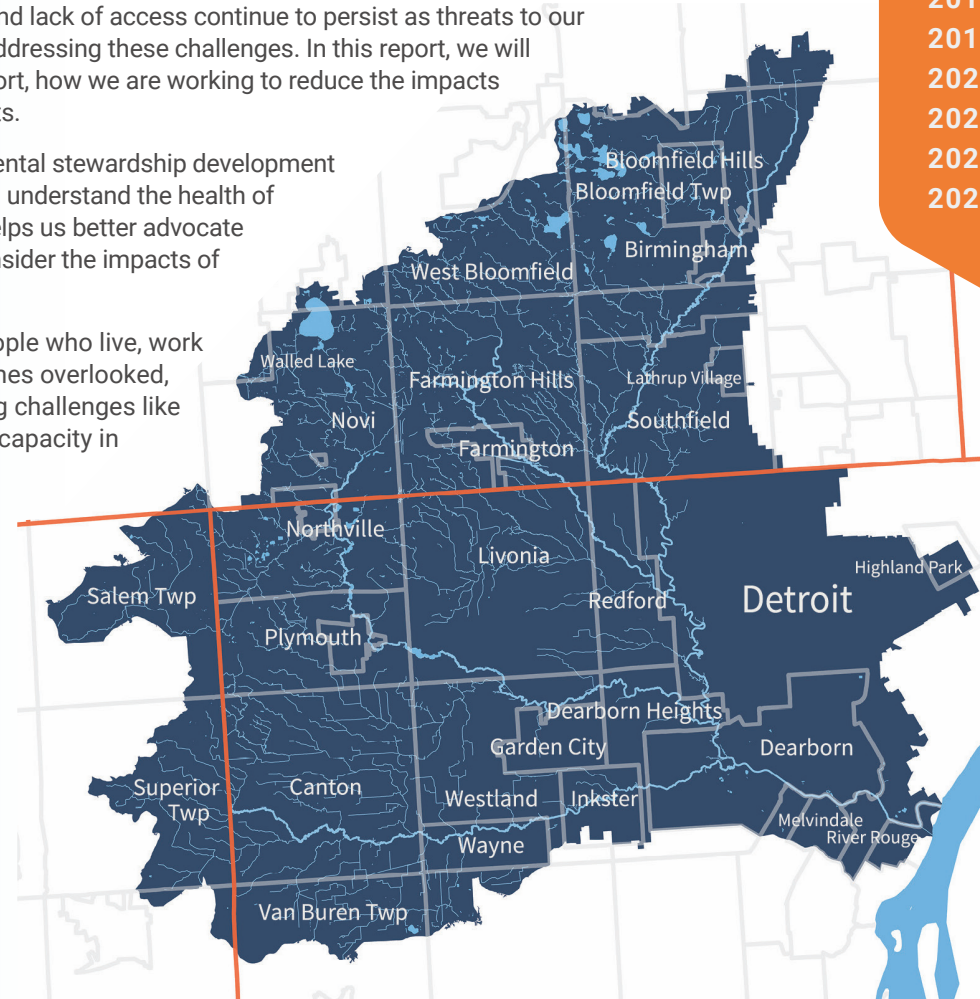
Community science monitoring programs offer gateways to environmental stewardship development opportunities, and have resulted in decades of viable data used to help understand the health of the river. Paired with our collaborative network of partners, this data helps us better advocate for protection of natural resources and to push decision makers to consider the impacts of development on downstream communities.

We continue to lean on the expertise of our communities and the people who live, work and play within the watershed. Elevating these inherent, and sometimes overlooked, assets can uncover hidden gems of opportunity for better addressing challenges like localized flooding or long-term active habitat management. Building capacity in local groups grows local power for local change.

Looming environmental challenges can feel daunting and isolating, but together we come up with the best solutions.

Each of you help drive the change we hope to see in this world. The time is now for action—your support of FOTR keeps us on the leading edge of community based, people first, environmental action. We pledge to continue learning, evolving, asking hard questions and staying present with each of you.

Kindest regards,
Marie McCormick, Executive Director



Membership Increases

Look how your community of Friends has grown!

