



JOHN IMES

DIRECTOR'S VIEW

End the 'Sewer Wars': Collaboration and a focus on green infrastructure is the key to solving Milwaukee's water woes...

The renewed focus on Milwaukee's water woes and the prospects of another costly "Sewer War" should force us to rethink the traditional, prescriptive and litigation-driven solutions of the past. We must adopt innovative strategies to help clean our waters.

Fortunately, the use of green infrastructure, environment-focused, performance-based strategies and new directions in environmental governance can help Milwaukee achieve the environmental quality and healthy business climate it deserves.

This starts with the concept of "Green Urbanism."

Leading European cities (and some in America) are turning to green roofs, porous pavement, drainage swales, rain gardens and other green infrastructure to minimize, absorb and cleanse their stormwater runoff.

Defined as basically any roof substantially covered with vegetation, green roofs can retain one or more inches of rainfall, reduce heating and cooling costs up to 50 percent, double a roof's life, and contribute to a quieter, healthier, more sustainable urban environment.

European green roofs are increasingly becoming a part of the urban landscape with more than 100 million square feet of planted roofs. A 10.4-acre living roof on Ford's River Rouge Plant in Michigan adsorbs up to 4 million gallons of water annually. Chicago, Atlanta and other cities are installing green roofs on city halls, fire stations and other municipal buildings. Cities are also offering incentives to developers, such as density bonuses for buildings or developments which incorporate green infrastructure.

Similarly, porous pavement, drainage swales and desealing (taking up impermeable concrete and asphalt in key run-off areas and replacing it with landscape or porous pavement) will help slow or absorb stormwater. The recently completed national design competition for the Menomonee River Valley highlights the potential of cutting-edge stormwater and flood management techniques that will restore habitat, slow and cleanse runoff, and create a unique setting which attracts new development and high-paying jobs. The reconstruction of the Marquette interchange could embrace some of

the same techniques.

In his best selling book, "The Rise of the Creative Class," Richard Florida stresses the importance of the "quality of place" as key to attracting and retaining the knowledge workers necessary to build a high-wage economy. Green urbanism offers the right mix of the built and natural environments that can help redefine Milwaukee's image and create a unique setting for creative workers and businesses to thrive in.

How might we pay for green infrastructure investments? The current system assesses sewer taxes based on property value, which fails to account for a parcel's true contribution to run-off. A fairer system might be a Stormwater Utility, which assesses fees based on the amount of impervious surface, the degree of slope or other site-specific factors that contribute to run-off. As a result, property owners who incorporate green infrastructure or other strategies to reduce runoff would pay less than property owners who don't.

For example, property owners could reduce their fees by disconnecting down spouts from sewer systems, utilizing rain gardens or barrels to capture runoff, and by using water more efficiently, particularly during storm events. Such a user fee-based system might even spur innovations like the new Urban Ecology Center (located in Riverside Park), which features large cisterns that capture all of the roof's runoff for use as non-potable water. For economically disadvantaged areas, stormwater fees might also be pooled and redirected to help pay for projects.

A second step is changing the direction of environmental policy.

Wisconsin's new Green Tier law can help us get cooperation from reluctant industries, developers, state and local agencies and environmental groups to try something different to achieve clean water and economic development goals. "Green Tier" represents the next generation of environmental management with an emphasis on environmental performance, flexible compliance, legal accountability, management systems and other incentives.

We can avoid another "Sewer War" through green infrastructure investments, user fee-based funding, setting performance goals and emphasizing collaboration, flexibility and accountability for water quality outcomes. It is possible to achieve both an improved environment and a healthy business climate in Milwaukee.