

Water Hazards: Inside Information on Infrastructure

Turn on a faucet and water comes out. Flush a toilet and water goes down. Rain, rain, go away? Well, that's what the storm drains are for.

Here in the U.S., a lot of us have the luxury of taking these things for granted. More and more communities, including many right here in west central Minnesota, are finding their water, wastewater and storm water systems are old, tired and struggling to keep up with demand. In 2003, West Central Initiative (WCI) published a study that showed the immediate need to replace aging city infrastructure—most 60-plus-year-old WPA projects. A whopping \$800 million is needed in the next 15 years for infrastructure overhaul in the nine counties of west central Minnesota alone.

Maybe you've heard all this before.

You read about infrastructure in the local news a lot lately. Many communities are working on their water systems right now, some are trying to figure out what to do, and others have already done the repair and replacement—with mixed results.

The thing is, there's no cookie-cutter solution to each community's needs. Some towns have city water and sewer, some don't. Some have one system, but not the other.

WCI wanted to provide information about smart alternatives to infrastructure replacement and repair that are environmentally AND economically friendly for all kinds of communities.

Last December we reported that WCI contracted with Yellow Wood Associates to survey three cities with varying infrastructure needs: Battle Lake, Brandon and Ottertail.

Yellow Wood used its Green Community Technologies® approach to help the communities evaluate the impact of applying sound alternative technologies to municipal infrastructure and related services. The firm then created a step-by-step outline of what a community can do using readily available resources and information.

Your grandparents had the right idea

The cities were surprised to find that some of Yellow Wood's suggestions were downright old-fashioned, like collecting rain water for non-drinking uses.

The city of Brandon hopes to implement some of these ideas—like a rain barrel for every household and other water-saving devices—as time and funding permit, said city council member Shelley Plessner.

After listening to their report from Yellow Wood, Ottertail made septic systems priority one, according to Lee Sherman, Ottertail city coordinator. City administration met with the area's wastewater management provider for some conservation pointers the city could implement and share with residents.

Being blessed with aquifers and five lakes within the city limits means more water stewardship not less, Sherman said.

Wanda Berg-Vorgert, city clerk-treasurer for Battle Lake, agrees. "We're surrounded by lakes so it's very important that we look at green technologies," she said. "We have an obligation to protect our lakes, especially when it comes to development."

For those who may balk at the price tag for implementing alternative treatments like lakescaping or creating wetlands to filter storm water run-off, "think of the costs of [environmental] clean up," Berg-Vorgert said.

Representatives from all three of the cities felt it was helpful to have outside analysis of their infrastructure.

"We have a tendency not to see the forest because of the trees," Sherman explained. "It was helpful for someone from outside of the area to put things in a new light."

"It was good to be able to sit down and brainstorm with knowledgeable people. It gave us a new perspective," Plessner said.

"The information that [Battle Lake] learned will always be in the back of our minds whenever we do a new project," Berg-Vorgert said. "It will be a great resource for us to return to from now on."

Would you like to learn more about assessing your city's infrastructure?

WCI has posted Yellow Wood's outline of the process on its Web site to share with other communities reviewing their infrastructure systems. Go to www.wcif.org, or contact Greg Wagner, WCI economic development planner, at 800 735-2239, or greg@wcif.org.

Yellow Wood Associates was able to provide a highly specialized service to the pilot project cities. WCI hopes Minnesota-based firms with similar capacities can be found to work on future infrastructure projects.