

Fairfax Puts Pond Program on Hold

Facilities for Storm Water Runoff Called Ugly, Environmentally Destructive

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Fairfax County engineers are studying alternatives to the storm water holding ponds that have become a fixture of new developments and that many residents say are ugly and destructive to the environment.

Large regional ponds -- dry most of the time -- have been used by county engineers for more than a decade to contain rain runoff and control erosion and water pollution. Fairfax County has built dozens of them as developments have sprouted. But plans for nearly 100 more regional "dry ponds" are now on hold while county engineers search for more natural and environmentally friendly options, officials said.

The pond-building program is part of the county's efforts to comply with federal clean-water standards. The aim has been to prevent runoff from new housing developments from washing soil downstream and carrying pollution into waterways and eventually into the Chesapeake Bay. But the regional ponds often require streambeds to be cleared of trees, dammed with earth berms, equipped with concrete drainage structures and then served with access roads so the ponds can be maintained.

"Let's face it, they're just . . . ugly," said county Supervisor Michael R. Frey (R-Sully), who has been getting an earful about the ponds from homeowners in his district. "They can be like mini-Hoover dams."

Fairfax County so far has built 46 regional storm water ponds. In addition, the county maintains about 900 smaller ponds, and about 1,400 others are privately

maintained. In residential projects, developers pay for construction of the ponds and the county is responsible for maintaining them.

Most of the facilities fill up after a heavy downpour and dry out in a few days.

The Fairfax controversy centers on whether the county should continue to consolidate storm water management with a relatively small number of regional ponds, for efficiency and economy's sake, or build hundreds of smaller facilities.

Many homeowners, a citizens' panel that has been meeting on the issue and some county officials say it is time to explore new techniques to harness storm water, including the creation of "rain gardens" and "bio-retention basins," as well as new marshes and "forested wetlands."

Those methods involve installing special soils and plants in basin-like terrain in an effort to make the ground more permeable and return storm water to the local water table. Since many more of them would be required, they may be costlier to maintain than regional ponds, and some officials worry that they may not be as reliable.

"We are searching for the most environmentally sensitive methods we can find, but we've got to do something," Frey said. "Not cleaning up the water is not an option."

Frey said county staff members are rethinking the regional pond approach, and he plans to ask the Board of Supervisors to defer indefinitely the construction of any new ponds at its next meeting.

The latest pond plan to raise the ire of homeowners is in Oakton, where the county plans to construct a \$1.2 million earthen dam, 20-foot-tall concrete and steel drainage structure and paved access road in a forested stream valley off West Ox Road.

The dam would be nearly 300 feet long, about 20 feet high and 70 feet wide at its base. The construction and subsequent flooding behind the dam would destroy several acres of trees, say opponents, who turned out for a meeting with Frey on Monday at a local elementary school.

"It's the destruction of the local habitat that is most disturbing to us," said Dirk Suringa, a Treasury Department lawyer whose new house in the Dartmoor Woods development overlooks the site of the proposed dam. He and his wife, Kimberly Suringa, also a lawyer in the District, want the county to look at alternatives.

Besides being "unsightly," Dirk Suringa said, the dam project could create a breeding pond for mosquitoes. He also worries that when full, it would be dangerously deep.

"If a child walks down in there, you're not going to see him again," he said. "You don't read about children drowning in a bio-retention basin."

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