Aligning Stormwater Goals and Community Goals

BY LYNN RICHARDS

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Communities all across the US are grappling with seemingly contradictory goals: how to build their economies and revitalize their downtowns or distressed neighborhoods and at the same time protect established neighborhoods from increased flood pressures and meet increasingly stringent standards for stormwater runoff? Implementing smart growth approaches is one approach that can help any community meet all of these objectives.

Considerable research and studies have shown that many of the land-use strategies associated with smart growth approaches, such as redevelopment projects, high-density development, and mixed-use transit oriented development, have direct water-quality benefits. For example, putting new development on a parking lot or an abandoned strip mall allows local governments the benefits and opportunities associated with new development with little to no water-quality impact. Moreover, many redevelopment projects often decrease existing impervious surface to create a green space amenity. With or without the decrease in impervious surface, the physical act of development performs as a stormwater management strategy.

I have often suggested to local governments that the single strongest action they can take for increased stormwater management is to develop incentives, policies, and marketing strategies for redeveloping their underutilized spaces, such as dead or dying malls, strip malls, abandoned buildings, or downtown surface parking lots. Directing development to already degraded land accommodates new development in areas with existing infrastructure and takes advantage of investments the community has already made in a particular neighborhood. Contrast that to a new development at the edge of town, which often transforms relatively pristine land or former agricultural land to houses, roads, retail centers, and parking lots. Significant new impervious cover is created, and significant new public investments in infrastructure and services will be needed.

To get *additional* water-quality benefit from these redevelopment and other smart growth projects, green infrastructure approaches can be incorporated into the project. Green roofs, green streets, rain gardens, and cisterns are just some of the green approaches that work well in denser, more urban communities. These green approaches often add value to the final project and to the community's character. For example, a mixed-use redevelopment project, which co-locates offices, retail, services, and apartments to reduce the overall impervious cover footprint and the number of car trips, and that adds a rain garden between the on-street parking and the sidewalk, increases the buffer area for pedestrians, creates a more inviting pedestrian environment, and manages some of the stormwater from the project and road.

However, while these types of redevelopment projects can provide an

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opportunity for a municipality to alleviate an existing stormwater problem—that is, to fix past ills—redevelopment projects should not be held to the same stormwater standard as a development project that has just transformed a forest, meadow, or agricultural land to development. Doing so can create an unlevel playing field for developers and unwittingly encourage development on land where it's easier to meet onsite stormwater requirements, which is often at the edge of town or in other undeveloped areas. These far-flung developments may then require new or wider roads, which can create or exacerbate existing stormwater flows.

Federal, state, and local stormwater standards can and should recognize the water-quality benefits associated with specific land-use strategies that have demonstrated water-quality benefit.

For example, West Virginia and Tennessee recently enacted new general state stormwater permits that allow a developer to design and manage less stormwater onsite if the development is a redevelopment project, brownfield site, high-density, or mixed-use transit-oriented development. The developer is not held to a lower stormwater standard but is allowed a reduction in the stormwater to be managed onsite. The rationale is that the specific development projects are providing a stormwater benefit and that benefit is taken into account in the onsite stormwater standard.

The era of single-objective spending is over. Aligning stormwater goals with other community economic development and community revitalization goals will help communities stretch their tax dollars and yield better water-quality outcomes. For example, I once heard a general manager of a sanitation district say at a public meeting, "I could spend $1 million installing a big tank or pipe underground to hold stormwater until it can be released. That money will serve just one community objective: managing stormwater. However, the same $1 million could be spent retrofitting streets to install green features, which invests in our community."

That general manager recognized that any investment in neighborhoods where investment has already occurred can help foster redevelopment and revitalization efforts. And this creates a win-win scenario for communities—improved stormwater management and revitalized neighborhoods. Our stormwater standards should support these goals.

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