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Putting JC on the 'Green Map'

Community members hope rain gardens will reduce flooding

by Adriana Rambay Fernández Feb 12, 2012 | 910 views | 0 | 2 | | | |

Reporter staff writer



"What we are trying to do is organize a process by which community groups can do what they are already doing, but with each other – more collaboration," said Debra Italiano, chair of Sustainable Jersey City, a network of civic-minded citizens who want the city to be a more sustainable place to live and work. "So with Green Map, how do we get more people to collaborate to put what they are already doing on the map?"

[view slideshow \(3 images\)](#)

Italiano sat at a table with Sustainable JC members Robb Kushner and Jan Graff and Green Map Systems founder and director Wendy Brawer. The discussion was part of the group's field trip last month to the Green Map headquarters in the Lower East Side. Green Map provides mapmaking tools, training, and iconography to chart local ecological, social, and cultural projects and resources within a city.

During the visit, large maps covered the walls, an intern watered plants, and cookies fueled the dialogue. The main topic was how to use the Green Map System for the Sustainable JC rain garden campaign, which will try to alleviate local flooding by planting native plants and shrubs to absorb and trap rainwater.

"I would think we ought to have a rain garden map," said Kushner. He is a key ambassador for the rain map project. "You want to be able to just see where potential problem areas are."

Identifying flood-prone spots

Because of the city's aging sewer system, which combines and collects storm water and sewage in one network, flooding occurs and raw sewage ends up on public and private properties when the system becomes overwhelmed.

The federal Environmental Protection Agency last September issued a consent decree that said the city was in violation of the Clean Water Act because of such overflows and the resulting pollution.

Residents in the downtown area have asked city officials to confront the problem, which was worsened by Hurricane Irene in August, 2011.

“The potential for Green Maps is huge.” – Robb Kushner

The local Environmental Commission issued recommendations last year that included low-impact development such as creating swales (low-lying stretches of land) and retention gardens to deal with storm water overflow.

Rain gardens can help

“You can enclose the area that is most likely to flood. So that tells you right off the bat that putting a rain garden in this area is an opportunity,” said Brawer, pointing to a set of icons that serve as a template for cities that want to design a Green Map.

“You have to go above the [flooding] spot. You have to walk uphill,” said Graff. She is a permaculture design expert. “Where does it begin? And then try to catch it. If you try to go deep for the gully usually your water just flows out.”

The group last year planted a Permaculture Learning Garden in Hudson County's Washington Park that borders Jersey City and Union City by Paterson Plank Road.

“There was an overflow that was not being managed,” said Italiano about Washington Park. The permaculture garden employs a strategy that involves building up a perimeter of soil and plantings along the edges to prevent water from running onto the streets.

Rain gardens big in Seattle

Planting rain gardens has become popular in other cities with sewer system overflow problems including Seattle, Wash. In that city, nonprofit Stewardship Partners and Washington State University Extension joined up aiming to plant 12,000 rain gardens by 2016 across Puget Sound neighborhoods. They expect the rain gardens to soak up 160 million gallons of polluted runoff each year.

While creating rain gardens does not replace the need to upgrade and repair an outdated sewer system, it can help minimize the impact of heavy rains and educate the community about sustainable land use.

“I want to show people that instead of having a concrete lawn [why not] have a beautiful green garden,” said Italiano.

Anyone can add a site

The current Jersey City Green Map has over 200 sites on it. Anyone can visit the Green Map web site or download the cell phone application and view or add green sites. The JC Green Map includes icons for parks, schools, art studios, neighborhood gardens, farmer's markets, and solar and wind energy sites amongst many others. Sustainable JC plans to bring on interns in addition to working with neighborhood associations to help identify rain garden sites and other green sites for the local map. They are also talking with local artists about putting installations at the site of future gardens.

“People have put stickers and write notes right on the map,” said Brawer. “Some people get



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carried away and put their kitchen compost!"

Brawer said that she sees the Jersey City Green Map initiative as a way to develop a protocol for other cities to follow.

"This is really the pilot that we are putting parameters around for Sustainable Jersey and for other municipalities," said Italiano. In 2011, Jersey City achieved silver certification from Sustainable Jersey, a statewide certification program for municipalities that want to go green. Community asset mapping is among the list of actions a municipality can take toward certification.

There are 14 locally-led Green Map projects in New Jersey, and 766 worldwide across 60 countries.

"The potential for Green Maps is huge," said Kushner.

To view the JC Green Map, visit: <http://www.opengreenmap.org/greenmap/jersey-city-nj>. For info about Sustainable Jersey City visit: <http://sustainablejc.org/>

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