

The Atlanta Urban Ecology Resource Center @ Proctor Creek

A Collaborative Proposal for Revitalizing Vine City and English Avenue Neighborhoods Using Community-driven Sustainable Strategies

Developed and Submitted by
Community Improvement
Association, Inc, and
Park Pride



In Partnership with:

West Atlanta Watershed Alliance

Environmental Community Action, Inc.
(EcoAction)

The Conservation Fund

Georgia STAND-UP

Georgia Trade-Up

Barnette Snead Associates, LLC

History

The Atlanta Urban Ecology Resource Center @ Proctor Creek (AUERC @Proctor Creek) is a community-driven effort to capture the benefits of 21st century technology and environmental practices for the long-term redevelopment of Vine City and English Avenue, two historically disinvested and impoverished Atlanta communities. Proctor Creek, the headwaters of which begin just outside downtown Atlanta runs for 9 miles, has a 16 square mile watershed and, is one of the most polluted streams in the country. However, this watershed is a vital tributary to the Chattahoochee River, which has environmental impacts throughout south Georgia and Alabama, all the way to the Gulf of Mexico. By virtue of its origins on the edge of the southeast region's most important urban center, and its outsized impact on stream quality and environmental habitat far beyond its geographic scope, Proctor Creek presents an ideal opportunity for developing a world-class environmental education center for local residents as well as an eco-tourism destination for visitors to the metro Atlanta area.



“Proctor Creek presents an ideal opportunity...”

Origins of The Atlanta Urban Ecology Resource Center Concept

The AUERC@Proctor Creek is a concept of the Community Improvement Association, Inc. a grassroots, non-profit, environmental education organization serving the Vine City and English Avenue neighborhoods. The AUERC grew out of an extensive collaborative process, and is based on a similar, successful initiative, the Milwaukee Urban Ecology Center. The AUERC@Proctor Creek concept is designed to align with sustainability objectives set forth in the City of Atlanta's Power to Change program and has been developed in collaboration with a number of other community-based organizations, as well as subject matter experts in sustainability and green job creation, economic development, land management, and other technical areas. Collaborating entities include:

- Community Improvement Association, Inc.
- City of Atlanta Mayor's Office of Sustainability
- Park Pride
- West Atlanta Watershed Alliance
- Environmental Community Action, Inc. (EcoAction)
- Southface Green Workforce Training Program
- Georgia STAND-UP
- Georgia Trade-Up
- Atlanta Food and Farm, LLC
- Neighborhood Planning Unit-L
- Georgia Technical Institute

Additional technical support and expert assistance has been provided by:

- The Atlanta Regional Commission
- The Conservation Fund
- Proctor Creek Watershed Stewardship Council/Federal Partnership
- Georgia Technical Institute
- Georgia State University Department of Environmental Health
- Emory University School of Public Health
- Department of Watershed Management
- Georgia Adopt-a-Stream Program
- Barnette, Snead Associates, LLC.

Park Pride will serve as fiscal sponsor for funding developed during planning and implementation of the AUERC@Proctor Creek plan.



Economic Development Potential



The AUERC@Proctor Creek is based on a simple idea—that impoverished, mostly poor minority communities in the city core can become leaders in urban sustainability, taking control of their own destinies through intensive environmental education, revitalization, and job creation based on environmentally responsible investment. The AUERC@ Proctor Creek collaborative and its community supporters have benefitted from previous studies such as the Atlanta Regional Commission Proctor Creek study, Park Pride's Proctor North Avenue (PNA) analysis, as well as City of Atlanta sponsored master plans for the Vine City and English Avenue neighborhoods. The project has been catalyzed by a number of large-scale investments planned for the Vine City/English Avenue area, including:

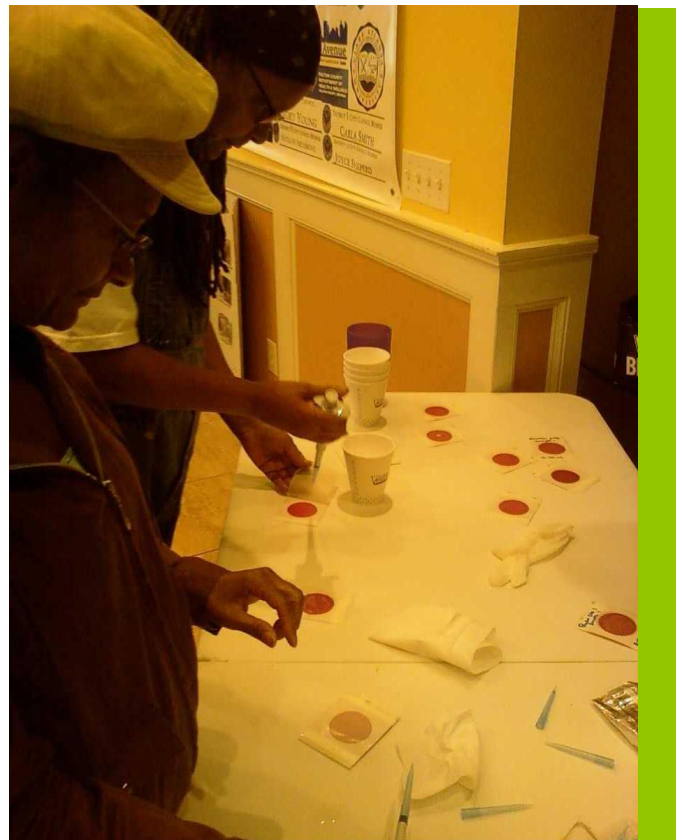
- The new Falcons Stadium
- Multi-Modal Passenger Terminal
- Infrastructure investments along the Northside Drive traffic corridor
- Infrastructure investments along the MLK, Jr. Drive corridor and commercial district
- Improvements to and TOD-driven redevelopment of the Vine City and Ashby St. MARTA Stations
- Improvements associated with BeltLine light rail infrastructure and spin-off mixed-use development
- Additional commercial and residential development related to these projects

