

**AGAINST THE ODDS: SUCCESSFULLY EXECUTING THE NATURAL  
RESOURCES STEWARDSHIP PROGRAM DURING THE PANDEMIC**

ROSEVILLE PARKS AND RECREATION

2020 MINNESOTA PARKS AND RECREATION ASSOCIATION AWARD OF  
EXCELLENCE: VOLUNTEER INITIATIVES



**CONTACT**

Matthew L. Johnson

[Matthew.johnson@cityofroseville.com](mailto:Matthew.johnson@cityofroseville.com)

(651) 792-7102

## **Describe the project goals and objectives including any technology that was used.**

Roseville Parks and Recreation has a long history of Volunteerism. In 2014, the City undertook a \$1.5mil comprehensive Natural Resources Restoration Program to revitalize and maintain Roseville's public natural resources. The program began using an ecological contractor with the assistance of staff and some volunteers as parks and open spaces underwent a significant transformation to a more native landscape. Following the initial wave of revitalization, the program was expanded and transitioned to ongoing management and stewardship conducted primarily by trained volunteers. The overall goals of the program were and continue to be to:

- Revitalize Roseville's natural areas
- Preserve natural assets within the city
- Foster environmental awareness within the community
- Encourage volunteerism, community-service, community-building
- Foster leadership and kinship among community members

Over the past couple of years, the program began to transition from the initial contractor/staff led to the more volunteer led program. Volunteer leaders were recruited, trained and began to lead their own natural resources efforts in the park system. Additionally, staff/consultant led events have become more frequent and attendance has grown. Examples of volunteer events include buckthorn removal, garlic mustard removal, native seed harvesting, native seed spreading, flower plantings, flower maintenance, specialized work on the community orchard and more.

Entering 2020, the goals for the program were to continue this evolution including to:

- Further engage with our volunteer community
- Improve regular communication about the status and goals of the program to those who participate
- Create a deeper bond between the volunteers and park stewardship
- Increase the number of volunteer hours worked from 2019 to 2020

In the early months of 2020, we were well on our way to accomplishing those goals. More than 40 volunteers attended our 2020 program kick-off event in January and there was a tremendous amount of excitement around the program. However, like so many programs, when COVID-19 hit in March, the success of the program was very much in doubt. Because most of our volunteer events required large groups of people to meet and interact in a semi-structured way, it was unclear whether any volunteer natural resources events could be held this year. This was concerning, both in that it would leave work that had been planned for 2020 undone but more importantly, because a prolonged loss of contact with volunteers over an extended period of time would likely reduce their engagement in the program and stop the positive momentum that had been building for the program. Additionally, staff understood the important role that the program played for some volunteers' physical, social and emotional needs and were concerned what impact a total shut down may have on them.

Given these factors, staff recommitted to figuring out methods to safely engage volunteers in the Natural Resources Stewardship Program. This recalibration established new goals for 2020:

- Ensure that any events and activities that are run are safe and exceed the CDC/MDH guidance for safety measures
- Engage with as many volunteers as possible during safe events
- Focus on maximizing number of contacts with volunteers (shifts worked) instead of total hours worked, as multiple contacts was more likely to yield long term engagement.

By the end of the of a year, what was once thought to be a total loss turned into a tremendous success: the Natural Resources Stewardship Program logged more than 900 volunteer hours worked in creative and impactful ways; many of which occurred in the early months of the pandemic when many programs and services were not running.

## **TECHNOLOGY**

Several pieces of technology were used in execution of the 2020 Volunteer Stewardship Program including:

- **Volgistics**, a volunteer database, was used to track volunteer participation and monitor event to event and year to year trends.
- **Zoom** allowed safe communication between staff members and lead volunteers in planning events/activities
- **Communication technology** including Civic Plus Newsletters, Facebook and Twitter were used to recruit volunteers, and communicate the progress that volunteers were making to the community.

## **Outline the planning process and timeline for the project.**

The Natural Resources Management plan was originally created through a comprehensive engagement process that included community meetings, condition assessments and contracted experts. An annual review of the plan, and request for feedback is conducted each January at a general meeting of all program volunteers. The plan is also reviewed annually by the Parks and Recreation Commission. Fortunately, both reviews occurred in January, 2020.

The modification of the program due to the COVID-19 pandemic was conducted initially in April and from there on a month by month and day to day basis to allow maximum flexibility as the COVID-19 situation evolved. The Parks Superintendent and Volunteer Coordinator led the planning process through research on best practices, Center for Disease Control and Minnesota of Department of Health guidelines and with input from volunteer leaders.

