

Prince George's County Official Asks Congress to Channel Runoff Money His Way

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WASHINGTON - A Prince George's County official told Congress on Wednesday that he has a cheaper and more efficient solution to a perennially under-funded problem -- stormwater runoff.

Larry Coffman's testimony to the House Subcommittee on Water Resources and Environment came as Rep. John J. Duncan Jr., R-Tenn., cited federal studies calling for a minimum of \$260 billion over the next 20 years to improve wastewater infrastructure. That is twice the amount federal, state, local and private sources currently spend on the upgrades combined, Duncan said.

"Our existing wastewater infrastructure is aging, deteriorating, and in need of repair," said Duncan, the chairman of the subcommittee.

Coffman, the associate director of the Prince George's County Department of Environmental Resources, testified that the "low-impact development" techniques used in the county could help stretch federal dollars.

The techniques earned the county a first-place award from the Environmental Protection Agency in 1998 for its stormwater-management program.

Where conventional treatment facilities of steel and cement channel stormwater, the county uses rooftop gardens and rain gardens. The latter look like traditional landscaped medians, but with sandy soil to naturally drain and clean the runoff.

Coffman asked the subcommittee to require that recipients of the federal Clean Water State Revolving Fund use such techniques whenever possible, pointing to a footnote in a 2002 Congressional Budget Office report that said such methods might lower the costs of centralized sewer systems.

Municipalities around the world have saved as much as 30 percent of the cost of sewer construction with low-impact designs, Coffman said. He estimated the county's savings to be about the same.

"Federal, state and local highway projects can easily incorporate low- impact development filtration and storage techniques into streetscape landscaping for very little additional cost," Coffman said.

Of the \$1.35 billion that Congress dedicated this year to the state revolving fund, \$75 million was targeted for these low-impact methods, he said.

The other four witnesses before the committee, ranging from the United States Conference of Mayors to the National Utility Contractors Association, pleaded to the committee members for more federal funding.

Despite a funding gap that one House witness called "more like the Grand Canyon," the committee showed little interest in the new techniques that Coffman touted. The congressmen directed follow-up questions at other witnesses, but not Coffman.

He later said he understood why.

"When you come in with a new technology, you're competing with an existing technology," Coffman said.

Civil engineers traditionally capture stormwater in retention ponds or channel it to central plants for treatment. The water channeled to plants cleans the sewage pipes in the older systems and dilutes the effluent.

But such systems are also subject to periodic overflows, Coffman said, and having to treat the extra gallons also tacks extra dollars onto the bottom line. He advocates keeping the water on site, where it can filter down to the water table or evaporate.

Despite the lack of initial interest from the committee members, Coffman said he believes his testimony will help his cause.

"What goes on after (the meeting) is what is important," he said.

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