- 2018 — 288 households
- 2019 — 300 households
- 2020 — 488 households
- 2021 — 568 households
- 2022 — 668 households
- 2023 — 740 households

2023 Board of Directors

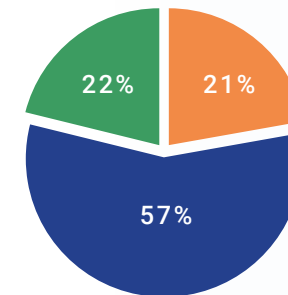
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- Vice President** Alice Bailey // Environmental Consulting & Technology, Inc.
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- Treasurer** Carol Snodgrass // CPA (Retired)
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DIRECTORS

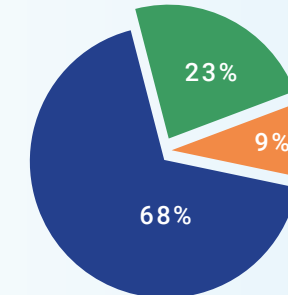
- Paul Draus, Ph.D. // University of Michigan Dearborn
- Erma Leaphart // Sierra Club Michigan Chapter
- Nicholas Leonard // Great Lakes Environmental Law Center
- Samra'a Luqman // Concerned Residents of South Dearborn
- Madelin Maher // Bank of America
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- Brandy Siedlaczek // City of Southfield
- Jeremiah Steen // National Audubon Society
- Myra M. Tetteh, Ph.D. // Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan Foundation
- Sue Thompson // Wayne County Department of Public Services

2023 Financial Report



Grants
Unrestricted
Foundations

TOTAL REVENUE
\$2,054,766



Administrative
Development
Programs

TOTAL EXPENSES
\$1,880,786



Collaboration for Meaningful Change



The development of the Lower Rouge River Water Trail exemplifies thoughtful collaboration on a broad, regional scale. This first-of-its-kind trail in the Rouge River watershed moves through the entire west to east length of Wayne County and crosses 10 different municipalities. In 2023, the collaboration of multiple stakeholders, including Inkster Task Force, National Kidney Foundation, City of Inkster, Wayne County Parks, and PEA Group, led to the complete design development of a universally accessible

kayak launch and access paths in Inkster Park. Slated to begin construction in 2024, these recreational assets will provide vital river access to a community historically separated from its River. Along the Lower Rouge River Water Trail, over eight of the ten planned multipurpose trailheads are 100% shovel ready, with several slated for construction within the next 12 months.

In 2023, FOTR worked hand in hand with Michigan Department of Natural Resources, US Fish & Wildlife, Wayne County, Washtenaw County, and Canton Township to assess fish passage issues at culverts along the Lower Rouge River and improve the success and survival of Rouge River fish populations. Culverts are tunnels built under roads or railroads for the uninterrupted flow of streams. If improperly sized, culverts may impede fish movement, and disrupt reproduction, feeding, and ultimately the success

This page, top: Paddlers launch into the Lower Rouge River at the Morton Taylor trailhead in Canton. **Bottom:** Friends of the Rouge staff taking measurements of a culvert to assess fish passability in the river. **Right:** The Ripple Effect workshop attendees learn about plants with Dr. Runzi Wang. **Opposite page:** FOTR intern Jaclyn Mowry (second from left) and students plant trees along the lower Rouge River.

Did you know?

The Rouge River—and the surrounding land that makes up the watershed—have been listed as an Area of Concern since 1987 for degraded environmental conditions stemming from historic and ongoing pollution.



Over 230 organizations partnered with FOTR this year for boots-on-the-ground action to help cultivate a healthier Rouge River.



In 2023, the work of the City of Dearborn and Wayne County Parks to clean and open logjams in Venoy Dorsey Park, Inkster Golf Course, and Dearborn Hills Golf Course, resulted in significant stretches of the Lower Rouge River being reclaimed for safe and open paddling.

and survival of impacted Michigan fish. Poorly sized culverts can also create bottlenecks for water during storm events that may cause local flooding and threaten the integrity of bridges and roads. In 2023, the FOTR monitoring team began preliminarily surveying culverts. When the surveys are complete in 2024, the FOTR scored culverts will be put on a prioritized list to inform local partners of the culverts that pose the greatest threat to native fish success. Once priority culverts are identified and scored by FOTR, culvert reconstruction improvements for safe fish passage can dovetail road reconstruction along the Lower Rouge River. What was once a barrier will become a “road” for fish success!

The Rain Catchers Collective, a new collaboration with the Clinton River Watershed Council and the Huron River Watershed Council aims to empower southeast Michigan residents and communities to protect the quality of the region’s lakes and rivers. This collaborative supports nature friendly practices such as installing rain gardens and rain barrels. The Rain Catchers Collective provides information, products, and services to help residents across three watersheds and throughout Southeast Michigan—from Ann Arbor, to Pontiac, to Southwest Detroit—capture rainwater on their property. The Rain Catchers Collective partners founded the collaborative effort to meet a growing demand for these sustainable practices.

Community Collaboration plants the seeds for new initiatives, sheds light on different perspectives, and motivates communities and organizations to work together for meaningful change. True collaboration starts with mutual trust and a wholehearted commitment to success. This commitment allows Friends of the Rouge to learn from the experiences, knowledge, and expertise of community stakeholders to achieve shared goals.





