



Christine Lee: A Call to Action on Stormwater Pollution Prevention

The small town of Edmonston, Maryland made history last week. Although its population may be small (less than 1,000 as of the most recent census), its ambitions are big. This November, the city broke ground on what is being hailed as one of the greenest streets in the nation. The new street aims to reduce or eliminate water pollution, air pollution, and storm water runoff.

By incorporating porous bricks, native tree cover, and wind-powered street lights, the new road will help to minimize both water and air pollution in the Chesapeake Bay area. Additionally, the water that drains off the street will no longer be flushed into nearby lakes and rivers; it will instead be naturally filtered through the use of diversion channels and natural rain gardens. When stormwater runoff is diverted into rain gardens, immense amount of pollution can be saved from our lakes and rivers.

This revolutionary project started in a small town less than three miles away from our nation's capital; in a town along a small river called the Anacostia, which eventually drains into the Potomac River. It's an impressive undertaking and one that should be admired; yet, it begs the question: why not here first? Why not us? The metropolitan area of Minneapolis and St. Paul is one of the biggest urban centers along the Mississippi, the most majestic river traversing our nation. In a state that is historically so highly environmentally proactive, it's surprising and troubling that we do not have more stringent stormwater runoff regulations.

When Minneapolis built its first sewer system in 1870, all waste, sewage, and stormwater was funneled directly into the Mississippi River. This went on for a disturbingly long time; it wasn't until 1938, nearly seventy years later, that the City of Minneapolis opened a sewage treatment plant. Today, stormwater runoff into the Mississippi River is certainly treated more strictly for sewage and waste; however, 100% of everything that goes down the storm drains that you see on the street still goes directly in to the Mississippi River.

Not only does Minneapolis-St. Paul have a very high population in a condensed area covered in impervious surfaces, but it's also along the grandest rivers and most important drinking water sources in our country. Therefore, legislators at both the city and state level should take notice of the stormwater developments occurring elsewhere in the nation. Pervious asphalt is now widely available and highly successful, even in our often-frigid climate (although, admittedly, about 15% more expensive). Wind and solar power are both plentiful in Minnesota and could certainly power the many street lights that illuminate the cold nights in our beloved cities.

Rain gardens with native plants and grasses thrive in our rich soils and could easily absorb the stormwater that runs off from our sidewalks and streets. Ultimately, Minneapolis and Saint Paul need to take heed of the advancements in stormwater management; soon, it will no longer be a luxurious idea, but a necessity if we wish to preserve our beloved Mississippi River.

Although not necessarily organized around a common goal, rain gardens are already common throughout the Twin Cities. As of September 2008, there were already 1,300 rain gardens installed in Twin Cities, all helping to protect our lakes, rivers and streams and improve water quality. For more information about installing a rain garden in your own yard, check out Metro Blooms, which offers how-to raingarden workshops as well as personal on-site consultation. Other local organizations, including Friends of the Mississippi River and the Ramsey-Washington Watershed District, also provide information and assistance for installing rain gardens in your yard.

Additionally, the City of Minneapolis offers a \$65 native plant reimbursement to help pay for your rain garden. With all of these incentives, it's hard to come up with reasons not to install a rain garden in your yard!