



Akron hoping green approach can save money on its sewer cleanup plan

green infrastructure slideshow.zip

Akron is considering green infrastructure -- an example of which is seen here -- as a possibly cheaper way to address its sewage overflow problem. (Courtesy of Northeast Ohio Sewer District) *(Courtesy of Northeast Ohio Sewer District)*

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FAIRLAWN, Ohio – Akron is hoping a greener approach to its sewer overflow problem will lessen the cost of a looming \$1.4 billion, federally mandated sewage cleanup project, a city official said at a panel discussion Thursday night.

“That \$1.4 billion [price tag] gives us all a lot of heartburn,” said James Hewitt, manager of Akron’s engineering bureau. “Not just the residents, but the mayor and [city] council. So, the mayor decided ...we want to look at green components to try to save some green.”

Hewitt was among the experts that spoke to residents about green infrastructure, the name for surface features that use grass, plants and soil to help absorb rainwater and keep it from overwhelming underground sewer systems. About 50 people, including members of Summit County Council and Akron City Council, attended the event, which was organized by the Akron chapter of the League of Women Voters and held at the Unitarian Universalist Church in Fairlawn.

Many audience questions on Thursday pertained to last month’s vote from Akron’s council to **approve a two-year, 69 percent sewer rate hike**.

The hike will pay for previous sewer system improvements and for potential fines the city may face for not moving ahead with additional upgrades. It also allows Akron Mayor Don Plusquelic to proceed with discussions to change an existing cleanup plan that was negotiated with state and federal regulators and consider a greener alternative instead.

Hewitt walked residents through the city’s decade of negotiations with the United States Environmental Protection Agency. The federal government in 2009 sued Akron, **forcing the city to address the noxious sewage overflows** that pollute the Cuyahoga River (which, incidentally, flows into Lake Erie) during heavy storms.

“In my mind, we have been more than forthright with the agency, more than generous with the [federal] government, and we’ve been environmental stewards to try to make our community better,” he said. “I

think at the end of the day we're all in this together and we're just trying to make this affordable for the citizens of Akron."

A Northeast Ohio Media Group **series** last month highlighted and explored 'green infrastructure' as a **potentially cheaper alternative** to the tunnels cities traditionally have built to hold the sewage during storms until it can be pumped into treatment plants.

Increasingly, cities like Akron, grappling with expensive, federally imposed sewage cleanup projects, are looking to green infrastructure.

The series found that the Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District, which provides sewer service to much of Greater Cleveland, developed **its \$3 billion tunneling plan**, while giving only limited consideration to green. Sewer district officials have incorporated some green projects into their plan -- about \$80 million worth -- and say they are pursuing more as opportunities present themselves.

After lobbying from cities and local governments, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency recently opened the door for what's called integrated planning, which allows cities more flexibility in dealing with water control issues. Shannon Conway, an engineer with MWH Global who's helping Akron develop their plan, said Thursday the change allows for more innovative approaches that can include green infrastructure.

"I do believe this for them really is a shift... This is the first time I've seen a hand reached across the aisle, legitimately to give the City of Akron and [the federal government] a deal we can all live with," Conway said.

Samuel Salisbury, a principal with design-landscaping firm Salisbury-Schweyer Inc., who has consulted with Akron on its green infrastructure plan, said he sees potential in Akron's approach.

"This is a huge learning experience for everyone. But we're all in this together, and I think we're going to see Akron transformed," he said.

This story was corrected on March 28 to reflect that the U.S. EPA sued Akron in 2009. It previously incorrectly reported the federal government was threatening a lawsuit.

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