

ACROSS FENCE LINES

Connecting Corporate America to Communities
through Urban and Community Forestry Programs



Funded by the U.S. Forest Service

CASE STUDY

UCF as a Catalyst for Employee-Community Connections Across the I-94 Industrial Corridor

Detroit, Michigan

Introduction

Rapid industrial development is taking place along Detroit's I-94 corridor, particularly in the area between Interstate 94 and the city of Hamtramck. In this area, many large, high-impact industrial entities have built or rehabilitated manufacturing and distribution facilities near tightly knit, culturally homogenous communities of historically underserved residents.

In this context, urban and community forestry efforts serve as an ideal interface for connecting employees of commuter campuses to the communities surrounding these facilities. The high density of corporate facilities in this area has also facilitated partnerships between companies — General Motors (GM), ArcelorMittal Tailored-Blanks (AMTB), DTE and Waste Management all contributed to a pilot planting in summer 2021, with additional corporate-led plantings planned in the near future.

The Business Drivers

Business Driver 06 – Community Engagement - Initial project development was conducted as a community engagement effort by AMTB with the goal of building a positive rapport with nearby residents. Significant investment by the DTE Foundation in community outreach and strengthening neighborhood ecological resilience has driven project development and facilitated discussion with other local corporate partners. Structured, corporate-facilitated volunteer platforms at AMTB, GM, Waste Management and DTE Energy support the past and future plantings planned in collaboration with community leaders. With past corporate-community dynamics in the area marked by contention and even litigation, the convening of corporate and community partners around the common goal of urban and community forestry has brought significantly improved relations.

Alignment with Ten-Year Urban Forestry Action Plan Goals

Goal 1A - Support the Integration of Urban Forestry Into all Scales of City, Regional, and State-scale Master Plans – Local community development organization Alkebu-Lan Village (AKBV) is designing a neighborhood revitalization plan, through which corporate volunteers will carry out community-designed plantings that align with the city of Detroit’s stormwater management strategy. Plantings and the installation of permeable pavement will ultimately provide wastewater management subsidies for residents living in the revitalization area.

Goal 2 - Promote the Role of Urban and Community Forestry in Human Health and Wellness – Local organizations like AKBV have focused their outreach on the need to alleviate effects of the poor air quality in their community and on the impacts of air pollution on local youth. The UCF work being conducted in this area highlights and promotes the capacity of planned plantings to mitigate these health concerns.

Goal 3B - Engage Underserved Communities in Urban and Community Forestry – AKBV showcases and promotes Black excellence and expertise to local youth, partnering with grassroots organizations and experts to lead educational outreach. Local UCF work is conducted by a diverse suite of partners including local residents, employee volunteers of industrial partners and participants in AKBV’s educational programs.

Goal 4 - Strengthen Urban and Community Forest Health and Biodiversity for Long-Term Resilience

Discussions with community members highlighted the many benefits of tree plantings, including pollinator habitat creation, recreational space beautification, air quality improvement, carbon sequestration, food security augmentation and resilience to climate change impacts such as flooding. As a result, a diverse array of tree species is included in the project design, with an emphasis on those that will meet local climate resilience and food security goals.

Goal 6 - Diversify, Leverage, and Increase Funding for Urban and Community Forestry

- AMTB outreach and DTE funding to support development of projects focused on community resilience helped the project team secure funding from the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, with 70% of the awarded funding allocated toward on-the-ground installation of green infrastructure, including 500 trees planted throughout, and stewarded by, the community.

Goal 7 - Increase Public Awareness and Environmental Education to Promote Stewardship

– With guidance from Wildlife Habitat Council (WHC), AKBV is actively engaging existing program participants (e.g., a summer teen group and an afterschool youth support program) in conducting and activating the plantings resulting from this partnership. Moving forward, these participants will partake in ongoing project maintenance and monitor wildlife in the planting sites.

The Community

The CDC Social Vulnerability Index (SVI) measures a community's ability to respond to natural disasters, disease outbreaks or human-made incidents like a chemical spill. Wayne County, Michigan (where Detroit is located) has an overall SVI score of 0.8682 on a scale of 0 (which is the lowest vulnerability score) to 1 (which reflects the highest vulnerability).

According to the EPA's EJSCREEN, this rapidly industrializing area scores in the 90-100th percentile of Michigan for Particulate Matter 2.5 exposure. The area also scores in the 90-100th percentile of Michigan for NATA Air Toxics Cancer Risk.

These scores corroborate anecdotal conversations with leaders of both the Mount Elliott Yemeni community and the African American Alkebu-Lan Village community, which reflected significant concern over widespread respiratory irritation in local children, thought to be caused by air pollution.

Challenges

With community outreach ongoing since early 2019, community leaders have supported the significant investments in their neighborhoods made by industrial partners. Initial funding was needed, however, to create a structure for scaled corporate contribution to the priorities identified and ideas outlined by community leaders. While UCF and urban agriculture were identified as mutually beneficial activities early in the process, without a clearly defined structure for implementation, a managing partner, or seed funding, conversations stalled in the theoretical design phase for nearly 2 years.

In an area of Detroit where some residents lack reliable internet access, the Covid-19 pandemic also slowed or halted opportunities to engage the community in dialogue on priorities, site selection and project design.

Opportunities

Leveraging Community Trust – UCF efforts in the I-94 corridor have benefited from the initiative and energy contributed early in the process by Arcelor-Mittal Tailored Blanks. AMTB employees' commitment to meeting and engaging with the residents of the adjacent community have built trust and a positive rapport with local leaders and led to the identification of urban agriculture and community forestry as optimal avenues for diverse collaboration between industry and residents. This outreach has resulted in partnerships with the Detroit Police Department, the local mosque, the city government and almost all corporate I-94 Industrial Park tenants, allowing for transparency and inclusion from the project's design phase onward.

Engaging Employee Volunteers - The cluster of companies along the I-94 corridor benefits from access to corporate-supported, structured volunteer platforms. For instance, the efforts of employee volunteers from GM have provided significant strength to grant applications as a matching contribution. The contributions of GM, DTE and Waste Management employees were also key to carrying out a pilot planting in summer 2021.

Securing Diverse Funding Sources - WHC involvement in guiding project design, funding applications and developing educational materials was facilitated by generous support from DTE Energy. This seed investment allowed for conversations to advance, resulting in a shovel-ready proposal that was accepted by the U.S. Forest Service's Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI). The GLRI funding will provide the resources needed to advance large-scale projects in 2022.

Partners

- Alkebu-Lan Village
- General Motors
- DTE
- Detroit Police Department
- General Motors
- U.S. Ecology
- University of Michigan, Dearborn
- Waste Management
- Wildlife Habitat Council

Key Takeaways

- UCF has allowed businesses in the I-94 corridor to engage with the surrounding community, advancing local food security, resilience to climate change-induced extreme weather events and the economic resilience of historically under-resourced populations.
- Employee initiative sparked a strong collaboration that, early on, identified UCF as a solution to multiple problems presented by community members near industrial facilities. The key to implementing UCF has been DTE's investment in building WHC's capacity to serve as a leader in the UCF field and secure any resources necessary.
- While the Covid-19 pandemic slowed down the in-person outreach necessary for equitable stakeholder engagement, it also allowed for additional planning and design time, resulting in the development of an inclusive and diverse initiative that will holistically address a wide range of community concerns.

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