

Charles River Conservancy

ANNUAL REPORT 2023



Photo by Mike Mejia

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Photo by Mike Mejia

WELCOME!

This sentiment is at the heart of what the Charles River Conservancy (CRC) does: we support the Charles River Reservation in ways that make its river and parks accessible, enjoyable, healthy and welcoming spaces for everyone in our community. Our work benefits the 300,000 residents that live within walking distance of the Charles, more than 1 million people who visit it annually, and—importantly—the river itself.

We cannot be successful alone. The CRC works with many partners and stakeholders to understand the diverse and evolving role that the Charles River serves. Through our collaborative strategy we have accomplished so much and are excited to share our work from the past year. Together we:

- Nearly doubled the size of our Charles River Environmental Watch (CREW) program to enable independent, skilled volunteer stewardship
- Celebrated and shared important lessons learned from our pilot Charles River Floating Wetland in a comprehensive report
- Elevated the voices of Lynch Family Skatepark users to extend park use at night and advance a public art project grounded in spatial justice
- Continued our coalition-based advocacy to support a significant DCR budget increase and to improve agency effectiveness
- Centered community engagement across all of our projects and programs to build and strengthen connections across groups, people and nature.

We invite you to read more about this work, which all of you—our donors, partners, volunteers, program participants and community members—helped to make happen. Our collective accomplishments support a healthy and resilient ecosystem and connect community members to this resource and to each other. We have laid the foundation for even more impact in the year to come, and we look forward to partnering with you along the river in 2024!

Laura Jasinski
Executive Director

Lonsdale Koester
Board Chair



ABOUT US

MISSION

We strive to make the Charles River and its parks a well-maintained network of natural urban places that invite and engage all in their use and stewardship.

VISION

The Charles River Conservancy lies at the center of the Charles River, its parks, and the park users. We similarly envision a future in which the Charles River and its parks are celebrated, well-utilized, and connected centers of public life.

GOALS

-  Cultivate active engagement with the Charles River
-  Define the parks as a platform for community and cultural life
-  Advocate using research and placemaking
-  Ensure long-term organizational sustainability

STRATEGIES

- ★ Work through partnerships
- ★ Harness the community
- ★ Leverage impactful pilot projects



Photo by Mike Mejia



STEWARDSHIP & VOLUNTEERS

For more than 20 years, the CRC has harnessed the expertise of our staff and the collective power of community volunteers to steward the parks in the Charles River Reservation. In 2023 the CRC had a significant impact by providing vital ecological support and maintenance in the parks in three complementary areas: vegetation management, one-day group volunteer events, and season-long, independent CREW members.

Vegetation Management

The Charles River Vegetation Management Plan (CRVMP) was developed by the MA Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR), with two of its goals being to support native plants and to manage invasive species. These goals are important for the overall health of the parks and river. Unlike exotic, non-native plants, native plant roots extend deep into the soil, reduce erosion and support the overall health of watersheds by helping to absorb and filter runoff from impervious infrastructure. Native plants also provide sustenance and habitat for wildlife. This year, the CRC continued to monitor test plots to evaluate the success of native plantings and provide valuable data to inform CRVMP strategies for meadow, woodland, and shoreline habitat zones. The CRC also directed our volunteer resources at invasive plant species management, resulting in the removal of over 330 bags of invasive material.

Group Volunteer Events

In 2023, we continued our steadfast stewardship work to recruit over 2,000 volunteers to support the parks and the river. In addition to managing invasive plants, these volunteers removed and prevented hundreds of bags of trash from washing into the river, painted benches and picnic tables to support their use and longevity, and supported the beautiful gardens in the parks with fresh plantings and mulch. Our program staff worked carefully to create as many opportunities as possible, succeeding in harnessing thousands of hours in crucial care delivered to the parks.



“Every year I take a group of high school students to the Charles River Cleanup. My students are all immigrants. Some of them are reminded of home, and some of them experience nature up close for the first time. All of them are shocked at the garbage that they find, and proud to see the difference they made when we are done.”

