



SUMMER 2026

ELIZABETH RIVER
PROJECT

Mudflats

ERP Wins Major Federal Grant for Living Shorelines

Photo: Casey Shaw

The Elizabeth River Project (ERP) has been awarded a three-year, \$1,984,705 National Fish and Wildlife Foundation Chesapeake Bay Innovative Nutrient and Sediment Reduction grant—an extraordinary recognition at a time when environmental funding is more competitive than ever. This award reflects ERP's 30-year legacy of trust, scientific rigor, and community-driven restoration in one of the nation's most challenged urban waterways.

For three decades, ERP has earned a reputation for turning bold ideas into measurable ecological recovery. That credibility is what positioned the organization to secure this major investment, which will accelerate the construction of 20 mosaic living shorelines across the Elizabeth River watershed.

These projects combine shellfish reef, tidal marsh, and upland

buffer into a single, powerful restoration system—widely regarded as the gold standard for shoreline resilience, habitat creation, and nutrient reduction.

The grant will launch transformative work in communities that need it most. At the Virginia Zoo, ERP will restore 100 linear feet of shoreline as part of the Zoo's new EdVenture and Exploration Park, offering 500,000 annual visitors a firsthand look at the

"This award allows us to bring the most innovative, community-centered shoreline restoration strategies directly to the places that need them most."

power of ecological restoration. At Norfolk Christian Upper School, a 500-foot living shoreline and demonstration park will serve as an outdoor classroom for students and a training site for professionals.

Innovation is at the heart of this award. ERP and the Virginia Institute of Marine Science will calibrate the L-SNiPS nutrient and sediment reduction model specifically for the Elizabeth River—the first tributary-level application of this advanced decision-making tool. The project will also pioneer the region's first use of hatchery-raised ribbed mussels on mosaic shorelines, testing their potential to enhance nutrient removal and shoreline stability. Meanwhile, ERP will

join volunteers, nurseries, and university partners to strengthen the regional wetland plant economy, encouraging a local supply of genetically diverse, climate-resilient wetland plants.

For ERP, the grant is both a milestone and a mandate. "This award allows us to bring the most innovative, community-centered shoreline restoration strategies directly to the places that need them most," said Phoebe Murrell, Director of Restoration and River Star Homes Manager. "It reflects decades of trust built with our partners and neighbors—and it accelerates the future we're all working toward: a healthier, more resilient Elizabeth River."

The grant also expands ERP's educational reach, supporting at least nine immersive workshops and integrating mosaic shoreline science into the Learning Barge curriculum for more than 6,000 students each year.

For a river once written off as "dead," this award marks another powerful step in its comeback—proof that long-term trust, community partnership, and innovation can revive even the most challenged waters.

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From the
Executive
Director

River-Friendly Starts at Home

A river-friendly home looks different for everyone. For some, it may be a waterfront yard with a living shoreline, native plants, and a rain garden that helps slow and filter stormwater. For others, it may be an apartment balcony, a shared neighborhood space, or a rental home. It can also be found in daily habits that add up to a larger impact, such as picking up after a pet, reducing single-use plastics, keeping pollutants out of storm drains, or never flushing medicine.

For the past 15 years, our River Star Homes program has helped more than 7,000 households take simple, meaningful actions for a healthier Elizabeth River. It was built on the idea that we all have a role to play in restoring the river we share, and that small choices at home can add up to lasting change.

Now, as we celebrate this milestone, we are also preparing for the next chapter.

With support from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation Small Watershed Grant Program, we are refreshing the River Star Homes program to better understand how we can reach and engage more people. We are working with a behavioral science consultant to listen, learn, and evaluate what motivates people to take action, what barriers may stand in the way, and how the program can be more relevant and accessible throughout the watershed.

That matters because not every household has the same opportunities. Not everyone owns land. Not everyone has a yard. Not everyone has access to the same resources for larger projects like conservation landscaping or living shorelines. But everyone who lives, works, learns, or plays in this watershed is



connected to the Elizabeth River and deserves a meaningful way to be part of restoring its health.

As you read this edition, you will see stories of progress, partnership, and possibility, from the 15-year legacy of River Star Homes to the vision for Knitting Mill Creek Park, the dedication of our volunteers, and the many ways our community continues to show up for this river.

