

Springfield-Greene County Integrated Plan Proposal to EPA – A Citizen-Focused Approach

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The vision of the Springfield-Greene County, Missouri region is to be good environmental stewards in an affordable manner while utilizing innovative, “green” practices via local control.

Proposal Overview

This is a joint, cooperative proposal to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Missouri Department of Natural Resources (MDNR) from the City of Springfield, Greene County, and Springfield City Utilities. This proposal, however, is broader than EPA’s *Draft Integrated Planning Approach Framework* – this proposal addresses not only water stewardship, but also air quality and solid waste issues – covering the majority of environmental issues every community faces. We feel this more holistic approach is not only appropriate, but is necessary for environmental success. Communities must be allowed to develop local plans that achieve the “biggest bang for the buck” toward environmental stewardship, while making these plans affordable to their individual communities. To focus only on water quality issues ignores the fact that wastewater, storm water, drinking water, air quality, and solid waste all have proposed or current regulations and must be addressed by communities, but can only be successful if done in a manner that is affordable to the citizens of these communities. It is the citizen who will be expected to fund every one of these requirements, whether in the form of wastewater rate increases, utility rate increases, or additional taxes or fees. We are proposing a **citizen-focused approach** in this proposal.

We are most appreciative of the EPA’s October 27, 2011 memorandum (*Achieving Water Quality Through Municipal Stormwater and Wastewater Plans*), which opens the door for more creative, locally developed plans that recognize each community has its own unique set of environmental challenges and opportunities. We share the same objective as stated in this memorandum, “clean water that protects public health and the environment.” This same memorandum states, “we sometimes assess and implement the best alternative to solve one problem at a time without full consideration of all Clean Water Act obligations. This approach may have the unintended consequences of constraining a municipality from implementing the most cost-effective solutions in a sequence that addresses the most serious water quality issues first.” This proposal follows that same line of thinking, but goes further by considering more than just water issues.

We hope you find this proposal intriguing, thoughtful, and balanced.

The citizens and leadership of the Springfield-Greene County region recognize the importance of quality environmental stewardship. The largest public and non-profit entities within the region, including the City of Springfield, Greene County, and City Utilities, co-founded the Partnership for Sustainability (www.greenozarks.org), a group whose mission is “to determine how our community can become a center of excellence in sustainability.” Springfield’s wastewater treatment plants are award-winning operations. Our community formed (and our three entities financially support) the Watershed Committee of the Ozarks, a nationally recognized organization dedicated to water quality. These are just a few examples of the many initiatives that our community has implemented. We have provided a more complete list with a brief description of each in Appendix “A”. We know we are just borrowing our water, air, and land that will be needed by future generations.

We recognize the value of protecting our environment, and as Missouri Department of Natural Resources has stated, we are considered a “model community” in this regard. Thus, we are not attempting to avoid our duty to protect the environment – just the opposite. We realize our stormwaters and wastewaters flow through our watershed into our drinking supply. We believe, however, that a “shotgun approach” to local environmental stewardship will result in costs that are unaffordable by most communities, including ours. Our organizations recently sponsored and provided technical support to a citizen’s “Affordability Task Force” that evaluated the potential impact of the various unfunded environmental mandates headed our way and issued recommendations to MDNR, as well as concerns about the overall affordability of existing and planned mandates. This citizen-based group estimated that, unless things change, our community will be forced to pay an additional \$1 billion toward these unfunded mandates, and our low-income citizens could be paying 18% of their income to cover the costs of these mandates by 2030. This is not a sustainable approach; something must change.

We believe a more localized approach – ***using local expertise to develop a local plan that achieves effective results at a reasonable cost to citizens*** – is perhaps the only sustainable strategy for the long term. If our communities are pushed too far, at too great an expense, a public backlash is likely that will swing the pendulum the other direction and we will relinquish the gains we’ve made during the past few decades. We agree with EPA that it is time to re-think our collective approach to this problem with a balanced strategy, and we are proposing a new approach.

