

# Lessons in Nature at James Farm Ecological Preserve



A cooperative partnership between Sussex County  
and the Delaware Center for the Inland Bays

## CASE FOR SUPPORT

### I. BACKGROUND

#### Delaware Center for the Inland Bays

The Center was established by the Delaware General Assembly as a nonprofit organization in 1994 under the auspices of the Inland Bays Watershed Enhancement Act. Its creation was the culmination of more than 20 years of active public participation and investigation into the decline of the Inland Bays and the remedies for the restoration and preservation of the watershed. *It is the mission of the Center to preserve, protect, and restore Delaware's Inland Bays and their watershed.* To satisfy this mission, the Center:

- ❖ conducts scientific research to understand the health of the Bays and how best to restore them.
- ❖ develops and implements innovative wildlife and water quality restoration projects.
- ❖ works with decision makers to achieve science-based policies that protect the Bays.
- ❖ provides environmental education programming to children and families to cultivate rich connections with the outdoors.
- ❖ conducts community outreach to acquaint the public with the Center's mission and inspire support for restoring the Bays

#### James Farm Ecological Preserve

The James Farm Ecological Preserve is a 150-acre collection of diverse coastal ecosystems located near Ocean View, Delaware. The Preserve was donated to Sussex County in 1992 by the late Mary Lighthipe, a descendant of the James family that once farmed there. Ms. Lighthipe stipulated that the property be preserved in its natural state and used for the purposes of environmental education and outdoor recreation. The Center assumed management of the Preserve on behalf of Sussex County in 1998.

Today, the Preserve is a living demonstration of successful habitat restoration. Since assuming management, the Center has meticulously restored its ecosystems, which include freshwater wetlands, salt marshes, maritime forests, meadows, intertidal flats, and sandy beaches. This ecological diversity makes the Preserve especially unique, as it embodies the natural beauty of the entire Delmarva peninsula, all in one place.

The Preserve is also the centerpiece of the Center's education efforts. The Day on the Bay program, established in the year 2000 as a partnership with the Indian River School District, has served over 19,000 students with curriculum-aligned, science-based environmental education.

Of the students enrolled in IRSD schools, nearly 52% are minorities, 32% come from low-income families, and 17% are disabled, all of which represent underserved populations that

reside in the Inland Bays watershed. For many, a day at the Preserve is their first opportunity to experience the Bays despite living less than 20 miles inland.

Although southern Delaware has an abundance of natural recreation areas, a majority require a fee for access or program participation. While these fees are an important piece of the local economy, they can also be a barrier; nearly one-quarter of Sussex County youth fall below the national poverty line. The benefits of time spent outdoors are a basic human right. Everyone is entitled to form a relationship with the natural world. Nurturing this relationship will not only improve a student's quality of life but will also open the door for future learning and encourage action through community involvement. For this reason, access to the Preserve is free, removing the barrier of cost to low-income individuals and families.

Other activities conducted at the Preserve that further the Center's mission include:

- ❖ citizen science surveys, which enlist volunteers to study how the quality of the Bays is changing in response to restoration efforts.
- ❖ public programming, such as guided bird walks and paddle tours, which further engages children and adults in the study of ecosystems and environmental conservation.
- ❖ community outreach events, which provide a forum for educating residents and visitors of all ages about the ecological and economical importance of the Inland Bays.

The Preserve also provides public access to a number of outdoor recreation activities, including fishing, clamming, swimming, ecotours, paddlesports, birdwatching, and two miles of walking trails. Its popularity is evidenced by its heavy use in comparison with nearby Holts Landing State Park. In 2020, the Preserve received over 37,000 unique visits, up from 10,000 unique visits in 2012.

## II. THE PREMISE

### James Farm Ecological Preserve Master Plan

When originally developed in 1998, the Preserve's facilities were installed piecemeal and without foresight of Sussex County's forthcoming growth in population. As the Preserve's popularity increased and its programs expanded, the need to plan for increased visitation while protecting its ecosystems became evident.

