



SUBMISSION FORM

All submission forms must include the following information. Separate submission forms must be turned in for each eligible program. **Deadline: July 1, 2023.** Please include this submission form with the electronic entry. If you do not receive an email confirming receipt of your entry within 3 days of submission, please contact [Gage Harter](#).

PROGRAM INFORMATION

County: Prince William County

Program Title: Prince William Public Libraries: Fostering Environmentally Responsible Communities

Program Category: Environmental

CONTACT INFORMATION

Name: Deborah Wright

Title: Library Director

Department: Prince William Public Libraries


Telephone: 703-792-6100 **Website:** www.pwcva.gov/department/library

Email: dlwright@pwcgov.org

SIGNATURE OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR OR DEPUTY/ASSISTANT COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR

Name: Christopher Shorter

Title: County Executive

Signature: 

Program Overview

Prince William Public Libraries (PWPL) implemented a comprehensive strategy to engage the Prince William community in conversations and actions that address environmental sustainability and climate change. PWPL adopted multiple approaches, including building learning spaces, establishing partnerships, and offering various programs and activities to people of all ages and walks of life. Two of the 12



PWPL libraries became partners of the national initiative Communities Responding to Extreme Weather, and five libraries joined the national NexTrex plastic bag recycling challenge. Six libraries now have pollinator gardens and composters, and all libraries have water stations promoting the use of reusable water bottles. The pinnacle of PWPL's sustainability efforts is Central Green, an outdoor library area for hands-on environmental education – the only of its kind in the region. All these efforts exemplified community interest and collaboration, promising a successful future in building greater environmental awareness in the region, state, and nationwide.

Executive Summary

PWPL is the hub connecting residents to the power of information, and it believes in the importance of public libraries in conversations about current topics such as climate change and sustainability. PWPL set out to engage the community in these critical issues and raise awareness about the value of protecting natural environments.

To ensure maximum reach and impact, PWPL joined national initiatives, established multiple partnerships, and launched interactive, enjoyable programs that help community members become environmental stewards. Within a relatively short time, PWPL became a significant driving force in fostering environmentally responsible communities in the greater Prince William area. Moreover, what started as environmental education, grew into community building and networking. It is now a community-wide effort and collaboration.

PWPL provides residents opportunities to learn about and care for pollinator gardens and discover the ease and benefits of composting. Children learn what it takes to have clean tap water at home, and adults explore ideas on how to make small but impactful lifestyle changes that reduce one's ecological footprint. All PWPL's libraries have water stations encouraging the use of reusable water bottles, and five libraries participate in the national NextTrex plastic bag recycling challenge. Central Green, PWPL's first-of-its-kind outdoor library area for hands-on environmental education, has a weather station, windmill, and a water table that allows the youngest explorers to learn how water flows and how certain things submerge while others float.

Environmental education at PWPL has proven effective in raising significant interest and participation. PWPL's efforts will have a lasting impact on nature protection and sustainability across the region and nationwide. Other library systems and organizations around the country can duplicate the programs and activities that PWPL is implementing to make positive changes in their communities.

Program Description

Sustainability is a Trending Topic

Sustainability and renewable sources of energy are important topics in Prince William County and a priority for Prince William County Government (County). Offshore wind turbines are rising off the coast of Virginia, more homes have solar panels, and local schools are introducing electric school buses into their fleets. The County’s 2021–2024 Strategic Plan includes focus areas of “Environmental Conservation” and “Sustainable Growth,” there is a native plant policy in place, and electric vehicle charging stations are being added to the County buildings and parking lots.

Simply put, sustainability and renewable sources of energy resonate, and PWPL has the resources and experience to be a strong contributing member of this movement.

The Role of Public Libraries

Public libraries play an important role in conversations about current issues. PWPL’s vision is to be the hub connecting residents to the power of information, including addressing topics such as climate change and sustainability. PWPL aims to raise awareness about the natural environment and to encourage and inspire people to be environmental stewards. PWPL launched innovative programs, enhanced experiential learning, built hands-on learning areas, and joined nationwide initiatives. These efforts streamline to support one goal: to better educate the community about these topics, bettering their lives and more responsible behavior benefiting us all.

