

February 2, 2024

Aaron Staup  
City of Novi  
26300 Lee Begole Dr  
Novi, MI 48375-1247

Dear Aaron,

Thank you for being a special partner for a clean water future in Metro Detroit. Thanks to your support, 2023 was a wonderful year for engaging Friends in hands-on action and education for a better Rouge River.

Friends of the Rouge (FOTR) continued to expand engagement with community. New for 2024, the expansion of advocacy work to elevate priority watershed issues and amplify community voices for the Rouge River. Also new this January, FOTR kicked off an 8-month strategic planning process to build on the strengths, successes, and learnings from the last 5 years of growth, which included significant increases in reported revenue (\$0.7 to \$1.8M), staff (8 to 16), and impact (see 2023 attached impact sheet).



Image: Friends planting trees along the Lower Rouge River, Spring 2023.

In 2023, FOTR empowered Metro Detroiters to save their River and become a part of the solution for: water pollution, habitat loss, flooding, heat, and inequitable access to green spaces. 2023 highlights include:

- 701 Rouge River outreach, action & education events
- over \$4 million in earned media to spread Rouge River awareness
- 12,998 Friends engaged in programming
- over 8,245 hours of river and environmental education
- expansion of emerging invasive species monitoring
- launch of the “Rain Catchers Collective” a collaboration between the Huron River Watershed Council, Friends of the Detroit River, the Clinton River Watershed Council, and Friends of the Rouge, to bring green infrastructure solutions to Southeast Michigan

Your valued partnership and committed investment makes all of this and more possible. You are warmly invited to further explore the impact that you make. Then, let us know how we can better serve you to meet your environmental and sustainability goals.

Sincerely,

*Lara Edwards*

Lara Edwards, Development Director

CC Rebecca Runkel

**Friends  
of the ROUGE**

# 2023 Marketing & Community Engagement Report

## *Engaging Community—Action, Advocacy & Education*

**Almost 13,000 Friends from across Metro Detroit engaged with Friends of the Rouge in:** riverside student education; community science to track frogs, toads, bugs and fish; invasive species monitoring and removal; river clean-ups; logjam workdays; water trail builds, rain garden creation, tree planting, and Rouge River recreation. With your support, together, we are a movement for a more vibrant River community: more River stewards, more hands-on riverside education, less flooding, more robust River habitat, enhanced access to the Rouge River, and cleaner water.



Image: Metro Detroit Residents of all ages participated in new residential home rain garden builds. Above, two volunteers take a break from planting Detroit Rukiya Colvin's new rain garden.

## *Earned Media Reach*



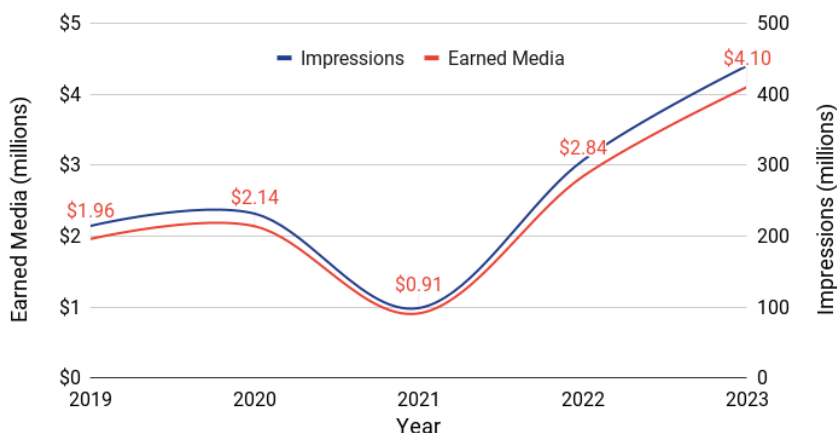
In 2023, Friends of the Rouge continued engagement with Robar Media in collaboration with watershed groups in Southeast Michigan for enhanced exposure and attention to the work of making a better Rouge River possible. **The Ad Value Equivalency, or earned media, for this attention was valued at a record \$4.1 million—a 40% growth over 2023.**

The continued growth in media exposure and reach reflects the growth of the organization's impact and influence as the voice of the Rouge River.

Above left: Image WXYZ Detroit: Friends of the Rouge Executive Director Marie McCormick speaks with reporter Faraz Javed on the proposed Salem Township wastewater facility, December 20, 2023

Below left: Graph - Impressions (millions) and Earned Media (millions) over time.

Highlights of news coverage on page 7.





