

FRIENDS OF RYE NATURE CENTER

Strategic Plan 2023-2025

Nature Builds Community





Introduction

Over the last three years, Friends of Rye Nature Center (FRNC) has continuously seen that the desire for quality outdoor experiences is a priority that unites all of us. But when it comes to how people want to use their local nature center, preferences vary. Some people seek an accessible woodland where they can simply watch their children play and explore. Others want an immersive experience as they observe the nuances of a complicated ecosystem. Some seek a place to actively learn about the natural environment. And still others want a haven where they can have the sensation of feeling lost in the woods.

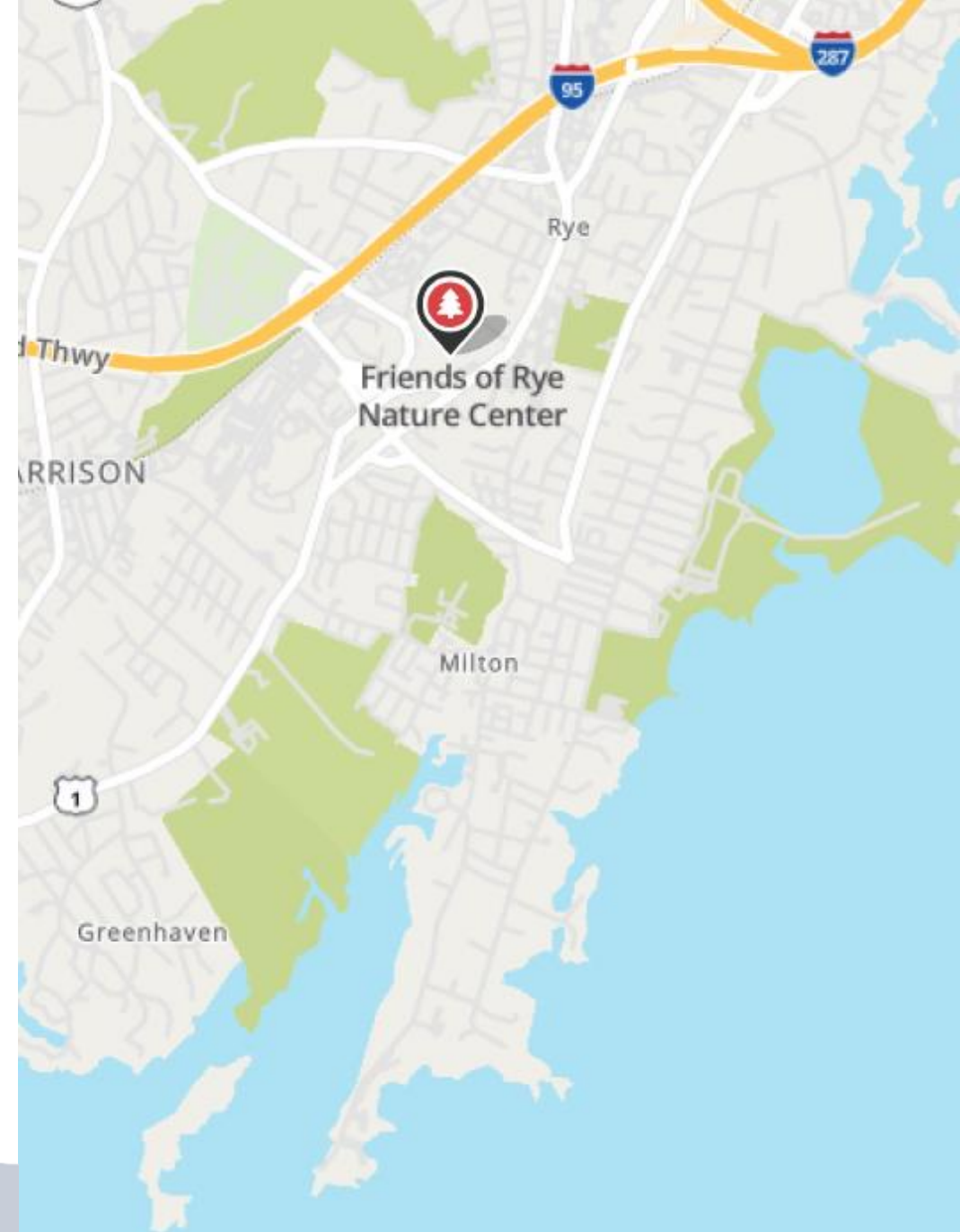
When our Board and staff reflected on these competing desires in early 2023, the lively discussions sparked our imaginations. In the end, our goals were defined by the desire to keep our community united through nature. Our plan considers the growth of our community and incorporates the variety of interests and needs that this growth brings. This plan, which will guide the next three years of FRNC's programs and conservation efforts, delivers something for every outdoor enthusiast. We hope you will find something that will connect you more deeply to nature and the FRNC mission.