Community Engagement for a Better River

FOTR firmly stands behind the tenant of nothing for community, without community. At events across Metro Detroit in 2023, community members shared their voice and expertise, engaged in action, and shaped plans for a better future for the River.

In the Rouge River community of Dearborn, all branches of the River come together. Residents in Dearborn’s South End community experience particularly heavy air pollution, stormwater pollution, and flooding. In 2023, community members engaged with FOTR to share community insight. This shared expertise led to the creation of a 2040 Green Infrastructure Vision for South End Dearborn. The partnership with Concerned Residents of South Dearborn and Salina Elementary and Intermediate Schools, went beyond the

planning process. Community partners and residents came together with FOTR to plant hundreds of trees and shrubs to buffer the schools’ play spaces from neighboring industrial complexes. The new trees will support improved air and water quality and reduce heat in summer months. Plans for a nature playscape, rain garden and native planting at Salina Elementary and a rain garden at Salina Intermediate School are in progress for 2024.

In a first-of-its-kind community outreach effort for Rouge River Watershed AOC projects, FOTR partnered with Wilcox Lake community groups like Old Village Association and Plymouth Pollinators together with Wayne County Parks and Alliance of Rouge Communities to bridge relationships

and engage community stakeholders in the process. FOTR’s role in this work supported local community groups to build internal capacity to grow in the role of land-stewards before, during and after the AOC project demobilizes. As one of many Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI) funded Area of Concern Projects in the Rouge, the Wilcox Lake remediation project in Plymouth, MI supports restoration of critical fish habitat, invasive species mitigation and native plantings.

The “Dry Dock Pop Up” serves as a vibrant community engagement platform that brings the Lower Rouge Water Trail to area festivals, farmers markets, and events to communities along the Lower Rouge River. In 2023, the interactive and educational “Dry Dock Pop Up” experience appeared at 29 events and was a featured topic in the Great Lakes Area of

20
23

929 school students experienced hands-on Rouge River water quality education

243 community members volunteered to identify the calls of local frogs and toads to help measure the health of the Rouge River and its surrounding habitat.

7,691 volunteers took action for a better Rouge River and a more vibrant future.

Concern Diversity Equity and Inclusion Workgroup Webinar. The “Dry Dock Pop Up” model gained recognition as a best practice model in 2023 at the local, state, and national levels by the *Reimagine River Access Conference*, the *Michigan Outdoor Summit*, and the *Healing Our Waters Great Lakes Conference*.



The Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI) is the largest federal investment in the Great Lakes in two decades. GLRI funds a variety of activities including grants and the direct implementation of Great Lakes Legacy Act projects.

Opposite page, left: Rain Gardens to the Rescue volunteers plant Rain Gardens in Detroit. Center: Volunteers search for river bugs during the Fall Bug Hunt.

Right: Visitors to a Dry Dock PopUp at the Michigan Department of Natural Resources Adventure Center in Detroit. This page: Wayne County Conservation Stewards tour the Plymouth Arts & Recreation Complex rain gardens in bloom.



Utilizing Community Science for Advocacy

Through community science, volunteer “researchers” contribute meaningful data to further scientific understanding of key issues affecting the Rouge River and the greater watershed. The importance of community science outlasts hands-on learning experienced by volunteers at events. Findings from “bug hunts”, stonefly searches, fish monitoring, and the frog & toad survey serve to inform public officials for better decision making and create a critical springboard for data-driven community advocacy.

A “Community-Based Study on PFAS in Fish” report was released in 2023. The Ecology Center, the Huron River Watershed Council, and FOTR partnered with six local anglers for the community-based science that led to the report. Anglers collected and helped process 12 species of fish from 15 locations. Over 60 fish were tested for different PFAS chemicals; all of the fish tested contained PFAS. Because there are no safe levels of PFAS for humans to consume, the report findings are critical in mobilizing state and federal lawmakers to re-evaluate and lower the fish consumption advisory level for fish that contain PFAS.

In response to preliminary salt level data collected by volunteers at FOTR Bug Hunts, in 2023, Michigan Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy (EGLE) requested FOTR to expand salt testing. Testing will expose areas of the River with salt levels that can be toxic to the freshwater animals, and may lead to the listing of river branches as “impaired for chloride” by EGLE. In addition to measuring salt levels in Rouge branches and tributaries, new tests will study three



different chloride sampling methods (YSI probe, lab-tested water grab, and Izaak Walton League SaltWatch strips) to compare accuracy. Currently, only tests from water grabs at an EGLE-approved lab are allowed to contribute to impairment designations. These tests can be a high barrier due to cost and lab availability. Data from this study will help establish if low-barrier methods like the free SaltWatch strips can be allowed in the future.

