

Green Infrastructure for Cecil County

Report by Ken Wiggins on a presentation given to the County Commissioners on
November 6, 2007

Yesterday I attended a briefing by The Conservation Fund <http://www.conservationfund.org/> (Joel Dunn, David Burke, and Ted Webber) to the County Commissioners and staff regarding Green Infrastructure for Cecil County. They matched a County grant to fund their study. They highlighted the importance of green infrastructure as a network of natural areas that contribute to clean air and water, wildlife habitat and providing benefits to citizens. They characterized green infrastructure as a system of "hubs" (over 100 acres) connected by "corridors", where wildlife could freely migrate from one hub to another providing more diversity and richness to the entire ecosystem.

Their briefing included a "snapshot" of our present situation which indicated that we are already in trouble. Their assessment said that our existing green infrastructure comprises 37% of Cecil County lands in 46 hubs. In the decade between 1992 and 2002, 39 of the 46 hubs had been impacted by development (Mostly north of I-95). Only 23% of our green infrastructure is shielded, or protected in some way, leaving 63,000 acres at risk.

This discussion was not simply about preserving songbird habitat, or bucolic rural views. Our briefer cited Anne Arundel County, which faces a \$5 billion bill for storm water management issues due to over-development and new impervious surfaces. The money is required for stream restoration and watershed mitigation efforts. If Anne Arundel had had a plan in place, and had adhered to it, it might have avoided the present disastrous dilemma it faces. It will cost money to preserve our green infrastructure today, but we'd end up paying more in the future if we choose to ignore the situation today. Nature's solution today, is far superior to any engineered future mitigation.

The Conservation Fund recommended a detailed water quality and enhancement program of forest and wetland land cover areas that would maintain and improve our green infrastructure in 16 watersheds to help us to manage our total maximum daily load caps. They recommend upgrades to our wastewater treatment plants and incentives for the installation of denitrifying septic systems among others. They have volumes of technical data which they will share with the County planners when they submit their final report. Their recommendations may be problematical because many of their actions fall into what we have designated as our growth corridor. So we will have to find ways to reconcile growth and green infrastructure simultaneously.

They indicated that there is federal and state money on the table to accomplish some of these tasks. Our briefer stressed two things of importance that they especially felt were important — to get the green infrastructure plan integrated into our Comprehensive Plan as an overlay, and to initiate a County office for Green Infrastructure that would monitor and assess water quality, natural resources, and green infrastructure. They recommended a tracking and reporting system. They urged that we find funding mechanisms through

impact fees or from permit fees.

It is an opportune time to initiate a green infrastructure program in Cecil County. It is still not too late to preserve what we have by way of natural habitat and we might avoid the fate of Anne Arundel County if we act propitiously. Bottom Line - We are either going to pay now for a green solution, or pay more later for an engineered solution.

I have a spare copy of the handout which includes their executive summary and a few unreadable maps. I asked for a copy of their complete briefing, and to be copied on the final report when they deliver it in December.

Ken Wiggins