We invite you to help shape the future of River Star Homes by taking our survey, sharing your ideas, and encouraging your neighbors to get involved. Together, we can make river-friendly living more accessible, more impactful, and more reflective of the diverse communities that call the Elizabeth River watershed home.

Thank you for helping us
DO SOMETHING BEAUTIFUL.

Lacy S. Shirey
Lacy Shirey, Executive Director

This entire mailing was printed on recycled paper with soy ink



Mission – To restore the health of the Elizabeth River by working with our neighbors, businesses, and governments.

JOIN the Elizabeth River Project. Our mission is made possible by generous members like you. Contact donate@elizabethriver.org for membership questions.





River Star Homes began at RIVERFest in 2011 with a simple idea: small actions at home can create big change for our river. Today, over 7,000 homes have stepped up and made the pledge.

Celebrating 15 Years of River Star Homes

Fifteen years ago, the Elizabeth River Project set out with a simple but ambitious idea: what if river-loving neighbors each made small, meaningful changes at home—changes that, together, could help heal an urban river once considered one of the most polluted in America?

In 2011, we launched the River Star Homes program on the Lafayette branch of the Elizabeth River, inviting residents to take a voluntary pledge to adopt river-friendly practices. To spark excitement and pride, we offered a beautiful River Star Garden flag—a symbol neighbors

could display to show their commitment to the river. Families reduced fertilizer use, scooped their dogs' waste, installed rain barrels, and learned how everyday choices ripple outward into the watershed.

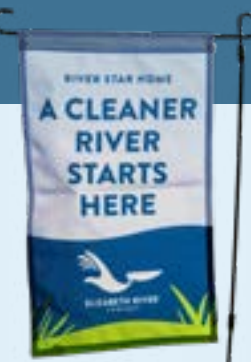
Since the program's inception, River Star Homes have planted over 310,000 square feet of new shoreline habitat, stabilizing eroding banks, and converted 39,412 square feet of turf into native plantings, creating vital habitat for wildlife.

One of the first to embrace the program was Marie Jensen (pictured center above), a Lafayette River resident who joined in 2015. Marie has since

installed a living shoreline on her property and raised oysters that help filter the water flowing past her dock.

"The Elizabeth River has greatly improved thanks to the Elizabeth River Project and caring River Star Homes," says Jensen. *"Seven simple steps make such an impact on the health of the river."*

Now, as we celebrate 15 years of River Star Homes, more than 7,000 households across the Elizabeth River watershed proudly fly their yard flags. Together, we're proving that a healthier Elizabeth River isn't just possible—it's happening, one home at a time.



Do Something Beautiful and sign up today!

It's fun, free and easy to join, and when you do, we'll give you a beautiful flag for your yard, a welcome packet and more.

ElizabethRiver.org/river-star-homes

The Man, the Myth, the Misidentified Mammal: Jimmy Entas Tops ERP Volunteers



Jimmy Entas isn't just a familiar face at Elizabeth River Project volunteer events — he's a force of nature. In 2025, he logged an extraordinary **275 hours**, once again earning the title of ERP's top volunteer, a distinction he's claimed multiple times. But for Jimmy, it's never been about recognition.

It's about love — for a river, a community, and even, unexpectedly, a person.

For Jimmy, the Elizabeth River is "the heart and soul of Norfolk," a companion woven into his daily life since 1993. Retirement in 2022 only deepened that bond. With more time to kayak, bike, and soak in sunrises, he felt a pull to give back. ERP became the first organization where he felt an "instant and deep connection," especially while helping build living shorelines.

One moment stands above the rest: meeting Sharon. While volunteering on a shoreline restoration, he

struck up a connection that quickly grew into something more. The river didn't just give him purpose; it introduced him to his girlfriend.

Jimmy's service extends far beyond the riverbanks. He pilots adaptive bikes for Spinclusion, tutors young readers, supports the Chesapeake Bay Foundation's oyster efforts, ambassadors for the Elizabeth River Trail, and pitches in with Keep Norfolk Beautiful and the Lafayette Wetlands Project.

What keeps him hopeful is what

he sees every time he's out on the water: clearer views through the shallows, oysters spitting, and wildlife returning in steady—including the memorable "otter" that later turned out to be a beaver.

