



# Strategic Plan

2012–2015

Developed by the Board and Staff of Austin Youth River Watch  
with input from our Students, Partners, and Supporters

Approved by the Board of Directors in December, 2011

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# Executive Summary

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By 2015, Austin Youth River Watch will double the size of its highly successful core program, expanding the impact and benefits for the entire Austin community. In addition, our students will undertake intensive service-learning projects that provide tangible improvements to our streams and rivers. Program growth will be backed up with organizational capacity building.

As a result, more Austin-area students will graduate from high school, more young people will become future environmental stewards, and twice the amount of robust water-quality data will be available to our community.

## Goal #1: Double the number of students in River Watch's core program.

**Need:** Many underserved high-school students in the Austin area would benefit from River Watch's combination of environmental education and long-term support for high-school graduation. Further, our region would benefit from additional water-quality data and from training more youth to become active environmental stewards.

**Solution:** We will double the size of our core programs, growing from the current service level of 120 students per year to 250 students per year. These new students will come from both our current schools and other high schools in the Austin area.

## Goal #2: Engage our River Watchers in new, high-impact community projects.

**Need:** Our River Watchers have expressed a strong desire to engage in additional projects that have long-term, tangible impacts for our community. Further, research reveals that all students who engage in meaningful service-learning projects like these derive a number of educational and personal benefits.

**Solution:** We will work with partners to identify and execute new, high-impact community projects. These service projects will be mission-oriented, substantive, and results-driven. Examples include stream-bank restoration, vegetation management, and creekside trail building.

## Goal #3: Expand River Watch's operational and fundraising capacity.

**Need:** As River Watch expands core programs and adds new service-learning projects, we will require a concurrent expansion in our operational and fundraising capacity.

**Solution:** We will expand our Board to 15 members, add 3 additional program staff, and create at least 1 new position for administrative and fundraising support. We will also explore strategic partnerships with similar organizations to aid in our growth.

# Background

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## Mission

Austin Youth River Watch advances personal and academic achievement through environmental monitoring, education, and adventure.

## Organizational History

In the early 1990's, sparked by a belief that Austin could benefit enormously from a program that mentored high-school students in both personal accountability and environmental stewardship, Jack Goodman and Wes Halverson led an effort to create Austin Youth River Watch as a stand-alone nonprofit organization.

With initial funding and long-term support from the City of Austin and the Lower Colorado River Authority (LCRA), we began teaching students to collect and track water-quality data. Students also learned leadership skills and were encouraged to stay in school.

As we begin our 20<sup>th</sup> year of service, our core program remains the same, and we now serve about 120 students each year from 10 high schools in the Austin Independent School District. Our success rate speaks for itself: The high school graduation rate of our River Watchers over the course of almost 20 years is nearly 100%.

## Strategic Planning

In early 2010, Austin Youth River Watch received additional funding from the City of Austin to hire its first paid Executive Director, with the understanding that this support was an investment in growth – specifically, serving more students in the Austin community. The Board and Staff began exploring options for planning and funding that growth.

In late 2010, Austin Youth River Watch won a prestigious grant from the 501 Council of Greenlights For Nonprofit Success to facilitate a comprehensive planning process. That process began in early 2011, and it included Board and Staff retreats, student and stakeholder surveys, analyses of organizational strengths and opportunities, and benchmarking against similar organizations. The result is this 3-Year Strategic Plan, which addresses operational, fundraising, and programmatic growth, beginning in Fiscal Year 2012–2013.

# Case Statement

## What we do

Austin Youth River Watch is a multi-year, after-school and summer program for high school students, combining support for graduation with intensive environmental education. Our students collect, analyze, and publish water-quality data from Austin-area streams and rivers. They report their data to local and statewide agencies.



Our student participants – the River Watchers – start out by learning the basics of water-quality monitoring. As trainees, they learn skills and knowledge from their fellow students, visiting scientists, and our staff of professional educators. Many River Watchers stay in the program throughout high school, eventually becoming peer mentors themselves.

Austin Youth River Watch is a safe place for teenagers to grow and gain confidence while learning to be active stewards of our planet. We strive for every one of our River Watchers to finish high school and prepare for a successful, fulfilling life.

## Our value to the Austin community

Austin Youth River Watch has an unusual program model, embedding drop-out prevention within a long-term program of environmental education. Our students, the River Watchers, benefit from receiving consistent support from our program staff and their peers, the

Student Participation, 2010–2011	
Ethnicity	Gender
Latino: 59%	Female: 61%
African-American: 27%	Male: 39%
Anglo: 8%	
Asian, Other: 6%	

students have something productive to do in their out-of-school time (including the summer), and they get out into nature on a regular basis. They also receive a modest stipend for their work, which helps them learn to manage their money. Our model has proved extraordinarily successful over the years, and we bring value to our community in three distinct ways:

Higher graduation rates: Over our 20-year history, the graduation rate of our students is almost 100%. This statistic alone – and the ability of River Watch to achieve this goal on a modest budget – has helped establish River Watch as one of Austin’s nonprofit “success stories.” Our students graduate from high school, enter college, and start their careers, all of which have a positive impact on the Austin economy and community.