Transforming the Vine City and English Avenue neighborhoods using a cleaned-up, pristine Proctor Creek as a recreational and educational centerpiece would reclaim this essential natural asset as both a benefit to the surrounding communities and as an economic generator for the City of Atlanta and the region. Those two factors—community benefits and economic impact—are the primary justifications for pursuing the AUERC@Proctor Creek project.

The AUERC@Proctor Creek Education and Demonstration Facility

The proposed centerpiece of the Proctor Creek green initiative is a state-of-the-art environmental education facility sited near the creek headwaters, a location intended to maximize stream utilization for recreation as well as to mitigate periodic flooding as recommended in Park Pride's PNA study. The Community Improvement Association, Inc. and collaborating partners propose to build an education facility that also serves as a demonstration and exhibition center for best practices in energy and resource efficient construction, green infrastructure design, urban greenspace preservation, and nature enhanced recreational opportunities. The design of this facility, and its surrounding green infrastructure features, will be coordinated by Park Pride through a community-driven discourse led by Community Improvement Association and its collaborating partners. This process will capture and prioritize community needs, many of which have been previously expressed in numerous public forums and documented events

- Elimination of pollution and flooding in the Proctor Creek stream corridor through improved stormwater retention
- Access to full-time jobs with pay that can sustain middle class lifestyles
- Preparation and training for jobs with a career path, especially acquisition of skilled trades
- Education for energy efficiency and conservation to address climate change while also reducing living costs
- Community-clean-up, waste reduction, reuse, and improved recycling
- Opportunities for local food production and fresh markets
- Expanded access to parks, recreation, and open space including multi-use trails and a possible amphitheater
- Investments in "civic infrastructure," providing long-term capacity to maintain improvements to the area's physical and economic environments.



Park Pride, the Community Improvement Association, Southface, and other technical assistance partners will work collaboratively to identify highly qualified firms with expertise in sustainable strategies, architecture, engineering, real estate development, and economic development strategy. These firms will be oriented to both opportunities and resident needs within the Proctor Creek impact area, setting the stage for building out a development team firms can bring the AUERC@Proctor Creek plan to reality. On-going consultations with the Milwaukee Urban Ecology Center will help guide that effort. The overall development AUERC@Proctor Creek development concept correlates to the Westside TAD Neighborhoods Strategic Implementation Plan for Joseph E. Boone Boulevard.

Green Infrastructure and Job Creation

Job creation and job training opportunities are perhaps the highest priority community benefit sought by residents of the Vine City/English Avenue communities. Both the large-scale development projects cited above and the AUERC@Proctor Creek plan offer opportunities to demonstrate the efficacy of sustainable development strategies as job creators for low-wealth, minority urban communities. A 2006 study of the English Avenue community conducted by Georgia Technical Institute students revealed:

- Unemployment rate: 8.35%
- Average gross wages: 13,144.00
- Housing vacancy rate: 55%
- Unresolved code violations: 72%
- Parks acreage: 0
- Residents lacking high school diploma or GED: 31%



The Great Recession and sluggish recovery have only served to exacerbate these conditions. Linking the economic imperatives of climate change to green lifestyle and behavior choices, and demonstrating how together those together can catalyze new economic opportunities is the basis of the AUERC@Proctor Creek initiative. Similarly it will demonstrate how solving flooding and wastewater pollution through green infrastructure and engineering produces a cleaner, healthier environment while also generating good jobs that many Vine City and English Avenue residents can be trained to do. Large-scale construction projects planned for the area, investments in multi-modal infrastructure such as new transit, walkable communities, paths, and greenways, increase sustainable infrastructure. New housing and commercial development including mixed-use TOD development around local transit stations will power additional growth and job creation. Helping local residents understand the scope and scale of economic opportunities created by rebuilding the city along sustainable lines is a key objective of the AUERC@Proctor Creek. The other objective is to provide the community-based education and support systems to help residents prepare for and compete for those opportunities.

