

Environmental Resilience Institute

St. Louis Park, MN green infrastructure

The City of St. Louis Park, Minnesota Increases Green Infrastructure on Residential Properties

Summary

In 2017, the City of St. Louis Park, Minnesota implemented the Rainwater Rewards Program with the goal of increasing awareness and importance of managing stormwater and green infrastructure throughout the city. The program seeks to increase green infrastructure by providing residents with financial and technical assistance to install projects that reduce stormwater runoff on residential properties.



A rain garden installed as part of the Rainwater Rewards Program. Photo credit: Erick Francis

How did they do it?

Action

Applicable Resources

Action

Applicable Resources

Identified funding sources.

- Allocated \$50,000 of the City budget to help fund the project.
- Received annual grant money from the State of Minnesota Clean Water and Land Legacy Amendment.
- Clean Water and Land Legacy Amendment's web page <https://www.legacy.mn.gov/about-funds> demonstrates a variety of funding options that are available for green infrastructure work.
- ERIT's funding page <https://www.ericproject.org/funding/index.html> has multiple sources of funding for green infrastructure projects.

Identified partner organizations to promote and assist the program

- Partnered with a local non-profit for promotion and outreach.
- Partnered with other non-profit and government units to create and distribute educational resources.
- Metro Blooms <https://metroblooms.org/> is a local non-profit that helps communities create resilient landscapes and foster clean watersheds.
- Conservation Corps of Minnesota <https://www.conservationscorps.org/> is an organization that provides assistance with conservation activities.

Developed resources to help residents identify contractors

- Created a list of questions and considerations for residents to consider when hiring a designer.

Background

St. Louis Park, MN is a suburb of Minneapolis with an area of approximately 10 square miles and a population of about 48,000 residents. The city was incorporated in 1886 as primarily an industrial area but was largely developed in the post-World War II era when stormwater management was looked upon differently than today. As the city begins to redevelop, the city faces many challenges with managing stormwater, from isolated flooding along with improving water quality and wildlife habitat, making it more essential than ever to adopt green infrastructure programs. The focus of the

Rainwater Rewards Program began with helping the about 12,000 residential properties mitigate drainage issues while also reducing stormwater through infiltration, improving water quality, improving wildlife habitat, and reducing the stress on the City's stormwater infrastructure.

Implementation

A water resource manager was the lead and champion for creating the Rainwater Rewards Program. The City’s small local government naturally fostered a multidisciplinary environment in which nearly every department collaborates with one another to create a program with multiple benefits. The water resource manager advocated for the many benefits of the program including improving water quality and retention, increasing pollinator habitat, and even helping to resolve civil disputes between neighbors concerning flooding and runoff. Being a small government, after the City Council approved and funded the program in 2017, Rainwater Rewards accepted applications that same season.

For residents to participate in the program, their projects must meet one or more of the following goals: 1) protecting and restoring stormwater by capturing pollutants in rainwater, 2) increasing the watershed’s ability to store water, 3) preserving and restoring native plants and wildlife, 4) protecting and preserving groundwater quality and quantity, or 5) increasing awareness of the importance of managing stormwater. Examples of projects funded through the Rainwater Rewards Program include, but are not limited to rain barrels, tree planting, rain gardens, pervious pavement, and green roof installation.

Projects are not funded completely by the program but on a cost-share basis. The percentage of cost-share is determined on specific criteria, including location in the watershed and type of project proposed. Projects started or completed before applications have been approved are not eligible for funding.

Available projects

Type of Project	Cost Share	Maximum Funding
Rain Barrels	50 percent	\$100
Tree Planting	50 percent	\$500
Rain Garden without Hard Surface Drainage	50 percent	\$1,500
Rain Garden with Hard Surface	75 percent	\$2,000
Infiltration with Hard Surface drainage, Previous Pavement, and Garden Roof	75 percent	\$3,000

How the program works

The City's Stormwater Management website provides information about the program and eligible projects, contact information for project designers and construction crews, and a simple application form.

After residents have chosen their project, they may select a project designer or contractor to help develop and implement the project, or the resident can complete the project themselves. The City does not recommend specific individuals or companies, but they provide a list of questions or topic to consider when looking for one. The City also provides information on the Blue Thumb website <<https://bluethumb.org/>> , which is a public/private partnership that promotes raingardens, runoff reduction, native plants and improved water quality. Other partners include local governmental units (watershed districts, conservation districts, cities and counties), non-profit organizations, and private companies such as nurseries and landscape design and build companies.

When choosing a designer or contractor residents should consider several things, including stormwater project design experience and familiarity with local regulations. During project design, the City recommends that residents have a qualified designer or engineer perform a detailed site review to assess applicable permits, drainage characteristics and more. After the site review is completed and plans are finalized, residents complete a form with the final project design plans. The City then reviews the projects for effectiveness in managing stormwater runoff, feasibility, overall design characteristics and eligibility for funds, and permit requirement.