Proposal

When combined, the potential water, air, and solid waste environmental mandates for Springfield, Greene County, and City Utilities could exceed \$1 billion over the next 10-15 years, an amount our community cannot afford. Thus, we are proposing a “pilot project” to develop a plan focused on environmental issues based on the following guiding principles:

- Affordability – Ensure that the plan is affordable to the community’s citizens.

- Effectiveness – Ensure that the plan addresses environmental issues in a manner whereby citizens receive the “biggest bang for their buck.” Recognize that every community is unique, and ensure each community gets an opportunity to address the environmental needs that are greatest in their community.
- Fairness – Ensure that the plan results in all communities being treated equally and fairly.
- Attainability – Ensure that the plan outlines actions that can reasonably be accomplished within the “community affordability” limit.
- Measurability – Ensure that the plan includes performance measures that track progress over time and indicate which projects are “best practices” that can/should be adopted or adapted by other communities, if applicable.
- Adaptability – Learning must be a part of the process moving forward. For the plan to be effective, we must be able to adjust and improve our plan based upon our experiences and results.

We feel that these should be the tenets of any environmental mandate placed upon our (or any) community. Working with the Missouri Department of Natural Resources, we are proposing to develop a local solution by using local expertise and community values to determine how we can best improve our environment while still making that solution affordable to our (your) citizens.

Our guiding principles (listed above), along with our proposed collaboration with MDNR, meet all eight of EPA’s “Principles to Guide the Development of an Integrated Plan” within the EPA’s draft *Integrated Planning Approach Framework* as follows:

1. We will work with MDNR to “reflect State requirements and planning efforts.”
2. We will “utilize existing flexibilities in the Clean Water Act” to be good stewards of our environment.
3. By focusing on the most effective solutions, we will “maximize the effectiveness of funds.”
4. Per our vision statement, we will “incorporate effective innovative technologies, approaches, and practices, including green infrastructure.”
5. In support of our fairness and affordability principles, we will “evaluate and address community impacts and consider disproportionate burdens resulting from current approaches as well as proposed options.”
6. By continuing the implementation of our Early Action Plan, even without a signed Consent Judgment, we are proving we will “ensure that existing requirements to comply with technology-based and core requirements . . . are not delayed.”
7. Our proposed plan will “ensure that a financial strategy is in place” – this is the essence of our affordability principle.
8. Per the collaborative nature of our community, we will “provide appropriate opportunity for meaningful stakeholder input throughout the development of the plan.”

We would like to highlight four key themes that we propose be integral to the development of an Integrated Plan – taking a holistic approach, community affordability, using local expertise and community values to develop locally effective plans, and collaboration.

Taking a Holistic Approach

A community cannot truly prioritize its actions and allocation of resources without considering all of its environmental requirements. If we focus only on water-related mandates, we will neglect air and solid waste issues. Our proposal is to address all environmental requirements collectively, then set our community's priorities in an affordable manner based upon our unique circumstances.

The October 27, 2011 memorandum from EPA states, "We write this memorandum to make sure we proceed as one EPA . . . ", but this memorandum only addresses water issues; it does not address air and solid waste issues. Thus, this strategy does not seem to ensure EPA is proceeding as one entity.

Our proposed "pilot project" would take a holistic approach to environmental planning and compliance actions. To address water issues, we propose an approach similar to that espoused by MDNR in their "Our Missouri Waters Initiative" – working collaboratively to establish water quality goals for each watershed, establish key benchmarks for measuring progress, and establish a reasonable timetable for implementation of the mutually acceptable plan to achieve those goals.

Community Affordability

A primary focus of our proposed Integrated Plan must be to attain "community affordability."

While we appreciate the EPA's draft *Integrated Planning Approach Framework* recognizing that the "appropriate sequencing of work" is an important consideration, the need is more than just to re-sequence our existing set of unfunded mandates or add a few months or years to the implementation schedule; the need is to determine what is affordable to our communities and determine what we can best do to protect public health and our environment within that limit. Communities do not have unlimited resources. We are not proposing an evolutionary change to simply "rearrange the deck chairs on The Titanic;" we are proposing a revolutionary change to ensure we don't sink the ship.

