



# A GREEN VISION SUSTAINED

**FOX VALLEY'S 70-YEAR COMMITMENT IS CENTRAL TO ITS OPERATIONS**

By **Jeff Long**, *Fox Valley Park District*

The year was 1947, a time when life in America was slowly returning to normal in the wake of World War II.

After years of sacrifice and rationing – a period in history when leisure activities were severely restricted – families in Aurora set their sights on new beginnings.

The Cole Center overlooks the nationally renowned Fox River Trail in the highly visible central portion of the District.



The Cole Administration, Park Operations and Natural Resources Center is a striking and sustainable representation of Fox Valley Park District's commitment to going green.

Residents desired a sense of community, one of coming together for a better tomorrow. The pillars for that bridge to the future included equal parts leisure, recreation and open public space for all to enjoy.

With overwhelming support, the Fox Valley Park District arose from that vision, expressly created to “protect and preserve scenic vistas along the Fox River” – a futuristic, green view at a time when rivers and waterways were relegated as local dumping grounds for manufacturing plants.

Today, that green legacy looms large as ever. Seventy years since its inception, FVPD is the regional leader in expanding open space preservation, environmental stewardship and public access to open space throughout the Fox River Valley.

### Guided by the 5 Rs

In the mid-2000s, Fox Valley made a landmark decision that put an historic signature on its commitment to sustainability and environmental stewardship.

The plan was spearheaded by the 5 Rs – renovating, reusing, restoring, recycling and reinvesting – all dedicated toward reducing Fox Valley's carbon footprint District-wide.

When it came time for the District to expand its administrative headquarters to accommodate its growing operations, Fox Valley was held to the highest of standards – its own.

The Cole Administration, Park Operations and Natural Resources Center surpassed that threshold with flying colors – most of them green – and became central to that goal, both literally and physically.

But it wasn't a shiny, newly built, massive facility. Rather, Fox Valley went retro with an eye toward a greener future. The new headquarters were converted from a 72,000-square foot industrial center along the Fox River – built over 60 years ago – that had most recently served as a fabrication facility for a commercial hydraulic lift company.

The \$7 million saved in taxpayer dollars through adaptive re-use rather than building new was only the beginning. As much as residents endorsed the tax savings, they were equally interested in expansion and added preservation of riverside lands – and this arrangement was a 2-for-1 deal that benefitted all involved.

### Green gateway

Consolidation also was an effort in conservation. A larger, more central site with greater space allowed Fox Valley to bring its park operations and administration under one roof. Now obsolete, the former maintenance site – four acres of riverside land on the south end of the District – was converted to parkland.

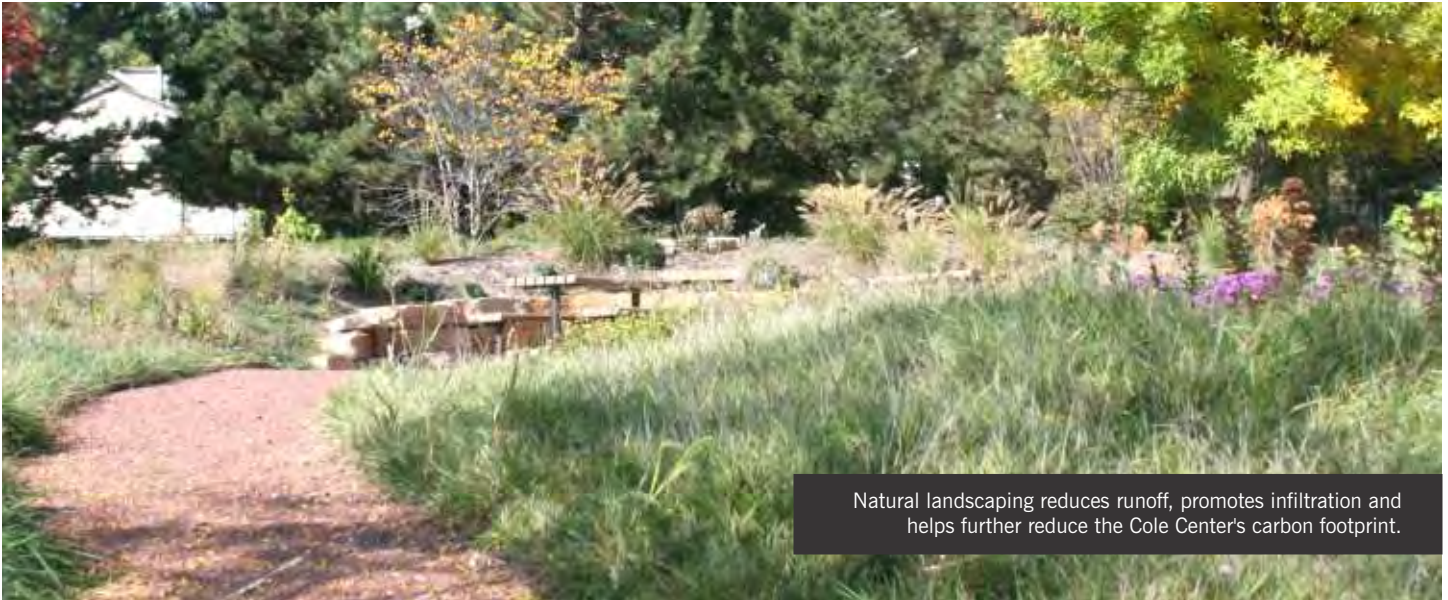
Today, absent the steel sheds, gas pumps and maintenance vehicles – those four acres have been restored and converted into a central trailhead for a regional network to more than 500 miles of interconnected trails – with the Fox River shimmering alongside.