Innovative Projects and an Exemplar Community Collaboration

For its commitment and determination to environmental education, PWPL was selected as one of 25 libraries nationwide to participate in the American Library Association’s Resilient

Communities: Libraries Respond to Climate Change grant initiative. PWPL presents the “Sustainable Lifestyle” program series, providing ideas on how to make lifestyle changes that reduce one’s ecological footprint and encouraging and inspiring people to lead a more sustainable lifestyle and be environmental stewards. Two of PWPL’s libraries have become designated Climate Resilience Hubs providing education about extreme weather events. Both libraries distribute information on climate preparedness and share materials and presentations provided by Communities Responding to Extreme Weather (CREW), a network of local leaders building grassroots climate resilience through inclusive and hands-on education, service, and planning.

With funding from several ChangeX grants, PWPL built pollinator gardens, installed composters at most of its libraries, and launched Repair Café events. People of all ages learn about the importance of pollinators and how to establish a pollinator habitat even in a small yard, have a chance to try composting, and re-discover the value of repairing. All these programs have become large-scale collaborative efforts, particularly the pollinator gardens. A local landscape designer drew a plan for the garden, County Buildings and Grounds built large planters and prepared ground planting areas, volunteers care for the native plants, local beekeepers and Master Gardeners from the Virginia Cooperative Extension come to educate children and adults, and area nurseries donate mulch and plants. Some artists moved their programs from library community rooms to the gardens to draw inspiration from nature and raise sustainability awareness through their paintings.

Repair Café events bring together small business owners and repair experts to offer opportunities to repair, upcycle, and give items a new lease of life – another step toward a more sustainable lifestyle. Jewelry, clothes, musical instruments, bicycles, are among the items that are

repaired during these events. One woman shared how she could finally wear jewelry repaired during the Repair Café that her mother had gifted her 20 years ago.

Composting programs teach people how to divert food waste, yard trimmings, and other organic matter from the landfill and compost them instead. There are compost displays at libraries with see-through walls, thermometers, and magnifiers for a closer look at the various materials as they decompose, and libraries distributed more than 1,000 compost starter kits.

With the financial support of Fairfax Water, Virginia's largest water utility, and in collaboration with Prince William County Service Authority, Virginia's largest combined water and wastewater authority and an environmental steward of the Chesapeake Bay Watershed, PWPL teaches children about the water supply and why it is vital to conserve the water and keep it clean. Children create a miniature, solar-powered water cycle system, build a mini filter using household materials to simulate the drinking water treatment process, and construct miniature sewers to learn about flushable and non-flushable items. Children also learned what it takes to clean the water from an oil spill.

Central Library's Central Green is PWPL's first-of-its-kind outdoor library space for interpretive environmental education, with installations including a windmill, solar lights, a weather station, and a story trail that pairs literacy with exercise and promotes overall well-being. PWPL was awarded two large environmental grants from Community Foundation for Northern Virginia and Dominion Energy Charitable Foundation to fund Central Green, and librarians and community partners turned the plans into reality. The County Building and Grounds Department assisted with transforming the space and installing the educational features. The Department of Public Works, Solid Waste Division and Environmental Education Division assisted with programming. PWPL teen volunteers planted the native plants, and an Eagle Scout built the story trail. Children and adults now enjoy the natural community space, exploring the

pollinator garden, participating in composting, observing the power of the wind and sun, learning about natural processes while walking and reading along the story walk, and paying attention to weather patterns while setting up a weather station. Book clubs and story time programs also enjoy meeting in this outdoor area.