With signs of recovery in mind, Jimmy imagines a future where the Elizabeth River isn't just cleaner but truly clean — a thriving ecosystem full of fish, birds, and edible shellfish. And who knows, by then he might even have his wildlife IDs down to a science... which is perfect timing, since he's now in the Tidewater Master Naturalist Class of 2026.





Knitting Mill Creek Park: A New Sanctuary for Nature and Neighbors

Prue Salasky and Terri Holland survey the massive thicket of privet and English ivy they’ve nearly single-handedly cleared to help ready the new park.

A transformation is underway along the Lafayette Branch of the Elizabeth River, where the Elizabeth River Project is creating Knitting Mill Creek Park—a restored marsh and community refuge that Director of Resilience & Community Engagement Luísa Black Ellis describes as “a new space for encounter and play along the Elizabeth River.”

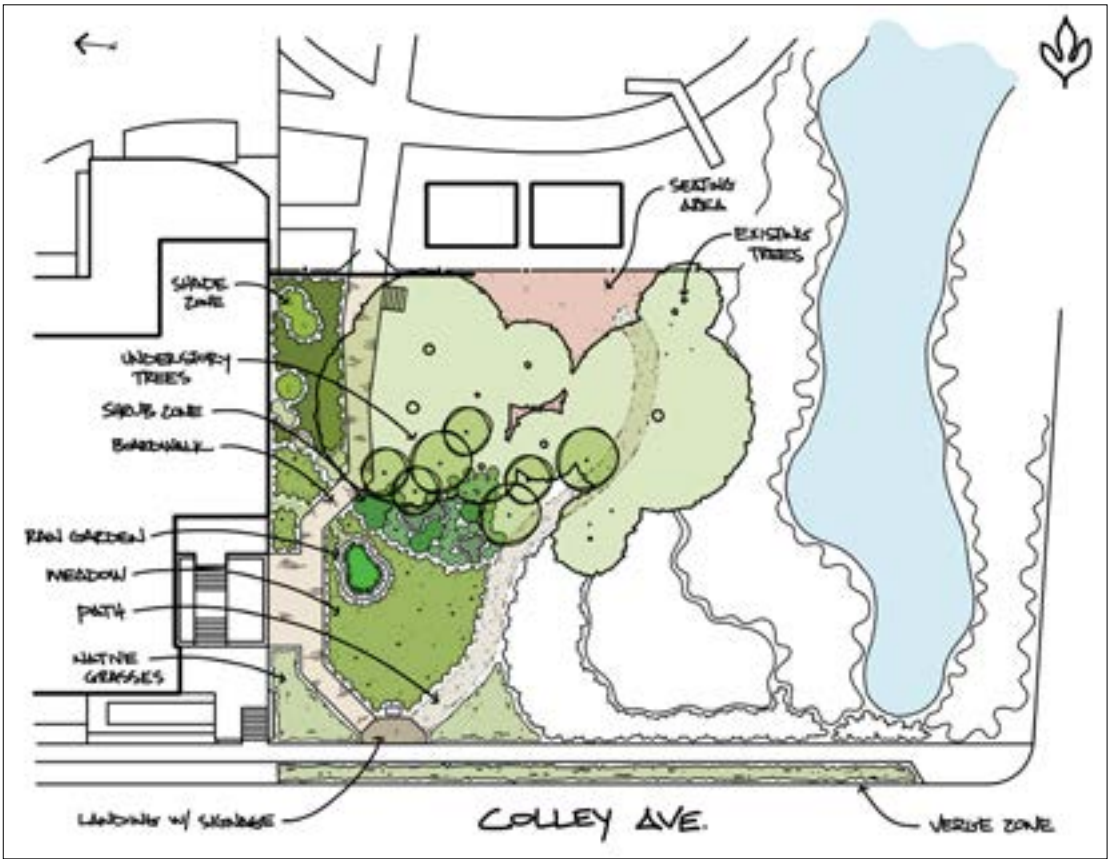
The park marks the newest milestone in the broader 2024 Knitting Mill Creek Restoration Plan, developed by North Colley’s residents, community groups, and River Star Businesses. In just ten blocks, more than 20 River Star Businesses now voluntarily reduce pollution or create habitat in this EcoDistrict—an extraordinary concentration of stewardship in a dense urban corridor.