The planning process yielded several points of emphasis:

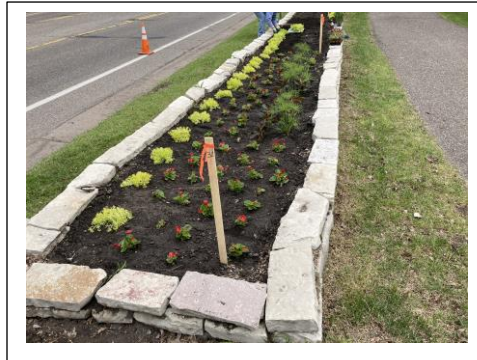
- Ensure that all events are pre-registered and participants pre-screen for any COVID-symptoms.
- Utilizes shifts, pods and other distancing measures to ensure that all volunteers who wanted to participate had the opportunity to do so.
- Focus on running events that maximized volunteers feeling of impact on the community to encourage ongoing engagement.

In the end, this strategy proved very successful. Although all projects were stopped for a period in the spring and again in the late fall, over the course of 2020, a total of 23 volunteer events were held. These events yielded 401 volunteer shifts worked, a number that nearly equaled the number of shifts worked in all of 2019. These 401 shifts resulted in more than 900 hours of volunteer stewardship work.

Although there were more than 20 events and interactions, three events that showcase the creative approach that was taken to providing impactful events are:

- **Flower Planting in Central Park (May):**

This annual event ordinarily draws 100 volunteers to plant thousands of flowers in Central Park over a two-hour period. To adapt the program during the pandemic, staff developed a plan that created a grid of floral plots and elongated the timeline of the event to two eight-hour days, so families and individual could plant their designated plot during a two-hour window with no one else around them. All told, nearly 10,000 flowers were safely planted at the event by more than 40 volunteers.



- **Citywide Tree Planting (September):**

This first-time event planted more than 100 grant funded trees in the city. In order to ensure a safe event, in lieu of planting the trees at one or two parks, the trees were divided across six different parks in the community. When volunteers signed up, they were assigned a specific park to report to. Staff delivered trees to each site but each location was managed primarily by a trained volunteer who led the other volunteers in the planting of their trees. This event was so successful, it is planned to be an annual event in future years.





- **Community Orchard Apple Picking and Food Shelf Donation (September):**  
In 2015, the city planted an experimental community orchard of fruit trees. For the first time, in 2020, those trees grew edible fruit. This fall, 28 volunteers put in 88 hours of work harvesting fruit from the trees. Similar to the flower planting, volunteers were scheduled in small numbers and spread out over many shifts to ensure the safety of all participants. At the conclusion of the season, more than 100lbs volunteer-harvested apples were donated to Every Meal, a local food-shelf dedicated to fighting childhood hunger. In addition to the apples that went to the food shelf, a few late blooming apples were harvested by Rachel Boggs, the city Volunteer Coordinator, and Patti Sullivan, a city Parkkeeper, and made into apple butter which was given to the orchard volunteers as a thank you gift for their efforts.



The above examples are three of the 23 events that were held this summer, but are illustrative of the approach that was taken by staff to offer safe, engaging events for volunteers to participate in when it seemed none were possible.



## **Outline the funding plan including the project budget, donations, grants or public-private funding sources.**

The holistic 2020 Natural Resources Stewardship Program had minimal cost associated with it other than staff time. In addition to the persistence of staff and volunteers, direct costs for much of the program were again contributed by private friends groups and public grant funds including:

- Friends of Roseville Parks donated \$4,000 to fund the flowers that were utilized for the Central Park boulevard flower planting.
- 100 trees for the tree planting day were funded through a Department of Natural Resources grant.
- Volunteers contributed more than 900 hours of work, a value of more than \$25,000.

## **Explain the level of collaboration including internal and external partners.**

More so than any previous year, the 2020 Volunteer Natural Resources Stewardship program required widespread collaboration. Examples include:

- Internal:
  - The city **Volunteer Coordinator, Rachel Boggs** (out of the Administrative Department) and the **Parks Superintendent, Jim Taylor** (out of the Parks and Recreation Department) collaborated to create COVID-safe volunteer events, and were on site for all of the staff-led events to ensure that they were safely executed. This often included using multiple sites, or holding multiple small events in place on larger events.
  - **City communications** staff assisted with a new quarterly newsletter to keep in contact with volunteers who were not comfortable participating in events during the pandemic, better inform volunteers in the program of the “big picture” outlook of the program, and inform volunteers of upcoming events.

