



GIC News Release

For Immediate Release
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Strategy Helps Create Healthy James River *and* Healthy Community

March 14, 2012: The Green Infrastructure Center Inc. (GIC) and Skeo Solutions have created a collaborative community-based plan to help restore the health and natural resources of a southside Richmond community within Goodes Creek watershed. The collaboration involved multiple partners who believe that sharing and targeting resources, expertise and hard work can help a community revitalize both its health and environment. The team of GIC and Skeo have partnered with City Councilperson Ellen Robertson, The Oak Grove Bellemeade School, the Bellemeade and Oak Grove neighborhoods, the City of Richmond's Stormwater and Parks Divisions, the United Methodist Church, the James River Association and many others to develop ideas and opportunities for greening the Bellemeade Community.

This project, called the ***Bellemeade Walkable Watershed***, combines ideas for greening the land within the drainage of a Goode's creek tributary with creating safe, accessible and fun ways to enjoy the outdoors. It supports Mayor Jones' new initiative for walkable and livable communities by providing on-the-ground ideas to promote healthy residents, while helping to infiltrate and clean stormwater. Goode's Watershed is located south of the James River between Commerce Road and Jefferson Davis Highway. It has suffered from many years of development and currently has large paved areas that present water pollution challenges from excess stormwater runoff.

The ***Bellemeade Walkable Watershed*** project seeks to restore the green infrastructure of Goode's Creek watershed, which drains to the James River. Green infrastructure includes the tree canopy that keeps the city cooler in summer and cleans the air; the rivers that provide habitat for fish and recreation for people; and the parks and other greenways that provide respite for people and habitat for birds and wildlife. Green areas help infiltrate water to reduce stormwater impacts to the James River and its tributaries, while also reducing neighborhood flooding. As Richmond developed over the years, much of its green space was lost and storm damage has reduced its tree canopy. Furthermore, paved areas and lawns send polluted rainwater runoff into the James River and its tributaries, so the city must find ways to reduce runoff and clean up the James River.

According to GIC Director Karen Firehock, “In 2010, we created a city-wide study of opportunities to regreen Richmond. In 2011, we sought to demonstrate how a targeted approach working with many partners can help restore the health of a watershed and a community. We picked the Bellemeade community as the place to demonstrate best practices for Richmond because it has many opportunities to regreen old industrial areas, as well as to conserve or restore natural assets, such as Bellemeade Creek.”

The partnership includes multiple city agencies, civic and environmental groups, faith communities and individual citizens. Through workshops held in the fall of 2011, project partners and residents developed key strategies to revitalize their community, while providing safe places and routes to get outdoors and get fit. A key new ingredient to this project is the new Oak Grove Bellemeade School, designed by VMDO Architects to be the greenest school in Richmond. According to community organizer and faith partner Bob Argabright, “It is so exciting to be involved in this project as it has the potential to be the cornerstone of a community transformation. The new school, community center and watershed –school-shed project will bring our children, families and our community an educational facility that will be truly 21st century!”

The project ideas were also informed by a team of 5th graders who proposed their ideas for new, safe routes to school. Firehock observed that, “Kids told us they want to *race* to school on a route that is safe, green and inviting. The park and creek around the school can serve as a new outdoor learning lab and help children achieve their Standards of Learning for watersheds, math and many other subjects.” In turn, Principal Jannie Laursen explained that, “The New Oak Grove Bellemeade Elementary will serve as a beacon in our community, lighting the way for new hope and prosperity.”

Currently, steps are underway to develop funding proposals and volunteer opportunities for the report’s ideas. For example, partnerships with city agencies are key to creating a safe infrastructure for children to walk to the new green school; shade trees and water infiltration are vital to keep streets cool and inviting; and it is important to create green spaces that will provide opportunities to play and learn outside for people of all ages. The University of Virginia’s Center for Design and Health has also offered the services of nationally-renowned parks designer David Kamp to help the community create a concept plan to redesign the park to increase outdoor learning and access to nature and physical fitness.

To learn more, or to download the report, visit: <http://www.gicinc.org/projectbellemeade.htm>

To receive a free copy of the report or to volunteer, email: info@gicinc.org

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The GIC is a nonprofit organization that assists communities in developing strategies for protecting and conserving their ecological and cultural assets. The **GIC** and its partner firm **Skeo Solutions** conduct research, land use planning and land assessment and mapping to provide the suite of tools needed by communities to protect and restore green assets. This project is one of a series of green infrastructure plans that the GIC has developed for regions, counties, and cities over the past five years.

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