— Watertown educator




STEWARDSHIP & VOLUNTEERS

CREW

Our Charles River Environmental Watch (CREW) program trains a small group of independent volunteers to provide season-long support to dedicated areas by picking up trash and reporting on conditions in the parks. In 2023, we nearly doubled the number of CREW members and expanded their responsibilities to include invasive plant species management, training them in plant identification, techniques for cutting or removal, and best practices with respect to plant waste.



10
CREW
members



80+
hours
served



50+
bags of
litter
removed




Photo by Mike Mejia



FLOATING WETLAND

In 2023, the CRC both reflected back, by sharing a comprehensive report on the Charles River Floating Wetland pilot installation, and looked ahead, by releasing conceptual designs for a vision for an expanded and impactful larger installation. Meanwhile, the existing floating wetland continued to thrive as a platform for advocacy, environmental education and engagement (see more on pages 18 and 19).

6
year
research
partnership



45
page
comprehensive
report



1
bold vision
for expansion



Sharing Lessons Learned

The three year mark of the pilot floating wetland was an important inflection point, both for the culmination of our research partners' findings and for the overall evaluation of lessons learned about implementing floating wetlands. The CRC shared a detailed report on our website and at a public celebration at the MIT Museum. The report included an overview of the design, permitting and installation phases, as well as findings

from a multi-year analysis about the benefits of floating wetlands from our research partner, Northeastern University. Our objective was to provide a thorough insight into the project, while also making the information feel as accessible as possible. Numerous nonprofits and municipalities who are looking to do similar projects have expressed their appreciation for this information and guidance.

“When we think about the floating wetland from what design, research and implementation has been able to accomplish, you can truly start to understand the ability to scale that and have a much greater impact.”

— **Gautam Sundaram**, Principal at Perkins&Will and CRC Board member, speaking on a panel at the MIT Museum