## Impact Spotlight : Culvert Inventories for Healthy Fish

**The Team:** Michigan Department of Natural Resources, US Fish & Wildlife, and Friends of the Rouge with Wayne County, Washtenaw County, and Canton Township

**The Problem:** Culverts are tunnels built under roads or railroads for the uninterrupted flow of streams. If improperly sized, culverts may impede fish from moving “across the road”. This can segment fish communities and create barriers to habitat access. Improperly sized culverts may disrupt reproduction, feeding, and ultimately the success and survival of impacted Michigan fish.

**The Opportunity:** The Michigan DNR contacted Friends of the Rouge to assess fish passage issues at culverts along the Lower Rouge River. FOTR scored culverts for a prioritized list to inform local partners of the culverts that pose the greatest threat to native fish success.

**The Impact:** Thanks to the injection of funds from the “Bipartisan Infrastructure Law” (BIL), Metro Detroit will have improved roadways. **And now—with priority culverts identified and scored by FOTR—culvert reconstruction improvements for safe fish passage can dovetail road reconstruction along the Lower Rouge River.** What was once a barrier will become a “road” for fish success!

Images: (top) Rouge River culvert with debris limiting flow; (middle) FOTR & Wayne Co. surveying streams to score culverts; (bottom, credit Robert Muller) Northern Logperch will likely be positively impacted by culvert improvements that result from this project.



## Website Reach

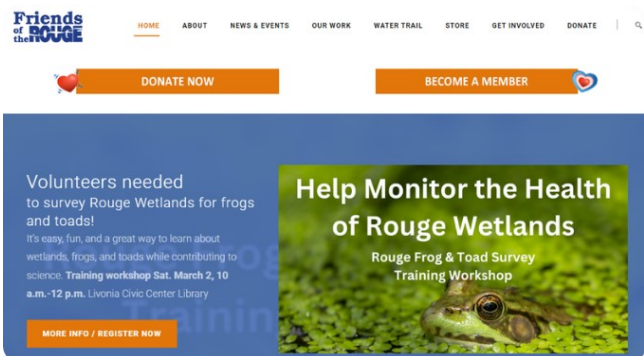


Image: Current FOTR homepage example.

Year	Users	Sessions	Bounce Rate	Session Duration
2023	56,000	44,000	44.8%	1m 19s
2022	62,000	86,900	66.67%	1m 29s
2021	58,000	79,000	61.58%	1m 36s
2020	48,000	67,000	60.27%	2m 8s

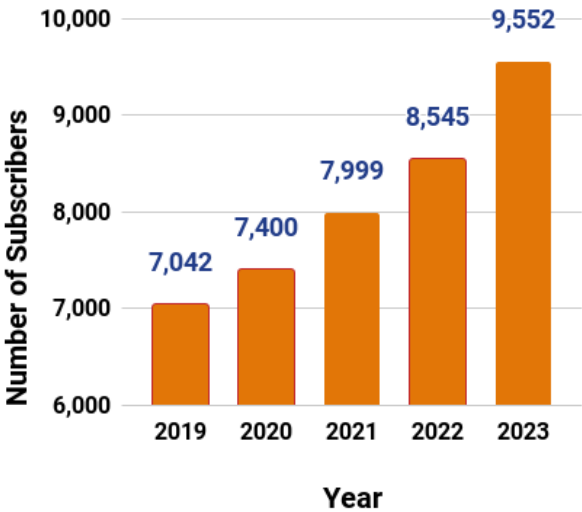
Graph: Users and usability has decreased in 2023.

**In 2023, the FOTR website experienced a sharp decrease in users and sessions over 2022 and 2021.** 2023 was a transition year for the FOTR website. A full redesign to optimize usability, enhance aesthetics, lower bounce rates, and provide clearer calls to action was in progress and the focus of staff time. FOTR eagerly anticipates the new site launch in 2024.

The “Rouge Rundown” e-newsletter for the Win!



Your logo belongs in the *Rouge Rundown*! FOTR’s bi-weekly e-newsletter grew in audience from 2019 to 2023 by 36% with mass email open rates consistently between 36-41%. Email—including the e-newsletter—continues to be FOTR’s most broad-reaching and effective tool to engage Friends to take action.



Images: The *Rouge Rundown* shares impact opportunities, State and local River news, community-science findings, and highlights Friends, partners, and supporters.

Graph: The number of “Rundown” subscribers is nearing 10,000 with 36% growth over 5 years!

YouTube Channel Reach: Calls of the Wild

YouTube viewership contracted significantly in 2023 over 2022—a reflection of the large shift from virtual to in-person education. With less new original content released, and qualitative evidence of declining interest in “online meetings”, views were down 86%. The most popular videos in 2023 were longtime beloved favorites: the heavily referenced frog calls from the free and permanent YouTube collection @FriendsoftheRouge.