In 2023, FOTR jointly authored a letter with Dr. John Hartig that urged State Lawmakers to earmark \$100 million in funding for the required matching dollars to support legacy contaminant sediment remediation in the Detroit and Rouge Rivers. There are only three years remaining before the matching time limit expires. Remediating Rouge River contaminated sediment is a critical component to the pathway of delisting the watershed from its Area of Concern status. Over 80 organizations and elected officials have signed-on to this letter.

Did you know?

In 2023, FOTR facilitated two community science bug hunts at 41 and 44 sites in spring and fall, respectively. Community science collected data is shared with state agencies through the Michigan Clean Water Corps database and reported to the Alliance of Rouge Communities, participating municipalities, communities, volunteers, and sponsors, which supports better decision making for a healthier Rouge River.

This page: FOTR staff and partners search for native mussels with Department of Natural Resources and State of Michigan Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy experts. **Opposite page, clockwise from top:** Volunteers perform woody debris management on logjams along the Lower Rouge Water Trail in Canton; Winter Stonefly Search volunteers monitor for bugs; Students from Troy High School perform chemical monitoring tests during the Rouge Education Project spring monitoring; Spring Bug Hunt volunteers; a Rouge native johnny darter.

In early March 2023, FOTR participated in Great Lakes Day in Washington D.C. with the Healing Our Waters Great Lakes Coalition to share local Rouge River stories and challenges with members of congress to recommend legislative and funding priorities that support restoration efforts and clean water protections for the Great Lakes. Prior to the President’s State of the Union address, Executive Director Marie McCormick, FOTR board member Erma Leaphart, and Hudson Villeneuve from the Michigan League of Conservation Voters stand on-site with climate change action signs.



FUNDERS AND SUPPORTERS

Aaron Companies
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Bosch Community Fund
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Hubbell, Roth, & Clark (HRC Consulting)
Inland Lakes Landscaping Corporation
Interlake Maritime Services, Inc.
Kiwanis Club of Colonial Plymouth, Inc.

League Of Women Voters: Dearborn & Dearborn Heights
Livonia Garden Club
M. J. Electric, LLC
Masco Corporation
Marathon Petroleum Company LP
Meijer SHRR – Store 233
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Michigan Association of Environmental Professionals
Michigan Environmental Council
Michigan First Foundation
Michigan State University
Michiganense Natives
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Mintek Resources
National Fish and Wildlife Foundation
National Kidney Foundation of Michigan
National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration (NOAA)
National Parks Conservation Association
Northville Township
OHM Advisors
Pacific Life Foundation
PARClife
PEA Group
Plymouth Township
ProCom LLC
Pure Oakland Water (POW)
Raymond James
Robert Bosch, LLC
SmithGroup
St. Suzanne Cody Rouge Community Resource Center
The Block Foundation
The Cabarrus Country Club Incorporated (LGA)
The Garden Club of Dearborn
The UK Online Giving Foundation
Toyota Motor Sales USA

Tonquish Lodge #23, Independent Order of Odd Fellows
Trailwood Garden Club
True Cut Tree Care LLC
TSP Environmental
University of Michigan
University of Michigan–Dearborn
University of Michigan Detroit Center (UMDC)
Upper Long Lake Management Committee
US Ecology
Utility Lines Construction Services
Village of Beverly Hills
Washtenaw County Water Resources Commissioner's Office
WM
Woman's National Farm & Garden Association: Bloomfield Hills Branch

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Nicole Wilson
Christine & Keith Yancy
Anita Yeager
and other anonymous "Best Friends"

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Carol Snodgrass
Jeff & Terry Snyder
Jack Snyder
Gerry & Sharon VanAcker
James Williams
The Zikowski Family
and other anonymous "Stoneflies"



2023 Fundraising Events

ROUGE CRUISE
\$47,316

REP BACK-TO-SCHOOL CHALLENGE
\$2,224

YEAR-END APPEAL
\$85,095

EARTH DAY APPEAL
\$7,880

NATIVE PLANT & RAIN BARREL SALES
\$30,922

STAFF

Executive Director	Marie McCormick
Education Manager	Erin Cassady
Education and Monitoring Coordinator	Sam Davis
Restoration Landscape Architect and Mentor	Brian Devlin
Monitoring Manager	Lauren Eaton
Development Director	Lara Edwards
Restoration Coordinator	Dallas Ford
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Operations Director	Karen Hanna
Restoration Manager	Cyndi Ross
Restoration Coordinator	Jaclyn Heikkila-Stafiej
Restoration Coordinator	Renato Marimon
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Restoration Assistant	Rosina Newton
Restoration Assistant	Margaret Lobbig
Restoration Assistant	Jacqueline Kristofik
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Trails Assistant	Ty Bugbee
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Development Coordinator	Nicole Wilson
Website Specialist	DeShe Mathis
Operations and Communications Associate	Cara Beld
Community Organizer	Aimee Woodruff

