MISSION STATEMENT

An important part of Friends’ strategic planning is framing communication with the public, and to that end the Communications Committee worked at crafting a new mission statement. Meant to encompass Friends’ purpose, the who we are and what we do parts of our identity, the following mission statement was voted into effect this year:

*Friends of Westchester County Parks engages the public to advocate for and invest in the preservation, conservation, use, and enjoyment of the 18,000 acres of parks, trails, and open spaces within the Westchester County Parks system.*

Developing and embracing this new mission statement is part of what shaped Friends activities in 2014 and guides our planning for future years.
Strategic Plan Update

In 2014, Friends began working towards the goals set forth in the previous year’s strategic planning session. Five goals were defined in that session – the active engagement of Westchester citizens through stewardship activities, increase the number of “Friends”, raise funds to support the organization, allocate funds for jointly defined projects with PRC, and build organizational capacity and infrastructure to attain goals. Friends is happy to report the following progress:

**GOAL 1**

*Westchester Citizens are Actively Engaged in Stewardship Activities*

In April, Friends took a leading role with “Pitch In For Parks”, the annual PRC stewardship event that takes place each year system-wide. We organized and recruited for a clean-up event at the Bronx River Reservation at County Center in White Plains. This area was chosen because of the popularity of the site, and as a section of the Reservation that does not receive as much stewardship attention as other sections. Together with 40 volunteers, Friends raked, mulched, cleared litter and debris, removed tree stakes, and “got dirty” cleaning up the park. In addition, our partners at REI “Pitched In” by donating eco-friendly t-shirts to our group of dedicated volunteers. Friends will take over the event county-wide in 2015, and look forward to promoting this important event to many county residents. One way that we will do this is through a new Volunteer Coordinator, who will not only plan “Pitch In” but what will be regular, frequent stewardship events throughout the year, across the park system. Friends also helped Groundwork HV on a “Swarm” event in March, contributing to the vine-cutting efforts at Croton Point Park, and plans another cleanup effort in partnership with REI early next year.

**GOAL 2**

*Increase Membership*

Friends took an important step towards building membership by hiring our first-ever Membership Coordinator. The Membership Coordinator’s sole focus is to build Friends’ membership base by reaching out to the public and advocating on the organization’s behalf. Our coordinator was a constant presence at events this year, from shows at the County Center, to booths at the pools and beaches, and manning a table on Bicycle Sundays. We reached 459 Friends this year, a five hundred percent increase over 2013, and raised over $15,000 in membership dollars! Additionally, a renewed focus was given to our brochures and other materials, giving these a fresh new look tailored towards the interests of our constituents.

**GOAL 3**

*Raise Funds to Support Our Organization*

A critical look was given to the Friends’ capacity to raise funds, with the exploration of both traditional fundraising, and creation of a program revenue stream. Ultimately, staff decided that the tools at our disposal dictated a focus on program revenue with an eye towards traditional fundraising in future years. To this end, the board voted to move forward on a partnership with PRC to create Westchester’s Winter Wonderland, the first winter holiday event of its kind in Westchester. Results of this event are highlighted further along in the report.
GOAL 4

Allocate Funds for Jointly Defined Projects

Friends is both independent of and interdependent on the Department of Parks, Recreation, and Conservation. To this end, we strive to collaborate on projects requested by PRC. The PRC Projects Committee was formed to advance this goal, and this year contributed to the purchase of a Power Rake, which helped cut man-hours and accomplish landscaping tasks more efficiently, the go-ahead to move forward with a Meadow Management Program at Croton Point Landfill, the continuation of the July 3rd MusicFest funding, Special Events at the Pools and Beaches, entertainment at Winter Wonderland, and staff development activities. Approximately $60,000 was spent this year.

GOAL 5

Build Organizational Capacity and Infrastructure to Attain Goals

The organization increased staff in 2014, adding our Membership Coordinator and interviewing and hiring a Volunteer Coordinator to start immediately in the new year. Our Executive Director has worked with a consultant on development, with plans to build organizational capacity in this area. We also began working with Adie Shore of Shore Grant Services, to apply for grants and support our programs. Finally, a renewed focus has been given to Board Engagement and Development, with the formation of several committees and plans for more in 2015.

We are building on several relationships, both new and continuing, and received grants including:

- Westchester Medical Center is the presenting sponsor of Winter Wonderland, with a three-year commitment.
- REI has granted Friends a $5,000 award to build our Volunteer Corps, which we envision in the coming year to be a group of dedicated citizens that participate with us on several stewardship activities throughout each year.
- Verizon Foundation supported the Parks Mobile App with a grant of $5,000.
- Con Ed continues to fund many Friends programs, including Bicycle Sundays, Trail Kiosks, and Winter Wonderland.
- The Clinton Family Foundation granted Friends $5,000 in funds to support our activities.
- Fujifilm’s continued support of the Parks Mobile App and plans for a new funding project in the coming year.
“Keep Bicycle Sundays Rolling”

