



SUBMISSION FORM

All submission forms must include the following information. Separate submission forms must be turned in for each eligible program. **Deadline: July 1, 2024.** 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](#).

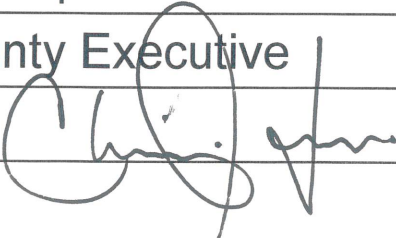
PROGRAM INFORMATION

County: Prince William County
Program Title: Libraries Fostering Environmentally Responsible Communities
Program Category: Environmental

CONTACT INFORMATION

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SIGNATURE OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR OR DEPUTY/ASSISTANT COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR

Name: Christopher J. Shorter
Title: County Executive
Signature: 

Program Overview

Serving more than 500,000 residents in Prince William County and the City of Manassas and having over 2,000,000 visits annually, Prince William Public Libraries (PWPL) is an essential government and community player in raising awareness about current topics, including environmental issues.

PWPL has committed to a greener future by taking sustainable actions and providing opportunities for staff and the community to collaborate to make positive change.

PWPL has engaged the community in these critical issues, raised awareness about the value of protecting the natural environment, joined national initiatives, and established multiple partnerships, 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 leading conversations about current topics such as climate change and environmental sustainability. Therefore, PWPL implemented a comprehensive strategy to engage the Prince William community in conversations about these critical issues and raise awareness about the value of protecting the natural environment.

From transforming unwanted plastic bags into new benches, installing water bottle filling stations so less plastic is used, establishing pollinator gardens, and offering programs that inspire the public to become environmental stewards, PWPL actively took steps to go green.

To ensure maximum reach and impact, PWPL joined national initiatives, established partnerships, and launched hands-on programs that engage community members in environmentally friendly actions. 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's efforts will have a lasting impact on nature protection and sustainability across the region and nationwide. Other library systems and organizations can duplicate the programs and activities that PWPL is implementing to make positive changes in their communities.

Program Description

Situation Faced by the Locality

Environmental sustainability is an important topic in Prince William County and a priority for the Prince William County Government (County). The County’s 2021–2024 Strategic Plan includes focus areas of “Environmental Conservation” and “Sustainable Growth.” The County has implemented a native plant policy, and electric vehicle charging stations are available at County buildings and parking lots, with plans to add more. The County aims to be a leader in promoting sustainable growth that ensures the social, economic, and environmental health of the County.

PWPL strives to be a collaborative county agency by contributing to achieving these goals while ensuring that our efforts demonstrate our value as a community asset. PWPL believes in the importance of public libraries leading conversations about current topics such as climate change and sustainability. Therefore, we have a comprehensive approach to engage the Prince William community in programs and conversations that address sustainability efforts.

Innovative and Practical Solutions

From innovative ideas such as transforming unwanted plastic bags into new benches to practical solutions such as installing water bottle filling stations so less plastic is used, PWPL is actively taking steps to go green. All these efforts streamline to support one goal: to better educate the community about these topics, leading to better lives and more responsible behavior benefiting us all.

PWPL collaborates with the American Library Association on its nationwide Resilient Communities: Libraries Respond to Climate Change initiative, offering programs raising awareness about the natural environment and sustainability, providing ideas on how to make lifestyle changes that reduce one's ecological footprint, and encouraging and inspiring people to be environmental stewards.

Two of the 12 PWPL libraries are partners of the Communities Responding to Extreme Weather (CREW), a network of local leaders building grassroots climate resilience through inclusive and hands-on education, service, and planning. Both libraries host literature on climate preparedness and provide education and support during extreme weather events.

Since 2022, PWPL has participated in the national NexTrex plastic bag recycling challenge. Six libraries have containers for visitors to drop off plastic bags, and once enough bags are collected, Trex creates benches made from 100% recycled materials. Thanks to the community's donations, PWPL has three benches to enjoy in its outdoor spaces and a fourth on the way. Since the beginning of the program, more than 2,200 pounds of plastic bags have been collected.

Installing water bottle refilling stations at all library buildings has also reduced the amount of plastic in landfills. Every time a library visitor uses the water bottle refilling station, it records how many plastic bottles have been saved. As of December 1, 2023, more than 189,043 plastic water bottles have not gone into area landfills thanks to people using the refilling stations.

PWPL also collaborates with the Prince William County Public Schools on a printer ink cartridge recycling collection program. Since October 2022, more than 211 ink cartridges have been donated.

