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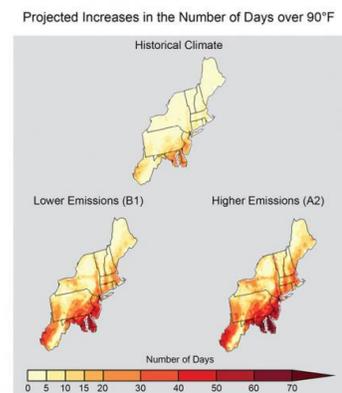Phone: 917-620-2006
For Immediate Release

Heat Island Initiative Expanded by Groundwork Hudson Valley During Sultry Summer

A project linking climate risks to racial justice in Yonkers receives a boost from the Kresge Foundation, the NY State Office of Environmental Justice, The JPB Foundation, and Groundwork USA
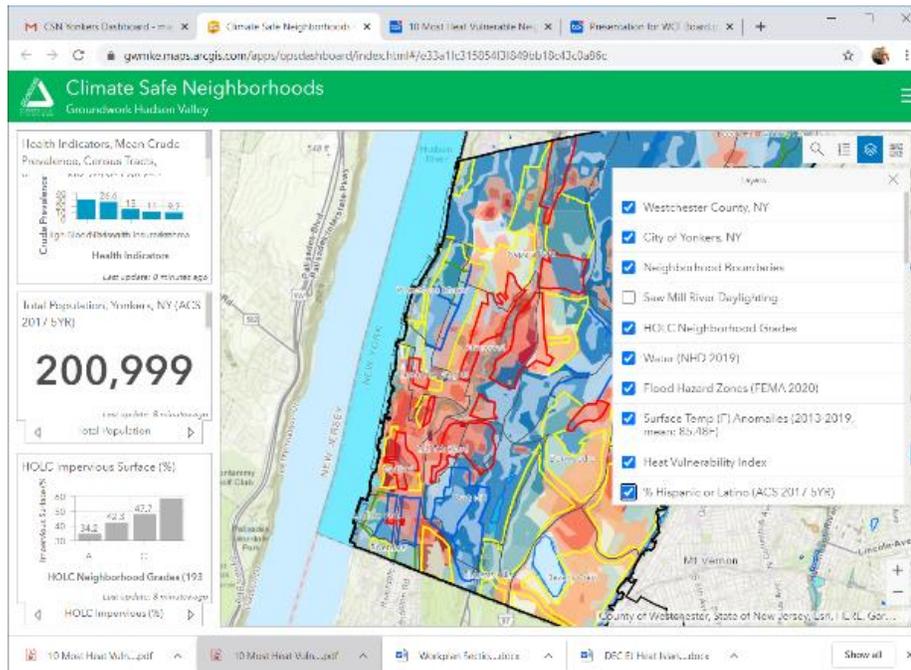
July 15th, 2020 – As part of a national heat awareness campaign in cities across the U.S., Groundwork Hudson Valley was awarded $165,000 in funds to complete an intensive study of heat-related risks across the City of Yonkers related to climate change. The funding is being provided by the Kresge Foundation, the NY State Office of Environmental Justice, and The JPB Foundation to examine areas of high heat intensity, known as heat islands, throughout the city of 200,000+ people through the use of current satellite imagery and cross-referenced data on historic redlining, income, race, health issues, flooding and sea level rise. The results will guide the development of new mitigation efforts and educational campaigns in areas of Yonkers highlighted by the study as most at risk to this issue. Data collected to date indicates that the most vulnerable neighborhoods overlap with the city's historically redlined communities. The research is being carried out in partnership with Groundwork USA under its national Climate Safe Neighborhoods Partnership.

"The need to get the best possible, site specific data on this topic is especially urgent for our community," says Groundwork's Executive Director Brigitte Griswold, "given that temperatures are accelerating across the country and historically redlined neighborhoods are most vulnerable to heat and climate-related risks." Already, extreme heat causes more deaths in the U.S. than all other weather-related causes combined, according to National Oceanic and

Projected Increases in the Number of Days over 90°F
Historical Climate
Lower Emissions (B1)   Higher Emissions (A2)
Number of Days
0 5 10 15 20   30   40   50   60   70

Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), with the effects more pronounced in urban areas. Reducing urban heat exposure is an equity issue, as low-income communities and people of color are more likely to live in neighborhoods with older buildings, low tree cover, more heat-retaining surfaces, and limited access to coping mechanisms such as air conditioning. These neighborhoods are are also especially vulnerable to wind and flooding that destroy properties and power outages that disrupt cooling efforts. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported last month that 10,527 deaths can be attributed to high heat from 2004-2018, with 90% of the fatalities occurring between May–September. Like Covid-19, certain populations are at much higher risk for the direct and indirect consequences of heat, including those with cardiovascular, hypertension, and pulmonary diseases. The elderly have the highest death rate from heat and heat waves are especially dangerous to pets, outdoor workers, and the uniformed services. NOAA predicts that the New York metro area will see a dramatic rise in 90 degree+ days in the next fifty years. And the region is also expected to see a significant increase in heavy rainfall leading to flooding, a process that is already clear in the meteorological data.

The funding is allowing Groundwork to compile, map and organize all available data related to heat intensity across Yonkers, while adding GIS layers related to demographics, health, and environmental risks, which will be compared to other cities in the partnership. Technical support is being provided by the New School Urban Systems Lab, the City of Yonkers, Sarah Lawrence College Department of Economics, Groundwork USA, Westchester County, CAPA Strategies, and NASA DEVELOP. The data will be used to engage community, business, and government stakeholders in a shared effort to identify and prioritize mitigation efforts to abate the worst impacts of extreme heat and flooding.

"As we continue to make Yonkers more resilient to our changing climate, this initiative is playing an important role in identifying areas of our city most susceptible to extreme heat exposure and helping further develop preventative measures to safeguard communities from the impacts of more frequent and severe weather events," said Yonkers Mayor Mike Spano.

The heat issue is of great concern to the Municipal Housing Authority of the City of Yonkers, which houses thousands of low- and moderate-income families in areas initially identified by Groundwork as most vulnerable to heat hazards and other climate risks. Wilson Kimball, the agency's new President & CEO and former Commissioner of Planning and Development, said "We cannot ignore how hot it has been this summer and think that business can continue as usual without finding ways to adapt the properties we manage and the properties our Section 8 tenants live in to this new reality." It is especially challenging now, she worries, "given that more residents are staying in their homes due to the pandemic. Well-functioning air conditioning is a priority for the agency as is providing Covid-safe cooling centers for those who need it and to prepare for blackouts combined with excessive heat warnings."

The agency, along with other key business, government, and community stakeholders, is beginning to work with Groundwork to evaluate its properties so that longer term solutions can be addressed through additional tree cover, shade structures, reflective paint, and hydration stations.

About Groundwork Hudson Valley: Groundwork Hudson Valley creates sustainable environmental change in urban neighborhoods through community-based partnerships that promote equity, youth leadership and economic opportunity. For twenty years, Groundwork has made neighborhoods more livable and sustainable through an array of on-the-ground environmental projects that directly involve local residents. We restore rivers and build trails, parks, and playgrounds. We engage community members in all of our work – with a particular focus on educating and employing young people.