



**WEST  
CREEK**  
CONSERVANCY

**Winter Newsletter**  
**2026**

*photo credit - Aimee Pearson*

# A NOTE FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

## Board of Directors

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Danielle Ticherich

*Finance & Operations Manager*

Danielle Dejak

*Stewardship & Outreach Coordinator*

Kelly Eppink

*Director of Development*

Steven Baker

*Director of Education*

From all of us at West Creek – wishing you a belated Happy New Year! And with the end of one year and beginning of the next, it’s a great opportunity to provide a wrap up of sorts. Amidst the noise and polarization of so much in our lives, we’ll again highlight that parks, trails, greenspace, and clean/accessible freshwater is something we would assume that all can all get behind.

West Creek is proud to report that over the past twelve months, 39 conservation projects have been completed, covering well over 1,000 acres, along with 12 restoration projects across Greater Cleveland and Northern Ohio.

West Creek is also enthralled to see three trail development initiatives take shape along the West Creek Greenway and the Clear Fork River. And importantly, these all happened with other big initiatives in the background like Irishtown Bend, the former Haydite mine, and a multi-county solar/conservation development – each of which made significant strides in 2025.

Protecting land, restoring water resources, and connecting people to these special places is the heart and soul of our mission – and it’s all been possible because of our amazing partners, volunteers, supporters and donors.

West Creek’s conservation efforts extend east to the Pymatuning, west to Sandusky, south past Mansfield and even into Columbiana County – but it’s not about acres or miles, it’s about impact, the partners and communities we serve and the legacy we get to leave for future generations.

If you’d ever like to get involved, learn more about a project, or even get onto a site with us, always feel free to reach out!

Cheers,

*Derek Schafer*

Derek Schafer, Executive Director



## Strengthening Our Impact: West Creek Conservancy & Spice Field Kitchen Unite

West Creek Conservancy and Spice Field Kitchen, a partner at Creekside Collaborative Partners, are proud to announce their merger uniting two mission-driven organizations to form a powerful new force for ecological restoration, food systems education, and community engagement across Northeast Ohio.

West Creek Conservancy, whose mission is to protect, restore, and connect natural spaces and communities, brings decades of leadership in land conservation and watershed restoration. Spice Field Kitchen, now known as **Creekside Field Kitchen**, is locally known for its innovative place-based education for both youth and adults, culinary programming, and has cultivated deep roots in food literacy, cultural storytelling, and sustainable agriculture.

The newly merged organizations will continue all existing programs under a unified strategic vision, with plans to expand educational offerings, deepen community partnerships, and increase access to green spaces and food education initiatives. You can expect a seamless transition and strengthened impact.

**Creekside Field Kitchen**, will not only continue its programming—it will be amplified. The merger allows for a greater reach, shared resources, and a more resilient platform for long-term sustainability and innovation.



# West Creek Conservancy Board Updates



## Welcome, Anne Juster

Anne is a lifelong educator and currently serves as President of the Martha Holden Jennings Foundation, where she supports creativity in Ohio's PK-12 public school. She is excited to bring her passion for teaching and learning to the West Creek Board, where there are powerful opportunities to advance place-based learning, culinary programming, and environmental stewardship.

A native of Northeast Ohio, Anne grew up exploring the forests, creeks, and meadows behind her home and developed a deep, lifelong connection to the natural world. To this day, she feels most alive when in the woods. She is eager to contribute to West Creek's mission and help ensure that future generations of Ohio children have the same opportunities to experience the transformative power of nature that shaped her own life.

## Farewell, Liz Boehm

On behalf of the entire West Creek Conservancy Board and staff, thank you, Liz, for your dedication and passion for our mission. Board and staff are particularly grateful for the vision, leadership, and expertise provided to improve West Creek marketing and communications processes and metrics.

While your presence on the board will certainly be missed, we know that the lasting impact you've made will help West Creek continue to thrive and grow. Thank you once again for your service, and we wish you nothing but success in your future endeavors.

-Mike Mohlenkamp, Board Chair



# West Creek Conservancy Welcomes New Staff



**Danielle Dejak** joined West Creek in May 2025, initially as a Seasonal Natural Resource and Outreach Assistant. She transitioned into the position of Stewardship and Outreach Coordinator in December. With a bachelor's degree in Environmental and Plant Biology she has a robust background in ecological stewardship, community education, and plant care.

Danielle oversees the operations at Creekside Collaborative Partners, organizes volunteer events that aid nursery tasks, and plays a key role in leading West Creek's Native Seed Library Program.

Danielle's lifelong love for exploring the outdoors has fueled her dedication to protecting natural spaces.