So, the Center embarked on the development of a holistic plan that would address the needs of Preserve users and collectively envision its future. The Center and Sussex County sought input and ideas from key stakeholders of the Center and the Preserve, including staff, elected officials, community leaders, educators, volunteers, donors, and other community members. The resulting master plan, finalized in 2014, addresses enhancements to better serve residents and visitors of Delaware while protecting the Preserve's ecosystems and enhancing education and outreach opportunities.

Implementation of the Master Plan began in 2017 with Phase 1, which focused on safer access and improved outdoor experiences for Preserve users. Infrastructure enhancements included:

- ❖ a DelDOT approved parking lot entrance and driveway to safely accommodate increased vehicle traffic.
- ❖ expanded parking facilities to increase parking capacity from 8 to 27 cars.
- ❖ designated school bus parking for safe student loading and unloading.

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- ❖ a multi-purpose event lawn to accommodate greater attendance at outreach events and provide open space for public recreation.

The Center successfully secured all necessary funding and Phase 1 construction was completed in the spring of 2019.

Phase 2 of the master plan, for which this campaign is seeking support, focuses on enhancing the Preserve's infrastructure to better accommodate activities associated with environmental education, restoration, research, and community recreation. The design, engineering, and permitting process for these enhancements is currently underway.

### III. INFRASTRUCTURE ENHANCEMENTS

The vision for the proposed infrastructure is that it be as unique and appealing as the diversity of the ecosystems of the Preserve. Every function and aesthetic, down to the signage and wayfinding system, will realize this vision. Structural designs will hold true to the agricultural heritage of the property and the region, making it a truly special place for Sussex County.

Phase 2 of the master plan includes the following enhancements:

#### The Campus Area

- ❖ Three-season environmental education building with capacity for up to 70 individuals, equipped with electricity, presentation capabilities, counter space, and sinks for lab activities.
- ❖ Educational storage building with single workspace for simple administrative work.
- ❖ ADA accessible restroom facility.
- ❖ Amphitheater seating for 70 individuals to serve as an outdoor classroom.
- ❖ Equipment storage pole building with capacity to hold maintenance equipment and multiple utility vehicles.
- ❖ Ecotour concessionaire storage facility.

#### Trail System

- ❖ Realignment of the Red Trail to address stressors on ecosystems and create a more immersive natural experience for visitors by diverting them away from neighboring residential and commercial properties.
- ❖ Boardwalk system extension and replacement.
- ❖ Aesthetically and structurally integrated signage and wayfinding system.

#### Other

- ❖ New gateway signage.
- ❖ Updated and expanded interpretive signage placed in 18 locations around the Preserve to educate users about its ecosystems and environmental processes.

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## IV. IMPACT

Enhancements to the Preserve set forth by Phase 2 of the master plan will provide a number of benefits while simultaneously allowing the Center to better fulfill its mission. These benefits include:

- ❖ expanded environmental education programming for all ages and income levels, especially school-age children.
- ❖ a premier outdoor destination for an increasing number of residents and visitors of the watershed to further develop their relationship with the natural world and reap the health benefits of time spent outdoors
- ❖ successful Bay restoration efforts through increased awareness of and philanthropic support for the Center's mission.

### Environmental Education

Two of the greatest barriers to expanding the Preserve's education programming are capacity and the elements. The only existing structure that provides a covered gathering place is a small pavilion which also houses the Preserve's maintenance vehicles. This lack of adequate shelter results in program cancellations when there is inclement weather. A three-season education building will ensure that greater numbers of students have access to environmental learning opportunities at the Preserve, despite the weather forecast. The features of the building, such as electricity, counter space, sinks, and a presentation screen, will facilitate an elevated curriculum for the Day on the Bay program and will also allow other indoor/outdoor programming for all ages, such as film screenings, labwork, presentations, and volunteer orientations. Furthermore, the Preserve's maintenance facilities which are currently intermingled with its education facilities, will be separated to minimize program disruptions and allow these two important functions to occur simultaneously.