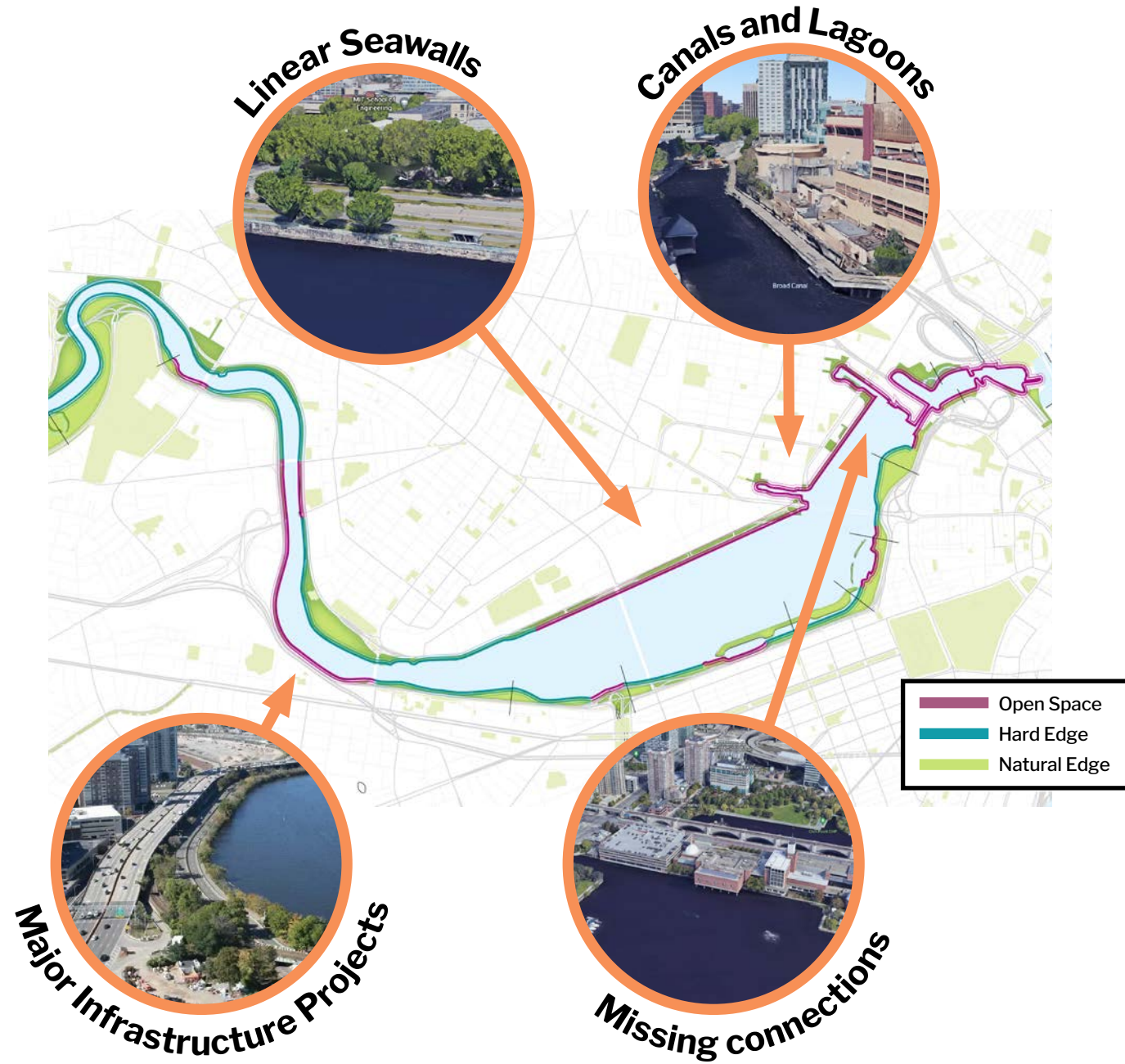


Photo by Clyde Carmant

FLOATING WETLAND

Conceptual Plans for Expansion

Installing the first floating wetland in the Charles was an important step in realizing innovative approaches to a healthier, more resilient river. To have a larger impact on the river's ecology, however, the project needs to be expanded in scale. The CRC has engaged stakeholders and the community to understand opportunities and criteria for a larger installation. In 2023, we revealed concepts for expansion in East Cambridge's Broad Canal and other opportunities for floating wetland applications along seawalls and as a part of upcoming major infrastructure projects.



CRC re-creation of diagram by Perkins&Will | Inset images by Google Earth



Conceptual renderings by Perkins&Will



LYNCH FAMILY SKATEPARK

Public Art Project

Over the past two years, the CRC has deepened our relationship with the skatepark community, exploring opportunities to support the physical and social infrastructure of the space with a public art project. The CRC kicked off 2023 with three community forums at The Foundry to keep the conversations active through the winter.

“A lot of skaters are creatives and a lot of creatives are skaters.”
 — Claire Lee, founder of LonelyBones Skate Co., speaking at Forum 2

The forums were designed with partners to engage the wider community about the complexities of social and spatial justice at the skatepark. Forums created space for users and visitors to voice preferences for change, discuss place-based inequities, and develop a selection strategy for an impactful artwork that represents the community which designed it.

These events have provided us with extensive data on how public art can be a conduit for important park improvements and changes. In 2023, we began a partnership with an art equity consultant, Agncy, to distill community input and develop a Call for Art for the coming year that is reflective of the community, feasible, and equitable.

75
skatepark users engaged

3
community forums

95
participant responses collected

Forum 1:
 Through a workshop and art activity, local artist Rixy shared both the distinctions and connections between graffiti, street art, and mural art, the process of creating the art, and its impact on the community.



Forum 2:
 A panel of artists, skaters, and community activists shared their experiences with the intersection of art and skating and engaged in an open dialogue with the audience. *From left: Lizzie Torres, Curtis Williams, Angelina Santiago, and Claire Lee.*



Forum 3:
 A physical model of the skatepark, built by and presented by the Teen Program at the Community Art Center, allowed for place-based feedback and discussion.



All photos by Clyde Carmant



Photo by Elena Saporta

ADVOCACY

The CRC believes that more can be achieved when stakeholders advocate together; therefore, we work to galvanize support for the parks through coalition-building. Our efforts continue to focus on multi-year, transformational projects, like the Allston Multimodal project and Memorial Drive Improvements. In 2023, the CRC appreciated the opportunity to welcome and to support the governor’s new leadership at DCR, offering expertise and historic knowledge to the incoming Commissioner and his team.