**Kelly Eppink** joined West Creek in November 2025 stepping into the role of Director of Development. With a wealth of experience in membership, donor relations, and event management within local nonprofits, she is eager to merge her professional expertise with her passion for nature and the outdoors. Kelly holds a Bachelor of Arts in English and a Master's in Education.

Hailing from Northeast Ohio, Kelly fondly recalls her childhood adventures exploring local parks and creeks with her family. These early experiences ignited her passion for conservation and her commitment to connecting Ohioans with the remarkable natural spaces that surround them.



**Steven Baker** is a former non-profit director and educator with over two decades experience in education and curriculum development, and his master's degree is in Curriculum and Instruction. He brings to West Creek a commitment to fostering food literacy, sustainable agriculture, and community empowerment through education.

Steven's vision is to cultivate a community that values the interconnectedness of people and nature, fostering a deeper appreciation for the resources that sustain us.

With strong curriculum creation and intervention strategies background, Steven has tailored his expertise, and focuses on standards-based food systems education and accessible programming that meets community needs.



**2025 BY THE  
NUMBERS**

**1102**

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**TOTAL ACRES PRESERVED**

**39**

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**COMPLETED PROJECTS**

**10**

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**COUNTY REACH**

**21**

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**COMMUNITY REACH**

**LIFETIME  
BY THE NUMBERS**

**336**

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**LIFETIME COMPLETED PROJECTS**

**6120**

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**LIFETIME ACRES PROTECTED**



## Conserving the Grand River Gorge

In early December of 2025, West Creek Conservancy completed a two-phased property acquisition along the state designated “wild” section of the Grand River Gorge in Painesville Township in Lake County. This project, in close partnership with Lake Metroparks, added almost a full mile of forested Grand River frontage, and just over 100 acres to an already existing massive parcel of open space, now totaling more than 3,700 acres and is currently owned and managed by Lake Metroparks.

West Creek worked diligently to acquire the two separate properties, and go under contract with the individual sellers. More than \$1,000,000 was fundraised to add key riverfront access to both Helen-Hazen Wyman Park and Hemlock Ridge Park. Funding for the project was provided by the Ohio Public Work Commission’s Clean Ohio Greens Space Conservation Fund, Ohio Department of Natural Resources H2Ohio program, and Rich and Barb Weiser.

The Grand River corridor of both properties—which contain incredible timber resources and several rare, threatened, and endangered species—will be available for access through adjacent parks with future plans for parking and trail access in the upland areas of each property. This newly protected space will safeguard the biodiversity that exists, as well as ensuring the health of the river ecosystem, benefitting many for years to come.

# Creekside Collaborative Partners



## Seed Libraries - Available Now!

Creekside Collaborative Staff are thrilled to share that the native seed library program has returned this year. West Creek has partnered with local public libraries to offer regionally appropriate native seeds which support pollinator pathways and help create resilient landscapes. By now, you should find multiple seed library locations across Northeast Ohio. To ensure these seeds have the best chance of success, Staff are also hosting Winter Sowing Workshops this February. Participants will learn simple at-home stratification techniques that mimic natural winter conditions, helping native wildflower seeds germinate reliably in the spring. Keep an eye on our social media, or visit [westcreek.org](http://westcreek.org) for seed library locations and workshop details.

Creekside extends their heartfelt thanks to the Ohio EPA's Ohio Environmental Education Fund (OEEF) and Cox Charities Northeast Fund for their generous grant support, as well as to Holden Forests & Gardens for their valued partnership. Their support helps this vision grow!

## Nursery Winter Wrap-up and Looking Ahead

Creekside Collaborative Partners have officially wrapped up another successful seed-collection season—and couldn't have done it without amazing volunteers! Thanks to their hard work, Creekside gathered an impressive range of native tree seeds that will play a vital role in strengthening local ecosystems.

Last year's collections have been either up-potted to grow bigger and stronger, or will be 'harvested' this spring as bare root saplings, which means they'll be gently uprooted and quickly installed in a recent restoration. As small saplings, they establish more quickly on project sites and require less resources than larger trees. The new seeds will soon support even more restoration efforts, and Staff are looking forward to watching them flourish in the air-pruning propagation tables.

**Save the date—Spring Plant Sale is scheduled for May 23!** Pre-orders will again be taken. If you'd like early selection and want to help expand native habitat across the region, you are invited to join our community of supporters.

## Creekside Field Kitchen

Hello everyone! I'm Steven Baker, the new Director of Education for West Creek Conservancy, and I'm thrilled to officially join this incredible team. Our recent merger represents a natural evolution of shared values—creating a unified organization that honors both legacies while expanding our ability to serve communities, steward ecosystems, and inspire the next generation of changemakers.