## Case Statement, continued

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Personal benefits to our students: Our River Watchers become more confident, more skilled, and more successful as a result of their time in our intensive program. They leave high school eager to succeed in college and the work force. Today, there are former River Watchers in government, academia, nonprofits, and private industry. They do incredible work as environmental stewards, both personally and professionally, and some have even become environmental educators themselves. Our most recent program evaluation revealed over half of our students graduate from high school with an interest in pursuing environmental careers.

Long-term data on water quality: The availability and quality of fresh waters is rapidly becoming one of the most important economic, political, and environmental issues of our time. Our River Watch students are leaders in this field, and their longitudinal data on water quality for tributaries and reservoirs along the Colorado River is critically important to planning and decision-making for our area. Our data sets are relied upon by scientists and planners, and we are often the first people to notice when problems occur, such as toxic spills that lead to sudden changes in water quality and endanger river and stream ecosystems.

### Why should we expand River Watch's programs?

The need for our program is greater than ever, and it continues to grow. Drop-out rates are increasing, especially among our target populations, water resources are becoming scarce, and young people are becoming more disconnected from the natural world than ever before. Our communities need young people to become successfully engaged in caring for the environment, and to carry this engagement forward into their adult lives through careers and community service.

Austin Youth River Watch's economic assessment of the market for our services revealed that there is a growing demand for cost-effective programs that deliver consistently high impact. Compared with other nonprofit organizations, we offer a competitive advantage to "social investors," which means that we are in a strong position to attract funding.

# Goal #1: Double the size of core program

From 2012–2015, we will double the size of River Watch’s core program, growing from the current service level of 120 students per year to 250 students per year. These new students will come from our current schools and other high schools in the Austin area. We will also expand programmatic capacity through additional vans, staff, and a 2<sup>nd</sup> site.

Strategies	Tactics	Goals by 2015
Increase number of students at existing schools	Identify priority list of current schools from which to recruit more students; once final 2-3 schools are determined, plan & execute recruitment	65 students added
Add students from newly partnering schools	Identify priority list of schools with which to form new partnerships	65 students added
	Contact priority schools to discuss potential for opening program there	
	Once final 2-3 schools are determined, plan & execute recruitment	
Find "2 <sup>nd</sup> EcoHouse" site	Determine requirements for 2 <sup>nd</sup> site, then work with realtor to lease site	New site secured and ready for programs
	Set up new site to accommodate programs	
Increase number of program staff	Develop & post job descriptions, conduct interviews; Hire 3 <sup>rd</sup> & 4 <sup>th</sup> program staff	2 program staff added
	Offer ongoing professional development & training to all staff	
Raise funds to grow and sustain core programs	Develop a Fundraising Plan for the growth and sustainability of core program	\$250,000 additional annual revenues
	Secure gifts from individuals	
	Secure foundation & corporate grants	
	Work with fundraising partners to access additional resources	

## Goal #2: Incorporate new service projects

From 2012–2015, we will identify and execute new community projects for our students. Coordinated with partners whenever possible, these service projects will be student-driven, mission-focused, and impact-oriented. Examples include stream-bank restoration, vegetation management, and creekside trail building.

Strategies	Tactics	Goals by 2015
Develop & execute new Special Projects	Develop criteria for new projects, including volunteer & partner engagement	Number of projects implemented, plus project-specific metrics
	Plan, execute, & evaluate new projects	
Add new, project-specific program staff	Develop & post job description, conduct interviews	1 program staff added
	Hire 1 full-time program staff	
	Offer ongoing professional development & training to all staff	
Raise funds to support growth	Develop fundraising strategy, reflecting amounts needed to initiate & sustain projects	\$80,000 additional annual revenues
	Establish annual giving program for individuals from diverse networks	
	Secure foundation & corporate grant support	
	Work with fundraising partners to access additional resources	

## Goal #3: Expand operational capacity

From 2012–2015, in addition to the 3 new program staff described in Goals #1 & #2, we will expand our Board to 15 members and create at least 1 new position for administrative and fundraising support. We will also explore strategic partnerships with similar organizations to aid in our expansion.

Strategies	Tactics	Goals by 2015
Grow Board to 15 members to support expansion	Network & advertise to find potential candidates	11 Board members added
	Interview & cultivate candidates per formalized procedures	
	Offer training & professional development to all Board members	
Increase operational capacity	Develop & post job description, conduct interviews	1 administrative staff added
	Hire 1 part-time administrative staff then grow to 1 full-time administrative staff	
Increase community visibility	Maintain dynamic web & social-media content	Increases in website hits, news appearances, social-media network growth, attendance at events
	Engage diverse volunteers in programs, operations, & fundraising	
	Work with partners that can help us increase visibility	
	Network in environmental and education communities	
	Create periodic engagement & cultivation events	
	Apply for awards that generate visibility in community	