In addition to Park Pride's expertise in land management, green infrastructure, environmental remediation and maintenance, the Southface Green Workforce Training Program has played an instrumental role within the collaborative by preparing a framework for green jobs production. Georgia Trade-Up has brought extensive knowledge of apprenticeship training for skilled construction employment, and a commitment to building a workforce pipeline that offers access to career track employment for current community residents. The economic development goals of the AUERC@Proctor Creek have been developed in alignment with the City of Atlanta's "Power to Change" sustainability objectives with the goal of using environmentally conscious action to drive economic opportunity.



Like its counterpart in Milwaukee, the AUERC@Proctor Creek can and should become an attraction in itself. Close to Atlanta's downtown core and convention district, with new entertainment and hospitality venues planned for construction nearby, and well connected with transit through the future MMPT, existing MARTA stations, BeltLine connections, and possible westward extension of the Atlanta Streetcar, the AUERC is positioned to be a destination as well as a community-serving educational institution. A wide range of community programs, ecological and biological demonstrations, technology installations, and planned activities will draw visitors from throughout the Atlanta region and beyond. Its close proximity to 3 major educational campuses—the Atlanta University Center, Georgia Technical Institute, and Georgia State University—could establish the center as a hub for urban environmental education, research, and outreach.





Community Environmental Education

Transforming distressed, disinvested, historically neglected neighborhoods into leaders of environmental preservation and sustainability isn't a pipe dream. It is already taking place in Vine City and English Avenue along the banks of Proctor Creek. Proctor Creek is one of just eleven locations selected for the nation's Urban Waters Federal Partnership that is designed to reconnect economically distressed urban communities with their waterways through improved agency coordination and community collaboration.



The Department of Watershed Management (DMM) Office of Watershed Protection and ARC have worked with community stakeholders to create the Proctor Creek Watershed Improvement Plan. This has resulted in a number of streamwalking events to evaluate watershed conditions, identification of obvious sources of pollution, and the collecting of hundreds of water samples. Community Improvement Association, the West Atlanta Watershed Alliance, EcoAction, and other community-based groups have been actively engaged in these activities, and have served as effective links for outreach and education to a wider audience within the Vine City and English Avenue populations.

Over a period of 18 months in 2010 and 2011 Park Pride engaged a coalition of organizations and individuals within the Vine City, English Avenue, and Atlanta University Center communities in a Visioning Process. The Proctor/North Avenue Vision Study (PNA study) identified greenspace improvements that would provide capacity relief for the area's combined sewer system while offering a series of interconnected greenspaces. Features recommended in the study included parks, greenways, community gardens, rain gardens, and green streets. In 2010 a dozen community volunteers were certified in Adopt-a-Stream training offered by the Department of Watershed Management at the offices of the Community Improvement Association, followed by a series of stream clean-ups along the creek banks.

With these and other grassroots environmental education and research efforts as well as organized interventions, Vine City and English Avenue have already established a strong foundation of community-based environmental education. The AUERC@Proctor Creek will capitalize on this strong foundation of federal, state, city, and community partnerships to build a comprehensive program of outreach, stream maintenance, and watershed protection reinforced by a strong commitment to community engagement and on-going education efforts. Success in environmental education efforts has been won through emphasizing a handful of motivating principles:

- Encouraging community residents to engage and embrace their natural environment, thereby dispelling the myth that low-wealth, minority neighborhoods don't care about the environment and that "going green" is an endeavor reserved for the affluent.
- A commitment to preparing community residents for job and training opportunities resulting from the return of large-scale investments to the city core, especially dense, multi-use developments linked by transit, supported by green infrastructure, and reliant upon technology and strategies designed to achieve sustainable outcomes.
- Taking ownership in the environment by becoming good stewards of the land, air, and water, holding themselves, business, and their elected representatives accountable for environmental impacts.
- Value and celebrate a diverse urban environment through preservation and study of native plant and animal species within a thriving ecosystem.



A strategic partnership with the Milwaukee Urban Ecology Center will enable the AUERC@Proctor Creek partners to consolidate on-going activities into a comprehensive and innovative environmental education program tailored to the Atlanta metropolitan region. Outreach to schools and other learning centers will expand the center's reach and impact. Utilization of natural features created by green infrastructure such as parks, trails, and wetlands, as well as diverse flora and animal habitat will provide a physical environment conducive to learning and discovery.

Implementation

- The AUERC@Proctor Creek collaborative team anticipates a multi-year implementation process, beginning with intensive community engagement and buy-in for the education center concept. Park Pride, Community Improvement Association and other collaborating partners will conduct charrettes and other forums to provide community input into site design, development, and programming and conduct technical research related to project feasibility. This initial activity will constitute a pre-development and planning phase.
- Once the concept is fully vetted and a design finalized, action can be taken toward identifying the most appropriate site from among the options available within the Westside TAD Neighborhoods Strategic Implementation Plan for Joseph E. Boone Boulevard.
- Project design and site control will trigger a phase of intensive work to identify capital resources and funding, leading to construction.
- A strategic plan for on-going program development and business operations will be implemented to ensure that the AUERC@Proctor Creek is economically viable and self-sustaining.

Contact Information:

Tony Torrence

Community Improvement Association

678.663.1858 freetheland@live.com