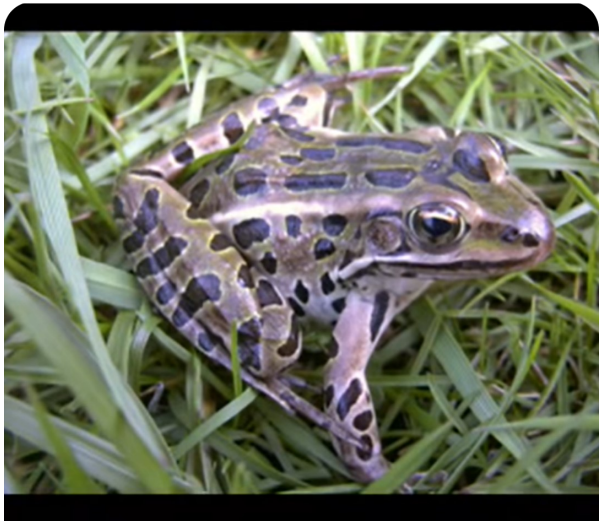


Image: And the winner for FOTR’s most watched YouTube Video in 2023: The call of the Northern Leopard Frog!

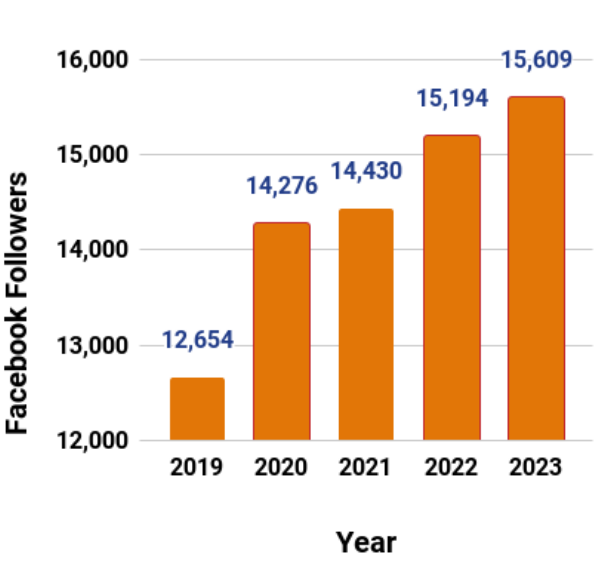
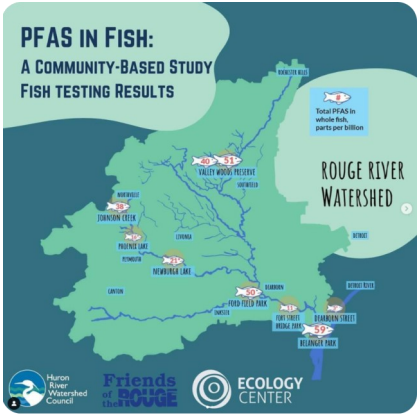
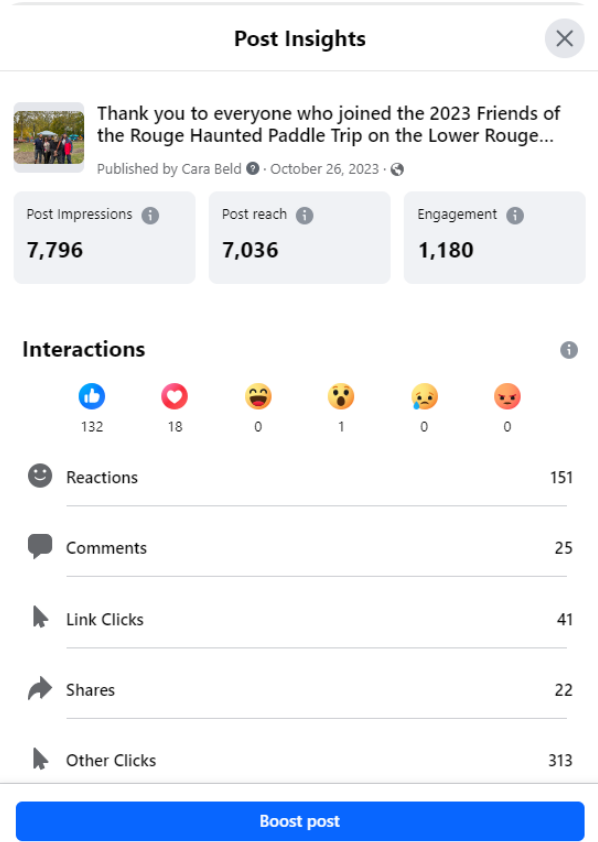
	2023	2022	2021	2020
Views	8,565	59,090	51,927	13,015
Hours of Watch Time	395.7	690.6	581.4	385.2
Impressions	39,791	50,400	294,034	62,228



# Engaging Community via Social Media

FOTR leveraged social media to share event information, news stories, event recaps, impact stories, fundraisers, River facts, and sponsor recognition.

