

Public Information and Education Agency Achievement Award
Educational Program
Fort Wayne City Utilities Rain Garden Program

As part of efforts to reduce combined sewer overflows, reduce the quantity and improve the quality of stormwater runoff, and involve the public in these efforts, Fort Wayne City Utilities has implemented a program to encourage the installation of residential rain gardens on private properties. The comprehensive program is intended to help citizens understand how stormwater runoff contributes to combined sewer overflows (CSOs) and how CSOs impact river water quality, and what they can do on their own properties to reduce water pollution. Although the scope of CSO solution is beyond what individual actions alone can fix, Fort Wayne City Utilities' goal is to give citizens a sense of ownership in addressing river water quality challenges beyond just writing a check for their utility bill every month. Correspondingly, public understanding of clean water challenges and benefits is also essential when the community is facing significant increases in utility bills to pay for investments in sewer system upgrades and rehabilitation. The rain garden program is an integral part of City Utilities' program to educate the public about the need for increases in utility rates to pay for public infrastructure investments.

Rain Gardens for Stormwater Management

Stormwater runoff impacts City Utilities and our customers in two significant ways. During wet weather, stormwater runoff may fill Fort Wayne's combined sewer system causing combined sewer overflows into our rivers. In parts of Fort Wayne that are served by stormwater-only sewers, rainwater runoff is collected in pipes that discharge into streams, ponds, lakes and rivers. This stormwater runoff carries a variety of pollutants with it that are

picked up in the urban environment. However, stormwater runoff receives no water quality improvement/treatment before it enters a water body. City Utilities has incorporated this information into a green infrastructure initiative – the Rain Garden program. Rain gardens were selected as the first programmatic step in developing City Utilities’ suite of green initiatives because the idea of gardening using native perennials and rain water is a manageable concept that many people can grasp – both those who have previous gardening experience and those who don’t.

Fort Wayne’s rain garden program includes five program elements:

1. Creating awareness of the rain garden concept through public presentations, presence at trade shows and community events, a general informational brochure and a program website at www.CatchingRainFW.org.
2. Teaching residents basic how-tos for siting, sizing, designing and constructing a rain garden on their property through free workshops, a how-to manual and free on-site technical assistance provided by Master Gardener volunteers.
3. A financial incentive of up to \$250 in the form of cash to help residents off-set some of the costs of installing a rain garden. Property owners must apply for the incentive and agree to maintain their garden for at least three years in order to qualify.
4. Construction of 20 demonstration rain gardens at public locations as examples to the public of how rain gardens look and how they work. City Utilities provided the garden designs and did preparatory earth work. Site owners assisted with planting and provide maintenance. Each gardens has an interpretive sign that includes contact information. Several of the demonstration gardens are located at schools and schools are intended as teaching labs.

5. Development and distribution of an interdisciplinary curriculum using rain gardens as a theme. City Utilities also provided teacher training workshops to help teachers incorporate the materials in the classroom. The materials and workshops are provided at no charge.

The program concept and implementation strategies for the program were developed in house. Assistance with creation of a “How-To Manual for Homeowners” and a general brochure was provided by an outside consultant. City Utilities also received assistance from consultants in the creation of educational workshop content, design of demonstration gardens, and the development of the kindergarten through 12th grade curriculum materials. Topics for the curriculum were determined by a local teacher work group that also reviewed and helped polish the material.

Making the public aware of the rain garden program has been key to its success. Many of the City’s demonstration rain garden sites have been planted by Scouts or schoolchildren so local television stations have covered these events. To make media aware of these “photo-ops” the City has prepared news releases and worked with the demonstration site owners to organize the plantings as media events. The home and garden sections of both local newspapers have written about the Fort Wayne program as part of articles about rain gardens in general. Utility bill stuffers showing the dates of rain garden workshops are mailed with Fort Wayne City Utilities bills in February and March. The stuffers go out at the same time that City Utilities hosts a booth at the annual Fort Wayne Home and Garden Show. A significant increase in people calling to register for a rain garden workshop was experienced immediately following the Home and Garden Show and mailing the bill stuffer.

Although the actual impact on the quality of Fort Wayne's rivers is difficult to measure, the rain garden program has been successful as an educational tool to teach the public about stormwater quality and combined sewer overflows. To date, 45 workshops have been conducted with nearly 1,000 people attending. In addition, approximately 30 presentations about the rain gardens or the rain garden program have been given to groups and organizations in the community and the region. Approximately 170 rain garden incentives have been given and 120 residential rain gardens have been registered at the rain garden web site indicating that 120 homeowners have gotten the message and have changed their behavior. Twenty demonstration gardens have been installed at schools, churches, City-owned buildings and museums and are being maintained. Two local universities and several local businesses have become involved in the program either by assisting with maintenance at the demonstration sites or by having students design their own rain garden for a campus location. At community events City Utilities is recognized by many individuals as the "rain garden group" and rain garden owners spontaneously report a high level of satisfaction with their projects. And, while it is difficult to identify the rain garden program as a direct cause, Fort Wayne's most recent sewer rate case was adopted by the City Council with no expressed opposition from the public.

An important priority for Fort Wayne City Utilities is engaging stakeholders to increase their understanding and support for City Utilities and its projects and programs particularly those aimed at improving river water quality. Through the rain garden program we have been able to impact the behavior of some customers, to involve them in water resource protection activities and to demonstrate the on-going need for investment in utility infrastructure.