About the Rye Nature Center and Friends of Rye Nature Center

The Rye Nature Center is in the center of Rye, New York, just one mile from the Long Island Sound. This 47-acre wildlife preserve has over two miles of hiking trails, ponds, streams, and granite outcroppings. The property's original Carriage House is the main building of the Center's operations, providing indoor classroom and office space.

FRNC has been operating and funding the Rye Nature Center since 2002. The nonprofit renewed its most recent license agreement with the City of Rye in early 2020. This agreement lasts through 2046 and allows FRNC and the City of Rye to pursue much needed capital improvements at the Center.

In 2022, FRNC's annual operating budget was \$2.2 million, which allowed the organization to educate over 40,000 people.





FRNC is at the forefront of providing nature experiences that create a deeper sense of community.

OUR MISSION

Friends of Rye Nature Center is an independent, not-for-profit organization that offers programs to people of all ages and abilities. We encourage conservation, provide environmental education, and support our community's access to nature.

CONSERVATION

We preserve, protect, and manage our 47-acre forest so it can be studied and enjoyed by our community. Our active land stewardship practices ensure that our Nature Center will be here for future generations.

EDUCATION

FRNC educators immerse all ages into the environment through hands-on learning programs. Our teachers and naturalists foster a respect for and connection to the natural world.

COMMUNITY

Our collaboration with other not-for-profit groups and local families ensures that nature is accessible to everyone. Through donor-supported scholarships and funding, we provide environmental education and programming so that *no one is left inside*.

Leadership

CHRISTINE SILLER, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Christine has been the Executive Director of Friends of Rye Nature Center since 2009. Her entrepreneurial spirit and passion for environmental education and conservation have dramatically transformed Rye's 47-acre preserve and its programming. Under her leadership, the organization has created and implemented several innovative approaches to nature education, which have resulted in a dramatic increase in both the number and diversity of people FRNC serves.

CAITLIN LAYNG, PRESIDENT

Caitlin is an active member of the Rye community, having served on the Auxiliary Board of the Rye Free Reading Room, as a fundraising chair for several events at Rye Presbyterian Nursery School, and as a member of the PTO Executive Committee at Midland School. She is currently the treasurer of the Rye Squash Club and coaches Rye Youth Lacrosse for elementary girls. Caitlin's five children have long been active participants in FRNC programs and she co-chaired Oktoberfest for two years prior to joining the Board.



Our Board of Directors

Dan Allen
Melissa Belleville, ***Vice President***
Rebecca Bruno
Natasha Cholerton-Brown
James Engerran, ***Vice President***
Lauren Gallagher

Brett Harsch
Mary Julian
Emily Ivers
Jen Lambert
Caitlin Layng, ***President***
Susan Moreland, ***Secretary***

Rob O'Connor
Jessica O'Mary
Andrew Padovano
Megan Schatz, ***Treasurer***
Todd Smith
Chip Stevens

Our Staff

Executive Director
Christine Siller
**Development &
Operations Director**
Nicole Pennucci
Program Coordinators
Lisa LaBarbera
Kassandra Souply

Education Director
Alli Rogers
Program Director
Mary Gillick
Associate Directors
Emily Embick
Mary Gillick
Katie Jamer
Henry Myers

Educators
Ben Beresford
Joslyn Chen
Fran Fradianni
Beth McCabe
Zach Sandler
Ryleigh Scales
Denise Shah
Joan Sullivan

Conservation Director
Jax Mack
Land Stewards
Steven Koester
Cameron Smith
Horticulturist
Annette Hein



Goals for 2023-2025

Nature Must Be Accessible

Develop more opportunities to engage and educate those in our community and beyond through updated programs with a focus on accessibility.

A Forest That Fosters Community

Promote our 47-acres as the community's collective space for recreation and conservation education. Inspire all people to protect the forest and invest in its succession and health.

