

Earthplace and the Town of Westport: A 60-year Public-Private Partnership

Background

Earthplace was founded in 1958 by conservationists led by **John Ripley Forbes - an American naturalist who lived in Westport**. Their first step was to join together open lands from neighbors in the Old Hill area of Westport into a 62+acre nature sanctuary. Soon after, the current museum building and nature center opened as the Mid-Fairfield County Youth Museum.

In the Early 60's – **nature educational programs blossomed** including the country's first nature-based preschool. Nature programming for school age children became a popular school field trip and family attraction. The Westport Board of Education helped fund these program initiatives beginning with an annual appropriation of **\$4,400 from the board of ED budget**.

History of Town Support

In the mid- 60's – **Allen Raymond joined the Nature Center board** and quickly recognized the value to the town of their educational programs and open space, and funding support shifted from the Board of Education to the town budget.

In the early 1970's the appropriation was **\$30,000/year** which represented **21% of revenues**. The Nature Center kept growing, and so did the town appropriation by about 3% per year. Financial support also increased from private and other public sources as the importance and popularity of nature education grew.

By 1999 Town support reached \$67,000 and increased steadily by 2-3% per year reaching \$79,000 in 2006, \$81,000 by 2010, and **\$85,000 by 2012** based on the perceived value of nature education to the Westport community.

By 2013, Earthplace was in financial difficulty having burned through most of its cash reserves, and the Board explored selling parcels of land to raise cash. To help, the town increased support to \$95,000, which remained unchanged for the next 10 years. In 2022, the town raised their appropriation to \$105,000 where it remains today. **The current cost of this partnership for residents is \$3.79 per year.**

During this period of growth for Earthplace, the breadth and impact of educational programs increased dramatically, improving community resources and our value proposition.

Our request to the RTM:

Restore and maintain town support at its current level of \$105,000 per year to ensure that Earthplace and Harbor Watch can continue their partnership and provide preferential nature and environmental educational value to Westport residents.

Delivered Value:

Nature Programs for the 2024 calendar year:

Program type	Cost	Number of engagements
Westport Farmers' Market tabling; Plein Air Painting on the Trails, other town tabling events, hosting community volunteer events, Environmental Learning Series, jUNeday	Free	315
Daily birds of prey feedings, Story Time, Winged Wonders, Saturday Craft	Free with admission	6691
(39 events) Educational programs: Gardening, foraging, wildflower identification, birding, ecology, outdoor exploration, environmental theatre	Under \$20	402
School and Scout Programs	(at cost)	1852
Trail use	Free	17,000

Harbor Watch Services to the Town of Westport:

	Value to Westport
River monitoring and pollution track-down (May through September)	\$15,000
Dissolved oxygen study and Unified Water Study in Saugatuck Harbor (May through October)	\$10,501
Education programs (virtual, in-person, and trawling)	\$10,094
Total Cost	\$35,595

Public Support for Regional Nature Centers:

1. Earthplace – \$3.5 Million
 - Town appropriation of \$105,000 or 3.0% of revenues
 - Harbor Watch also receives funds from the Conservation Dept. and shellfish commission
2. Stamford Nature Center - \$3.2M
 - Receives - \$320,000 operating support—or 10%
 - Town provides IT and HR support
3. New Canaan Nature Center - \$1.5M
 - Receives no operating support
 - Town owns the buildings and property, through letter of agreement.
 - Town maintains grounds (mowing & plowing) and provides capital maintenance for the buildings including HVAC
4. Greenburgh Nature Center (Scarsdale, NY) -- \$1.4M
 - Receives \$337,000 in operating support or 24%
5. Trumbull Nature Center – \$247,000
 - Receives \$135,000 in state grants (DEEP, Econ. Dev.)

Intrinsic Value of a Nature Center in Westport:

Provisioning

Products obtained from ecosystem

- Solar energy
- Ecocrafting materials
- Firewood

Cultural

Nonmaterial benefits

- **Education:** 7,408 free or low cost programs (2024)
- **Recreation:** ~17,000 trail users annually
- **Ecotourism:** ~13,000 museum visitors annually

Regulating

Benefits to all of Westport obtained from the regulation of ecosystem processes at Earthplace

- **Climate regulation:** 9,542 metric tons of carbon stored in Earthplace preserves
- **Water purification and flood prevention:** ~81,462,000 gallons of water filtered through Earthplace woodlands and wetlands annually
- **Control of pests and pathogens**
- **Air quality regulation**

Supporting

Fundamental processes that maintain the health and function of the ecosystem and is essential for all other services

- Maintenance of biological diversity
 - Carbon and nutrient cycling
 - Water cycling
 - Soil formation