Next, the City meets with residents to agree upon project funding and the requirements of the maintenance agreement, and then residents may begin project construction. Agreements are tailored specifically for each project and typically includes a five-year maintenance plan, schedule, and inspection plan. After final inspection and completion of the maintenance agreement, reimbursement will be given to residents according to previously agreed upon project characteristics.

The homeowner process

1. **Select your project** from one of the eligible projects.
2. **Select an experienced designer** to help develop your project, if necessary. For example, Blue Thumb Partners, which is coordinated by Metro Blooms (a local organization focused on environmental resiliency).
3. **Perform a site review** to determine the most effective project and location. Review to be completed by the homeowner and/or designer.
4. **Finalize preliminary design** based on-site review.
5. **Complete and submit the Rainwater Rewards Program application** (include the project design).
6. **Application review.** City staff reviews the application for effectiveness in managing stormwater runoff, feasibility, overall design characteristics, and eligibility for funds. During the review

process, City staff informs if any permits are required to construct the project.

7. **Project approval.** City staff will reach out with the project approval or comments after the application review is complete.
8. **Begin constructing the project**, after approval received.
9. **Inspection of project** – upon completing the construction. The City inspects the project to ensure it was built according to plan and functions as intended. The homeowner must contact City staff to set up inspection.
10. **Maintenance agreement.** To ensure the project is effective over time, it must be routinely maintained, and the property owner will need to enter into a maintenance agreement with the City. See a sample maintenance agreement.
11. **Funding reimbursement.** Upon completion of the inspection and final approval, reimbursement for the project begins. It takes about two weeks to receive the reimbursement check.

Learn more about the process <<https://www.stlouispark.org/government/departments-divisions/natural-resources/rainwater-rewards-program>>

Over the course of the five-year agreement, City staff perform inspections of projects to observe the project and to ensure the project is functioning as designed. If substantial, or non-regular maintenance is required, the City contacts residents to discuss what kind of maintenance is required and in what kind of timeframe they will be required to complete it. Maintenance agreements are enforced through property maintenance codes, and if serious violations occur, initial grant funds may be reassessed. If residents sell their home, they must notify the city within 30 days of the sale.

Funding

The program is funded primarily through two sources:

1. The City of St. Louis Park allocates about \$50,000 per year for reimbursements and five percent covers for administrative program costs.
2. The Clean Water and Land Legacy Act provides additional funding for projects to help reduce costs. The City has received funding ranging from \$4,200 to \$12,400 per year. The allotment varies as the grant distributions from the Clean Water Land Legacy Act depend on the number of entities applying for funds.

Timeline

From idea to reality, the program design and approval took less than a year. The initial planning process for St. Louis Park's Rainwater Rewards Program began in 2016. By spring 2017, the program had been approved by the city council and funding was secured. Immediately following approval, the program was opened up to the community and began taking the first applications that summer.

Outcomes and Conclusions

The St. Louis Park residents widely accepted and embraced the Rainwater Rewards Program. In its first three years of implementation, the program supported the installation of approximately 60 green infrastructure projects. As of summer, 2020, the program is on track to support the installation of 40+ projects. The program makes these projects much more affordable as reimbursements can cover 50 percent - 75 percent of the total project costs, increasing the access of these projects to a large portion of the community residents. The average cost to residents following reimbursement is approximately \$100 - \$250.

The community's embrace of the Rainwater Rewards Program also spurred local businesses to increase their own implementation of green infrastructure in new development and construction.

Challenges

A primary challenge for the St. Louis Park is the ability to actively respond to the residents' interest in the Rainwater Rewards program. The Water Resource Manager is currently the sole administrator of the program. As interest grows and scheduling site visits become more time-consuming the manager will work to meet all demands while still maintaining a high level of service to the city's residents.

Another challenge is the program expanding beyond single-family homes to including multifamily buildings. Multifamily buildings are generally larger in scope and have the potential for more costly projects and longer time frames for completion and keeping property managers interested over a longer-term is challenging.

According to the project manager, "this is a great program for the community and if you have a supportive council and the right resources, it can be a lot of fun! The benefits are almost untold in terms of what people learn."

Equity and Justice

The program began at a grassroots level, with a focus on residential properties, in an effort to gauge interest in the program and to determine future budgetary needs. As the popularity of the program continues to grow, the city is excited about expanding the program outreach to the greater community to include all housing developments, including apartments, within the city in the coming years.

Project Resources

- The Minnesota Pollution Control Agency has information on capturing rainwater and preventing runoff <<https://www.pca.state.mn.us/news-and-stories/capturing-rainwater-and-preventing->

runoff> . The guide provides several examples of solutions that communities and residents can undertake.

- The Minnesota Stormwater Manual has a decision tool for stormwater infiltration <https://stormwater.pca.state.mn.us/index.php/Decision_tools_for_stormwater_infiltration> that helps determines what best management practices can be utilized at a given site.

For more information about St. Louis Park's program, contact:

Erick Francis
Water Resources Manager
The City of St. Louis Park
952-924-2690
efrancis@stlouispark.org

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