Programs for Every Generation

Ensure our program reach touches all ages. Create segmented educational opportunities for senior citizens, teachers, adults, families, and students.

Facilities for Our Future

Provide a safe and enjoyable environment for educational programs and visitors. Plan, design, and construct relevant capital projects and improvements that support FRNC's growth, enhancement, and mission.

Nature Must Be Accessible

Access to nature, whether limited by one's location, financial means, or knowledge, is paramount to the health and well-being of all. FRNC is devoted to alleviating the systemic challenges and obstacles communities and individuals face when it comes to accessing nature.

To ensure access to nature is available to everyone, we are constantly updating our programs and approach to:

Initiative 1: Improve visitor experience to appeal to diverse audiences.

Initiative 2: Expand our mission's reach through targeted family and adult programs.

Initiative 3: Deepen community partnerships with redesigned programs and internships.





Initiative 1: Improve Visitor Experience to Appeal to Diverse Audiences

Less than 6 months: Increase programming that provides up close and personal interactions with animals and wildlife.

- Resume popular public programs including weekly “Caregiver & Me,” and seasonal family programs and campouts.
- Create an "Animal Meet & Greet" schedule for the public to visit the Center's resident pets and add an “About Our Animals” section to our website.

6 to 8 months: Curate passive visitor experiences.

- Create better access to site destinations such as the STEM Course and Nanderwhere Pond.
- Complete additional features along the Poetry Path for an enhanced trail experience.
- Develop interactive exhibits that provide public educational opportunities.

18 to 24 months: Providing access for low-income families and groups lacking natural green space.

- Expand partnership with the White Plains YWCA to serve their youth programs in addition to the women’s residence.
- Research ways to increase transportation opportunities to the Nature Center property.

Initiative 2: Expand Mission Reach Through Targeted Family and Adult Programs

6 to 12 months: Increase public programs.

- Offer guided hikes for adults on Saturdays.
- Host workshops in collaboration with local environmental partners.

12 to 18 months: Invite our community to collaborate in large scale programs.

- Launch an annual speaker series with community partner(s) to address environmental and conservation education, focusing on engaging adults and teens.





Initiative 3: Deepen Community Partnerships With Redesigned School Programs/Internships

Less than 6 months: Engage higher education students.

- Create internship opportunities through partnerships with local colleges and universities to offer students hands-on environmental education and conservation experience.

6 to 12 months: Increase the number of programs taught within the Rye City School District.

- Update current programs to reflect enhancements to core curriculum and Next Generation Science Standards.
- Develop new marketing strategies to inform teachers of program offerings.
- Revisit contracts with PTO and Rye Fund for Education to increase number of FRNC programs provided.

12 to 18 months: Expand school program catalog.

- Survey districts about their needs for supplemental programming.
- Develop innovative programs that utilize both the property and classroom.
- Foster direct relationships with district teachers for long-term projects.
- Create teacher resources for self-guided use of property and implementation in classroom.



A Forest That Fosters Community

FRNC's preservation of the Rye Nature Center and its ecosystems are our legacy to our community. Our organization engages citizens from all communities in the stewardship of our natural resources.



To ensure our forest and the precious ecosystems within it thrive, we will:

Initiative 1: Improve Forest Health and Resiliency.

Initiative 2: Increase Community Conservation Engagement.

Initiative 3: Engage in Blind Brook Restoration.

Initiative 4: Enhance Recreational Experiences.

Initiative 1: Improve Forest Health and Resiliency

Protect saplings and succession plantings.

- **Less than 6 months:** Plan and implement a sustainable process to utilize our greenhouse.
- **6 to 12 months:** Create deer resistant caging system for all new plants and shrubs. Train staff and volunteers on maintenance and monitoring.
- **12 to 18 months:** Design and plant a model succession forest within our deer exclosures.

Construct wildlife habitats.

- **Less than 6 months:** Encourage biodiversity by saving downed trees.
- **6 to 12 months:** Stagnate invasive tree species proliferation.
- **12 to 18 months:** Increase tree planting and native ground cover.

Control invasives.

- **Less than 6 months:** Increase the seasonal hours spent pulling invasives with volunteer and community clean-ups.
- **6 to 12 months:** Plant natives in the understory to combat invasives.

Ensure climate resiliency.

- **6 to 12 months:** Plant southern range natives.
- **12 to 18 months:** Assess tree and soil cores.
- **18 to 24 months:** Track forest response to drought and flooding.



