

Roxborough / Shawmont Valley Native Plant Restoration Idea

Tom Brouillette

I am hoping that the Upper Roxborough Civic Association could offer questions and comments about this idea, and if there's anyone interested in working on a committee to implement it.



Shawmont Avenue looking toward the river, overwhelmed by knotweed and other invasive plants

The Idea: replant the area beneath the PECO and Amtrak power lines in Roxborough/Shawmont Valley with shorter native trees and shrubs, and where trees and shrubs won't work plant shorter native perennials: grasses and other flowering plants. This is a tract along the bike path, but also up higher under the large transmission towers. It is also adjacent to the Schuylkill Center for Environmental Education, and would include the most visible area along Shawmont Avenue where it goes toward the old Shawmont railroad station (the oldest standing railroad station in the U.S., restored within the last couple years). This area sees thousands of visitors every year.

I understand why PECO/Amtrak/SEPTA want to keep vegetation short (or, as it is now, non-existent), but shorter natives could have huge benefits for supporting wildlife, and creating a thing of beauty for people to visit, and inspire others.

There are many native species that could work well, including Dwarf Chinkapin Oak (*Quercus prinoides*) and Bear Oak (*Quercus ilicifolia*), are just two examples.

I'm not the only person to think of something like this for this area. Maybe someone has put forward such a proposal in the past? It's not cheap. It would take a lot of effort and coordination between all the concerned parties, and research on how to make this disturbed land more native plant friendly, and build on the *natural* advantages of this area.



Before the clearcut



After the clearcut

The Fairmount Park Conservancy has done something like this in Fairmount Park (<https://myphillypark.org/what-we-do/capital-projects/lansdowne-montgomery-creeks/>) It

may have been easier to do that than what we have here, since here is a jigsaw puzzle of various owners. Working on discrete sections one at a time is probably the way to go, while having a Grand Plan for expansion of our efforts.

Identifying ownership of the various areas, and contacting the owners to see if there's interest in cooperating with this venture might be the next step.

After this, getting some funding to do an audit of what natives can be preserved, and what invasives can be eliminated. This would be followed by planning for what plantings are best for soil type and location. This area has been disturbed for a long time, and as I look at the soil on Nixon Street, below the bicycle trail, it appears to me a mix of organic material, and coal slag grit, with broken glass and metal debris throughout (at least along the old railroad/now bike trail). It may even be eligible for brownfield status. Things grow in it, though!



On top of the bridge that goes over Shawmont Avenue near Nixon Street

I'm eager to put effort into it (I'm inspired by the landscaping work of Piet Oudolf: <https://www.thenewperennialist.com/allure-of-the-luriepiet-oudolf-returns-to-chicago/>). I'm also willing to be on a committee to help make this idea happen—it will obviously take many people. I have 10 years of landscaping experience, and from that I well know that something like this would take years of work in planning, installation, and maintenance. It could be a jewel in the crown of Philadelphia and Montgomery County native habitat restoration.

The city published a Philadelphia Trail Master Plan in 2013 that mentions a couple of places in the area for trail improvements:

[https://www.phila.gov/media/20190516115200/Philadelphia Trail Master Plan 2013.pdf](https://www.phila.gov/media/20190516115200/Philadelphia_Trail_Master_Plan_2013.pdf) (See page 70: Schuylkill Center for Environmental Education SRT Connector. See page 90: Schuylkill River Trail Shawmont to Montgomery Co. Line.)





Two views of the knotweed on the sides of Shawmont Avenue

Potential Small Grants:

<https://bhwp.org/plant-grants/>

https://prdagriculture.pwpca.pa.gov/Plants_Land_Water/PlantIndustry/GISC/Learn-More/Pages/Grants.aspx

<https://wildones.org/seeds-for-education/>

<https://www.hardyplant.org/grantsprior>

<https://www.invasivespeciesinfo.gov/subject/grants-and-funding>

<https://monarchjointventure.org/mjvprograms/education/garden-grants>

https://www.media.pa.gov/Pages/DCNR_details.aspx?newsid=1003

<https://www.instrumentl.com/browse-grants/pennsylvania/plant-grants>

<https://www.thegrantportal.com/>?

<https://naturalcommunities.net/pages/grants-for-native-plants-and-habitat>

Additional Notes:

There are two landscaping companies that park their equipment at the intersection of Nixon and Port Royal. I don't know the owners, and I wouldn't expect them to donate anything to this, but since they are in the heart of the area, maybe there's a role for them? They have most (if not all) of the equipment needed, and a skilled workforce.

A non-profit organization would need to be custodian and disbursing of funds. Maybe someone can suggest an appropriate group.

I sent a version of this write-up to several organizations and individuals. In addition to the PA chapter of the Sierra Club, I have received supportive responses from:

- Anya Saretzky (Rails to Trails)
- Jamila Davis, Public Information Officer (Department of Planning & Development and Philadelphia Housing Development Corp)
- Nicole Brunet, Policy Director (Bicycle Coalition of Greater Philadelphia)
- Paige Menton (Journeywork, a non-profit dedicated to habitat restoration <https://journeywork.org/about/>)
- Aaron Couch (president of Residents of Shawmont Valley civic association).

Here's how it started:

I have lived in the Shawmont Valley neighborhood of Philadelphia for a few years. The natural beauty and greenery of the area inspired my wife and I to move here (we had lived in the Fairmount neighborhood for about a dozen years before). For the past few years I've had a notion about transforming various neglected areas along the roadsides and the Schuylkill River Trail into a more native plant friendly environment.

Four years ago, when the western end of Nixon Street was repaved after sewer line work on River Road, the work crew bulldozed a swath of the embankment on the north side of the road. I immediately saw an opportunity to plant wildflowers in the now-exposed earth. I did it for fun. I wanted to see something colorful instead of endless knotweed, mugwort, and half-dead ragged trees. (Some of the trees and shrubs along the street are natives and seem to be doing OK.) I didn't have high expectations, but it worked! It was only a small spot, but I saw that passersby stopped to look and take pictures. The next year I expanded the area

with more flower varieties, and it came out even better. The third year, I expanded the area again, and planted a couple oak trees (donated by Tom Landsmann), goldenrod, Jerusalem artichoke, bee balm, fothergilla, chokeberry, and many others.

There is a lot of potential for a native planting makeover on this one strip of land along Nixon Street. It gets a lot of traffic, and whenever I worked in the area, hand-pulling the invasives, people stopped and told me how much they loved the flowers. I gave my effort a name: The Shawmont Valley Roadside Prettification Project.

Here's how it's going:

Over the winter, Amtrak clear-cut a wide strip of trees along the Schuylkill River Trail from Port Royal Avenue (Philadelphia) and into Montgomery County. I regret that it wasn't done with more care: selective cutting could have been a piece of a general restoration. As hot as summers are, the bike trail along this stretch will now be absolutely BLAZING this summer without shade. I have heard from a few people how much they welcomed riding into this previously shady part of the trail for heat relief. The shade is almost completely gone now. It would be great if something can be created out of the destruction. I've attached before and after photos.

This past winter, a River Road neighbor dumped entire dead trees and branches precisely on top of the area that I'd been working on for the past four years, nearly obliterating everything. Not all is lost, but it's not going to be as nice this year.

These two events were a kick in the pants for me, and it seemed time to reverse the neglect of the neighborhood.

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An ocean of knotweed