



## Resilience by the Bay: Norfolk’s Biophilic Strategies

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Resilience isn’t a new concept for Norfolk, Virginia, a port city on the East Coast of the United States and home to the world’s largest naval base. For nearly 400 years, our coastal city has faced wars, outbreaks of disease, hurricanes, and flooding, but has consistently recovered and evolved to meet the next set of

challenges. Norfolk, like most places, has been hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the city, along with many community partners throughout Norfolk, has continued working on exciting and innovative projects that improve the built and natural environment.

In early 2020, the city and its award-winning partner design firm, Work Program Architects, created the [Open Norfolk](#) program. This community assistance program has helped local businesses open safely under Virginia Governor Ralph Northam’s COVID-19 guidelines and has filled neighborhoods’

need for outdoor programming by activating community spaces to create safe places for families and community members to gather. Three Neighborhood Spots were created in Five Points, Broad Creek, and the NEON Arts District that provide pop-up programming like food trucks, outdoor exercise classes, fresh food giveaways, and small business markets to allow for safe outdoor recreation and socializing. An additional spot was launched in conjunction with Teens with A Purpose, a local non-profit youth empowerment

organization. In all instances, the community organizations and leaders helped with the construction and management of the sites.

The [Elizabeth River Trail](#) stretches 10.5 miles along Norfolk’s waterfront, weaves through 28 neighborhoods and provides opportunities for residents and visitors to enjoy urban nature at any time of the year. After a very successful fundraising campaign, there have been substantial improvements to the amenities along the

trail including 12 new ADA-accessible access points, native plant gardens, bicycle repair stations, playgrounds, kayak launches, fitness equipment, and public art. These improvements are helping to transform the Elizabeth River Trail into an asset that increases environmental awareness, improves neighborhood connectivity, and provides innovative economic development opportunities for Norfolk.

On November 19, 2020 [Governor Northam made a](#)



Norfolk City Hall  
Photo Credit: City of Norfolk

**historic announcement:** the Elizabeth River is the second tributary of the Chesapeake Bay in Virginia (only behind the Lafayette River, also located in Norfolk and a tributary to the Elizabeth River) to meet oyster habitat restoration goals. Due to pollution, overfishing, and disease, local oyster populations collapsed during the Twentieth Century, which created issues throughout the Chesapeake Bay and particularly waterways in Norfolk. However, thanks to the efforts of the Virginia Marine Resources Commission, Chesapeake Bay Foundation, Elizabeth River Project, Hampton Roads Sanitation District, the cities of Norfolk and Chesapeake,

and local homeowners and organizations, 24 acres of oyster reefs have been restored along the Eastern Branch of the Elizabeth River. This exciting new development is important because not only do oysters filter water, they also create habitat for marine animals and plants. This improves water quality and increases biodiversity, something that is very important for a city like Norfolk.

Norfolk has been recognized as a Tree City by the Arbor Day Foundation ([Tree City USA](https://www.arborday.org/)) and its neighborhoods have extensive trees and flowers. It is also home to the [Norfolk Botanical Garden](https://www.norfolkva.gov/norfolkbotanicalgarden), which includes 175 beautiful

acres, 7 miles of paved paths, and another 7 miles of unpaved paths to explore. It is surrounded by water on three sides and is one of the only gardens in the country that you can visit by foot, by boat, by tram, and on occasion, by bike. The City of Norfolk administers its [Celebrate Trees Project](https://www.norfolkva.gov/celebratetrees), an environmental initiative designed as a community partnership that gives residents and businesses a reason to celebrate and grow Norfolk's tree canopy. The program was inspired by a tree-planting program in Norfolk's sister city, Kitakyushu, Japan. In the coming years, Norfolk's goal is to increase the tree canopy from 23% to 30%, the

recommended percentage for cities east of the Mississippi River.

There are many other interesting and exciting things happening in Norfolk. The redevelopment of the [St. Paul's neighborhood](https://www.norfolkva.gov/stpaulsneighborhood) will continue to transform downtown Norfolk by providing much needed affordable housing, walkable neighborhoods, and natural flood protection by daylighting portions of Ohio Creek, planned as an amenity-packed Blue-Greenway. New additions to the city's [Green Infrastructure Plan](https://www.norfolkva.gov/greeninfrastructureplan) emphasize habitat protection and actions to protect endangered species, and the [Zoning Ordinance](https://www.norfolkva.gov/zoningordinance) continues to be updated to include biophilic and resilience principles such as open space, native plants, tree protection, reducing flood risk, and alternative energy. Norfolk has always been a resilient city populated

by resilient residents and will continue to find innovative ways to meet new challenges.

### Resources

Alvarez-Wertz, Jane (Nov. 19, 2020). "Lost branch" of Elizabeth River finds success with oyster restoration program. *Wavy*. <https://www.wavy.com/news/local-news/norfolk/gov-northampton-to-make-oyster-restoration-announcement-in-norfolk>.

Arbor Day Foundation. What is Tree City USA? <https://www.arborday.org/programs/treecityusa/about.cfm>.

City of Norfolk. Building a Better Norfolk: a zoning ordinance for the 21st Century. <https://www.norfolkva.gov/norfolkzoningordinance>.

City of Norfolk. Celebrate Trees Project. <https://www.norfolk.gov/235/Celebrate-Trees>.

City of Norfolk. Green Infrastructure Plan. <https://www.norfolk.gov/DocumentCenter/View/38067/Norfolk-Green-Infrastructure-Plan--Action-Plan-Appendix-for-Endangered-Species?bidId=>.

Norfolk Botanical Garden. <https://norfolkbotanicalgarden.org>.

Open Norfolk. <https://www.opennorfolk.com/about>.

St. Paul's Area Transformation. <https://www.stpaulsdistrict.org>.

The Elizabeth River Trail. <https://elizabethrivertrail.org>.



Elizabeth River Trail  
Photo Credit: City of Norfolk