Initiative 2: Increase Community Conservation Engagement

6 to 12 months: Increase education and volunteerism opportunities.

- Increase internship opportunities for high school and college students.
- Connect with teachers about on-site conservation education opportunities.
- Design Boy and Girl Scout volunteer series.

12 to 24 months: Promote FRNC as a community conservation resource.

- Design and implement family and community clean-up events.
- Act as a resource regarding community greening efforts.

Welcome to the Rye Nature Center's Educational Garden!

We hope to inspire many new gardeners here: from five-year olds who we teach to water and sow seeds to experienced gardeners who may want to try a new plant or growing technique.

Helping the Planet

Our garden has a lot to grow up to! We expect it to help reduce fuel consumption, sequester carbon from the atmosphere, prevent flooding, provide food for both humans and wildlife, and to educate a new generation of planetary stewards. Whew! A human could have a panic attack with that weight upon them. So how does our garden do all of this?

Reduce Fuel Consumption: Apples we buy are sometimes shipped from New Zealand, tomatoes from Holland, asparagus from Mexico—we can save the fuel involved in shipping them if we grow them ourselves. By canning, pickling, or fermenting, we can even preserve our homegrown vegetables for colder times.

Sequester Carbon: Carbon dioxide in our atmosphere has reached extremely high levels and much of it has been put there by conventional agriculture. Plants are constantly pulling CO₂ out of the air and some of this carbon dioxide is cycled through micro-organisms in the soil. However, when soil is tilled and exposed to air, this sequestered carbon is lost. Healthy, minimally disturbed soil is the goal in the Rye Nature Center garden.

Prevent Flooding: Rainwater sinks into soil but runs off of asphalt. Therefore, if we decrease the amount of impervious surface (those that don't absorb water) in our neighborhoods we can slow and store rainwater. Rooftops are perfect candidates for greening—they receive plenty of sunlight, deer can't get to them, and they are the frontline in stormwater management. Our rooftop containers catch several gallons of water each time it rains.

Provide Food for Humans and Wildlife: These goals are not always mutually exclusive. Conventional agriculture treats insects, birds, and many other animals as pests, leaving unacknowledged the habitat that animals have lost to farmland. Progressive gardeners and farmers recognize the beneficial role that insects and arachnids play and plant at least a few flowers to provide nectar and shelter. These insects then serve as a food source for birds and toads in the garden. Try as we might, we still can't see any positives about gardening near groundhogs.

Gardening is a lifelong pastime and we hope to share our ideas, seeds, and delicious veggies with as many people as we can. Please ask our staff about anything you see here or if you'd like to share tips that have worked for you.

This garden is sponsored by ConEdison and generous donors to the 2013 Green-a-Thumb campaign.

