In 2015 Kim Hines had a problem that unbeknownst to her the Augusta Canal Authority would one-day help to remedy. Hines, Executive Director of Augusta Locally Grown (ALG), hit a snag with a new project, Harrisburg Home Gardens (HHG). HHG aimed to encourage residents in the Harrisburg neighborhood to grow their own food by installing free home gardens.

However a major complication arose for HHG because the native soil was contaminated with heavy metals from nearby industrial mills, the Sibley and Enterprise Mills. In order to ensure healthy home gardens Hines would need to source all of the soil from outside of downtown Augusta.

Hines recognized HHG would require a hefty, on-going expense of topsoil and soil amendments, or compost, to maintain the gardens each season. Determined to make HHG successful, Kim purchased soil and compost from regional farms outside Augusta but knew she needed a long-term solution to keep project expenses at low-cost.

Nearby, the Augusta Canal Authority was struggling to keep up with canal maintenance required in warmer months, when an abundance of invasive aquatic plants grow. If left untouched, for just two weeks, water hyacinth and Brazilian elodea, form a dense mat that clog the turbines of underwater hydro-generators used by local government and businesses. The overgrowth also deteriorates the health of the underwater environment, restricting light and depleting oxygen levels.

Clearing the canal requires a maintenance crew, several days per week, removing on average 2-3 truckloads. Weeds are hauled to a landfill but in peak months the city struggles to coordinate enough trucks. Extra loads are dumped at a nearby clearing, at the dead-end of Goodrich Street, where the canal's footbridge begins on Eve Street.
It was this temporary dumping ground that first caught Hines' eye. On her visits to a nearby housing community, she'd often explore a vacant site on Eve Street and dreamed of its potential. That’s when she noticed the careful, yet conspicuous, strides of passersby. Curious of their destination, she’d watch visitors approach the mountain of old weeds with buckets--working quickly to dig beneath the wilted leaves and fanged roots--to scoop out the bottom, or dark loam of newly forming peat. When Hines would greet these visitors, she’d hear a familiar refrain, "This is the best stuff for tomato growing!"

It was these chance encounters, Hines would later recount in conversations with Dr. Donna Wear, a friend and biology professor at Augusta University. And then later when she sought the advice of Mike Smith, a compost expert and farmer at Longleaf Plantation in Newington, GA. Smith, who’s taught composting principles all over the world, shared this insight when visiting Augusta, "First rule of composting, use what you got." Through Wear and Smith, Hines confirmed the invasive weeds were a potential source of organic matter to make compost. When Hines shared the compost idea with David Young, a local farmer, it didn’t take any convincing for him to join forces. As a team they quickly got to work identifying needs, support, and community partners. While Young jumped into planning a simple three-chamber design for a compost operation.

Navigating Partnerships

One of the first steps was finding a suitable location for composting. There were a few acres of vacant land near the Sibley Mill, next to the Eve Street footbridge. It seemed ideal to Hines and Young to be close to the source of weeds, and within the Harrisburg community they served. The only issue, the land was owned by the Augusta Canal Authority (ACA) and designated to be an overflow parking lot for Savannah River tourists.

Rather than give up on the project, they persisted and used their social capital as community leaders to garner ACA support for the project. Six months later ACA authorized a portion of the land for Sibley Soilworks in their site plans. During the site design phase, ACA also granted ALG weekly access to an on-site pavilion to host its weekly farmer’s market, the Veggie Park Farmer’s Market. The vacant site Hines once dreamed and watched passersby was now becoming a community asset, and much more than the average parking lot.


June 2016: Augusta Canal Authority grants use of land.


Sept. 2017: Sibley Soilworks grand-opening and trial tests begin.

Aug. 2019: Compost passes safety trials, and deemed safe for food production!
Young took the lead on operations and logistics, recruiting and supervising a crew of 30 volunteers to clear brush and erect fencing around the perimeter of the site. He negotiated with the City of Augusta for the use of their waste management dump trucks to transport gravel that would cover the ground of the site. Finally, ACA agreed to coordinate deliveries of weeds to the site. Over time, Hines and Young identified other types of organic waste to compost with the aquatic weeds, such as horse manure, coffee grounds from a local cafe, and donations of organic waste from local farms.

An important aspect of the Sibley Soilworks has been determining if the compost it produces is clean enough to grow food. Similar to the ground in Harrisburg, the canal waters are contaminated with heavy metals. With Dr. Wear’s scientific expertise, the team knew the canal weeds were excellent at absorbing and filtering contaminants but they weren’t sure if the heavy metals would cycle out of the decomposing plant matter, and if so how quickly toxins breakdown before the waste was safe for use.

Under the leadership of Dr. Wear, Augusta University students began testing compost samples in the Fall of 2017. So far the compost has tested well, free of toxins. The final phase of testing involved growing food with the compost to ensure consumption is safe. In a Spring 2019 trial carrots were planted, harvested, and tested for contaminants and the compost was deemed safe for food production. Now that they’re through the initial testing and trial period, Sibley Soilworks compost will finally be available for public use.

For Dr. Wear, who grew up eating from a home garden, she wants to help Augusta residents do the same. But she also wants to foster personal connections to the environment by creating easy remediation methods for toxins that so often plague our urban environments.

In the future, Hines and Young hope to see the project expand in both scale and scope, with employees and retail sales. Though still in its start-up phase, Sibley Soilworks has fostered relationships that go beyond what you might expect at first glance—relationships between businesses, community members, academic researchers, and city leaders. Sibley Soilworks is about residents building healthier soil for healthier lives, together.

Learn more: augustalocallygrown.org