In such a built-up area, opportunities to restore shorelines are rare. That’s why converting five lots beside the Ryan Resilience Lab into a thriving marsh and buffer feels so significant. “This is amazing not just because it’s going

to make more of a home for returning life,” Black Ellis says, “it also makes a more inviting home along the River for our human neighbors, too.”

The park’s design, developed with River Star Business Orbis Landscape Architecture, is rooted in a Natural Plant Community Modeling approach. Instead

of selecting plants individually, this method looks to intact native ecosystems as the blueprint for restoration. For the Elizabeth River, that means drawing from the classic



assemblage of *Spartina patens*, *Spartina alterniflora*, *Iva frutescens*, and *Solidago sempervirens*, a community that has long supported the river's wildlife. Re-creating these relationships ensures that pollinators, birds, and marsh species encounter the full ecological network they depend on, not isolated plantings.

Orbis then helped interpret this ecological palette through a human lens. After identifying the species that would exist in an undisturbed Elizabeth River marsh, the team thoughtfully layered in native blueberries, showy wildflowers, and other plants with seasonal color, texture, or fragrance—subtle enhancements that help visitors connect emotionally with the landscape without compromising ecological integrity.

Community input shaped the design just as strongly. A remarkable 215 residents shared feedback, with 92%

naming “access to the river” or “a quiet place to relax” as top priorities. In response, the park will guide visitors from a wildflower meadow near the sidewalk into a sheltered corridor of native shrubs and trees, ending in a tranquil marsh overlook beneath mature pines planted by volunteers more than two decades ago.

Invasive species removal is underway, with marsh planting expected this summer and upland restoration in the fall. The park opening is planned for spring 2027.

This project is made possible thanks to the generous support of Jean and Chuck Townsend - Rose Community Foundation, Hampton Roads Community Foundation, Kay Abiouness, Pru and Louis Ryan, Susan and David Goode, Cynthia Faschini and Andy Wallach, and Renee Russell, whose commitment to the River is helping bring this vision to life.



Chris Beach, co-founder of EcoGardens, inspects the invasive *Phragmites* cleared during volunteer removal events in preparation for Knitting Mill Creek Park.



The rare Pandora Sphinx Moth rests on Virginia creeper, already growing abundantly in the future park, where it will be kept—with light trimming as needed—for the valuable habitat it provides.



Solidago, *Spartina*, and *Iva frutescens*—plants that have shaped the Elizabeth River's shoreline for generations. Their enduring community now guides the Natural Plant Community Modeling approach behind Knitting Mill Creek Park, ensuring the river's wildlife meets a familiar, fully functioning habitat.



Knitting Mill Creek Park Conservation Landscaping

Wednesdays, July 1, July 29, 10am-12pm

Ryan Resilience Lab

Help restore balance to the ecosystem and help us prepare for native plantings in Knitting Mill Creek Park, our upcoming community pocket park!

Sign up at elizabethriver.org/volunteer

Staff Spotlight: Hailey Lauritsen, Learning Barge Manager



If you've stepped onto the Learning Barge in the past few years, chances are you've met Hailey Lauritsen, whose enthusiasm and calm leadership help set the tone for every field trip. A 2020 graduate of George Mason University with a B.A. in Environmental and Sustainability Studies, Hailey has long been

drawn to the intersection of conservation, education, and community.

Hailey first joined the Elizabeth River Project as a seasonal educator, quickly proving herself a natural fit for hands-on teaching and life on the water. "When I first saw the job posting for the Elizabeth River Project,

I was still finding my footing in the environmental field and really wanted to establish myself in a career that allowed me to pursue all of my interests," Hailey recalls. "I love conservation and environmental education, so the Learning Barge has been an amazing fit."

Now as Learning Barge Manager, Hailey starts each day energized by what's ahead. "I always get a little bit of an adrenaline rush welcoming the students during the introduction," she says. "The best part is seeing the educators and students have a blast together when the field trip is in full swing."

With thousands of young learners visiting each year, Hailey sees firsthand how transformative the experience can be. Many students arrive nervous about being on the

water or interacting with animals, but she watches them leave more confident, curious, and connected to the natural world.