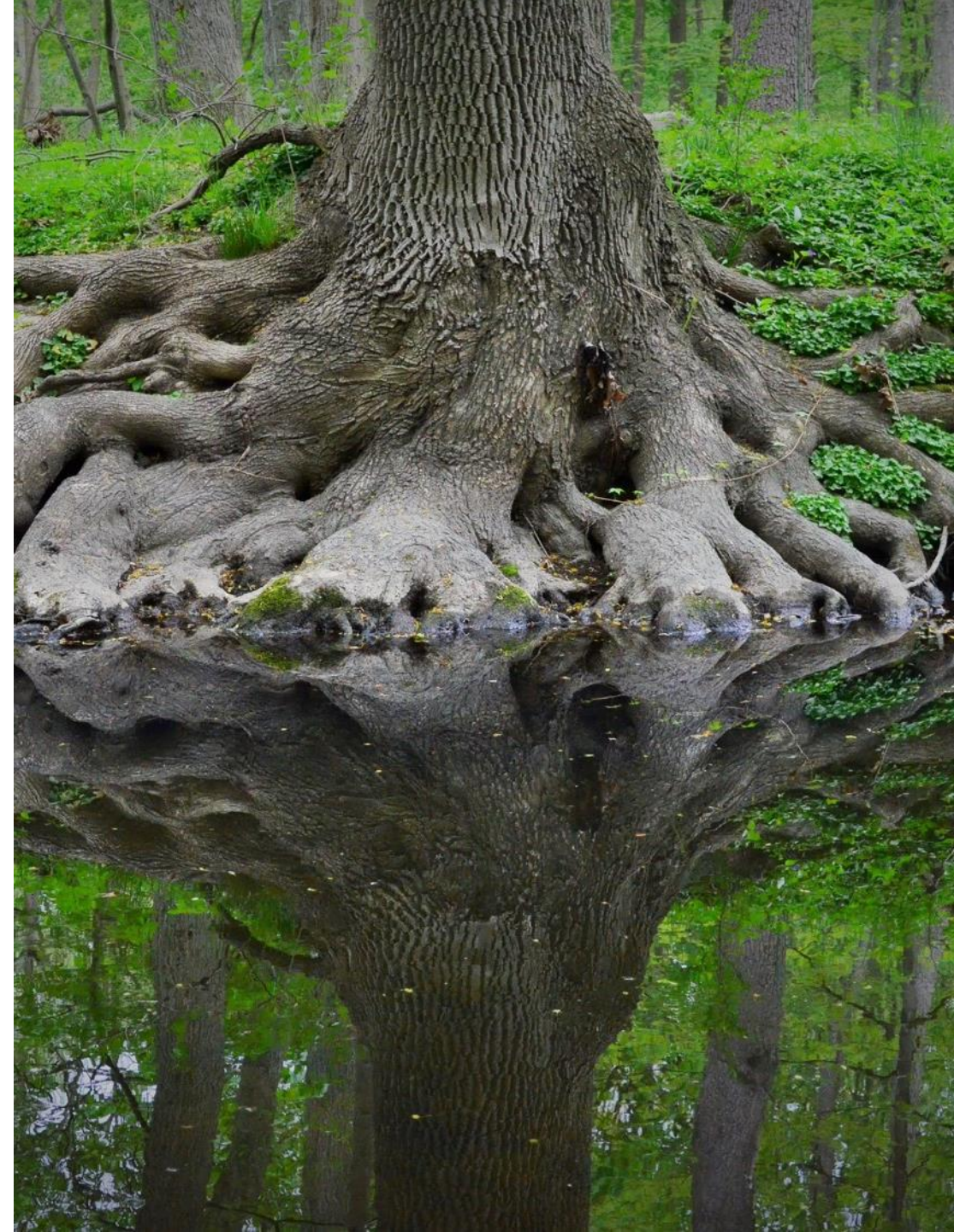
Initiative 3: Engage in Blind Brook Restoration Projects

6 to 24 months: Promote Brook rehabilitation at Rye Nature Center and throughout Rye.

- Work with Long Island Sound Futures Fund and Barton & Loguidice on restoration plan for the segment of the Brook that passes through Rye Nature Center.
- Manage aquatic and terrestrial invasives.
- Serve as an example for other organizations developing brook restoration projects.

6 to 24 months: Monitor water quality.

- Resume regular water quality monitoring and documentation.
- Monitor outflows into Blind Brook.
- Partner with our neighbors on Blind Brook and Long Island Sound protection efforts.





Initiative 4: Enhance Recreation Experiences

Create a responsible trail system.

- **6 to 12 months:** Close social trails created by deer and create a trail lining/barrier system.
- **12 to 24 months:** Create boardwalks and turnpikes to reduce flooding and increase protection of native planting areas.

Experiences for all levels.

- **6 to 12 months:** Create an accessible trail map and marker system.
- **12 to 24 months:** Increase trail engagement by implementing activities such as a Fitness Trail and constructing an ADA trail.

Enhance casual visitor experience.

- **6 to 12 months:** Create an interactive trail map and tree ID walk.
- **12 to 18 months:** Implement the site's trail signage plan and install discreet educational signs.

Programs for Every Generation

FRNC seeks to inspire and cultivate a lifelong connection and commitment to the natural world. We provide innovative approaches to learning so that all people can enjoy and appreciate all that nature provides.



To meet the growing diversity of our community and ensure that as many people as possible engage with nature, we will:

Initiative 1: Create innovative opportunities to increase community and school district engagement, and enhance passive user experiences.

Initiative 2: Determine new resources and partnerships to expand services to more people.



Initiative 1: Create Opportunities to Increase Community and School District Engagement, and Enhance Passive User Experiences

6 to 12 months: Bring back popular programs.

- Post biweekly Nature News articles so that all ages can learn the latest updates at the park and how to interact with nature.
- Engage community in Citizen Science efforts like the annual monitoring of the American eel migration.

12 to 24 months: Identify new program opportunities.

