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Stormwater Evangelists

The Low Impact Development Center seeks out projects that will most widely and effectively spread the use of LID by landscape architects and others.

By Linda McIntyre

The Low Impact Development Center (LIDC) in Beltsville, Maryland, was a pioneer in developing the sustainable techniques that keep stormwater on site, infiltrate it in place, and use any excess for irrigation or aesthetic features. It has steadily built up a portfolio of more than 200 projects that its staff has designed or on which they have acted as consultants or contractors. But the projects are not just an end in themselves—the center's true aim is to change the built environment, from urban infrastructure to greenfield development to retail construction, and end reliance on end-of-pipe solutions and centralized controls.



Walter Calahan

Despite these lofty goals, the center flies under the radar in many respects. It engages in no traditional marketing or advertising, instead working with an established network of like-minded partners and relying on word of mouth and project experience, documented on the web site, to bring in new business. "You don't always see or recognize our name on stuff," says landscape architect, engineer, and planner Neil Weinstein, the LIDC's executive director. "We're not so good at promoting ourselves, probably because we're too busy."

Comprising only seven staff, the LIDC is known to many stormwater mavens across the nation as a leading source of expertise and information accumulated by working with a wide range of partners, from federal, state, and local government agencies to nonprofit environmental groups to private firms. "We want to work with groups and institutions to incorporate [LID] into their standard operations," says Weinstein. "So we've worked on a lot of pilot projects, where we learned how to construct things and the benefits of different approaches." These aren't intended as one-off efforts: The projects themselves, by working well, contributing data, and looking good, sell the techniques, and the center's partners use their experience in other projects in their day-to-day practices.

It's not your standard design or multidisciplinary firm. But the small and nimble operation, comprising engineers and scientists as well as landscape architects, could serve as a model for others interested in establishing a practice able to adapt to a variety of project types and sizes. More traditional landscape architects can also draw on the center's experience—the LIDC has made a lot of user-friendly information, in the form of design templates and manuals, technical specifications, and analyses, available free of charge on its web site.

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