Some moments stay with her—like the day Bottlenose dolphins swam right past the barge, thrilling everyone on board. And behind the scenes, she treasures the camaraderie of the team: deck washes, music, laughter, and the shared joy of working on the river.

When she's not aboard the barge, Hailey enjoys exploring the outdoors, spending time with her dog, and diving into a good book.

We are honored to have Hailey on the ERP team, where her dedication as Learning Barge Manager helps inspire and educate the next generation of environmental stewards for the Elizabeth River.



See all River Star Businesses HERE

2026 Inside Business River Star Hall of Fame Buckeye Chesapeake Terminal



Buckeye Chesapeake Terminal has transformed its waterfront into a model of industrial environmental leadership, completing a third major restoration that converted a barren acre into a thriving native meadow designed to filter stormwater and support wildlife. Guided by a multi-expert design charrette, the team capped the site with topsoil, planted 3,000 native plugs and 550 shrubs, and hydroseeded with a hardy, salt-tolerant seed mix, irrigated using water from the terminal's stormwater pond.

This project builds on earlier successes, including a 12,919-square-foot wetland planted by 50 volunteers in a single low-tide cycle and a 5-acre "Rail Spur" parcel that rebounded naturally once herbicide spraying and mowing ceased. Together with long-running oyster restoration, wildlife habitat improvements, and significant pollution-prevention upgrades, Buckeye's efforts demonstrate how industry and community partnerships can restore river health while revitalizing once-degraded land.

Advancing to Model Level: Cox Communications



Cox Communications became the first U.S. telecom provider to achieve Zero Waste to Landfill at two Chesapeake facilities, reaching diversion rates above 92% and

saving \$3.2 million annually. The company pairs these waste-reduction milestones with circular-economy efforts like refurbishing equipment and powering operations with 100% green energy. Cox employees also volunteer regularly at Paradise Creek Nature Park, supporting habitat restoration alongside other community projects that strengthen environmental stewardship.

Hampton Roads Planning District Commission



HRPDC transformed its Regional Building parking lot into a green-infrastructure showcase, using porous pavement, bioretention features, and native plants that capture 33,000 gallons

of stormwater and reduce pollution while adding habitat. The site now includes Level 2 EV chargers, reinforcing the Commission's commitment to cleaner transportation.

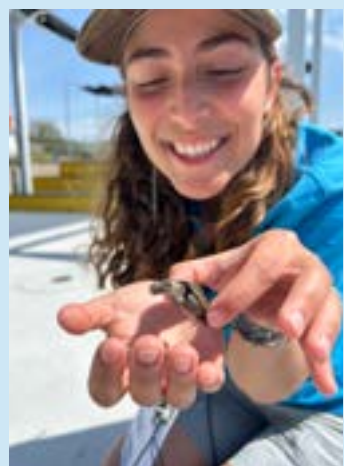
Habitat Heroes



Yellow-Crowned Night Heron

A Yellow-crowned night heron shakes out its feathers at Paradise Creek Nature Park, keeping its plumage clean and in top shape for hunting along the marsh.

Photo: Darren Fetty



Abbey Marquardt shares a special close-up moment with students aboard the Learning Barge before releasing this juvenile Diamondback Terrapin back to the river.



Community members and partners like River Star Business Enviva have joined forces to remove more than 1,400 lbs of litter and debris from the Paradise Creek marsh since fall.



A seahorse discovered by Jarrell Williams during a Seabin cleanout at Nauticus shows how restoration efforts are making space for fragile species to thrive again.



While tending Norfolk State's 3,300-square-foot pollinator meadow, Phoebe Murrell jumped in to help rescue a flock of ducklings trapped in a campus fountain and reunite them with their mother.