Meanwhile, while the former site was being restored, renovation and reinvestment were proceeding rapidly at the new Cole Center. It, too, was situated along the Fox River and completed a green complex of publicly accessible lands and park district facilities. Lined by the famously popular Fox River Trail on both sides, it offers a welcoming wave of natural beauty leading into the business district of Aurora, the second largest city in Illinois.

In all, these preserved public lands occupy 40 acres of riverside beauty, extending nearly one mile, ushering a green a welcoming gateway to downtown Aurora.

The added significance of Fox Valley siting its headquarters in this location is that the five riverside acres it occupies will be preserved in perpetuity as public parkland after the building reaches the end of its life cycle.

To that end, the green benefits of moving its headquarters to the heart of the District - which encompasses 65 square miles – goes far beyond greater visibility and convenient public access.



Natural landscaping reduces runoff, promotes infiltration and helps further reduce the Cole Center's carbon footprint.

Being centrally located greatly reduces the District's carbon footprint – on a daily basis – requiring reduced travel for maintenance and grounds-keeping fleets, as well as staff trips from other facilities. District-wide, this has reduced fleet mileage an average of 600 miles per week – every week since 2010, when consolidation took place.

And those numbers are about to increase roughly two-fold, given that Fox Valley recently followed suit with its police department. In December 2016, police headquarters were transferred from its site on the south end of the District to the Cole Center, including its entire fleet of 14 vehicles.

Police and planners together... safety and sustainability have joined forces.

### Retrofitting for the future

With 233,000 residents in its three-city service area, Fox Valley is the second largest park district in Illinois, and one of wide-ranging diversity. Bringing together such a vast array of constituents and developing unity can often be challenging. But the Park District's approach was echoed favorably by residents, who strongly endorsed Fox Valley's commitment to stewardship, both financial and environmental.

The Cole Center stands as symbol to those shared beliefs, many times over.

A model of sustainability, the retrofitted Cole Center combines energy-efficient design with more than 125 sustainable features.

Before the "retrofitting" even began, the District was already ahead on the green game in that it avoided impacting prime farmland habitats for indigenous species and wetlands by utilizing a previously developed site.

Among the facility's many highlights is a RainXchange rainwater harvesting system that provides sustainable storm water management options with the ability to collect, store (in underground tanks) and reuse rainwater for vehicle/equipment washing and irrigation.

To date, Fox Valley's 10,000-gallon harvesting reservoir is one of the largest systems of its type for a municipal building in Illinois. This project became one of the first within the Aurora city limits to address the city's updated ordinance for sustainable storm water management.

To further prevent runoff of storm water, a 20,000-square-foot permeable paver parking area provides a naturalized filtering process that cleanses rainwater and promotes infiltration – especially significant features considering the close proximity of the Cole Center to the Fox River.

Rain gardens and bio-swales are spread out extensively across the Cole Center's grounds, which also features native plants and natural prairie grass throughout its exterior. It's served as a testing ground of sorts.

"The Cole Center marked our first full commitment to sustainability on a large, comprehensive scale," said Jeff Palmquist, Senior Director of Operations and Planning. "In the process, we learned how to best utilize these methods and materials to apply similar practices throughout the District."

Fox Valley has since installed permeable paver parking lots at its four largest parks, while rain gardens and bio swales are prominent in nearly every new park concept plan and renovation.

Foremost among the Cole Center's many energy-efficient features are the outdoor lighting systems that feature light emitting diode (LED) lights. These use 75 percent less electricity than fluorescents and last 10 times longer, making them the greenest light source available.

Shortly after its public unveiling, the Cole Center was awarded the Sustainable Development Award by The Conservation Foundation. The honor is bestowed upon a business or agency that "best demonstrates environmentally friendly practices in its development projects," according to Brook McDonald, president and CEO.

"With all of its sustainable features, the Cole Center is a model structure that meets or exceeds the highest environmental standards," McDonald added.

Though it was created to blend in with nature and the communities it serves, the Cole Center stands out as a proudly green representation of sustainability.

"It is truly a touchstone of our commitment to green practices," said Palmquist. "With its high-visibility location in the heart of the District, it is a reminder every day to the public and our employees that we 'walk the walk' when it comes to raising the bar and aspiring to a green and sustainable future."