DCR Budget Increase

DCR saw an increase to their State Parks and Recreation budget from \$85 million in fiscal year 2023 to \$105.6 million for fiscal year 2024, marking a significant achievement for our advocacy with other park friends groups and partner organizations to increase investment in our state parks. Our goal is to ensure essential resources for the parks, with a key focus on advocating for increased funding and capacity for DCR that will not only impact the Charles River, but all state parks and natural resources across the Commonwealth.



Additional Lighting

Advocacy is threaded throughout our initiatives and programming. Recent public art initiatives and engagements about the Lynch Family Skatepark have surfaced opportunities to uplift the advocacy efforts of park users. The skatepark community and the CRC worked together to achieve an extension of the lights by one hour.

The community advocated through an online petition, and the CRC advocated through our direct contacts at DCR. Positive reception to this extension has allowed the initial light extension pilot period to continue, creating a meaningful benefit to park users and showing the importance of voice and partnership.

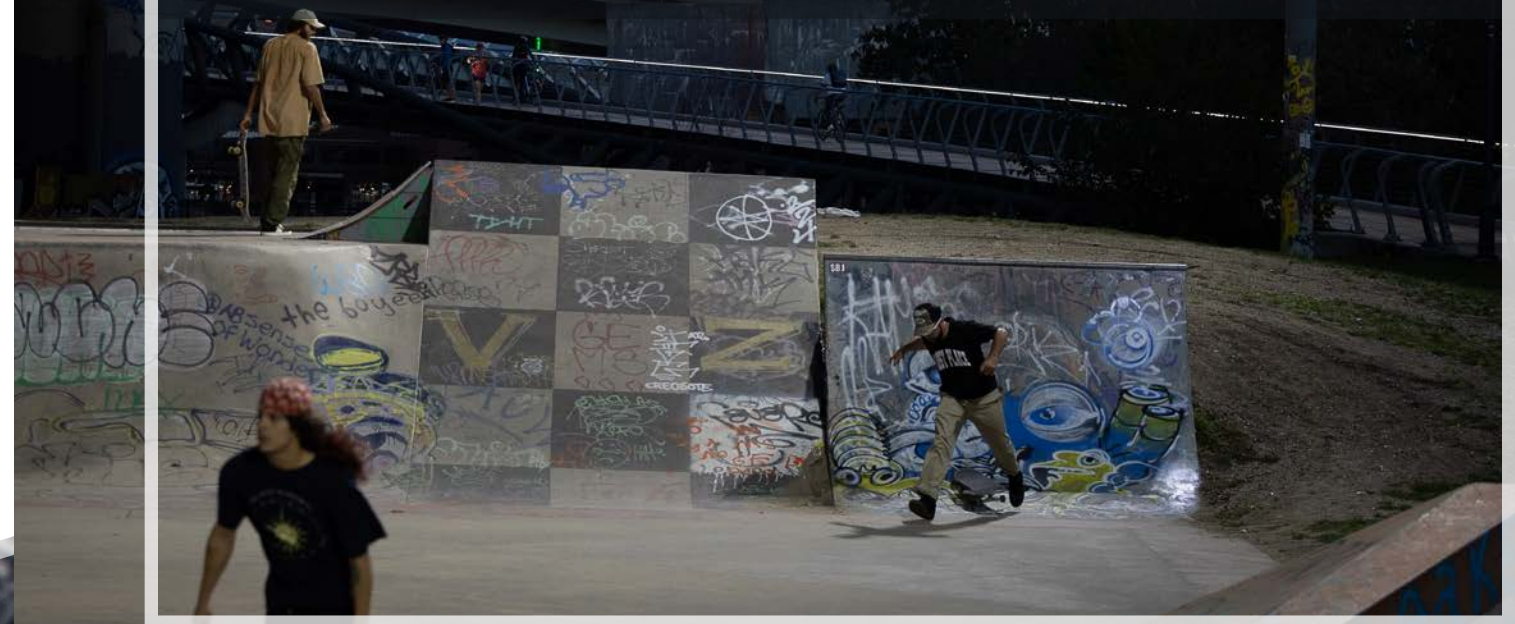


Photo by Clyde Carmant

“this park is a dream and a gift to everyone on wheels in boston. the extra hour gives us extra time in our very busy days to decompress and have fun and SHRED 🙌”

— Skatepark User

“An extra hour makes all the difference for me being able to make it out to the park after my workday - thank you so much CRC!! ❤️❤️”

— Skatepark User



365
more hours
per year of
shredding



Photo by Mike Bryant

Community Events

While we love getting people to the river, the CRC also brings the river to places throughout the community. We gave talks in local schools, participated in tabling events, and found ways to bring our resources to new venues. These connections provided an opportunity for partnerships to flourish, fostering increased collaboration and sustained engagement across various programs.



COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Through participation at neighborhood events, partnerships with schools and youth-focused organizations and development of enrichment activities, the CRC connected the community to the Charles.



STEAM Activity Kits

In 2023, we developed family engagement leaflets with students from Lesley University to augment the STEAM build-your-own-wetland kits that have been integrated into the Cambridge Public Schools (CPS) 6th Grade curriculum. The leaflet was printed in 6 languages (English, Arabic, Amharic, Spanish, Bengali, Haitian-Creole) to support families in connecting with environmental work happening in their community. We also updated complementary video resources (originally made in 2020) to reflect research findings and keep these resources relevant.



Photo by MIKE Bryant

Sailing + Science

The CRC brought a hands-on floating wetland engineering challenge to Sailing + Science run by The American City Coalition (TACC) and hosted by Community Boating, Inc. Resilient to the rainy day, the TACC community joined together inside a boathouse along the Charles where individuals and youth flexed their cognitive skills to create their interpretation of the floating wetland, testing its buoyancy and investigating the relationship between plants and water bodies like the Charles River. The CRC looks forward to continued partnerships that see continued exploration of the Charles River's waterfront parks, especially in more ideal weather!

Youth Kayak and Design Tours

The floating wetland is both a local real world example of scientific research and an opportunity to explore innovative green infrastructure design. In 2023, the CRC guided several youth groups to the wetland by kayak to better understand the structure, to touch the roots growing into the water, and

to see an abundance of plant, insect, and bird life. Kayak trips were complemented by design sessions, allowing these young community members to imagine how green infrastructure projects can support the local community. Youth perspectives and ideas continue to shape our vision for expanded floating wetlands.



194
kayakers to the wetland

100
STEAM kits to CPS Students

750
educational leaflets sent to families

6
language translations for leaflets

“Our students (and teachers) learned so much during [the STEAM activity kits]! The brochure and materials were such high quality... We so appreciate our partnership with you all and look forward to where it takes us in the future!!!”

— Cambridge Public Schools Science Curriculum Coordinator



THE RIVER BANK

The River Bank, our annual fund, supports our mission to make the Charles River and its parks active, attractive, and accessible to all. None of the accomplishments you read about in our annual report would be possible without our supporters.

The River Bank not only ensures the CRC's financial stability and growth that is needed to continue impactful work along the river, it also connects supporters to our work in a way that is meaningful to all, such as:

\$100-\$499

Inspiring the next generation of river stewards by sharing educational resources like floating wetland activity kits to science classrooms

\$500-\$999

Improving the river's health with activities that keep trash out of the river, like park stewardship by our CRC volunteers

We engage with and thank donors at all levels, providing walking and kayak tours, volunteer days, and recognition through our social media, e-newsletter spotlights, and our Annual Report publications.

Thank you to each and every one of our supporters for your continued involvement and investment in the future of the Charles River.

Stewardship Society

\$1,000-\$2,499

Creating unique outdoor experiences, including our annual City Splash community swim

\$2,500-\$4,999

Supporting biodiversity and healthy ecosystems, such as management of harmful invasive plant species

\$5,000-\$9,999

Envisioning an accessible riverfront through our advocacy and coalition building for projects like the Allston Multimodal Project