- The city **Emergency Management and leadership team** provided support and guidance on developing safe volunteer events.
- External:
  - **Stantec Environmental Services** provided ecological guidance to the program and provides support staff to educate and guide volunteers during select events.
  - **Local Community Groups:** Friends of Roseville Parks provided funding to the flower planting event in May. A local Boy Scout troop provided volunteers for the tree planting event.
  - **Every Meal Roseville:** In 2020 volunteers harvested more than 100lbs of apples from the community orchard. Through a collaboration with Every Meal Roseville (the local food shelf), the apples were distributed to families in need.
  - **The Roseville Community:** without the Roseville community, this program would not have been possible. In 2020 155 people spent 954 hours volunteering in our parks this year.
  - Staff utilized resources provided by the **CDC, MDH, NRPA** and peer **MRPA** organizations when developing their volunteer events.

**Describe the community support/impact, which could include measurable response to support of project including attendance, correspondence with groups/organizations, expanded community participation, publicity including social media, news articles and other television or any other examples of public support.**

The community support for the Natural Resources Stewardship Program in 2020 was strong. Community members told us that they looked forward to their next volunteering opportunity and it provided relief from the challenges of 2020. The metrics support this claim:

- 155 people volunteered in the program
- 401 volunteer shifts were filled
- 954 volunteer hours were worked
- 55 people volunteered in the Natural Resources Stewardship Program for the first time in 2020
- 23 volunteer events were held
- 12 volunteer led events were held without any city staff present

Feedback from many volunteers indicated that their volunteering opportunities were an important connection to the community and their overall wellbeing during the pandemic.

Additionally, the program received a significant amount of recognition including:

- City news releases
- A feature story on CTV (local cable access) regarding the flower planting event
- A story about one of the volunteer events KSTP News
- Facebook and Twitter posts by the city, department and engaged volunteers

**Outline the evaluation or review process utilized throughout the project's implementation and completion highlighting relevant outcomes which could include volunteer feedback, surveys, resident response, budget savings, etc. Explain how project goals and objectives were met.**

The Volunteer Natural Resources Stewardship Program is evaluated regularly in the following manner:

- Ongoing interaction with volunteer leaders
- Annual review of the program at the annual meeting
- Annual review by the Parks and Recreation commission
- Periodic volunteer surveys from the volunteer coordinator
- Analysis of program metrics

When the decision was made to continue with volunteer events in April, the feeling was that any amount of engagement with even a small group of volunteers would be a success. Instead, we found more support for the volunteer program than we could have imagined.

In spite of having several months where no gatherings of any sort were permissible, and others where only extremely small gatherings were allowed, the metrics that we track participation with only slightly declined from 2019 and in many cases were greater than 2018.

- 401 shifts occurred in 2020 (only an 8% reduction vs 2019, and more shifts logged than 2018)
- 954 hours were worked (a 20% decrease in the number of volunteer hours occurred in 2020)
- 155 people participated in the program
- 954 volunteer hours yielded \$25,948 in work for the city
- 55 people volunteered in the program for the first time in 2020

Additionally, ongoing interaction with volunteers showed a positive review of the approach in 2020 (and continued into the early months of 2021). Volunteers reported feeling safe in their



participation, valued for their contribution and that their contributions made a meaningful impact to the community.

During this year, budgets for everyone were challenging. We were very fortunate to have Friends of Roseville Parks contribute funding for flowers and also receive a grant to plant trees. These were significant and welcomed budget savings during a challenging year.

## **Describe why the project is unique or otherwise deserving of an MRPA Award of Excellence.**

The 2020 Natural Resources program is unique and deserving of the MRPA Award of Excellence because it utilized ingenuity, persistence and collaboration to continue to affectively run the program during the adverse conditions of the pandemic, when many other volunteer programs stopped or drastically reduced operations.

When the Pandemic reached Minnesota this Spring, it appeared that there would be no way that we could continue the program in a meaningful way. To allow the program to stop for the year would have resulted in a catastrophic loss of momentum to the growing program, and adversely affected the volunteers who love to give back to their community. Instead, staff and volunteers worked through the challenges the pandemic caused, found creative solutions and implemented a program proved to be a huge success. In spite of the challenges and multiple cancelations, the program metrics were nearly on par with a previous-years. The lessons learned in 2020 will allow us to continue to effectively offer Natural Resources Stewardship opportunities throughout the remainder of the pandemic and allow us to continue to grow the program in spite of the pandemic. It is important to note that the heroes of the 2020 Natural Resources Program were the volunteers who continued to volunteer in large numbers, participated safely and provide new ideas on how the program could be run safely. Without this amazing group, the program simply wouldn't have been possible.

In this difficult time, rather than lose momentum, the program maintained a connection between volunteers and the city and actually gained contact with many new volunteers. More than the metrics, the bonds created through 2020's unique approach were hugely impactful to the volunteers, the community and the city.