



## Save trees, manage stormwater: Grand Rapids explores incentives for property owners

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GRAND RAPIDS, MI – What would motivate you to keep more storm water from running off your property into the public sewer system? What would it take for you to take care of that big, old tree in your yard rather than cut it down?

Grand Rapids is exploring incentives to get its property owners to do both things.

Here's a synopsis of what's going on:

### • Storm water management

City Commissioners last month inked a \$360,800 contract with Lansing-based TetraTech to develop incentives that might encourage landowners to put things like rain gardens and rain barrels on their private property. **This recent West Michigan Environmental Action Council report** outlines some possible incentives, and also recommends that Grand Rapids “continue to examine the feasibility of the implementation of a storm water fee based on contribution of runoff to the storm water system.” City leaders have danced with this idea for decades, and City Manager Greg Sundstrom **has vowed** not to pursue it anymore.

“WMEAC has always advocated for a storm water utility (fee). We think that's a great idea” but one that might not be right for Grand Rapids at this time, said Elaine Sterrett Isely, the non-profit's director of water and low-impact development programs. “In the meantime we need to find other ways to incentivize the implementation of the low-impact development, green infrastructure.

“One of the low-hanging fruits we see is some sort of awards program.”

TetraTech also will help the city identify opportunities to install green infrastructure on public property, and evaluate how climate change should recalculate the city's storm water standards.

“Climate change is a reality that we need to learn to plan for,” Isely said. “We're seeing more intense storms. That's a trend that's happening and we need to plan for it. It's folly to ignore that, particularly in the

storm water management context.”

## **RELATED: Grand Rapids establishes Stormwater Oversight Commission**

### **• Tree preservation**

After hearing **this update** last month from the city’s Urban Forestry Committee, Mayor George Heartwell urged the committee to come up with potential incentives for maintaining and increasing the number of trees in Grand Rapids.

For example, one idea he likes is a voluntary program that invites people who fly or drive into Grand Rapids to pay into a fund that could be spent planting trees or incentivizing tree preservation.

“The term ‘tree-hugging mayor’ has gone from being pejorative (at the outset of my tenure in 2003) to being a term of endearment and even of great pride,” Heartwell said. “The great mayors of America and the great cities of America are paying attention to their urban canopies. It’s the mayor and the city that’s not doing this kind of work is out of step.”

The current city budget includes **\$160,000 of parks money for a tree inventory**, with plans for a similar expense in the city’s 2016 budget. The inventory will take stock of trees – age, size, type, condition – in Grand Rapids parks and public right-of-way and help the city create an asset management plan for trees, like the Mayor’s Tree of the Year pictured in the photographs above.

A **recent tree cutting** in East Hills highlights the urgency of maintaining the city’s tree assets, said Dottie Clune, chairwoman of the Urban Forestry Committee.

“Particularly given some of the recent tree losses, we need to be really strengthening our zoning ordinance in terms of how it addresses tree removals and the incentives that we provide to property owners to retain trees on their properties,” she said. “A mature tree provides 70 times as many benefits as a new tree so that retention is an important part of this.”

A subcommittee will review city ordinances and make recommendations by the end of the year, Clune said.

## **RELATED: Can't miss this 2014 Mayor's Tree of the Year**

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