Over the past two years at the Creekside Collaborative Partners site in Parma, we've grown tremendously. From building a new hoop house and adding school partners, to offering community classes and summer camps, our agricultural and culinary programming continues to flourish. This year alone, we celebrated major milestones harvesting over 700 lbs of produce for culinary demos and community donations, and engaging 9,650 learners through field trips, classes, and camps.

As we look ahead, we're excited to keep growing—together. Thank you for being part of this journey to Protect. Restore. Connect.

-Steven Baker, Director of Education



**700+**

pounds of produce grown - used for culinary demonstrations and donated to the community

**9,650+**

participants in field trips, classes, camps and culinary lessons

## Volunteer Opportunities Ahead

As the winter season marches on, several volunteer opportunities will become available. Keep an eye out for upcoming events focused on wildflower seed stratification—staff and volunteers will be sowing more than 40 species in response to the enthusiastic feedback about requests for expanded species variety at our 2025 Fall Plant Sale.

Creekside Collaborative will also need helping hands to assemble rodent enclosures for young trees—an essential step in ensuring that newly planted seedlings survive their critical first years.

Continued support from our friends makes all of this work possible, and we look forward to collaborating with you in the months ahead. See below for a few upcoming events you can be a part of. Scan the below QR code for a full list of upcoming dates:



### SAVE THE DATE!

March 29 - Purple Martin House Raising Event  
with the Greater Cleveland Audubon Society

## A Green Beginning

“When I started my internship with West Creek Conservancy, I was quite “green” in the conservation world. Pun intended! I was an accounting student who had just begun exploring environmentalism through classes and clubs. After Derek spoke to one of my classes at Baldwin Wallace University, I knew I had to get involved with West Creek. I was so grateful to be given the internship with only accounting job experience under my belt.

I quickly learned so much about our local wetlands, the myriad of organizations that work tirelessly to preserve our lands, and how crucial fundraising can be for a non-profit. I was astounded to learn just how much hard work goes into conservation in Northeastern Ohio.

After my internship ended, I served as a Board Member for five years. Serving on the board reinforced just how vital West Creek Conservancy is to our region. Thank you to everyone, and can’t wait to see staff and supporters at Up! A Creek!”

-Maria Curcio



## WOULD YOU PLEASE CONSIDER A GIFT?

THERE ARE MANY WAYS TO GIVE AND BECOME A PARTNER IN OUR MISSION!

- I have enclosed my tax-deductible contribution to help with the mission of West Creek.
- I'd like to give the gift of appreciated stock.  
By donating stock that has appreciated, you are giving more than if you sold the stock and made a cash donation. In addition, you avoid capital gains taxes on the donation. Plus, you are still eligible to deduct the full fair market value of the asset you donated from your income taxes.
- I would like to make a monthly gift of \$\_\_\_\_\_.
- I would like to make a one-time pledge of \$\_\_\_\_\_.
- I would like to make a multi-year commitment and a pledge of \$\_\_\_\_\_.
- I would like to make a gift of \$\_\_\_\_\_ with a matching gift from my company.
- I would like to discuss a planned legacy gift.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

- Please send more information on making a gift to West Creek Conservancy through my will or estate plan
- I have already included West Creek Conservancy in my will or estate plan
- Email me updates on programs and member events.



  
**WEST CREEK**  
CONSERVANCY

P.O. Box 347113, Cleveland, OH 44134

**West Creek Conservancy is a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization. Your generous gift may be tax deductible to the extent permitted.**

**Please make checks payable to: West Creek Conservancy**



## Thank You for Joining Our Annual Holiday Party!

In December, West Creek held its annual holiday appreciation dinner—sponsored by **Chieftain Trucking and Excavating**—at the newly renovated Ridgewood Golf Course in Parma.

Staff, Board Members, Volunteers and Supporters gathered under the warm glow of holiday lights, and shared delicious food (catered by **Marigold Catering**), good news, and general revelry. West Creek announced the now effective merger with Creekside Field Kitchen, and it was met with great enthusiasm and encouragement.

The support West Creek receives and the commitment to the mission do not go unnoticed. Your involvement and enthusiasm inspire to continue our work with renewed vigor and dedication. As staff reflects on the past year, it is with grateful hearts. Here's to future success and more shared moments in 2026!



## Upcoming Events

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West Creek Annual Meeting  
April 14, 2026  
Ridgewood Golf Course

Up! A Creek  
September 19, 2026  
Windows on the River

For a full list of events, including our volunteer opportunities,  
please visit [www.westcreek.org](http://www.westcreek.org) or scan the QR code to the right.