**FOTR “followers” grew on Instagram and Facebook.** FOTR did not remove its platform from X (formerly Twitter) but will no longer focus there to reach and engage community. The largest social media audience continues to engage via Facebook—57% of whom are ages 55 and older. Instagram grew in reach and followers to capture a younger demographic—62% of whom are between the ages of 25-44. Combined, these platforms reach a broad audience of Friends.



Instagram	2023	2022	2021	2020
Followers	1,766	1,346	1,059	600
Reach	25,545	15,296	13,770	10,290
Impressions	84,300	75,833	89,862	12,118

Images: From 2023—(Top left) Rouge River Haunted Paddle Facebook post generates “buzz”; Instagram Posts (squares clockwise from top right) PFAS in Fish data graphic; student science at the Rouge River; Paddle trip “before” photo; residential rain garden install; (bottom left) Facebook follower growth over time; (bottom right) an increase in all Instagram metrics in 2023 over 2022.



## *Partners in Advocacy and Boots-on-the-ground solutions*

A better River takes a village. In 2023, Friends of the Rouge collaborated with over 200 community partners. From neighborhood associations to universities, local to national nonprofits, the work of building a more vibrant future is complex and done best with a wide net of community participation, reflective of the most diverse and populated watershed in the State.

Images: (top) EGLE Mussel expert Amanda Chambers leads Michigan Mussel clinic; (bottom left) Detroit Zoo Conservation Student Intern discovers the art and science of “bug hunting”; (bottom middle) kayak birding trip with Detroit Audubon; (bottom right) packed house for rain garden workshop with UM SEAS and the UM Graham Institute.



## *The Rouge Cruise*



It was a “Bon” Voyage for the 2023 Rouge Cruise! The biennial Fundraiser featured a sold-out boat, perfect weather (all images), live narration from FOTR Watershed Ecologist “Captain Sally Petrella” (top right), a view of the Gordie Howe bridge mid-build (bottom right)! **See you on land for the Heart of the Rouge in 2024!**



## 2023 News Coverage: Select Highlights

December 20, 2023

**WXYZ Detroit:** Proposed Salem Township wastewater treatment facility may be in jeopardy as Plymouth Township objects

November 17, 2023

**C&G News:** The Friends of the Rouge discover discharge in Booth Park

October 18, 2023

**Fox 2 Detroit:** Friends of the Rouge hosting its Annual Haunted Paddle

October 9, 2023

**CBS Detroit:** Friends of the Rouge tells you to Leave the Leaves this fall

August 5, 2023

**University of Michigan SEAS:** The Rain Garden Ripple Effect

June 28, 2023

**The Detroit News:** Michigan activists seek policies to curb pollution in industrial neighborhoods

June 16, 2023

**Fox 2 Detroit:** LaNita's Pocket Park sparks new life into old Detroit neighborhood

June 15, 2023

**Fox 2 Detroit:** National Canoe and Kayak Day

May 1, 2023

**Michigan Radio:** Once beset by industrial pollution, Rouge River on a slow path to recovery

April 24, 2023

**Hometown Life:** Dam good news: Beavers came back to Rouge River and decided to stay

April 20, 2023

**The Detroit News:** How to celebrate Earth Day in Metro Detroit this year

March 15, 2023

**The Detroit News:** Dearborn to pump \$30M in public parks, including upgrades to Camp Dearborn

March 14, 2023

**Detroit Free Press:** Beavers reclaim land in southeast Michigan

March 7, 2023

**WDET 101.9FM:** New study shows all fish tested from Huron and Rouge Rivers have PFAS

February 8, 2023

**Press & Guide:** Got frogs? Help the Friends of the Rouge find out

January 20, 2023

**Great Lakes Echo:** Toxic hotspot builds nontoxic community engagement



Image FOX 2 Detroit: FOTR Trails Manager Herman Jenkins with FOX 2 Detroit on June 16, 2023 to feature National Canoe & Kayak Day AND a re-match kayak race between Fox 2's Derek Kevra and Herman.

## Thank you! See you on the River in 2024!