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# County 'eager to be proactive'

June 15, 2015

By William Kibler ([bkibler@altoonamirror.com](mailto:bkibler@altoonamirror.com)) , The Altoona Mirror

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In the June sunshine, the riffle in Bells Gap Run was crystalline.

Just downstream, where the water slowed, it wasn't so clear.

In a pavilion near the streambank, environmental experts, civil engineers, landscape architects and municipal staffers talked about a project that could help turn that slower water equally crystalline.

### Article Photos



Photos courtesy of Stiffler, McGraw & Associates, Inc.



They were discussing a bioretention project, designed to slow runoff from nearby streets and parking lots, holding the water so it percolates into the earth, becoming groundwater - rather than running into Bells Gap with its sediment, phosphorus, nitrogen and other pollutants.

That project, and others like it, are part of an ongoing local response to increasing pressure from the federal Environmental Protection Agency and in turn the state Department of Environmental Protection to capture and treat storm runoff for flood control and water quality.

The whole of Pennsylvania is lagging in that response, except for Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, according to Donna Morelli, state director for the Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay, which is helping guide the Blair County Municipal Separate Storm Sewer System



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(MS4) Working Group.

Blair County's effort, which includes representatives of the 14 municipalities with "urbanized" areas, is robust, "eager to be proactive," according to Monica Billig, program manager with the Environmental Finance Center, which is also working with the group.

It is an effort that will ultimately lead to costs for local residents.

Until recent decades, engineers handled runoff with pipes and ditches that carried water directly to streams.

Such runoff "carries trash, bacteria, heavy metals and other pollutants from the urban landscape, degrading the quality of the receiving waters," according to an EPA website.

Here it also carved away streambanks, depositing sediment downstream that buried and killed aquatic life that fish depend on, said Bryan Seipp, watershed manager for the Center for Watershed Protection.

Engineers used to design detention ponds to delay stormwater and reduce flooding.

Now, they must work toward the ideal of stopping all runoff and letting it percolate.

"The earth is a giant filter," said Seipp, who wrote a plan for the local group calling for 90 projects in 10 municipalities at a cost of \$2.4 million - a plan that could ultimately be the blueprint for local improvements.

When that filtered groundwater ultimately finds its way to streams, it's free of sediment and pollutants, and it's cold, which helps keep sensitive trout alive, according to Scott Campanaro, a city engineering tech and member of the MS4 group.

Sediment is the biggest local stormwater problem, said Seipp, who spoke at the Bellwood park as part of a three-day seminar to help educate local practitioners who may be constructing the "green infrastructure" projects outlined in the plan.

Green infrastructure

Green infrastructure helps restore natural runoff patterns to an earth that didn't develop through the millennia with paved surfaces creating fast runoff, Seipp said.

Rain fell on forests and fields and soaked in or evaporated, as did water from melting snow.

Now it comes off streets, parking lots and roofs with volume and force, heading downslope to the nearest inlet and into pipes that take it to a waterway.

While such runoff is only one source of pollution - along with agriculture and point sources like sewer plants - it's the one that is increasing, Seipp said.

And while the green infrastructure laid out in the plan will hardly catch all the runoff, those kinds of facilities can be "woven throughout a watershed," ultimately solving the bulk of the problem, according to Seipp and the EPA.

It has already started here.

Workers, including students from the Hollidaysburg Area Junior and Senior high schools, recently built a pair of rain gardens sited to catch parking lot runoff at the YMCA.

Projects outlined in the plan include those rain gardens, other bioretention facilities like bioswales, retrofitting of traditional retention ponds so there's infiltration, stream buffers to protect banks from carve-out, removal of impervious materials and the building of wetlands.

Rain gardens are shallow, vegetative basins sited to receive runoff, with plants that tolerate conditions in spots where they're located - periodic standing water at the bottom, periodic wetting near the top - and with soils designed to drain quickly enough to prevent breeding of mosquitoes, according to online sources and local experts.

The plants help keep the soil permeable and help get rid of the standing water through transpiration.

In some locations, clay needs to be replaced with permeable soil and in some cases, underdrains need to be installed, according to online sources.

The versatile rain garden works well at the edges of parking lots and in yards, where they can receive runoff from roofs and driveways.

In the Bellwood park, the plan proposes a mowable bioretention area about 150 yards from Bells Gap Run to catch water from a parking lot and the street that would otherwise flow through an underground pipe to the creek.

Near the Tyrone VFW, the plan proposes a bioretention area at the lower end of a parking lot, where puddles now form and overflow into the adjacent Little Juniata River during rains storms, so the water would gather and soak in.