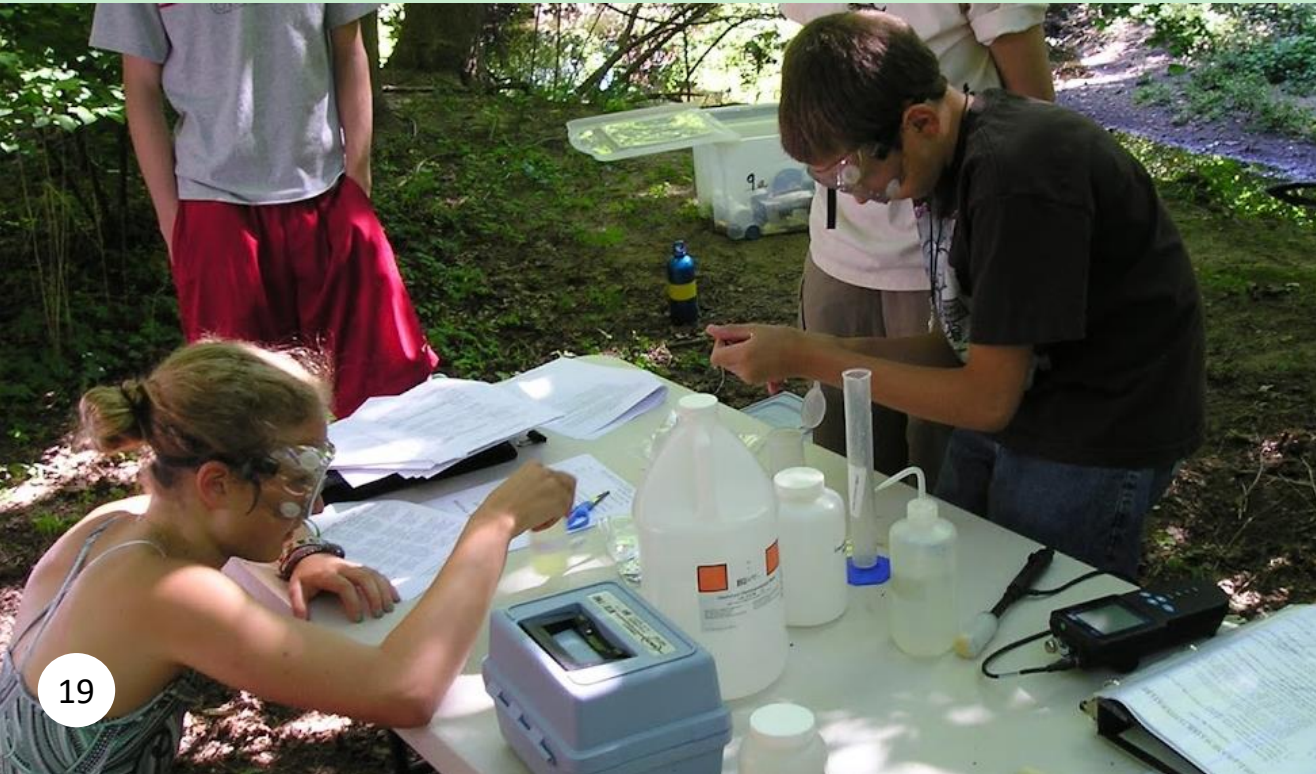
- Create hands-on curriculum for Rye City School District enrichment using Next Generation Science Standards. Train science teachers on how to implement these practices in their classroom.
- Enhance virtual presence through more online interpretation videos and live camera feeds from the Center's forest.
- Create a take one, leave one nature library.

Through developing a more streamlined approach to our current curriculum, staff will have more time to plan and prepare for new programs and virtual experiences. To educate 50,000 participants annually, we would increase passive experiences that would benefit the immediate community.



Initiative 2: Determine New Resources and Partnerships to Expand Services to More People

FRNC will collaborate with current and new partners to increase our mission's reach in and beyond Rye. Through marketing and increased NatureStation programs, we can promote our educational opportunities to wider audiences.



6 to 12 months:

- Use the current curriculum for preschool through 8th grade to develop a universal curriculum that can be offered as a package to Rye Schools, other districts, and NAF schools.
- Create a middle school programs and volunteer opportunities for Community Resource Center students.
- Increase programming with The Osborn Senior Living and other senior communities.

