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Linn County Conservation Excellence in Action Award Nomination - 2019

1,000 Acres Pollinator Initiative

The 1,000 Acres Pollinator Initiative is a public/private partnership in which Linn County Conservation, has partnered with the Monarch Research Project (MRP), Cedar Rapids Parks and Recreation and the Marion Parks Department. This collaborative effort aims to restore 1,000 public land acres to a diverse native prairie habitat (Pollinator Zones) within 5 years through private funding. This initiative has primary goals of restoring significant monarch and pollinator habitat throughout the communities of Linn County, Iowa through a community wide collaborative public/private partnership that engages governmental, business, educational, non-profit, and citizen sectors of the community. The Monarch Research Project non-profit organization has committed to the goal of raising up to \$1,000,000 for the conversion of 1,000 new acres of diverse pollinator habitat through private donations and grants. This \$1,000 per acre budget pays for all native seed, cover crop seed and site preparation products along with some specialized equipment and interpretive signage.

This initiative is a public sector habitat restoration prong of the larger Monarch Research Project county wide monarch and pollinator effort that includes monarch reproduction, pollinator habitat restoration, and landowner outreach and education. 1,000 Acres is addressing on a major scale the need to restore unproductive public lands to healthy, productive native habitats that support pollinators, wildlife, water quality and soil conservation. This initiative uses pollinator habitat restoration to leverage broader environmental health, community aesthetics, recreational opportunities, nature-based educational opportunities and ultimately human health.

Linn County Conservation leads the 1,000 Acres Pollinator Initiative public lands work through continued liaison roles working directly with Monarch Research Project and our two partnering cities. Daniel Gibbins, Deputy Director of Linn County Conservation, continues to serve as the 1,000 Acres liaison with Monarch Research Project for planning, communications, implementation and MRP funding approvals for Linn County, Cedar Rapids and Marion pollinator zones. Each year, Linn County Conservation coordinates directly with the cities of Cedar Rapids and Marion to plan how many acres of pollinator zones will be proposed to the Monarch Research Project for funding approval.

Linn County also serves as a subject matter resource to partners, related groups, and landowners concerning establishment and management of native prairie in Linn County. Linn County Conservation continues to serve as the primary 1,000 Acres Initiative contact for media and presentations at local, regional and national association conferences. These have included the Iowa County Conservation System (IACCS), Iowa Parks and Recreation Association (IPRA), National Recreation and Parks Association (NRPA), Midwest-Great Lakes Chapter of the Society for Ecological Restoration (MWGL SER Chapter), Linn County Roadside Conference, Trees Forever Woodland Legacy Symposium, and others.

The 1,000 Acres Pollinator Initiative is truly an innovative effort at all levels. Collaboration with leading educational institutions, scientists, environmental non-profits, leading industry experts and partnering agencies like the Fish and Wildlife Service have supported an innovative, cutting edge approach to planning and implementation. This includes guidance in the latest research based best practices for site preparation, native prairie seeding methods, design of a specific seed mix for monarch and pollinator habitat support, community marketing and education, and collaboration at a level rarely seen in public/private initiatives. Monarch Research Project has financed cutting edge research including the building of a scientific laboratory, working field trials to

design monarch rearing tents scalable to sizes usable by organizations to individuals, creation of protocols and innovative use of mechanized maintenance equipment and annual community educational forums. Linn County and MRP have also employed a variety of traditional and new methods to prepare and plant sites depending on the season and land type. This has included use of seed, plugs, prairie sod, prairie seed drills, vicon-type spreaders, etc. Use of multi-faceted management protocols have included prescribed fire in urban areas never allowed before the initiative. Marketing efforts during the first year of the initiative (2017) garnered national media coverage and a viewership of over 70 million.

