

Blair County, PA

Background

Blair County is a 527-square-mile county in Pennsylvania, home to approximately 130,000 residents across 24 municipalities that each have a diverse set of planning, land use, development, and agricultural needs that shape the County’s natural and built environment. Of the 24 municipalities, 12 plus the County itself hold Municipal Separate Storm Sewer System (MS4) Permits that regulate stormwater runoff in urbanized areas. The 12 MS4 municipalities, in addition to Blair County and other local and regional entities, have joined in partnership through the Blair County MS4 Workgroup, where municipal staff, engineers, consultants, elected officials, County agency representatives, and other interested stakeholders convene regularly to support each other’s efforts in addressing stormwater regulations and water quality goals.

With support from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF), the Environmental Finance Center (EFC) at the University of Maryland worked with a team led by the Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay and including American Rivers to accelerate the implementation of green infrastructure in Blair County’s watersheds and continue the development of regional stormwater management opportunities. The EFC’s role was to work closely with the Blair County Municipal Separate Storm Sewer System (MS4) Workgroup partners to identify opportunities to incorporate green infrastructure practices into long-term planning, as well as develop a supporting financing strategy that looks to improve efficiencies and reduce costs through a regional approach. The EFC’s goal was to develop a set of financing recommendations for the MS4 Workgroup that created a cost-effective, collaborative program for addressing the County’s urban stormwater management and water quality goals.

Approach

The EFC sought to create a logical sequence to the financing technical assistance provided to the Blair County communities, beginning with a generalized approach that progressed into community-specific data collection and analysis as the project unfolded. The process began with financing workshops held in January and March of 2015 designed to ensure that all of the participating communities had a shared starting point for a financing conversation. This was

HIGHLIGHTS

Location: Pennsylvania

Jurisdiction Type: County Workgroup

Population: 127,089 (2010)

MS4 Permit: Multiple Phase II

Project Period: 2014-2015

Funder: National Fish and Wildlife Foundation



A workshop for Blair County community leaders

followed by a series of “office hour” conversations intended to provide a level of community context and needs assessment that would inform the development of financing recommendations. Finally, as a shared vision emerged from the office hour conversations, additional dialogues were had with stakeholders outside of the MS4 Workgroup that could prove to be critical to stormwater program implementation partners. Throughout the process, the MS4 Workgroup was an invaluable forum for engaging the communities, discussing potential approaches, and vetting proposed solutions.

The EFC ultimately developed a set of financing recommendations designed to support the implementation of projects and on-going activities that would serve to address the projects identified by the Center for Watershed Protection’s (CWP) Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) Plan for the impaired sections of the Little Juniata watershed and a Chesapeake Bay Pollution Reduction Plan (CBPRP) for the Beaverdam Branch and Little Juniata watersheds, along with the individual communities’ MS4 permit compliance and local stormwater management goals.

Key Findings and Recommendations

Common Themes: The EFC found variance in the MS4 permitted communities’ overall approach to managing stormwater, particularly based on the composition of stormwater infrastructure in each community, the individual municipal capacity to implement stormwater management activities, and the levels of investment being directed towards managing stormwater. However, more importantly, the EFC identified recurring themes during office hours and additional meetings and communications with all project partners that lay a foundation for areas in which the Blair County communities can continue and/or begin to collaborate. These include:

- Mapping the structural and nonstructural components that support stormwater conveyance and treatment systems;
- Devoting resources and staff capacity to stormwater program implementation;
- Engaging and educating the broader community;
- Developing templates for tracking and reporting activities; and
- Seeking better guidance from Pennsylvania DEP.

All of the communities the EFC worked with expressed a strong desire for a robust stormwater program, but cited fiscal and capacity constraints as major hurdles. Forming their existing MS4 Workgroup and actively participating in this project demonstrated the communities’ commitment to regulatory compliance, as well as their desire to go above and beyond by protecting the natural environment and ensuring the health and safety of the broader community by better maintaining stormwater infrastructure.

A Regional Financing Approach: Findings from the office hours and the EFC’s independent research identified what would be needed for the Blair County MS4 permittees to finance water quality improvement projects associated with the regional TMDL Plan and CBPRP, as well as additional revenue needs to support MS4-related tasks. The EFC developed a host of financing scenarios and timeframes for implementation that were then vetted with the MS4 Workgroup and project partners. Following the vetting process, representatives from each of the 12 MS4-designated municipalities and the County met independently to come to consensus on the shared path forward. Juniata Township and Newry Borough opted out of the initial program, and were subsequently removed from the financing discussion. The communities also elected to have the Blair County Conservation District (BCCD) as the lead entity for the regional effort, chose a 20-year implemented timeframe, and selected a financing scenario modeled and adapted from York County’s regional CBPRP to support the program.

Cost Savings Strategies: In addition to developing a financing scenario designed to be sufficient enough to support program implementation in an equitable manner, the EFC also suggested cost saving strategies that the communities should consider, including employing a comprehensive regional approach, integrating green infrastructure into existing and future project opportunities, and accessing state, federal, and foundation grants to accelerate the implementation of projects and bolster the program.

Next Steps: Finally, the EFC suggested a series of steps for advancing implementation in the short-term as well as into the future, which include:

- Adapting recommendations in a way that enable the communities to take ownership of the financing solution;
- Pursuing grants to supplement funding needs as appropriate;
- Advancing efforts to establish a shared stormwater coordinator;
- Clearly defining implementation partner roles and responsibilities; and
- Routinely reassessing and reevaluating program needs.



BMP installation at the Hollidaysburg Area YMCA

For more information, please visit the [EFC website](#).

This project led by:



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