Simple yet substantial changes can also positively impact sustainability and the environment and inspire others. PWPL has switched to LED lights, which use less energy and last longer. The switch has saved PWPL more than \$86,000 and a cumulative 877,414 kilowatt-hours. PWPL has also begun using “smarter chemical” cleaning supplies to eliminate hazardous chemical use at its libraries. These supplies are safer for the staff and visitors and have a lower environmental impact, reducing the amount of harmful substances released into the environment.

Library outdoor areas have also been transformed to be more environmentally friendly. Six libraries now have pollinator gardens that offer opportunities for nature to thrive and for the public to enjoy and be inspired. PWPL’s three Story Trails couple literacy with exercise, promote overall well-being, encourage people to spend time outdoors, and appreciate nature.

Composters and seed libraries are examples of experiential learning for all ages. People can participate in composting activities and learn how to divert food waste, yard trimmings, and other organic matter from the landfill and compost them instead. PWPL also distributed more than 1,000 countertop compost kits with information on how to get started. All kits were packaged in a reusable tote.

Central Green, PWPL's first-of-its-kind outdoor library area for hands-on environmental education, is ideal for interpretive environmental education. It includes installations such as a windmill, solar lights, and a weather station. Central Green also has a pollinator garden and a composter. Central Green encourages the exploration of nature and conservation activities and enhances environmental stewardship.



Exemplar Community Collaboration

All these projects and efforts are a result of exemplary community collaboration and support. PWPL funded them 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 ensures a minimal impact on taxpayers and offers opportunities for building and strengthening community relations.

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, which allowed PWPL to receive funding and share resources, ideas, and experiences with other libraries.

To advance its efforts, PWPL was awarded two large environmental grants from the Community Foundation for Northern Virginia and Dominion Energy Charitable Foundation to build Central Green. While grantors funded the project, librarians and community partners completed the work. 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 plants, and an Eagle Scout built the Story Trail.

Another large grant from Sentara Health allowed PWPL to build two additional Story Trails to further promote the outdoors and enhance the wellness of community members.

With funding from several ChangeX grants, PWPL built pollinator gardens, installed composters, and launched Repair Café events. People of all ages now 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 prepared ground planting areas, and area nurseries donated mulch and plants. Library volunteers and Friends of Library members now care for the plants, and local beekeepers, Master Gardeners from the Virginia Cooperative Extension, and Keep Prince William Beautiful assist librarians with programming. Some artists moved their programs from library community rooms to gardens to draw inspiration from nature and raise sustainability awareness through their paintings.

Repair Café events bring together small local 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.

With funds from Fairfax Water and in collaboration with Prince William Service Authority, PWPL introduces children to the exciting world of water and teaches them why it is important to conserve and keep water clean.

These efforts are a continuation and a 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.

PWPL was also recognized by a professional library organization, the Urban Libraries Council, with its Top Innovator award. The award recognizes transformative programs that address current issues and showcase creative thinking and imaginative applications of library resources.



Results Achieved

PWPL's goal was to raise awareness about the value of protecting natural environments and sustainability and engage the community in these critical issues. PWPL wanted to offer a practice-oriented, memorable, and enjoyable educational experience to ignite further interest and yield enhanced environmental stewardship.

As noted previously, PWPL does track its sustainability efforts, including how much plastic is collected to be repurposed into benches, how many water bottles are saved from being thrown into the landfill, how many ink cartridges have been donated, and the cost- and energy-savings of switching to LED lights in our buildings. PWPL cannot collect a definitive set of statistics and numerical data defining the results of the Fostering Environmentally Responsible Communities efforts, but through anecdotal feedback, PWPL reached its goal.

The evidence of community members using the outdoor library spaces, recycling, composting, attending library environmental programs, and collaborating with PWPL on promoting environmental stewardship prove the success of this initiative.

Environmental education at PWPL has proven effective in raising significant interest and participation. The positive community response to these programs was immense. For most programs offered at the libraries, attendance was at capacity. In FY2023, PWPL offered 4,131 programs attended by 173,671. Though not all of these programs were directly related to sustainability, PWPL's environmental stewardship is always top-of-mind. Every time someone

walks into one of our 12 libraries, they are positively impacted by the LED lights and water bottle refilling stations, among other efforts.

PWPL believes this success will inspire other libraries and organizations to encourage and teach people to make lifestyle changes that will reduce their ecological footprint, support each other in maintaining these changes, and share knowledge with others.

The Next Steps

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