Financial Overview FY25

Statement of Revenue	
Grants and Contributions	\$ 2,145,320
Program Income	\$ 121,316
Membership	\$ 107,458
Investment Earnings	\$ 35,696
In-kind (non-financial contributions)	\$ 96,961
Other Income	\$ 12,362
Conservation Easement Tax Credits Sale	\$ 368,923
Net Assets Released from Restrictions	\$ 715,260
Total Revenue	\$ 3,603,296

Summary of Expenses	
Program Services	\$ 2,753,351
Management and General	\$ 1,194,259
Fundraising	\$ 198,415
Total Expenses	\$ 4,146,025
Net Revenue/Loss	
Net Loss	\$ (542,729)
Balance Sheet	
Total Assets	\$ 13,213,561
Total Liabilities	\$ 356,168
Net Assets	\$ 12,857,393



Operation Revenue		
85%	Grants and Contributions	\$ 2,145,320
5%	Program	\$ 121,316
4%	Membership	\$ 107,458
4%	In-kind	\$ 96,961
2%	Investment & Other	\$ 48,058

THRIVING BECAUSE OF YOU

Because of people like YOU, the Elizabeth River is rebounding—species are returning, habitats are healing, and hope is rising. Your gift today keeps this momentum going. Join us in restoring a river where life doesn't just survive—it thrives.



GIVE TODAY AT ELIZABETHRIVER.ORG

Your Guide to Summer on the Elizabeth

Join us for inspiring events that connect our community to the Elizabeth River—celebrating restoration, education, and action for a healthier waterway! See all upcoming events and register at ElizabethRiver.org/Events.



Help Build a Living Shoreline

June 11, 12, 15, 22, 23, Times vary with the tide
Ryan Resilience Lab

Help build a living shoreline and protect our river's future by volunteering to create natural habitat that reduces erosion, supports wildlife, and strengthens our community's resilience.

Kayak Litter Clean-Ups

June 13, July 18, August 1,
9:30am-10:00am
Ryan Resilience Lab

Join our kayak flotilla to reach hidden pockets of the river and remove the hard-to-reach trash that only volunteer paddlers can tackle.



Guided Kayak Tours

Saturdays, June 27, July 25, August 29,
10am-12pm
Paradise Creek Nature Park

Explore Paradise Creek on a tranquil kayaking adventure through Virginia's largest restored wetland, offering an unforgettable experience for both seasoned paddlers and curious beginners. \$35 per person for ERP members \$45 per person for non-members



Summer Bird Walks

Saturdays, June 20, July 18, August 15,
8:30am-12pm

Paradise Creek Nature Park

Join our Master Birder for a free guided tour that helps you connect with nature while boosting your mood, reducing stress, and sharpening your mind.

Dig Into Wetlands Workshop Series

Saturdays, July 18, August 16, September 19, 10am-12pm

Paradise Creek Nature Park

Discover the Tidewater Region's salt marsh ecology with U.S. Army Corps wetland delineator Rowen Schmidt in a hands-on exploration of how climate, geology, and other forces shape these vital ecosystems—an experience that will definitely get your hands dirty.

Full Series:

Discounted Workshop Bundle (All 3 classes):
\$75 per person for ERP members
\$100 for non-members

Individual Class:

\$30 per person for ERP members
\$40 for non-members

ERP x LRNow Summer River Clean-Up

Saturday, July 11, 9am-10:30am
Historic Kempsville Kayak Launch & Hunt's Pointe Park

Come help make the Elizabeth River a cleaner and healthier place for all by participating in a litter cleanup to help remove harmful debris, safeguard local wildlife, and improve water quality! Last chance to complete your Eco-Bingo Card!



Wildflower Watercolors

Saturday, August 29, 10am-12pm
Paradise Creek Nature Park

Dive into a vibrant native wildflower watercolor workshop at Paradise Creek Nature Park, where you'll bring local blooms to life through a fun, step-by-step painting adventure.



Undrowned with Alexis Pauline Gumbs: A Hymn to Returning River Life

Friday, August 28,
6pm-8pm
Ryan Resilience Lab

Experience *Undrowned* with Alexis Pauline Gumbs as she connects the resilience of returning marine life—like the Bottlenose dolphins now gracing our healing river—to the strength of the Elizabeth River and the community protecting her, and add the book to your summer reading list now so you can dive even deeper during the event.

Volunteer 757 Eco-Bingo

Now - July 11, 2026

Volunteer 757 Eco-Bingo is a region-wide challenge that connects you with hands-on environmental projects to improve water quality, strengthen shorelines, and build a caring community—all while completing activities for a Partner Prize Bag now through July 11.

GET STARTED! ElizabethRiver.org/volunteer

