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Breaking ground with a \$1.6 billion plan to tame water

By Sandy Bauers

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Philadelphia has announced a \$1.6 billion plan to transform the city over the next 20 years by embracing its storm water - instead of hustling it down sewers and into rivers as fast as possible.

The proposal, which several experts called the nation's most ambitious, reimagines the city as an oasis of rain gardens, green roofs, thousands of additional trees, porous pavement, and more.

All would act as sponges to absorb - or at least stall - the billions of gallons of rainwater that overwhelm the city sewer system every year.

The plan's complex funding formula would raise rates somewhat but also attract grants and encourage private investment.

Further, the Water Department says the city's greening would result in more jobs, higher property values, better air quality, less energy use, and even fewer deaths - from excess heat.

The plan is a radical departure from the highly engineered tunnels and sewage plant expansions cities have traditionally opted for.

"This is the most significant use of green infrastructure I've seen in the country, the largest scale I've seen," said Jon Capacasa, regional director of water protection for the Environmental Protection Agency, which has the final say on whether the plan passes muster.

"We commend Philadelphia for breaking the ice," he said.

Whether the plan will work as the department intends is still being analyzed by regulators and environmental experts. (This will take a while. The printed plan is 3,369 pages.)

Theoretically, it's workable, said the Natural Resources Defense Council's water expert, Nancy Stoner. The green techniques "are well-demonstrated," she said. "It's the scaling up that's new. That's what's really exciting."

Others concur - mostly.

"I believe it's the most significant investment in transforming the city that we'll see in our lifetimes," said Patrick Starr, senior vice president of the Pennsylvania Environmental Council. "It will change the way neighborhoods look, the way many streets and blocks look."

Either way, cities big and small are watching to see whether Philadelphia can get the plan approved by the EPA and, if so, deliver on its promise.

"This has national implications," said Christine Knapp, outreach director with the state environmental nonprofit PennFuture.

Here's the trouble with storm water: 60 percent of the city has a combined sewer system, which means both runoff from streets and wastewater from bathrooms and kitchens flow through the same pipes.

In dry weather, the system works pretty well, considering that portions are more than a century old.

But when it rains - even as little as a tenth of an inch - the system overflows.

With no place to go, the water - now laced with road oil, litter, and raw sewage - gushes from 164 pipes directly into the Delaware, the Schuylkill, and Tacony, Pennypack, and Cobbs Creeks. Bacteria levels skyrocket.

Like many cities, Philadelphia is under orders to come up with a plan to reduce the overflows, which amount to 14 billion gallons a year.


About 12 years ago, when officials started devising the plan, they ruled out separating the storm-water and sanitary lines, as is already the case in newer sections of the city.

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