

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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A Community-Led Groundwater Protection Plan in South Memphis Receives National Funding

MEMPHIS, TN—On May 28, 2025, Protect Our Aquifer (POA) and Alcy Ball Development Corporation (ABDC), with technical support from the Memphis-Shelby County Office of Sustainability & Resilience (OSR) and the Tennessee Department of Environment & Conservation (TDEC), received \$225,000 in funding to pilot a first-of-its-kind community-led groundwater protection plan in the Alcy Ball neighborhood in South Memphis.

The project is supported by a \$150,000 award from Partners for Places, a project of The Funders Network, and \$75,000 previously committed from the Hyde Family Foundation. Over the next two years, the collaborative will center the voices and leadership of Alcy Ball residents, empowering “citizen scientists” to guide environmental testing, green infrastructure design, and the creation of a groundwater protection strategy for the neighborhood. This plan will not only serve as a blueprint for county-wide groundwater protection, but will put Alcy Ball at the forefront of aquifer-informed development in Shelby County.

“Memphis is 100% reliant on groundwater. Yet communities like Alcy Ball – where pollution, disinvestment, and environmental vulnerability intersect – have been excluded from conversations about how to protect it,” said Sarah Houston, Executive Director of Protect Our Aquifer. “This project flips that script.”

Beneath the Alcy Ball neighborhood lies a breach in the protective clay layer that protects the Memphis Sand Aquifer, which supplies drinking water to the entire Mid-South. The breach sits directly under the former Memphis Defense Depot, a World War II distribution facility where everything from carcinogenic chemicals to Nazi mustard gas bombs were buried. Designated a Superfund Site in 1992, remediation has been ongoing, but neighbors remain distrustful of both the institutions that surround the site’s clean-up and the safety of their backyards, playgrounds, and parks. This project puts power in the hands of residents, informing groundwater protection planning with local, lived knowledge. Technical support from OSR and TDEC will also help residents access resources, better understand the process, and carry the plans forward.

What is a groundwater protection plan?

A Groundwater Protection Plan identifies risks to underground drinking water sources – like the Memphis Sand Aquifer – and outlines actions to prevent contamination, manage land use responsibly, and ensure clean water access for generations to come. Specifically, a plan **maps vulnerabilities**, identifying areas where an aquifer is at risk or where pollution is present, **guides land use**, informing decisions about infrastructure & development so that future growth does not compromise water quality, and **centers community voices** in data collection, planning, and decision-making.

Despite the frequent overlap of clay layer breaches and legacy pollution, no entity has developed a groundwater protection plan to inform remediation and redevelopment efforts in an aquifer-aware manner. This absence leaves frontline communities like Alcy Ball – where industrial activity, aging water infrastructure, and clay layer breaches overlap – particularly vulnerable. Without a plan, communities have no formal roadmap to protect their water, nor substantiate their voice in the land use decisions that impact our underground drinking water. This project puts South Memphians in the driver's seat for what we hope will become a countywide strategy toward a clean water future for all.

What will be in the Alcy Ball Community Groundwater Plan?

Over two years, the collaborative will conduct a full groundwater protection planning process – uniquely centered in the community. Led by POA's team of scientists and policy experts, ABDC will host community meetings throughout, soliciting input on the data collected and plans proposed. Residents, with technical support at city and state levels, will conduct an environmental review of the neighborhood, compiling data parcel-by-parcel on past and potential aquifer threats. With residents guiding the process, data will not just come from maps and science, but from the lived experiences of neighbors to legacy – and ongoing – pollution.

“We’re not just cleaning up the past—we’re building new systems to protect our future,” said Seth Harkins, Executive Director of Alcy Ball CDC. “Alcy Ball will not be a passive beneficiary of this plan. We will be the authors of it.”

Once community data has been compiled and vetted, residents, scientists, and planners will co-create a plan that both documents the team's findings and develops strategies for aquifer-informed development. Strategies could include industrial best practices to reduce the potential for contamination, inform utility operations, green infrastructure interventions to

filter and direct stormwater runoff, recommendations on further environmental investigation, and more.

The plan will not only be reviewed and published, but it will be put to work during the two-year project. A priority site will be selected by the community for a green infrastructure demonstration project, planned by experts but designed by the neighborhood. This showcase of sustainable land use practices, the team hopes, will help make the case for the transformative power of groundwater protection planning, and future countywide planning efforts.

The awarding of this Partners for Places grant positions Memphis alongside seven communities across the country – from Binghamton, N.Y., Burlington City, N.J., Chicago, Ill., Denver, Col., Detroit, Mich., and Orlando, Fla. – leading innovation in collaborative, sustainable solutions around equity and climate resilience. To learn more about other sustainability efforts moving alongside our work in Memphis, check out [The Funders Network's blog post](#).

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About Partners for Places, a project of The Funders Network

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Partners for Places, a joint effort by the [The Funders Network \(TFN\)](#) and the [Urban Sustainability Directors Network \(USDN\)](#), pairs local governments, philanthropy, and frontline community groups to support sustainability projects across the U.S. and Canada. Partners for Places' successful matching grant program creates opportunities for cities and counties, fostering long-term relationships that make our communities of all sizes more prosperous, livable, and vibrant.

The matching grant program brings national funder investors together with place-based funders to support equitable, sustainable climate action and green stormwater infrastructure projects. The program's national investors currently include [Freedom Together Foundation](#), [The Kresge Foundation](#), and the [Pisces Foundation](#). One or more local foundations are required to provide at least a 50% matching grant.

To date, Partners for Places has awarded more than \$12 million across North America in this successful matching grant program, leading to nearly \$25 million in investments.

About the Hyde Family Foundation

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Hyde Family Foundation invests in the people and organizations working to create a unified, thriving Memphis for all. We focus our support in four impact areas: arts and culture, education, leadership and civic pride, and neighborhoods and public spaces. Learn more about our work at hydefoundation.org.

About Protect Our Aquifer

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Protect Our Aquifer is a non-profit 501(c)3 organization incorporated in late 2016. POA has become a leading voice in the science-based protection of our Aquifer as a shared resource and drinking water supply. The organization serves as a critical tool to unify the diverse stakeholders of water protection, always elevating community concerns. To learn more, visit protectouraquifer.org.

About Alcy Ball Development Corporation

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Alcy Ball Development Corporation is a 501(c)(3) that is connecting and empowering Alcy Ball residents to develop a thriving community. At the center of our work lies increasing homeownership in Alcy Ball, a key tool for building stability by both decreasing expenses and increasing wealth. We draw participants toward these outcomes with our cycle of programming, "Connect - Train - Restore." For more information, visit alcyball.org.

About the Office of Sustainability and Resilience

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The Memphis-Shelby County Office of Sustainability and Resilience is the regional advocate and resource on topics such as energy efficiency, waste reduction, recycling, sustainable economic development, food systems, and green building practices in Memphis-Shelby County. As the "green" liaisons for both city and county mayors, the office coordinates various regional initiatives related to sustainability. Read more at shelbycountynosr.com.