

EASTON

\$11M science center proposed in Easton for field trips, visitors, research

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Easton Iron and Metal is seen in August 2018 at 1111-13 Bushkill Drive. lehighvalleylive.com file photo

The nonprofit [Nurture Nature Center](#) in [Easton](#) secured city support Wednesday night for its ambitious vision of a new attraction catering to local school groups, residents, researchers and tourists along the Bushkill Creek.

The science and creativity center is proposed for the former Easton Iron and Metal scrapyards that the city purchased and is working with Mark Mulligan's Easton-based VM Development Group to revitalize as a mixed-use redevelopment. A planetarium is included in the new center's plans, along with indoor and outdoor spaces for education and activities.

In the works for about two years already, the new Nurture Nature Center on the site was presented in September as part of VM Development's plans for [150 homes and 20,000 square feet of commercial space](#) there. Nurture Nature [last spring detailed plans for the center](#), but it wasn't until Wednesday night's meeting of Easton City Council that funding details were discussed publicly.

Council voted 4-0 to apply for a \$4 million federal grant for the project. According to the grant proposal, Easton would commit \$2 million to the estimated \$11 million project, through grants or tax-increment financing (TIF). Bethlehem created a TIF to set aside a portion of real estate taxes for funding improvements to the former Bethlehem Steel Corp. plant now home to SteelStacks and WLVT-PBS39. The nonprofit Nurture Nature Foundation would kick in another \$4 million to match the [grant being sought from the U.S. Economic Development Authority](#).

Pursuing the grant is a first step toward making the new center a reality, Mayor Sal Panto Jr. said. He voted for the grant proposal along with Councilmen David O'Connell and Roger Ruggles and Councilwoman Taiba Sultana. Councilmen Ken Brown, James Edinger and Peter Melan were absent.

Nurture Nature opened its doors 10 years ago at 518 Northampton St. in Easton but has outgrown the space for the kind of environmental education it wants to do, Executive Director Rachel Hogan Carr told council.

"The building was just simply not designed for his purpose and so we've kind of outgrown ourselves," she said of the 1914 structure once home to the Independent Order of Odd Fellows.



Nurture Nature Center Executive Director Rachel Hogan Carr presents plans for a new environmental education center on the former Easton Iron and Metal site along Bushkill Drive, during the Wednesday, Jan. 12, 2022, meeting of Easton City Council. easton-pa.com

The center has already secured buy-in on its new proposal from area school superintendents excited about the prospect of a local state-of-the-art field-trip destination.

City officials described the federal grant as a once-in-a-generation opportunity to help fund the new center on the scrapyards site at 1111-13 Bushkill Drive. It would tie in across the Bushkill Creek to the Karl Stirner Arts Trail by way of a trestle in need of restoration, Panto said.

The scrapyards site itself is in need of remediation before it can be redeveloped. Toward that end, Easton in November contracted with the Lehigh Valley-based Helmer Co. to design an environmental cleanup plan at a cost of \$40,000. Bethlehem-based HDR Engineering Inc. is also working with Easton to address petroleum and heavy metal

contamination at the site resulting from its operation as a scrapyard since the mid-1990s, according to a [legal advertisement](#) published this week. The cleanup is expected to take about two years, said Easton Public Works Director David Hopkins.

The Nurture Nature Center got its start addressing Easton's recurring flooding problems, and has grown into a nationally respected organization now assisting the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and NASA with research and risk modeling, according to Wednesday night's discussion before city council.

"So what we're proposing and what we're dreaming of now is Nurture Nature Center but bigger and better," Hogan Carr said. "It's going to be more community science, more art, more dialogue, more national research and we've got some great community ... college partners and we've partnered with colleges and universities across the country as well. We hope to become even deeper embedded in that work in a new larger facility, and we want to have a layout that's built to do this and that will be able to accommodate more school groups."

The center recently hosted an open house for school superintendents across the Lehigh Valley and from Warren, Hunterdon and Morris counties in New Jersey, resulting in numerous letters of support for the federal funding. Two of those superintendents spoke highly of the proposal Wednesday before council — Easton Area schools Superintendent David Piperato and North Warren Regional Superintendent Sarah Bilotti.



North Warren Regional School District Superintendent Sarah Bilotti addresses Easton City Council on Wednesday, Jan. 12, 2022, about the benefits of a proposed new Nurture Nature Center facility, alongside Easton Area schools Superintendent David Piperato, from left, and city Administrator Luis Campos. easton-pa.com

“The one I would say takeaway from that in addition to just the excitement that I saw in the room after Ms. Carr’s presentation was people just didn’t realize that something this spectacular was right here,” Bilotti said, noting the appeal for field trips and professional development.

“One of the things that I think we often struggle with is that if we want to go to a science center we have to go to Newark or Philadelphia,” she continued. “And even pre-COVID, school districts, especially elementary schools, are hesitant to send students that far.”

Easton had been working with the Allentown-based Da Vinci Science Center on building a new facility on a former hotel site the city purchased at 185 S. Third St., before Da Vinci decided to move the project to Allentown. That property is now planned to be redeveloped by Bethlehem-based Peron Development as a mixed-use residential, commercial and entertainment project known as The Confluence.

Easton chose Peron for that project, VM Development for Easton Iron and Metal and J.B. Reilly's Allentown-based City Center Investment Corp. for redeveloping the Pine Street parking garage through citizen committees charged with reviewing proposals and recommending the projects, which then received city council backing.

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