Friends’ membership and fundraising strategy coalesced this year to begin an awareness campaign for Bicycle Sundays. We discovered that many county residents don’t know that this iconic program, celebrating its 40th Anniversary in 2014, is funded by Friends and our partner, Con Edison. To get the word out, Friends hit the parkway to engage citizens one-on-one and discuss the program and its future with Friends as the funder. We made many new “friends” this way, as it contributed to our successful membership increase this year. Additionally, we did a direct mail campaign aimed at residents of the zip codes along the parkway itself, spreading the word about the program and Friends’ role as funder. We feel that this helped to not only spread the word about Friends’ existence, but to communicate that the program is not county funded and would “go away” without organizations such as ours. Thus, “Keep Bicycle Sundays Rolling” was born, and we plan to continue this campaign in future years. A partnership with REI also enabled us to raffle off an exciting folding bike to anyone that became a member during the Bicycle Sunday season. REI generously donated the bike to our efforts, and we chose a winner in September.

Friends also fundraised for Bicycle Sundays by working to provide services to those participating in the program. Cyclists have been accustomed to seeing Danny’s Cycles, a longtime presence on the parkway for bike repairs. This year, they became the “exclusive” repair station for September, a program that we plan to continue with Danny’s and other shops for the 2015 season. Biking and running on the parkway can also work up an appetite, and we partnered with O’Neill’s Mr. Softee truck to park close to the route and provide refreshments for participants. We closed out the season with a tailgate party, sponsored by our friends at the Westchester Cycle Club. On the final Sunday of the season, cyclists, walkers, and joggers were welcomed to a tailgate party featuring live music, to celebrate the 40th Anniversary of this beloved program.

10th Annual Best Friends Gala

This April, beautiful weather graced our 2014 Best Friends Awards Gala at Glen Island Harbour Club. We gathered to honor our “Best Friends” Al & Dee Del Bello, recognized for their numerous contributions to the Westchester County Park system over the years; our “Green Friend” Glenn Pacchiana of Thalle Industries, for environmentally sound business practices; our “Volunteer Friend” Pace University Environmental Center, an active Adopt-A-Park participant and host of “Conversations on Conservation”; and our “Business Friend” Ellen Koelsch, Bill Beck, and David Swope of Club Fit, for their continuous support of county parks through financial and volunteer efforts.

Once again, our honorees exemplify the best of what Westchester County has to offer in their unwavering support of our park system and green spaces. Friends could not exist without the support of these individuals and organizations, and we thank them for their dedication to our organization and to Westchester County parks.

Collaboration with “40 Under 40”

The Business Council’s 40 Under 40/Rising Stars Network joined Friends in July for a networking event at Sprain Lake Golf Course. Friends’ Board Chair Joanne Fernandez and Executive Board Member Seth Mandelbaum are part of this influential group, and this gave Friends the opportunity to speak with an important part of our constituency – professionals in Westchester County – that choose to make their home here in part because of the excellent park system and multitude of open green space. We spoke with many people in attendance about our programs and the importance of engagement between our organization and the business community. This became one of our most successful events of the year, with the kindness of the Rising Stars group leading to new “friends” gained, a grant opportunity, and the opening of what will be an exciting relationship in the years to come.

Trails Advocacy

In partnership with the Federated Conservationists of Westchester County, Friends Advocacy Committee hosted the first two of what will be ongoing Trails Advocacy meetings. We know that trails are one of the most popular, most requested, and most used parts of our parks system, so it is only natural to concentrate advocacy efforts on trail building and maintenance. Over twenty leading park and trail advocates joined us to begin to focus our agenda on advancing and improving parks and trails in the county. Among the priorities identified: improving and connecting our existing trail infrastructure, promoting safe access to the trails for pedestrians and cyclists, encouraging practical use of the trails as a means of transportation, and calling for action from partner advocacy groups and concerned citizens to make these issues a priority and ensure their continued presence in public discourse. As Friends looks towards 2015, we are focused on the opportunity to build a collaborative map of all trails, county-wide, and identify areas of advocacy focus.
Camp Morty

Camp Morty Director Dustin Hunter and Assistant Director Alissa Sperling can confidently say that the 8th summer was a smashing success! Over 400 campers from underprivileged backgrounds in Westchester County enjoyed a week of traditional summer camp at beautiful Mountain Lakes Park. Highlights of the summer included an all camp carnival with face painting and a moon bounce, family campfires during sibling week (a week that reunites siblings separated by foster care), a day long super hero themed program, and instructional activities that included swimming, outdoor adventure, ropes course, drama, dance, mural making, survival skills, and sports. The campers and staff also received a special visit from the Commissioner of Social Services, Kevin McGuire, who stressed the importance of education as catalyst for success.

Camp Morty was, again, generously supported by Hudson Valley Bank, with a grant of $10,000. Hudson Valley Bank has been a supporter of Friends for many years, and this is the second year that they’ve directed their funds towards the Camp. HVB’s generous donation helps ensure that Friends has the ability to continue to support this wonderful resource for the children in Westchester County’s DSS programs.

