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NEWS

This group has protected Wissahickon Valley Park for 100 years

Challenges to Wissahickon Valley Park are longstanding, including the early 20th century protest against autos which resulted in the creation of Forbidden Drive.

(From left) Friends of the Wissahickon staffers Sh project manager; Ruffian Tittmann, executive dire
Monica Herndon / Staff Photographer

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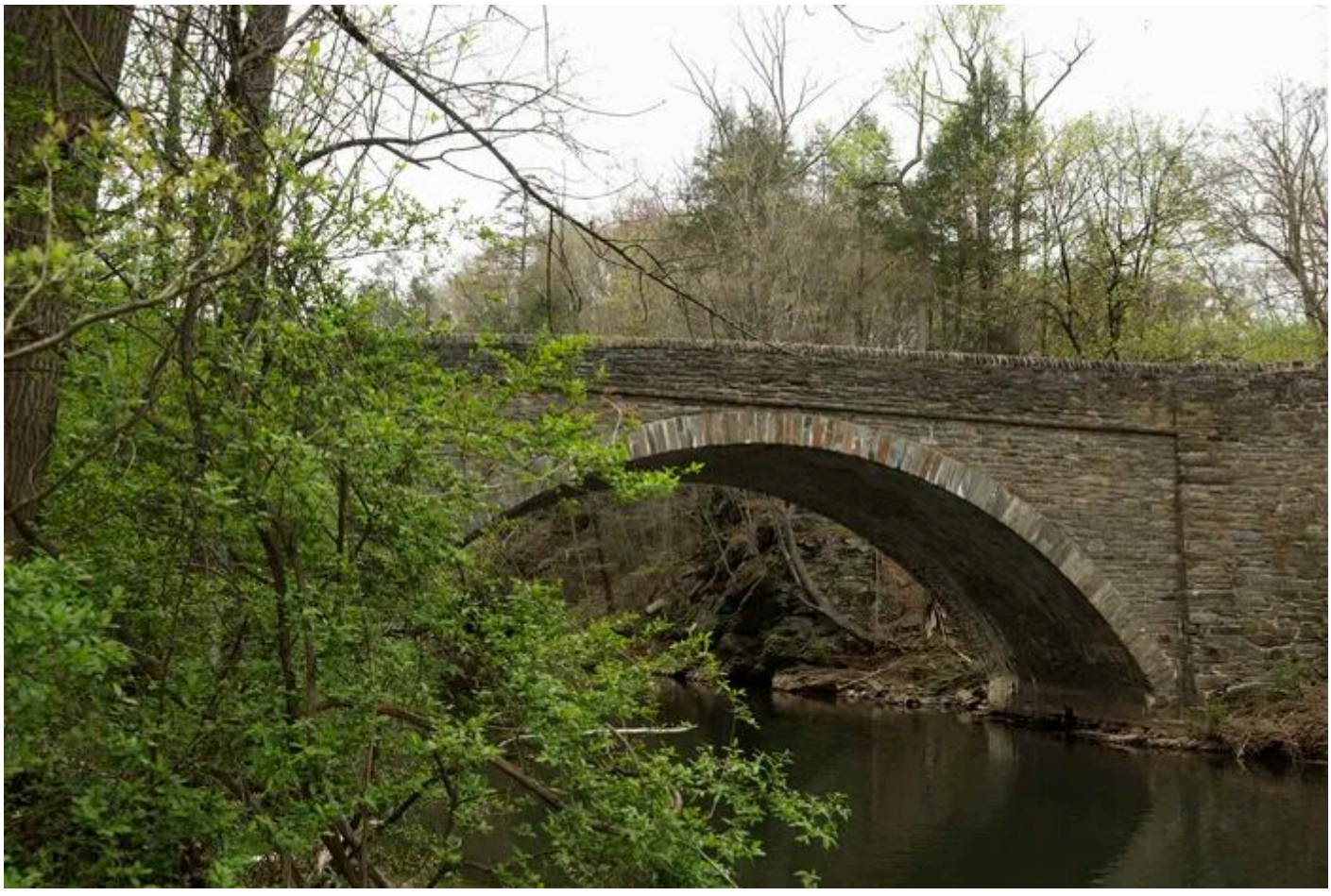
Neighbors, equestrians, and hikers knew as far back as the 1920s that they'd have to band together to protect Philadelphia's Wissahickon Valley Park.

They had successfully protested a proposal in 1921 to open a main road through the park to automobiles, resulting in what became known as Forbidden Drive. The surrounding population continued to boom, luring ever more people to the park. And a 1923 ice storm took out 200 trees, leading neighbors who lived at the edge of the park to tackle the damage.

Concerns about the park grew amid a strapped city budget, and users officially formed Friends of the Wissahickon (FOW) in 1924 "to conserve the natural beauty and wildness of the Wissahickon Valley and stimulate public interest."

FOW celebrates its 100th anniversary this year. But the steep-gorged, city-owned 1,800-acre park still counts on neighbors and users as it faces significant erosion, overuse, invasive species, and climate change. And the nonprofit, though it now has paid staff, still depends on those volunteers.