Recently, Central Green has been equipped with a bench made from recycled plastic bags – all recycled by Central Library’s patrons. Central Library and four other libraries participate in the NexTrex plastic bag recycling challenge aimed at reducing plastic bag waste in the County. When 500 pounds of plastic bags are donated, NexTrex donates a bench made from recycled materials to the library. PWPL participates in this program in collaboration with its long-term partner in environmental education, Keep Prince William Beautiful, an environmental organization that educates and inspires environmental stewards.

PWPL funded these efforts with monetary support from grants and donations and implemented them with in-kind support from County agencies, local businesses, community groups, individuals, and library staff. This approach not only ensures a minimal impact on taxpayers, but it also offers opportunities for building and strengthening community relations.

Environmental Excellence Certification

PWPL’s focus on sustainability is a continuation and culmination of a larger initiative. In 2013, PWPL was the first – and is still the only – library system in Virginia to receive the Virginia Environmental Excellence Program (VEEP) certification. VEEP encourages and assists facilities and organizations with environmental records above and beyond their legal requirements. PWPL has also been committed to Prince William County’s Smarter Chemical Program, a pollution prevention program that ensures only safe and effective products are used at its sites and waste is eliminated.

PWPL encourages and provides its patrons and employees opportunities to compost, recycle, and eliminate waste. PWPL's libraries have water stations for the public and staff to use, bins for the public and staff to recycle plastic bags, and they recycle CDs, DVDs, and ink cartridges.

Top Innovator Award

The Urban Libraries Council recognized PWPL as the 2021 Top Innovator for its "Resilient and Responsible Communities" initiative. The award recognizes transformative programs that address current issues.

PWPL believes that libraries throughout the nation will be inspired by its efforts to encourage and teach people to make lifestyle changes that will reduce their ecological footprint and support each other in maintaining these changes and sharing knowledge with others.

Results Achieved

1. Enhanced environmental education: PWPL provides the community with free, unique environmental education that makes learning easier, more enjoyable, memorable, and effective.
2. Increased environmental stewardship: Enhanced environmental education strengthens people's motivation to make positive changes. The hands-on activities and the opportunity to test-try at the library encourage more people to adopt lifestyle changes at home. More community members discover ways of reducing their impact on the environment, saving money, and living a more sustainable life.
3. Strengthened community collaboration: The cooperation among PWPL and other community partners on implementing these programs, and the public attention it attracts, encourages further participation and collaboration of individuals, community groups, and

businesses on promoting actions that will have a beneficial effect on the health of the natural environment and local economy.

4. **Bolstered confidence in public libraries:** The enhanced programs and new outdoor areas increase interest in PWPL, underscore the library's significance, and reinforce the institution as a relevant and current community asset.
5. **Inspired young people:** The enhanced environmental education engages and inspires youth with its hands-on activities. Future scientists and engineers can explore, investigate, and be inspired to devise impactful solutions to environmental problems.
6. **Beautified neighborhoods:** Central Green and pollinator gardens contribute to the beauty of their neighborhoods.

The Next Steps

PWPL is committed to enhancing this initiative and supporting its growth in the future. All the efforts exemplified community interest and collaboration, promising a successful future in building greater environmental awareness. PWPL will continue to expand its collaboration with community members, inspire more people to become environmental stewards, and inspire more libraries to step forth and encourage people to make lifestyle changes that will reduce their ecological footprint.

What started as an environmental education initiative at PWPL has become a community-wide effort and collaboration. It has momentum, and PWPL will support it to fulfill its mission of bringing people, information, and ideas together to enrich lives and build community in a welcoming, inclusive environment. PWPL will continue to serve as a driving force in fostering environmentally responsible communities and to be a strong contributing partner to County and other organizations and agencies who strive to promote and expand the preservation and

Prince William County
Prince William Public Libraries: Fostering Environmentally Responsible Communities

protection of natural resources and processes, strengthen environmental equity, and promote sustainable growth that ensures the social, economic, and environmental health of all.

Please see below the enclosed photographs of some of the programs.





Prince William County
Prince William Public Libraries: Fostering Environmentally Responsible Communities

