



Reducing impact of stormwater

Green infrastructure plan will help region

By KEVIN SHAFER
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On Monday, the Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District's Commission approved a Regional Green Infrastructure Plan. As one of the true believers and maybe the biggest proponent of green infrastructure in this region, let me be the first to tell you, it will *not* solve all of this area's water pollution problems.

But widespread green infrastructure will be a huge step forward toward our goals of zero basement backups and sewer overflows, fewer beach closings, reduced energy costs, reduced carbon emissions and safer drinking water. Believe it or not, Milwaukee is already a recognized national leader in infrastructure, and this plan keeps us at that forefront.

One of the reasons green infrastructure makes so much sense for the Milwaukee region is because we have already made a significant investment in grey infrastructure, namely the Deep Tunnel. It's prevented 98.5 billion gallons of pollution from getting into Lake Michigan by reducing our overflows from 60 per year down to around 2.5.

MMSD has captured and cleaned 98.3% of all the polluted water that has come to our regional system since 1993 when the Deep Tunnel became operational. The Deep Tunnel has proven to be a successful first step toward achieving our goal of clean water, but, just like green infrastructure, it's only part of the solution.

Green infrastructure mimics Mother Nature by storing and infiltrating stormwater on the land where the rain falls, making it a resource rather than a nuisance. This can be done with porous pavement, green roofs, rain gardens, rain barrels and bioswales.

MMSD's Regional Green Infrastructure Plan calls for us to capture the first half-inch of rainfall on our region, keeping it out of the pipes and the Deep Tunnel. That translates into 740 million gallons of water or 42% more volume than the Deep Tunnel currently holds. To provide some perspective, every inch of rain in MMSD's service area equals 7.1 billion gallons of water.

One of the most important findings of the Regional Green Infrastructure Plan is that we can do a lot to reduce stormwater runoff by improving the infiltration of rainwater on our lawns. No, we won't drill holes in our front yards. Rather, we will add soil amendments, such as Milorganite or gypsum, that will improve the natural biology of the soil.

These actions will improve the health of lawns and increase water infiltration. We won't need a crane or a backhoe, just a different approach to lawn care.

Green infrastructure offers many other advantages besides just managing the volume of stormwater runoff. It can also reduce the pollutants in the stormwater runoff, energy usage, our urban heat island and our region's carbon emissions. Beside all that, it adds natural beauty and recreational space, filters polluted stormwater runoff, and can raise your property's value. What's not to like?

Implementing the Regional Green Infrastructure Plan will be a monumental undertaking over the coming decades, but the beauty of green infrastructure is that it complements what already exists, builds from the success of our existing infrastructure, naturalizes and beautifies our urban fabric, and can be built in our front and backyards alike.

I believe that green infrastructure is the single most important approach to water management that addresses many of our existing and future needs. It will not solve all the world's problems, but it will make the Milwaukee region a more livable, vibrant community.

Kevin Shafer is executive director of the Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District.

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