The 1,000 Acres Initiative really began as an educational effort to build a model public/private partnership, scalable to any size for other communities and agencies to use across the country. An enormous amount of behind the scenes relationship and collaborative development work was done before the public education and marketing campaign was launched. This included meetings with institutions such as the University of Northern Iowa Tallgrass Prairie Center, Kirkwood College, local agency and municipality leaders, environmental non-profits, etc. Community newsletters, web pages and social marketing materials were prepared. Early project field signage was created to be installed with each Pollinator Zone while longer term interpretive signage was developed later that first year. Presentations began at the local and regional level and then in 2018 to the national level at NRPA Indianapolis and the 2019 NRPA Pollinator Protection Strategies Webinar. Local citizens were also engaged through Parks Commissions, Neighborhood Association meetings and meetings on site with various park user groups and special event planners. Local media and newspapers covered the initiative and garnered additional interaction with interested public. The engagement effort has been so comprehensive we continue to get a steady stream of questions, from private organizations such as local churches who are now planting prairie. We also consulted directly with the Cedar Rapids School District for their plans to install pollinator prairie at their administrative headquarters. Volunteers and Master Gardeners who work at the Cedar Rapids Noelridge Park greenhouse also were engaged to produce native plant material to support the initiative.

Linn County and MRP has directly engaged numerous agencies and groups such as the US Fish and Wildlife Service concerning our work through their Illinois and Iowa Field Office Supervisor, Kraig McPeck. This agency was so impressed with the MRP and the 1,000 Acres Initiative that correspondence from Kraig in December of 2017 and 2019 stated, "Your work with municipalities to find and identify 1,000 acres to enhance and/or restore to pollinator habitat is nothing short of amazing." Additionally, we are working with environmental groups like Trees Forever, Master Gardeners, etc. Partnership with Kirkwood Community College is used in support of their Parks and Recreation courses such as prescribed fire management. Professors and students have brought out professional control burn equipment, along with Cedar Rapids or Marion Fire Departments to partner in controlled burning. This teaches the staff and public critical lessons as to the value of prescribed fire to manage these prairies. Additionally, Linn County, Cedar Rapids Parks, Marion Parks and MRP have shared equipment and staff support at times to accomplish planting goals each year. This is a bit unprecedented in itself for such close and supportive collaboration between 3 governments and a non-profit organization in one county.

In the first 3 years of the initiative (2017-2019), 802 of the 1,000 acres will have been installed with a funding level of about \$630,000 provided primarily by the Monarch Research Project through private donations and grants. Of this, Linn County Conservation has received \$315,174.19 in funding from MRP. With known viewership calculated at over 70 million by the spring of 2017, we can only guess at national viewership levels for this initiative to date. We have literally fielded calls from outside the country asking us questions about the keys to success of this initiative. One of the most enjoyable was a blogger in Australia writing a blog for a bee company in North Carolina. This initiative has been covered by Fox News, Popular Science, the Huffington Post, and many others. Even Bill Bradley's American Voices Program on Sirius/XM radio recorded and aired an interview about 1,000 Acres. Additionally, 1,000 Acres is highlighted during the annual Linn Landowner Forum hosted by Monarch Research Project. This forum is attended by hundreds of Linn County landowners and leaders who want to learn more about prairie establishment and management. In total, considering the acres installed, funding garnered, partnerships formed, media and educational components and county-wide engagement, this is one of the most successful public/private partnerships we have seen.

From the beginning, the agreement and commitment between Monarch Research Project, Linn County Conservation, Cedar Rapids Parks and Marion Parks has been that these Pollinator Zones funded and installed on public lands are long-term green infrastructure that will be maintained for the future generations to come. Planning and analysis for the 1,000 Acres included review of resource commitment by partners to install, maintain and sustain these prairies as community assets. This was possible because native habitat restoration is at the heart of the core values and community goals of the Linn County Board of Supervisors and the Linn County Conservation Board. We don't plan to stop after the 1,000 acres is complete! We see this initiative as a spring board to continued progress in pollinator habitat conversion in Linn County and beyond. During late spring of 2019, Linn County and the Monarch Research Project began conversation and support of a group of county, city and community leaders from Black Hawk County who want to replicate an initiative fitting to their community based on the 1,000 Acres Initiative model. Linn County and MRP will continue to promote these community wide native pollinator habitat initiatives across Iowa and beyond in an effort to turn the tide for the many native pollinators that are critical to human and environmental health.

Thank you for your consideration of this application.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Daniel Gibbins". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "D" and "G".

Daniel Gibbins

Deputy Director, Linn County Conservation