As a community, we only have existing funding sources for wastewater (sewer rates), landfill (tipping fees), and our utility rates (water source, electricity, and natural gas). Our proposal is to develop an Integrated Plan that evaluates all environmental needs holistically and results in a list of environmental actions that will address the highest priority needs in the community. We are not proposing to abandon our community's \$50 million wastewater Early Action Plan; we are committed to completing and funding that plan.

When considering community affordability, we will need to determine how to define “affordable” for our community as related to environmental mandates, and we propose that a citizens’ stakeholder committee help determine this. Our approved wastewater (sewer) rate increases necessary to cover the cost of our Early Action Plan will consume 1% of our Home Median Income (HMI). Since our community has no established funding source for stormwater mandates or air quality mandates, and any mandates associated with our water supply or electricity supply will result in utility rate increases. What is a reasonable “funding increase cap” on a community when all of these initiatives are considered together? This is the conversation municipalities need to have with EPA. Will the EPA initiate future environmental mandates on communities that result in a requirement to initiate higher fees, new taxes, and higher utility rates?

Implementing all of these additional fees and taxes will have a significant negative impact on our region’s economic development and our community’s quality of life. Why would a new business locate here if they must endure additional fees and/or taxes to address unfunded environmental mandates in our region, but not others?

The “difficult financial conditions” referenced in the October 27, 2011 memorandum does not just apply to today. We must work together to recognize that communities throughout the nation have limited resources to apply to environmental mandates. We propose to develop an Integrated Plan that ensures we get the “biggest bang for our buck.”

Use Local Expertise and Community Values to Develop a Locally Effective Plan

The Ozarks is a unique place. The karst topography provides opportunities and challenges. Our declining water table is a concern. We have antiquated infrastructure in older parts of our community. Other parts of the country have their unique characteristics, too.

We hope to utilize our limited resources in a manner that goes the furthest toward achieving our shared goal of maintaining the quality of our water, air, and land. We realize that, at times, the “letter of the law” can be at odds with the “intent” of the law. As regulators ourselves, we also realize that it is nearly impossible within the formality of written regulations to avoid conflicting requirements that can consume financial resources with little progress toward the goal or intent of the law.

Fortunately, we have many local experts – individuals on our staffs and within the larger community – that care about protecting public health and our environment. And these local experts know our local challenges. A cookie-cutter approach will not work. Applying mandates and rules from a different part of the country is not usually the most effective path. Thus, we are proposing that we be allowed to use local expertise – the individuals most familiar with our community’s environment – to develop a locally effective Integrated Plan.

It is our intention to utilize an Integrated Plan Citizen Advisory Committee to help prioritize the locations where we, as a community, should focus our efforts.

Collaboration

Our community is known for its high levels of collaboration. It is in that spirit of community collaboration that we are appealing to EPA and MDNR to work with us, and all other communities, to ensure that all environmental mandates are affordable, effective, fair, attainable, and measurable. We can develop a planning process that ensures all stakeholders, including our citizens, have a seat at the table.

It is our interest to work in partnership with EPA and MDNR to develop a more holistic integrated plan and develop a model that can be replicated throughout the country.

Seeking Endorsement

One of EPA's "overarching principles" in their draft *Integrated Planning Approach Framework* is that "the responsibility to develop an Integrated Plan rests with the municipality that chooses to pursue this approach." We understand that "the devil is in the details," but before our community invests significant time and resources to develop a proposed Integrated Plan for EPA's and MDNR's consideration, we are seeking confirmation that the general direction outlined in this proposal is supported. If this proposed "pilot project" is a non-starter, we must consider other options.

We truly appreciate this opportunity to propose the development of this type of Integrated Plan as a "pilot project," and we are hopeful you will give it fair consideration. We would welcome an opportunity to meet with you to discuss this idea and determine how we can work together to achieve our mutual goals. We look forward to hearing from you.

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