While some visit the Preserve for formal programming, others may prefer a more passive approach. Eighteen new educational signs placed throughout the Preserve will interpret the diversity of its ecosystems and important coastal processes like sea level rise, and describe how users can contribute to the protection and restoration of the Inland Bays.

### Community Resource

The human health benefits of time spent outdoors are widely known. Those that get their recommended dose experience lowered blood pressure and stress hormone levels, enhanced immune systems, and less anxiety. Enhancing the Preserve's facilities to provide better access to outdoor recreation will ensure healthy communities whose meaningful connections with nature will foster stewardship of their environment.

To ensure a meaningful connection, visitors must be safely immersed in environmentally healthy surroundings. The Preserve's beautiful vistas are a unique local attraction, but the current location of certain trails hinders an immersive natural experience. The Preserve's main trail will be refurbished and partially relocated away from a neighboring junkyard to be fully immersed in the maritime forest. Other trails will be closed and allowed to naturally revegetate in order to accommodate sea level rise and protect ecologically sensitive areas of the Preserve's forest. Undersized boardwalks that became damaged during Hurricane Sandy will be replaced, improving walkability while protecting the Preserve's sensitive wetlands.

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While immersion is important, visitor safety and comfort are essential for them to realize the benefits of nature. Thus, the Preserve's single portapotty will be replaced with enclosed and permanent restrooms that are ADA accessible and can support large groups. The restrooms will be connected to the County's sewer system for safe treatment and disposal of waste. And the restrooms will provide sanitation through sinks and running water that is increasingly necessary for both casual visitors and school groups.

## Restoration

As the Center and its partners worked to develop the master plan, special consideration was given to the potential of Preserve visitors. Each visitor is a good prospect to be engaged and cultivated as ambassador, volunteer, and donor in support of the Center's efforts to protect and restore the Inland Bays. An influx of engaged constituents, facilitated by the master plan enhancements, would accelerate the organization's future success and sustainability through philanthropic activities and volunteer service.

To capitalize on this opportunity, the Center will:

- ❖ establish ongoing relationships with visitors through their voluntary engagement with an integrated system of Preserve and program evaluation systems, social networks, and a docent program.
- ❖ once engaged, visitors will be invited through the Center's media outlets to educational programs and events including the Native Plant Sale, Inland Bays Clean Up, and fundraisers; and
- ❖ visitors will be educated about the Center's volunteer many opportunities and projects to restore the Bays.
- ❖ visitors will also be engaged in fundraising appeals for the Preserve and Center's mission as a whole.

While the immediate impact of the master plan is providing the community with better environmental education programming and a premier destination to engage with the natural world, the long-term impacts are equally important, if not more.

The Inland Bays are a mecca for nature lovers and eco-tourists who support a \$7 billion coastal economy. Further decline of their health threatens a vital economic sector. The Preserve will be a worthwhile tool to increase awareness and garner further support for their restoration. As such, supporters of this capital campaign are not only ensuring a sustainable financial future for the Preserve and for the Center, but for the entire state of Delaware.

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## V. COST

The total cost for master plan implementation is \$1,500,000. This figure is based on preliminary probable cost estimates and includes a contingency factor. To date, approximately \$1,000,000 has been raised leaving approximately \$500,000 left to raise to complete the project.

### Capital Campaign

To secure funding for this project, the Center has undertaken a capital campaign entitled Lessons in Nature at James Farm Ecological Preserve. This campaign seeks state- and county-level funding, foundation grants, individual and corporate gifts, and in-kind donations of professional services, materials, and labor. Campaign planning began in 2020 and the quiet phase is currently underway. Launch of the public phase is anticipated in May 2021. The working campaign goal is \$850,000 and to date, it has raised over \$400,000.

## VI. CAMPAIGN LEADERSHIP

### Steering and Major Gifts Committee

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Mr. David Baker  
Mr. Chris Bason  
Dr. Susie Ball  
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