12 to 24 months:

- Work with Rye Free Reading Room and Arcade Booksellers to sponsor visits with naturalist authors.
- Provide more year-round opportunities to engage with current Inner-City Scholarship Fund (ICSF) campers and families such as an ICSF Old-Fashioned Winter's Afternoon or summer counselor positions to past campers.
- Create weekly enrichment for home school groups/students.



Facilities for Our Future

FRNC manages the Rye Nature Center grounds and buildings so that we can continue to provide a safe and enjoyable environment for educational programs and visitors. In addition to daily operations and repairs, we plan, design, and construct relevant capital projects to support FRNC's growth, enhancement, and mission.



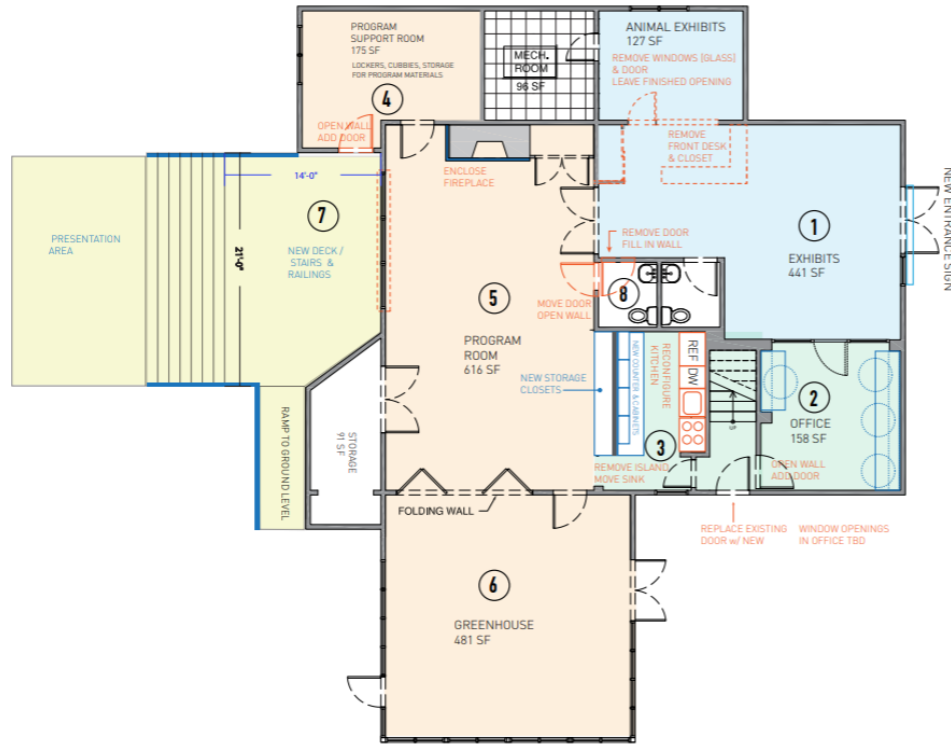
Our organization's growth and our community's needs require a Center that can serve diverse audiences. We will:

Phase 1: Adapt the existing facilities to improve immediate operations.

Phase 2: Address the need for structured outdoor classrooms and public spaces.

Phase 3: Plan, design, and construct interior and exterior spaces to support the future of FRNC's mission.

Phase 1: Adapt the Existing Facilities to Improve Immediate Operations



The Nature Center's main building and office space is the Parson Family's Carriage House and original to the estate's construction in the early 1900s. This space has been renovated several times since the Center's founding in 1959. Currently, the first floor is used for program space and the second and third floors are used as offices and storage for program supplies. The priority is to increase the functionality and flexibility of the Carriage House by making necessary repairs and updates to an aging facility.

In this phase, FRNC will evaluate and prioritize updates utilizing available resources. The goal is to provide maintenance and repairs in a minimally disruptive manner to workflow and programs.

FRNC will make plans to optimize office space to accommodate our growing staff. In addition, we will focus on establishing communal outdoor learning spaces that all visitors can enjoy.

Less than 6 months:

- Complete minor outdoor classroom improvements.
- Configure office layout to add additional workstations/coworking stations and establish a lactation/meditation room.
- Make improvements to the educational garden area.

