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Brian O'Neill: Coordination and cooperation bring a healthy solution to Green Tree

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Next time you're driving past the Green Tree exit on the Parkway West, give a thank-you wave.

This borough of 4,400 people has done outsized work keeping rainwater out of our regional sewage system. If you don't think that's a big deal, know that the treatment system's federally mandated task is to stem the flow of untreated sewage overflow into our rivers and streams — a nutbrown tide of 9 billion gallons in the average year.

Yeah. Yech. It's a daunting number and it's going to take a couple of decades and billions of dollars to get the spillage down even below 3 billion. But this borough put the green in Green Tree last fall with a modest \$250,000 project — 85 percent paid by Alcosan — that should remove an estimated 23 million gallons of stormwater that's been needlessly flowing through combined sewer pipes toward the treatment plant each year.

Putting that in perspective, the average rain barrel holds 50 to 60 gallons of water. You could line up barrels from the Fort Pitt Tunnel to Lake Erie and still not match what was accomplished near the intersection of Poplar Street and Noblestown Road.

“In my 30-year-career,” borough manager Dave Montz said, “this is one of the things I am most proud of.”

Though these are loaded words to use in a sewer story, let's back up. If your rising water and sewer bills aren't clue enough, you need to know why it's crucial to take water out of the system in the first place so it doesn't have to be treated in the second place. Or, or to put that another way, why flushing toilets during a rainstorm has been bad for the rivers and streams of Western Pennsylvania.

Each day, residents of 83 municipalities blissfully flush their waters toward the lowest point in Allegheny County, a deep pit in the Alcosan plant beside the Ohio River on the North Side. It's overwhelmed. Plans are underway to double the plant's capacity by 2027. But keeping rainwater out combined sewage pipes are the many other pieces of this nasty puzzle.

In the past couple of years, Alcosan has awarded \$20 million to million to 40 municipalities in a program called “Green Revitalization of Our Waterways.” The GROW grant reached Green Tree and Mr. Montz knew a spot at the Pittsburgh border he'd been eager to fix.

When PennDOT alerted the borough that it would be resurfacing Poplar Street, Green Tree moved up its construction schedule so the stormwater sewage work could be done beforehand, “saving us \$250,000 that would have been spent on restoration of the road surface,” Mr. Montz said. The borough’s contractor installed 370 feet of three-foot wide concrete pipe to divert water directly to Bells Run.

Before that, the rainwater had been heading into pipe that fed a Pittsburgh Water and Sewer Authority combined sewage chamber — just upstream of a [combined sewage overflow](#) discharge pipe.

The borough has spent about \$6 million in the past 15 years bringing its sanitary sewer system into compliance with the federal mandate. On this project, “there was no doubt we hit a home run,” Mr. Mantz said. His borough made another green fix a few years ago, too, with the swimming pool that is drained for about nine months of the year. That pool is required to drain into the sanitary system in season because of potential bacteria, but borough engineer Louis Casadei saw that all the rainwater hitting the pool was unnecessarily heading toward the treatment plant out of season, too. He put in a second drain line to the storm sewer system for the nine months the pool is idle.

“There are some things that are staring you in the face,” Mr. Mantz said.

The irony to longtime Borough Councilman Ron Panza is that “our sewage has to pass through the city at some point.” So despite Green Tree’s nimble efforts to send Alcosan only pure — ahem — stuff, it still meets with combined sewer pipes in Pittsburgh and might overflow before it gets to the treatment plant. (Alcosan issued sewage overflow advisories to boaters 67 times from May through October last year.)

Joey Vallarian, Alcosan spokesman, said the Green Tree project is nonetheless a solid win for the region and represents the biggest return from GROW grants so far. Getting rainwater out of the municipal system before it makes it to the city’s combined sewage overflow system means Green Tree’s 20-odd million gallons never ever have to be treated by Alcosan — or combine with sewage and hit the streams before it can get far.

It appears that coordination of state, municipal and regional agencies led to a healthy solution in Green Tree that saved taxpayers money. Nice to see that can still happen.

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