\$10,000-\$24,999

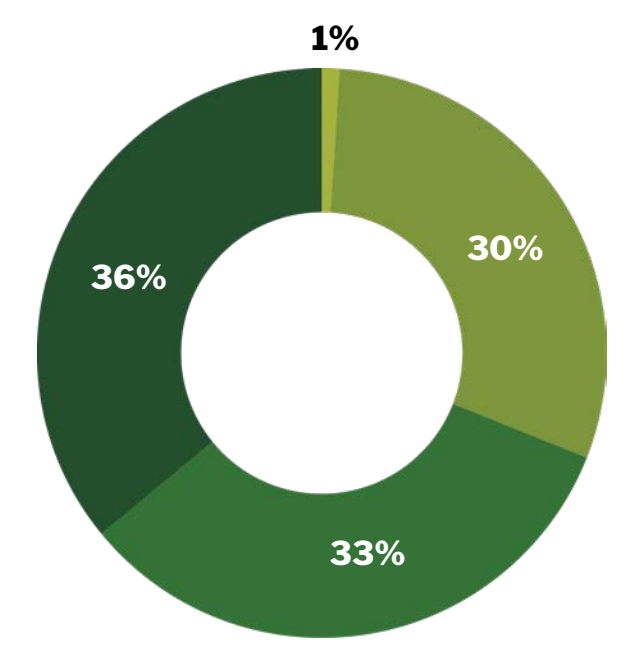
Supporting arts and culture in our public parks with partnership-building and community engagement

\$25,000+

Enhancing the river's resilience, including planning and design for an expanded floating wetland installation

FINANCIALS

The CRC's fiscal year runs from October 1 to September 30. In FY2023, which ended on September 30, 2023, the CRC had **\$665,272** in Revenue and **\$708,732** in Expenses.



Revenue

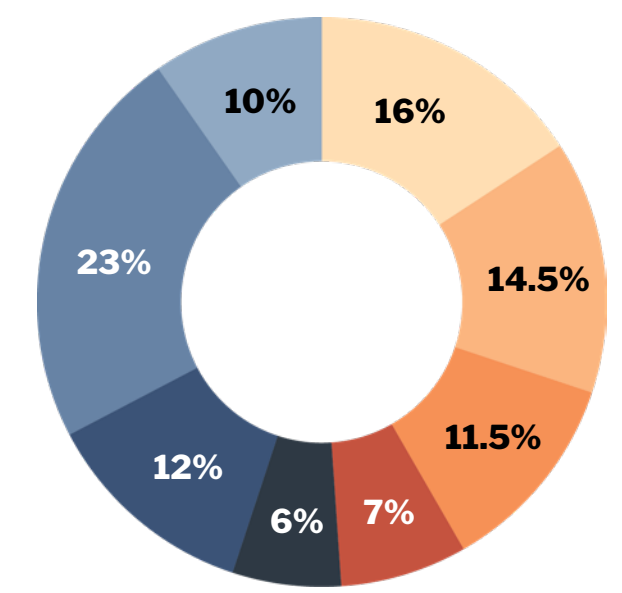
Sources

- Foundations
- Corporations
- Government
- Individuals



Type of Support

- Unrestricted 79%
- Restricted 21%



Expenses

- Floating Wetlands
- Volunteer Programs
- Skatepark & Other Projects
- Swimming
- Advocacy
- Communications & Outreach
- Administration
- Development

For a copy of our complete Fiscal Year 2023 financials, visit thecharles.org/about/public-documents



Photo by Mike Mejia

DONORS

Fiscal Year 2023 (October 1, 2022-September 30, 2023)

\$25,000 to \$49,999

Anonymous
 Amelia Peabody Charitable Fund
 Bristol Myers Squibb
 The McKenzie Family Charitable Trust
 Wagner Foundation
 The Whitehead Foundation

\$10,000 to \$24,999

Amy Bernstein
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 William Procter Scientific Innovation Fund
 The Wyss Foundation
 Zipcar, Inc.

