

Storm water runoff subject of discussion at city Planning Commission

New rain garden being installed at Ottawa Stadium parking lot
Harbor Springs

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By Kate Spaulding
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A rain garden is being installed at the Ottawa Stadium parking lot.

The team at Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council has long known that “stormwater matters” to the health of local waterways, and their continued public education campaigns and management resources work to bring awareness– and solutions– to local communities.

Stormwater runoff (rain or snowmelt that falls on streets, parking areas, rooftops, or other developed land that flows directly into nearby rivers, streams, and lakes) remains a threat to the waters of the Little Traverse Bay region, as the runoff picks up, and carries directly into the waterways, everything from oil, grease, and collants from vehicles to fertilizers, pesticides, literal, soil from construction sites, bacteria from pet waste, and more.

Recently, the Harbor Springs Planning Commission heard from new local policy manager, Anna McGlashen, from the Watershed Council, about potential policy-related solutions municipalities can advance to help curb stormwater runoff pollution.

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McGlashen, a graduate of the University of Michigan, helped the state of New York rewrite its pesticide policies before returning to Michigan for her master's degree. She joined the Watershed Council staff in May, 2023, but told the Planning Commission she hopes to "be here for the next 30 years"— which means protecting the region's water resources is more than a job. It's a way of life.

"I look forward to working with all of you," she noted, explaining that she was able to provide support in part thanks to a grant from the Petoskey Harbor Springs Community Foundation that allowed the Watershed Council to create a two-part education series: stormwater 101 (what it is, why it's an issue) and stormwater solutions (what communities can do about it).

"Because I know Harbor Springs has done a lot on stormwater management, I am going to go ahead and skip mostly to part two," McGlashen said.

Some in Harbor Springs will remember the graduating class of 2023's work in stormwater solutions when they were middle schoolers participating in Awareness to Action, a district collaboration led by Molly Ames Baker of Toponexus. The students successfully lobbied City Council to have a stormwater separator installed near City Beach, and developed multiple community awareness and public service announcement campaigns to teach people about how best to make a positive impact in the fight against stormwater runoff.

During the presentation to the Planning Commission, McGlashen said there are four key areas of management options municipalities can adopt, including a Watershed Management Plan, leveraging a Master Plan, local ordinances, and increasing the use of nature based solutions.

"The Watershed Management Plan is an incredibly useful tool, especially for Planning Commissions," McGlashen noted. Locally, the plan is a guide that was created by stakeholders and managed by the Watershed Council.

"We bring together the local government, the drain commissioner, the lake associations, representation from EGLE (the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy), and we talk about what the concerns area, where priority areas are, the status of watershed quality; in this process, there is watershed characterization, area

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“It is a several year process to write it, and then it is sent to EGLE for approval, and once approved there, it is sent to the federal Environmental Protection Agency for approval. All of the implementation tasks listed on that plan are eligible for EGLE funding,” McGlashen said.

Harbor Springs, along with Petoskey, Walloon Lake Village, and Bay Harbor, is listed as a “critical area” in that plan, indicating it is a location where actions are needed to address known and potential sources of pollutants.

“What this means for you, is that if you decided you wanted to undertake a specific project related to stormwater management, you are in a priority area, and would likely get funding to address the problem,” McGlashen explained. “It’s also useful, in terms of directing your attention. If you want to do an intervention but don’t know where to start, you can come to this plan for priorities to implement.”

Another option for communities is to develop a Stormwater Master Plan to work to detect and eliminate illicit discharges, encourage wetland and/or riparian zones, work to prevent erosion, encourage nature-based solutions (like native vegetation) and engage the community to become involved and invested in saving and using stormwater.

The city could also pass a stormwater ordinance, in which a standard of “no net runoff ” from new development is set, requiring greenbelts for waterfront properties, flexibility for developers to use a wide range of non-structural techniques to achieve desired standards.

McGlashen added that depending on the likelihood of new development happening on the waterfront, Harbor Springs may not want to invest the time to pass such an ordinance, if options for new construction are limited. She added that several components of a stormwater ordinance can already be found in Harbor Springs City Code, including regulations along the harbor, waterfront, and marina regarding refuse disposal, etc.

Moving into incorporating stormwater solutions into local zoning is “where the rubber meets the road” for Harbor Springs, McGlashen said. “This is where Harbor Springs does have some language requiring greenbelts, but the language regarding what that greenbelt looks like is very sparse...There are very limited water quality provisions in

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The final way McGlashen explained cities like Harbor Springs can make a difference when it come to stormwater management is through techniques like shoreline protection strips, rain gardens, "grey" infrastructure like catch basin inserts, and oil and grit separators, green roofs, and/or permeable pavement or pavers, especially in waterfront adjacent areas.

"These are very useful for removing pollutants before they hit the water," she said.

"We do have, through the Watershed Council, a grant to do a rain garden," noted city manager Victor Sinadinoski.

The rain garden is currently being installed under the direction of local landscaper and water garden expert Chris Leifson and can be viewed at the Ottawa Stadium parking lot.

Some other general interventions McGlashen said anyone can help implement when it comes to combating stormwater pollution include using native plants wherever possible in landscaping, clustering development and preserving open space, and designing buildings (and roads) to minimize impervious surfaces.

Sinadinoski said some of the solutions include the Tree Board's canopy management plan, and thinking about new parking surfaces offset by trees in the future.

City Council representative on Planning Commission, Nancy Rondel, also questioned if it was possible for the City to avoid using fertilizer on City-owned properties, and if so, if some signage providing information about why could be created.

"There have been times we have not used fertilizer on some of our parks...and we did get a lot of feedback about how bad it looked," Sinadinoski noted.

"I'm sure," Rondel said. "But I do think that is an area we could possibly look at and address somehow."

Planning Commissioner Vanessa Warren, a landscape architect and professor at Michigan State University, asked if there was language about impervious surfaces in the code, and zoning administrator Jeff Grim said there was

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Porous surfaces are more expensive– up to five times the amount, Warren noted– but she said “they are still going in; it’s slow, but it’s happening in some (municipal) projects” with which she is involved.

“These solutions can all be done– and are being done– all over the country, just not so much here at the moment,” said Planning Commission member and architect Mark Buday. “So thank you for coming and having this conversation, because I think it’s a valuable one.”

For more information on stormwater and solutions available for communities and individual community members, visit www.watershedcouncil.org, or reach out to McGlashen, amchglashen@watershedcouncil.org.

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