It makes sense to select projects for maximum effect at minimum cost, according to Seipp.

Desktop analyses can help identify promising sites, he said.

Projects on public land are often the simplest, because they avoid private property complications, he said.

But homeowners can do their own projects.

"It would be nice to have a rain garden" on every residential property, Seipp said.

The local MS4 group is trying to figure out the best strategy for catching up with the requirement that municipalities with qualifying urbanized areas obtain National Pollutant Discharge System permits to send their stormwater to streams.

Local MS4 group member Lucas Martsof, manager of Antis Township, thinks it won't be easy.

But it's necessary, because "EPA isn't fooling around," he said.

EPA audits have led to fines of \$100,000 and more in eastern Pennsylvania, which is on top of the cost of coming into compliance, he said.

Many of Pennsylvania's numerous municipalities won't be able to do it alone, he said.

It's easier in Maryland, because it's done there at the county level, where there's adequate funding, he said.

The key may be to form a dedicated service unit - a utility.

A stormwater utility is a unit within government that is responsible for funding the construction, operation and maintenance of stormwater structures and that generates the revenues through user fees to pay for them, according to the Bay County, Fla., website.

Municipalities can pay for staff and projects from their general funds, Billig said.

They can even designate money in a line item, she said.

But priorities can change and officials can shift money away from stormwater projects and maintenance, she said.

Forming a utility can eliminate that problem, and if it's a multi-

municipality utility, can enjoy efficiencies of scale, she said.

Still, some communities like to go it alone, she said.

It's important to learn what the people want, she added.

Communities can obtain grants to fund an effort initially, for education and demonstration projects, like the \$421,000 grant the local group obtained from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, matched by the Blair County Conservation District.

But grants aren't a sustainable way to fund stormwater improvements, Billig said.

A utility can be part of municipal government, a function of cooperating municipalities, within a council of governments - or it can be an authority.

Utilities not only can raise revenues from users, but can access loans more easily from organizations like Pennvest than municipalities, because of their dedicated funding streams, Billig said.

Ultimately, it will depend on what the local elected officials decide, said Teddie Kreitz of Keller Engineers.

"Storm management is one of those unfunded mandates," said Blair Township Supervisor Ed Silveti, one of those elected officials.

Someone or something needs to lead the local effort - whether paid staff or a designated municipality, he said.

He prefers a "structured approach."

An authority may be a logical vehicle, but so might an existing agency like the Soil Conservation District - perhaps working with the municipalities on a contract or memorandum of understanding, he said.

Municipalities should partner with their neighbors, where it makes sense, based on the watersheds that span boundaries, according to City Councilman Dave Butterbaugh.

Altoona would be a natural partner with Logan Township, he said.

Holidaysburg and Frankstown Township could make good partners, he said.

And Williamsburg and Woodbury and Catharine townships might make a good trio, he said.

Elected officials are "on a learning curve," Martsof said.

There are about 1,500 stormwater utilities in 40 states and Washington DC - including 163 in Minnesota - but only six in Pennsylvania, according to the latest annual survey of stormwater utilities conducted by Western Kentucky University.

Generally, stormwater utilities assess property owners based on impervious square footage, although household fees are usually flat or tiered, based on an average.

Nationwide, that is about 3,100 square feet, according to the survey.

Commercial properties usually pay based on their particular impervious areas, Billig said.

While stormwater fees range from zero to \$35 a month for single-family residential properties, the average was about \$4 a month, according to the survey.

Property owners can sometimes get discounts if they reduce runoff by disconnecting downspouts, creating rain gardens or installing permeable driveways or parking lots, according to Seipp.

The EPA ordered medium and large cities to begin MS4 planning in 1990 - Phase I of the national program.

The agency ordered smaller urbanized areas - like those involved in

Blair County now - to begin planning in 1999.

Permits for those municipalities with smaller urbanized areas were issued in 2003 and extended all the way to 2013, with emphasis during that time on education, outreach, public participation, mapping of outfalls, erosion and sedimentation controls and modernized ordinances.

The Blair work group formed in 2012.

Permits reissued in 2013 are good for five years, which means that by 2018, municipalities need to be compliant, according to Campanaro

"DEP is looking for a clear commitment to schedule projects in five-year cycles," Seipp said.

The new guidelines impose a Total Maximum Daily Limit of sediment for the Little Juniata, a TMDL that has been allocated among the municipalities in its watershed, proportionally to their shares.

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