\$5,000 to \$9,999

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 Suzanne Ogden
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\$2,500 to \$4,999

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 Vertex Foundation
 Watertown Community Foundation
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\$1,000 to \$2,499

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 Alchemy Foundation
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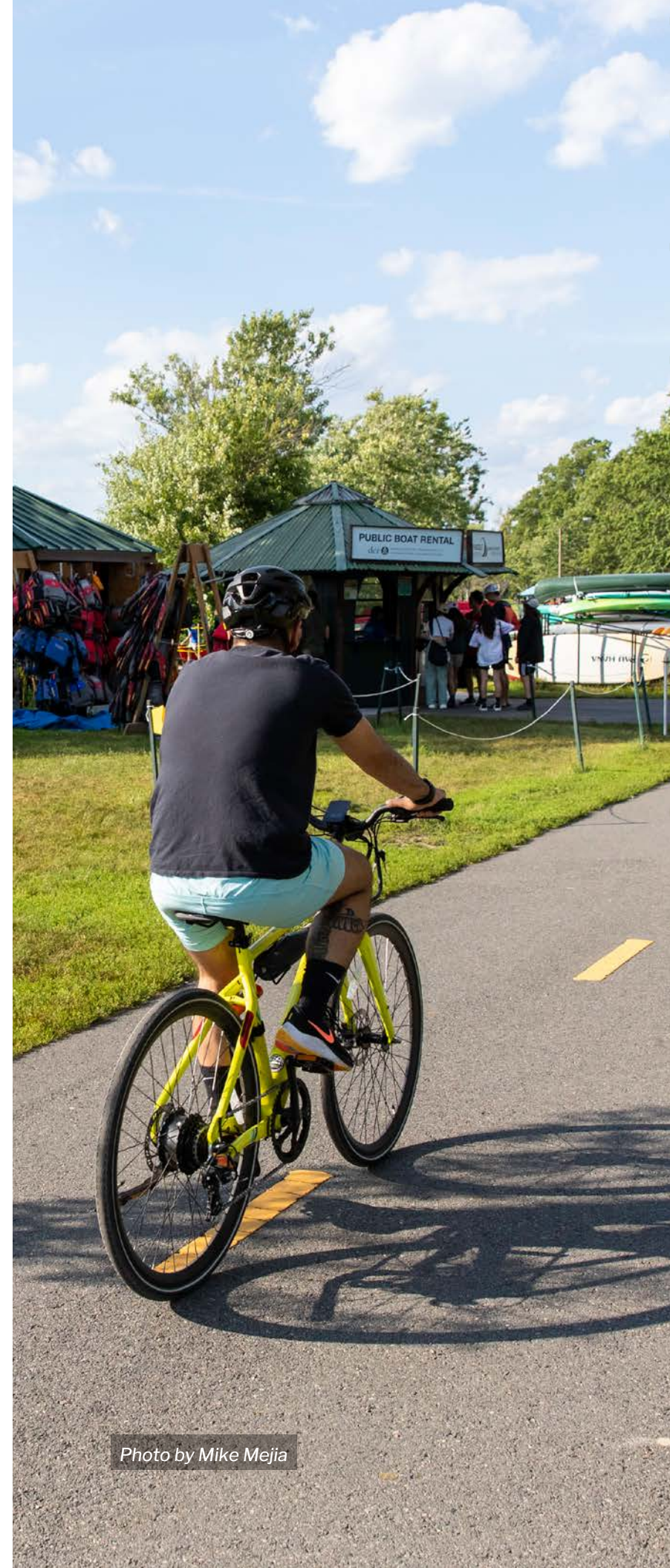


Photo by Mike Mejia

If you do not see your name, it may be because we understood that you wished to be anonymous. If you have any questions or wish to update your preferences, please contact crc@thecharles.org.



GET INVOLVED


1. Connect

Sign up for our monthly e-newsletter, check out our website, and connect with us on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, and TikTok.


Learn more at
thecharles.org


 thecharles.org

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 [@CharlesRiverCRC](https://twitter.com/CharlesRiverCRC)

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 [@charles-river-conservancy](https://www.linkedin.com/company/charles-river-conservancy)

2. Volunteer

Join us for one of our Saturday volunteer events, which are free and open to all, or schedule an event for your company or group during our 2024 season!

Learn more at
thecharles.org/volunteer

3. Donate

Your financial support will enable innovative ecological projects, maintenance to keep these public spaces welcoming for all, and advocacy to ensure that the public's interest in the parks is protected.

Learn more at
thecharles.org/support



Charles River Conservancy
43 Thorndike Street, S3-3
Cambridge, MA 02141
(617) 608-1410

Front & back cover photos by Mike Mejia