

Restoring a Stream and a Community

The city of Cincinnati and Hamilton County are working with the Partnership for Sustainable Communities and state and local agencies on a revitalization plan focused on what at first might seem like an unlikely target—the city’s combined sewer system. Built in 1906, the system is often overwhelmed in wet weather, when untreated stormwater mixes with wastewater in the combined system and overflows into water bodies or backs up into homes. The city is investing in green infrastructure such as rain gardens, reforestation, and street and building upgrades to manage stormwater. In doing so, it hopes not only to solve the sewage overflow problem, but also to revitalize the low-income community of South Fairmount.

As part of an innovative settlement with EPA, the Metropolitan Sewer District of Greater Cincinnati is investigating integrated green and “gray” stormwater solutions instead of installing large drainage pipes (a typical “gray” solution).⁸ Although both designs can reduce stormwater runoff, the green alternative is less expensive and more attractive, and can produce more jobs. An important goal of the parties is the restoration of Lick Run, a stream in South Fairmount that was buried as the area developed. The sewer district hopes to achieve required runoff reductions by daylighting the stream and restoring the stream channel. The sewer district will submit this alternative approach for the combined sewer system to EPA for approval. If the pilot shows that



Rain gardens at the HUD-owned St. Francis Senior Apartments replaced excess pavement to reduce stormwater runoff. A monitoring station, pictured at right, measures runoff levels. Photo courtesy of EPA.



“Cincinnati is demonstrating that there are sustainable solutions to challenges that traditionally would have been managed only through gray infrastructure. The initiative has resulted in rich engagement and participation from public and private agencies all across the spectrum to ensure these projects leave a successful legacy of sustainability and partnerships for communities of the future. Together, we’re not only addressing combined sewer overflow issues but also helping revitalize our communities.”

—Cincinnati Vice Mayor Roxanne Qualls

combined sewer overflow control goals can be met, Cincinnati will be able to proceed with these innovative projects.

The Power of Partnership

The Partnership helped focus investment and agency collaboration. EPA helped the sewer district explore green infrastructure options and, because there is little data on the performance of large green infrastructure projects, is working with the city to monitor pilot projects. The city used HUD Neighborhood Stabilization Program funds to purchase properties and remove rundown buildings. The Cincinnati Metropolitan Housing Authority received a HUD Choice Neighborhoods Planning Grant to develop a comprehensive neighborhood transformation plan for the English Woods/Fairmount community. A HUD Community Challenge Grant is funding an overhaul of Cincinnati’s zoning code that will encourage a mix of land uses, affordable homes, and more compact development. In May 2012, 700 city residents gathered to help develop a form-based code⁹ to restore the character of city neighborhoods. The code changes also will remove zoning-related obstacles to watershed-friendly strategies, such as reducing impervious surfaces by changing parking requirements.

⁸ Gray infrastructure includes conventional piped drainage and water treatment systems.

⁹ Form-based codes are development regulations that control the physical form of buildings and public spaces, unlike traditional zoning regulations, which regulate uses.

The Partnership is also supporting revitalization by promoting development that uses transit investments to connect housing and job opportunities. “Transit-oriented development is really about creating walkable, vibrant communities with a diversity of people and opportunities, all in close proximity to each other,” says Charles Graves, director of city planning and buildings.

The Cincinnati Streetcar project, for example, partially funded by a TIGER II grant from DOT and currently under construction, will add a new streetcar line to improve access to major employers, the riverfront, and area attractions. Meanwhile, a HUD-funded demonstration project will lead to new policies that encourage affordable housing and small-business entrepreneurship along the streetcar line.



Greater Cincinnati Works does infrastructure work to prepare for the Cincinnati Streetcar. Image courtesy of the city of Cincinnati.

SPOTLIGHT ON WYANDANCH, NY: WORKING TOGETHER TO SUPPORT DOWNTOWN REVITALIZATION

The Partnership has been working with Wyandanch, New York, in central Long Island, to implement a major community revitalization initiative. The town aims to transform its economically distressed downtown into a transit-oriented, pedestrian-friendly, and environmentally sustainable destination. As part of this revitalization effort, the town received EPA Clean Water State Revolving Funds to install a sanitary sewer system. The new sewer system is key to the revitalization effort because Wyandanch lacked this essential infrastructure for the proposed redevelopment. In addition to ongoing technical assistance from EPA, HUD, and DOT, Wyandanch received funding from DOT to study the feasibility of building a train station and, later, for the actual construction. The revitalization effort will make the neighborhood more walkable, create connections between bus and rail, and make it easier for visitors to reach downtown parks and restaurants. The Partnership continues to work with Wyandanch to support its vision for economic and environmental sustainability.



The vision for the Wyandanch downtown includes a mix of uses and housing types; a connected network of streets, civic spaces, and parks; and streets designed for pedestrians and vehicles. Image courtesy of Torti Gallas and Partners.

