



## GROW Ecological Commission: Two Years of Environmental Action



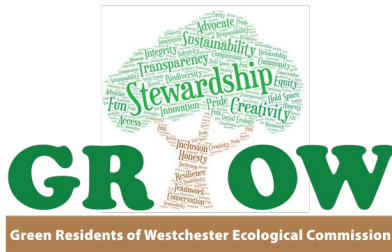
The Green Residents of Westchester (GROW) Ecological Commission is a volunteer group that advises the village and educates the community on environmental issues. We are critical partners in beautification and ecological decisions. The commission is responsible for preparing, achieving objectives of, and sustaining Westchester's Climate Action Plan.

### Highlights of our recent work:

**Native plants and landscaping:** Restoring native plant habitat is vital to preserving biodiversity, and can help reduce flooding.

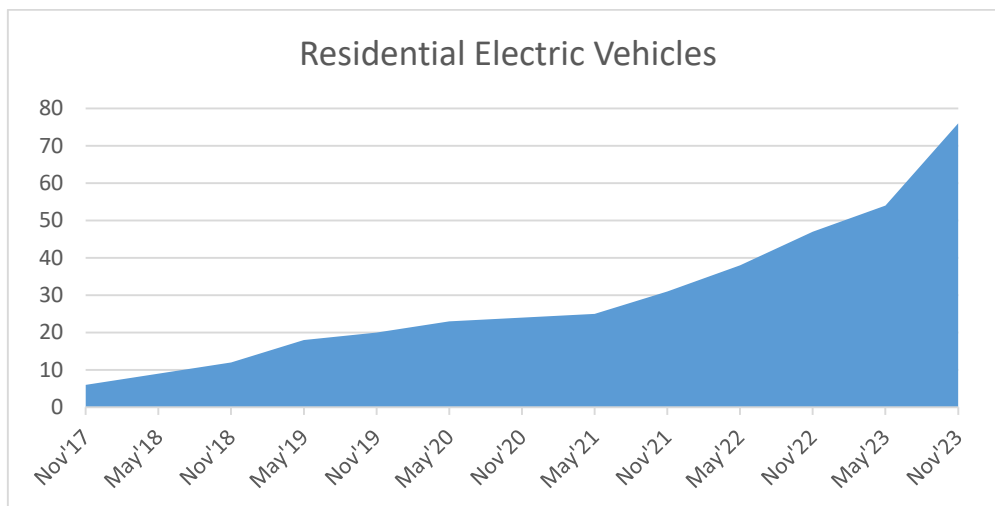
- Organized a native plant educational event and a plant sale with I Love Native Plants and Westchester Community Church.
- Held a sustainable landscaping education event with Midwest Grows Green/IPM Institute.
- Encouraged residents and children to appreciate nature by promoting events like the City Nature Challenge and the Villages' Arbor Day tree planting events at Westchester schools.

**Tree Care and Canopy Restoration:** Each year, Westchester's tree canopy provides \$1.8 million in ecosystem services that include carbon storage and sequestration, air pollution removal, and storm water interception (according to the Morton Arboretum 2020 Chicago Region Tree Census). They also can improve quality of life, increase property values, help foster good mental and physical health, and reduce surface temperatures.

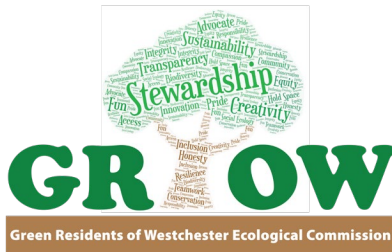


- Assisted the Village with writing two grants. A grant for \$25,000 was awarded for a comprehensive tree inventory and management plan for Village-owned trees. This will enable the Village to more efficiently build and maintain the canopy with an eye to age and species diversity.
- Distributed native tree saplings provided by the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District to residents during the Village’s shredding events.
- Distributed bookmarks highlighting the trees most commonly found within Westchester, as well as instruction tags for Public Works to provide to residents with newly planted trees.
- Advocated for the Cook County Forest Preserve Referendum and for the Village to update its Noxious Weeds Ordinance.

