



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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## Elizabeth River Project celebrates opening of climate resilience model

*At the new Ryan Resilience Lab, the Norfolk non-profit is helping the world's urban coastal residents protect themselves – and nature – as sea levels rise.*

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Media tours & dedication: Thursday, May 30, 10 a.m. - Noon

Public grand opening: Saturday, June 1, 11 a.m. - 4 p.m.

4610 Colley Avenue, Norfolk, VA 23508

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**Norfolk, VA, May 13, 2024** – The non-profit Elizabeth River Project, which has worked for 30 years to clean up one of the nation's most contaminated urban waterways, is set to officially open a global model for urban coastal resilience on June 1, 2024.

The Ryan Resilience Lab, funded almost entirely through local donations, will demonstrate practical ways the world's coastal residents and businesses can learn how to protect themselves – and the environment – as sea levels rise. The building is located along Knitting Mill Creek in Norfolk, a city where the tides are rising faster than anywhere on the East Coast.

“Everyone seemed to be talking about sea level rise, but no one was providing practical examples for how urban coastal cities like ours should prepare for it,” said the Elizabeth River Project’s Executive Director Marjorie Mayfield Jackson. “The Ryan Resilience Lab shows us how we can work with the challenges of nature and still protect it.”

A special Ryan Resilience Lab pre-opening dedication for invited media and guests is set for 10 a.m. May 30, with a public grand opening celebration schedule for June 1, from 11 a.m. - 4 p.m., at 4610 Colley Avenue, Norfolk. RSVP: Casey Shaw, [CShaw@elizabethriver.org](mailto:CShaw@elizabethriver.org), 757-613-0411.

In conjunction with the grand opening, shops up and down Colley Avenue will join forces with the Elizabeth River Project to launch an “EcoDistrict,” encouraging businesses and residents to adopt

eco-friendly practices in solidarity with the new Ryan Resilience Lab in their midst. In fact, demonstrating such practices is becoming the norm along the street with businesses such as Norfolk's first store selling all native plants; another selling recycled bikes and a third offering electric boats for rent.

From its floating entry pavilion and solar panels to its green roofs, giant cisterns and river-friendly pollution controls, the Lab is a natural next step for an organization that has always thought big.

When the group got its start in 1993, the Elizabeth River was considered biologically dead for miles at a stretch, suffering from decades of industrial and urban pollution as it wound its way through the coastal cities of Norfolk, Portsmouth, Chesapeake and Virginia Beach. But where many found hopelessness, the Elizabeth River Project had hope. Today, after spearheading the clean-up of half the river's toxic hotspots and reconstructing hundreds of acres of pollution-filtering tidal wetlands, the group is seeing the return of otters, dolphins, eagles, pelicans and other wildlife species to the river's shorelines.

Now, sea level rise threatens it all.

"Nearly 90% of the wetlands that are so crucial to the river's health are expected to drown," Mayfield Jackson said, "and as the water rises, it washes unfiltered pollutants back into the river."

That concern – along with the threats sea level rise poses to life and property – is what drove the Resilience Lab project.

"Rather than doom and gloom, we're taking on sea level rise with hope and inspiration," Mayfield Jackson said. "That's what the Elizabeth River Project has always been about."

The Resilience Lab, intentionally constructed inside a flood zone along one of Norfolk's busiest commercial corridors and flanked by multiple residential neighborhoods, showcases what the future of sustainable coastal living might look like. Inside and out, visitors will find ways to live sustainably and prepare for rising tides. Everything from the floating entry pavilion and storage shed to a "living shoreline" instead of a hardened shore, an 80,000-watt solar energy system, 10 gallons of rainwater collected and re-used in the toilets and a permeable parking lot to keep polluted runoff from reaching the river. Meanwhile, green roofs and walls covered in vegetation reduce runoff and conserve energy in winter and summer.

"Developing on-land solutions to rising tides and rising sea level is not just a case of trying to make it more habitable for human beings," said Louis Ryan, a local philanthropist who with his wife, Pru, is the building's namesake. "It's also a case of making the land more friendly to the river."

Designed by Norfolk architectural firm Work Program Architects, the innovative, 6,500-square-foot Ryan Resilience Lab has been built to adapt to tidal flooding, which experts estimate will become at least seven times more frequent in Norfolk by 2050.

"The lab is designed to withstand elements that will destroy many other structures around it," said the project's architect Sam Bowling. "But the materials and solutions we used aren't out of reach for other builders, homeowners and cities. Rain-absorbing landscaping, pervious paving, adaptable floodproofing, floating storage buildings — these are affordable solutions for structures that are built to last."

For Mayfield-Jackson, pioneering solutions to big environmental problems is what continues to motivate the Elizabeth River Project.

“Our success in cleaning up the Elizabeth River shows the positive impact that regular people can have on the environment if they make real efforts to come together and work toward a solution,” Mayfield Jackson said. “Sea level rise is our next challenge, and we’re rising to it.”

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### **About the Elizabeth River Project**

The non-profit Elizabeth River Project has worked since 1993 to restore the environmental health of the urban Elizabeth River, once presumed dead. Today most major industries on the port river along with the cities of Chesapeake, Norfolk, Portsmouth and Virginia Beach and tens of thousands of school children and residents collaborate with Elizabeth River Project in the success story that is the river’s revival. Pelicans, eagles, river otters, seahorses and dolphins are now a common sight.

Along with the new Ryan Resilience Lab, signature programs of the Elizabeth River Project include the Dominion Energy Learning Barge, “America’s Greenest Vessel;” Paradise Creek Nature Park, 40 acres of revitalized wetlands and forest; River Star Homes, River Star Businesses and the Youth Resilience Expo. Landmark projects include restoring oyster habitat in the Lafayette and Eastern branches and cleaning up some of the world’s highest levels of contamination at Money Point in Chesapeake, resulting in a six-fold reduction in fish cancer. The project is supported primarily by dues-paying members. Do something beautiful. Join us today: [ElizabethRiver.org](http://ElizabethRiver.org).