Phase 2: Address the Need for Structured Outdoor Spaces

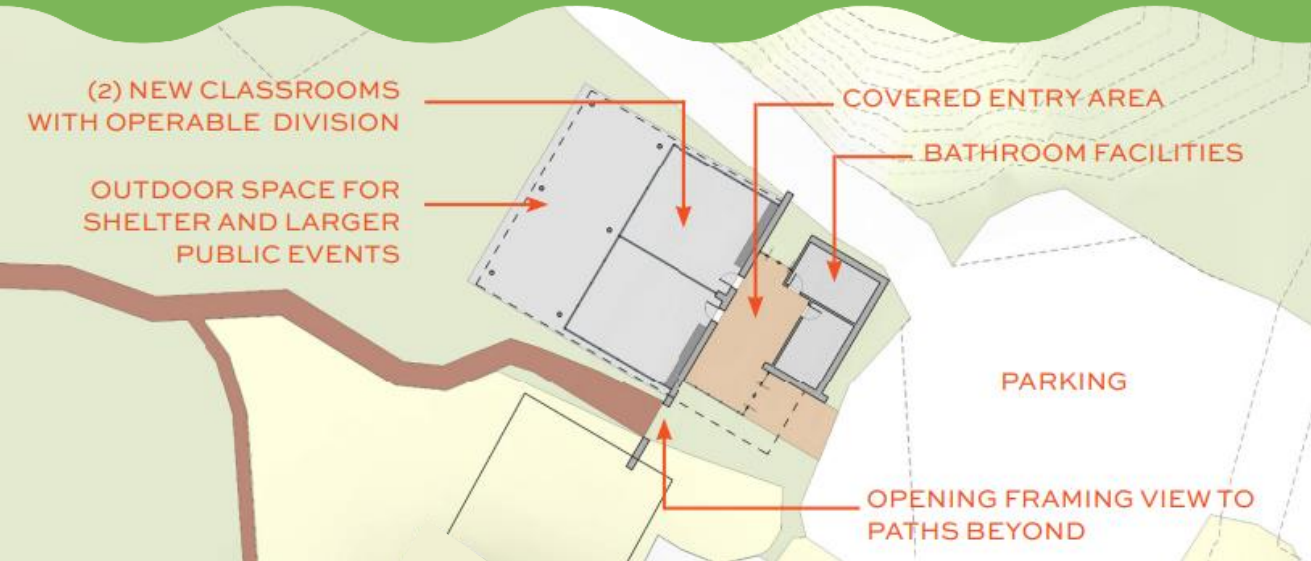
FRNC currently uses many impromptu and temporary outdoor spaces to meet classroom needs, define learning areas, and provide places to rest.

In the next 6 to 12 months, the goal is to create, expand, and enhance these areas to provide a more permanent and functional solution including:

- The construction of a deck off the main building that can be used as a classroom space for programs or as a resting place for the public to relax and enjoy nature.
- Rebuilding the educational access point over Nanderwhere Pond and enhancing its landscape to showcase native flora and create areas of respite and observation.



Phase 3: Plan, Design, and Construct Interior and Exterior Spaces to Support the Future of FRNC's Mission



6 to 12 months:

- Determine scope of new structures and prepare construction documents and engineering assessments.
- Renovate downstairs kitchen.
- Improve the visitor experience in the Carriage House by adding exhibits.

2024 – 2026:

- Plan for new entry road with City of Rye.
- Begin work on new structures.
- Implement additional landscaping designs to enhance the Carriage House and new structures.

In the last decade, the demand for FRNC's programs, camps, and visitor experiences has nearly quadrupled from approximately 10,000 people in 2010 to just under 40,000 in 2022. This increase reflects the interest in FRNC's quality educational programs and the shifting demographics of Westchester County.

In 2020, FRNC engaged an architectural firm to create a Master Site Plan to summarize the existing conditions of the Center's facilities, outline future programmatic needs, and make recommendations appropriate for growth.

Using the 2022 Master Site Plan and data from our 2019 Community Engagement Survey, FRNC is in the early stages of determining a comprehensive path forward. Our goal is to give our community new classrooms, public gathering spaces, restrooms, and a revamped visitor center with interactive exhibits and learning opportunities.

A Nature Center for the Future

Our 2023-2025 Strategic Plan prioritizes our community's desire to engage with nature. This plan delivers much needed improvements to our beloved grounds and trails. These enhancements will engage our community more deeply in environmental education and conservation issues

The recommendations for new facilities will require our entire community's vision and support. We hope that you will be inspired by our plans and join us in creating and investing in Rye Nature Center's future.

