

Revitalizing Baltimore City Watershed

The Challenge

Baltimore has 355 urban watersheds that channel stormwater runoff into the Chesapeake Bay. Watershed 263 is a 930-acre area in western and southwestern Baltimore that includes 12 urban neighborhoods with industrial, institutional, and residential land uses. About 75 percent of the area has an impervious surface, and open space is fragmented and unevenly distributed. The area has a tree canopy cover of just 5.5 percent compared to a citywide canopy cover of 17.3 percent. Stormwater, carrying trash and pollutants, from the area eventually flows into the Baltimore Harbor and Chesapeake Bay through a stormdrain system that emerges near the mouth of the Middle Branch of the Patapsco River.

The Solution

The Watershed 263 Project is a collaborative effort of the USDA Forest Service, the Stakeholder Council, and the Baltimore City Department of Public Works that focuses on revitalizing urban communities by using urban forestry projects to improve both water quality and quality of life. The project is largely managed by the Parks and People Foundation of Baltimore. The watershed restoration plan includes planting trees; cleaning and landscaping vacant lots; reducing litter; cleaning streets and alleys; creating community gardens, improving city parks, and landscaping schoolyards where asphalt has been removed; increasing recycling; and supporting community stewardship and involvement. Small, low-impact watershed restoration projects, such as tree plantings, improve environmental quality, create healthier communities, support economic development, and offer educational and recreational opportunities.

Organizing, training, and encouraging watershed residents and organizations to participate as stakeholders is critical to successfully implementing an urban stormwater watershed program.



Students stencil storm drains to help keep pollutants out of the Chesapeake Bay.

Resulting Benefits

- A community proposal for landscaping the watershed included creating a 6-mile neighborhood bicycle and pedestrian “trail” that connects historic parks and school sites to the existing 15-mile Gwynns Falls Trail.
- Forty public education and training workshops were conducted, and outreach campaigns and restoration projects were organized at 11 schools, 10 neighborhood associations, and 5 businesses.
- Two acres of obsolete schoolyard asphalt were removed and the area was landscaped; 2 more acres of asphalt will be removed in the summer of 2006.
- Six hundred street, park, and schoolyard trees were planted. Many more trees were mulched and cared for by community volunteers and AmeriCorp youth crews.

Sharing Success

The Parks and People Foundation worked with other city and Federal agencies to develop an urban stormwater watershed management plan and landscaping strategy that produced measurable results in water quality and can be effectively used elsewhere. Boston and Washington D.C. have requested assistance with their stormwater management plans as part of the Urban Ecology Collaborative after learning about Baltimore’s program.



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