Westchester Concessions

Westchester Concessions continued their cost-saving measures in 2014, which contributed to another year of positive revenues despite some weeks of difficult weather. Thanks to the efforts of Friends’ Executive Board, the rental agreement with Westchester County was successfully renegotiated to not only avoid an increase in 2015, but receive a 15% reduction in 2015 from the amount paid in 2014. This is a significant step towards Westchester Concessions’ ability to turn a profit, and thus contribute to Friends and our parks.

Burger Blast!

This was an exciting year for Friends at Westchester Magazine’s Wine and Food Week event, Burger & Beer Blast. As the beneficiary of this event, Friends joined the fun on a beautiful night at Kensico Dam Plaza. In this, our second year participating, Friends again received a $5,000 donation, plus the proceeds of as many tickets to the event as we could sell. We made over $12,000 and had the opportunity to engage with event participants to spread the word about our good work.

Two New Trail Kiosks

Through our longtime partnership with Con Edison, Friends unveiled two new trail kiosks this year, one at Cranberry Lake Preserve in North White Plains and the other at Tibbett’s Brook Park in Yonkers. Although very different in nature, both parks offer the opportunity to get outside and experience fresh air and outdoor exercise. The trail at Cranberry Lake offers hiking on four different loops, ranging in length from 1 mile to 2.4 miles, on the beautiful 190-acre nature preserve. The park itself is a safe haven for many types of animals, birds, and plants. The trail at Tibbett’s Brook Park takes walkers through this oasis of green space in the heart of Yonkers, where nearly 100,000 people visit each year. Thanks to Con Edison for making this trail information available to parkgoers!
Friends has a new Chairperson

Friends welcomes Joanne Fernandez, longtime member of the Board of Trustees, as our new Chairperson. Joanne is the Manager of Government Affairs for Entergy, and has been recognized for achievement and outstanding corporate citizenship by numerous organizations including: as an “Outstanding Women Business Leader” by the NYC Hispanic Chamber of Commerce; as a “Rising Star” by the Business Council of Westchester; as a “Visionary Leader” by Kids Xpress Magazine; “Best Green Friend” by the Friends of Westchester County Parks; and the Volunteer Center of the United Way.

With the excitement of welcoming Joanne as our new Chair, we also thank our outgoing Chairperson, Elizabeth Bracken-Thompson, for her many years of visionary leadership. Under Liz’s tenure, Friends grew financially and came to sponsor some of the most popular county programs, such as Bicycle Sundays and Independence Day MusicFest, the FitMobile, Fit-Trail, and many, many others. She was at the helm to bring aboard our current strategic focus, and continues to be an active and vital part of Friends’ Board. We sincerely thank Liz for her many years of leadership and dedication to this organization and the park system in Westchester County!

Marketing and Public Relations

In 2014, we continued to communicate our mission to the community through our marketing and public relations efforts. This year some of our biggest initiatives and events: the 2014 Friends Gala, National Golf Month, Bicycle Sundays partnership with Con Edison and Westchester’s first Winter Wonderland were covered by major media including News 12, Fios 1 News, The Journal News, Westchester Magazine and New York 1. With more than 70 news story placements and close to 10 million media impressions, we are effectively communicating our work within the county.

A combination of strategic marketing and public relations outreach helped to successfully launch the county’s first Winter Wonderland, securing 20 news stories in advance coverage and close to three million media impressions.

In 2015 we are planning a series of direct mail announcements to be distributed throughout the county highlighting events and initiatives for the year. We will focus on promoting Gifts & Grants (Clinton Family Foundation), fundraisers and other key initiatives throughout the year to ensure prominent visibility throughout the county and beyond.
Professional Development

Friends continues to support the professional development of PRC management and staff. Professional Development contributes to the high quality of service that PRC staff provide, enabling our park system to be clean, safe, and well-managed. PRC Staff provide park visitors with a level of excellence that they have come to expect. Friends is proud to sponsor PRC Staff “Boot Camp”, Staff Conference, and development seminars and conferences throughout the year. This is an important part of advancing Friends’ mission to engage the public to invest in our parks, as without the strong leadership of PRC administration, our 50+ parks and 18,000 acres would not be the beautiful, well-maintained, and safe green space that county residents have come to enjoy.

Finances

Friends ended 2014 with revenues of $1,476,765 and expenses of $1,551,447 (unaudited). Capital expenses for Winter Wonderland were a significant contributor to the net loss. Despite this, Friends is pleased to report an increase in program revenue of 23% from the previous year, for a total of $1,177,701, and an increase in membership revenue of 166% to $15,320.

REVENUES

Grants, special programs and projects: 79.7%
Fundraising: 9.4%
Administrative: 10.9%

EXPENDITURES

Program and facility support: 76.2%
Administration: 21.2%
Fundraising: 2.6%
Board Of Trustees News

Friends wishes to thank the following members of our 2014 Board of Trustees, who are not continuing on with us. We cannot support parks and open spaces in Westchester County without the support of our talented and dedicated Board members, and while we are sad to see Tom Secunda and Andrew Tung depart our board, we thank them for their service to Friends and wish them all the best!
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