“I can’t talk enough about the huge impact their organization has on our park system and what they’ve done to really transform the Wissahickon, maintain it, and engage so many diverse user groups,” said Elisa Ruse-Esposito, director of stewardship for Philadelphia’s Department of Parks and Recreation. “They have a very robust and talented team working for them, and are a huge fundraising partner. They put millions of dollars of investment into the Wissahickon for trail and capital projects that just makes the park vibrant and user friendly.”



Friends of the Wissahickon, a nonprofit that partn
anniversary this year.
Monica Herndon / Staff Photographer

This Saturday, FOW is hosting a “Su
Earth Day as part of the 100-year ce
multiple park locations to remove li
stormwater infrastructure, tend to t

“Coming up on their 100th anniversary, it’s amazing how long they were able to sustain and build a really vibrant organization,” Ruse-Esposito said.

‘Gem of a place’

Wissahickon Valley Park in Northwest Philadelphia was established in 1867 as a way to protect a source of the city’s drinking water. The park has 50 miles of trails for hiking, cycling, and horse riding along Wissahickon Creek through steep woods, connecting to Center City through the Schuylkill River Trail and to the Montgomery County trail system in Chestnut Hill. Trails traverse the gorge that leads to Wissahickon Creek, passing through pines, oaks, hemlocks, and mountain laurel.

During the Depression, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) not only blazed trails but built stone picnic shelters, guard houses, and toilets, much of which still stands.

“The Wissahickon is so special beca
Tittmann, FOW’s executive director
and a special gem of a place anywh
awareness of how special because o
neighborhoods in a busy, densely p

Decades after its start, FOW quietly raised money for projects and recruited volunteers. It did so without an office, phone, staff, or publications, acting as a partner to Philadelphia's Parks and Recs. The group raised funds in the 1930s to restore Valley Green Inn and still oversees its operation.

For decades, FOW worked mostly out of the public eye. But that changed in 1992 when Dave Pope, who is still a board member, became president. He grew the group and, working with the city, found more resources and undertook major projects, while developing a financial plan that allowed FOW to expand programs. A grant of $280,000 in 2002 by the William Penn Foundation allowed FOW to hire full-time staff.

FOW has now grown to a paid staff of 13. It counts 1,000 volunteers, who clear trails, work on restoration projects, and serve as guides. Overall, the nonprofit has 3,000 members that include those volunteers, as well as neighbors, corporate, nonprofit, and government agencies. FOW took in $2.3 million in 2022, its most recent available tax filing.

The organization is one of 143 such “friends” groups for parks in Philly, powered by volunteers who host cleanups, report issues, and plant trees. There are dozens of other small- to medium-sized parks in the city park system comprising 10,000 acres, approximately 5,600 acres of which are natural lands. The groups help with parks such as Fairmount, Cobbs Creek, and Pennypack.

“Friends groups are the eyes and ears of the parks, reporting on issues to us,” said Ruse-Esposito of Parks and Rec.

Evolving priorities

For a century, FOW has faced various challenges. Currently, erosion, climate change, and heavy use, are among top issues.

The park is flanked by hard surfaces. Climate change, Tittmann said, results in heavy storms that run off down the gorge, causing erosion and carrying pollutants into the Wissahickon, a t
water source. Meanwhile, invasive p
without making the land more susc

FOW is undertaking a $1.1 million project along an eroded channel that's carved a crumbling path along the Yellow Trail off Pachella Field.

"It's essentially created a stormwater channel that can become a raging river in a high-water event," Tittmann said. "Water is very powerful when it's moving fast, taking soil, rocks, and sometimes even trees with it, further channelizing the landscape."

The channel, with help from the Philadelphia Water Department, will be lined with rock and funneled to a retention basin.

FOW also tackles infrastructure and will soon start a project to restore the stream bank around Valley Green Run and a footbridge that collapsed in 2012 from erosion. First, the stream bank [illegible] build a new pedestrian bridge with [illegible] extended walkway, offering views of [illegible] Green Bridge.

Overuse of the park is also a concern for FOW. The park draws 2 million visits a year. People picnic, hike, bike, and cluster around natural features such as Devil's Pool. Within 10 years, Tittmann estimates, visits could reach 4 million.

During the pandemic, the Wissahickon became so crowded that neighbors said they had enough as many people arrived from out of state, blasting music, illegally swimming, and leaving behind mountains of trash. Neighbors held rallies, and formed a Facebook group to post pictures of trash and debris left behind, including food, portable grills, camping chairs, and water bottles.

The Leave No Trace Center for Outdoor Ethics, a national nonprofit, in 2021 named the park as a "hot spot" because of human-related impacts from the high number of visitors.

» READ MORE: Wissahickon Valle overuse

Tittmann said that the disorder has remain.

‘Ruthless raiders’

But challenges are nothing new to the Wissahickon. They came almost from the start and accelerated with the rise of the automobile.

Alexander Bartlett, archivist for the nonprofit Chestnut Hill Conservancy, said it was clear during the 1920s protest against autos that the park was threatened from many sides. A 1927 column in The Inquirer noted people trampling carelessly through the park and ripping out flora, calling them “ruthless raiders.”

“Automobile traffic along Forbidden Drive would have really destroyed the park,” Bartlett said. “There was an increased awareness of the value of the park and its fragile nature.”

Bartlett said the auto issue was the real catalyst that got neighbors thinking they should unite.

“They were successful,” Bartlett said of FOW. “And they’ve lasted 100 years.”