

# The Capital

## Top Stories

### Forum paves way for creating stormwater fund

By E.B. FURGURSON III, Staff Writer

A standing room only crowd learned more about the problems facing the county at a stormwater forum but came away still seeking backing for a way to pay for a program to repair the damage done.

County conservation activists, supported by community associations and research from county officials, have floated the idea of creating a dedicated fund paid by assessing roughly \$60 per residential property to be used exclusively for stormwater work.

But they have yet to get a commitment from enough elected officials to back the proposal and are trying to educate residents on the need for such a plan.

"We need leadership from the County Council," said Bob Gallagher, the riverkeeper for the Rhode and West rivers. "The fact we do not have it means . . . either we are not doing enough to make ourselves heard or they are not listening. If we don't have leadership on the issue there will be no bill to vote on."

More than 100 people packed the education center at the Smithsonian Environmental Research Center in Edgewater Sunday to hear about fixing water quality problems created by everyday human activity and the impervious surfaces that intensify the storm runoff degrading our creeks, rivers and the Chesapeake Bay.

Yet the outstanding question remains how to pay for it.

"We have an inventory of (storm water) projects that far exceeds our ability to pay for them," said Public Works Director Ron Bowen, who has been leading a lonely charge to find an answer. "The cost lies in the hundreds of millions of dollars."

Mr. Bowen explained the issue to those gathered at SERC noting that streams and runoff merely deliver pollution created by human behavior.

"We are the source of those pollutants," he said.

He said individuals can make changes in their own behavior, or around their homes, to minimize the nutrient load streaming into our waterways. He also stressed that even if the county created a dedicated stormwater fund it will not be enough.

"Government cannot do it alone. We need the cooperation of business and citizens to do their part as well."

The county currently spends about \$11 million annually on stormwater work. At that rate it could take 40 years or more to address the watershed problems.

Creating such an entity in Anne Arundel would not be a novel notion. More than 1,000 jurisdictions nationwide have done so.

Virginia Beach created a stormwater utility in 1993 to address its stormwater needs. The city's administrator Phil Davenport told the crowd that it is slowly working to help them address their own backlog of stormwater problems.

The city's staff devised stormwater legislation, but it took them two years to pass it.

"We had to sell the concept. They first said, 'No way.' In the end they had no other way out, no alternative," he said.

To do that in Anne Arundel will take a groundswell of public support aimed at administration and council members wary of the underlying anti-tax sentiment that pushed the county's tax cap through in the 1990s.

Councilman Ed Reilly, who moderated the three-hour forum, suggested County Executive Janet S. Owens, who has said a bill would not happen on her watch, is not pushing legislation because it would be unfair to saddle her successor with a new program like the stormwater utility.

The crowd groaned in disbelief.

So what the councilman and others reiterated was the need for more public education on the issue. People have to understand the problem in order to support proposed measures to fix it.

Mr. Reilly, R-Crofton, said those trying to get the bill passed should instead get commitments from the candidates seeking to replace Ms. Owens after she steps down next year.

"Elected officials will respond to the tax payers when they are willing to take action," he said.

Joan Bell, whose Saefern neighborhood has been trying to get dredging and watershed repair done for more than five years, said it seems county staffers are thwarted from doing their job.

"It seems the county officials want to do the right thing," she said. "But they just don't have the money do to do the job."

South River riverkeeper Drew Koslow said meeting the challenge is within the county's grasp.

"What is our legacy going to be?" he asked. "We know how to do it. Working together we can make a difference."

On Thursday, County Council members will tour degraded and repaired watersheds to get a firsthand look at the damage done and what adequate funding can do to restore landscapes and streambeds to functioning ecosystems.

*Published September 27, 2005, The Capital, Annapolis, Md.  
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