**Alternative Transportation:** One of the most effective ways to reduce acute and chronic respiratory ailments related to air pollution is to decrease the number of combustion vehicles on the road. This can be accomplished in many ways: carpooling, using public transportation, buying an electric or hybrid vehicle, walking or cycling. Walking and cycling are particularly impactful because they improve health.



*Figure 1*  
*Between, Nov'17 and Nov'23 the number of EVs in our village increased from 6 to 76, with the greatest increase occurring in 2023.*



- Collaborated with the Police Department to host two bike safety events (for adults and children).
- Featured alternative forms of transportation at the 4<sup>th</sup> of July parade: Mustang Mach-E, Tesla Y, and Volkswagen e-Golf and the Westchester Cycling Group
- Endorsed Westchester’s participation in Tour de Proviso, township-wide bike event.
- Recommended that the Village mitigate the impact on the environment without sacrificing needed functionality as Fleet Vehicles are due for replacement by: 1) considering total cost of ownership instead of capital and operating expenses separately (reference: Argonne National Laboratory), 2) planning for adequate EV charging functionality, and eventual re-evaluation of the need for underground fuel, and 3) considering staff input into new vehicle assessments while prioritizing EVs and hybrids.

**Solar Power:** Adding clean, renewable solar energy to the electrical grid will have the greatest impact on reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions.

- Hosted five solar events with Citizens Utility Board. The sessions covered rooftop solar, community solar, the *Illinois Solar for All* Program, and the opportunity to participate in the *GROW Solar Chicagoland* and *Solar Switch Chicagoland* group purchasing discounts.
- Recommended that the Village participate in the Chicago Metropolitan Mayors Caucus’ Community Solar Clearinghouse Solution, which will allow residents the opportunity to opt-in to this program.

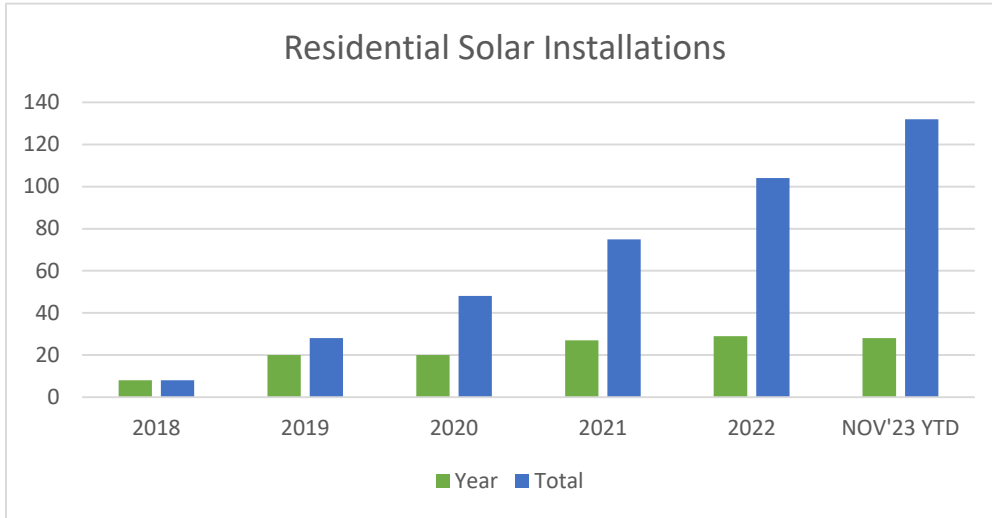
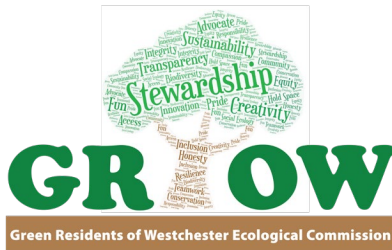


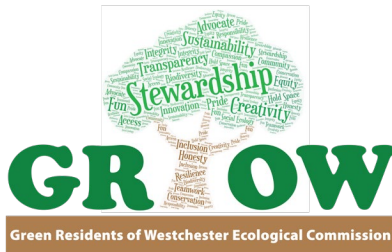
Figure 2: With the cost of solar energy coming down and enhanced State and Federal incentives in 2022, continued growth in solar installations and community solar (solar farm) subscriptions are anticipated.

**Reduce Green House Gas (GHG) Emissions:** Residential natural gas consumption is the greatest source of greenhouse gas equivalents in our community, and our community’s utilization of natural gas and electricity are significantly higher than the average for the metropolitan region, Cook County and our surrounding communities.

- Hosted two energy efficiency events with Nicor to inform our community about free in-home energy assessments, free and discounted energy savings devices, and incentives/rebates that may be available.
- Increased resident requests for Water Savings Kits (74 more kits) and Weatherization Kits (60 more kits) from the previous year.

**Minimize waste:** Globally, landfills are the 3rd largest producers of methane gas, which traps 80 times more heat than carbon dioxide during its first 20 years in the atmosphere.

- Hosted a composting educational event and met residents to highlight the benefits of composting at Tour de Proviso.
- Held two annual Reuse-a-palooza events yard sale and reuse festival weekends. Over 170 houses participated in Reuse-a-palooza each year.
- Provided opportunities for residents to have their holiday pumpkins and gourds composted by providing “Pumpkin Smash” collection bins.
- Gave feedback on the waste/recycling contract scope of services and ideas to help the Village reduce its landfilled waste. The suggestions included educational



events/materials on acceptable materials in curbside recycling, right-sized services to incentivize residents to reduce solid waste, and options to compost organic waste, among others.

**Prepare for climate change:** Scientists are clear about the reality of climate change and with devastating storms, dangerous floods, melting glaciers, and rising seas becoming increasingly regular part of life. We need to start working on ways to reduce the impact of climate change.

- Reviewed various climate mitigation strategies, their costs and benefits, and drafted a Climate Action Plan, which was unanimously supported by the Commission.
- Encouraged acting Village President, Nick Steker to join other local mayors in signing a Memorandum of Understanding to work collaboratively to reduce GHG emissions and other air pollutants in our area by joining the C4 - Cross Community Climate Collaborative. The Memorandum of Understanding has been adopted by the full Village board, and was presented at the Nov. 28<sup>th</sup> board meeting, and will be voted on — presumably favorably — by the time of publication.

## **Our 2024 goals:**

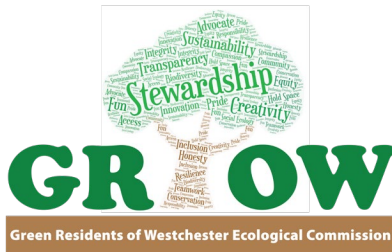
GROW is committed to continuing to work with the community to make Westchester a more sustainable and environmentally friendly place to live. In the coming year, GROW plans to focus on the following:

### **Take action:**

- Continue to develop Westchester's Climate Action Plan in collaboration with the Village.
- Increase resident engagement in sustainable landscaping, composting, and other ecological initiatives that benefit residents.

### **Educate:**

- Inform the community about water quality and sustainability.



- Increase awareness about air pollution, how it impacts health, and actions that can be taken.
- Identify rebates and tax incentives for residents interested in considering electric vehicles and electric appliances.
- Continue to provide information on solar technology and financial incentives for homeowners and renters, regardless of income.

### **Increase funding & partnerships:**

- Identify opportunities to secure funding for additional environmental projects
- Strengthen connections within our community and with our partners: Cook County Forest Preserve, Wolf Road Prairie, the Grassroots Garden Group, Park District, Westchester Public Library, the schools, the Illinois Extension Service, and within Proviso Township.

## **Get Involved!**

**2024 GROW Meeting Dates:** We usually meet 1st Thursday of the month at 6:30 PM (\*unless noted) in the board room of village hall.

January 11th\*, February 1st , March 7th , April 4th, May 2nd , June 6th , July 11th\*, August 1st , September 5th, October 3rd , November 7th , December 3rd\*.

### **There are many ways to participate in GROW activities:**

1. **Attend GROW events:** we host a number of events, workshops, and giveaways each year, promote them in the newsletter as well as the Westchester website, and email blast.
2. **Share your ideas and concerns at our monthly meeting:** Help us make Westchester a greener and more sustainable community. We meet monthly at village hall – meeting dates are listed here and on the village website.
3. **Read GROW agendas, meeting minutes, reports** on the village website <https://www.westchester-il.org/>.