

North Adams Transcript

Adams gets proactive about water runoff

By Hinda Mandell
North Adams Transcript

Friday, March 25, 2005 - ADAMS -- The town of Adams is taking proactive measures to protect the area's waterways and comply with environmental regulations not yet in effect for the town, according to Director of Community Development Donna Cesan.

The Environmental Protection Agency is working with local governments across the country to address polluted runoff of rainwater into storm drains. The purpose of this program -- Storm Water Phase II -- is to improve the quality of the nation's water sources.

According to Cesan, when rain hits the sidewalks it flushes chemicals, grease, dust, pet waste and other types of refuse on its surface down the storm drain. Eventually, this waste makes its way into the Hoosic River, untreated and unclean, through storm drainage systems.

According to information from an EPA publication provided by Cesan, phase I of the project addressed storm water runoff in sewer systems serving populations of 100,000 or more, as well as construction affecting five acres of land or more.

Adams is working on a draft of a "storm water management strategic plan," said Cesan. This information "will guide the town on how to meet the Storm Water Phase II requirements."

Cesan expects that the town will need to comply with the program regulations within three to five years. Adams received government funding in 2002 -- a water quality management planning grant from the state -- to work ahead on this strategic plan. The town has until June to turn in a completed strategic plan to the state. This funding allowed Adams to hire a civil engineer from Comprehensive Environmental Inc., an engineering firm with expertise in municipal storm water drainage. Over the next several years the town will implement this plan.

While small towns do not need to immediately comply with the program, Adams is hoping "to get a leg up," said Cesan.

"We hope to be a model for other smaller communities," she said.

According to the spokesman for the state's Department of Environmental Protection, Edmund Coletta, the EPA expects to see progress before that deadline five years down the road.

"The Environmental Protection Agency usually wants to see communities make progress. They don't want to see communities wait until the last year," he said.

Taking a proactive stance in complying with these future regulations gives the town more time to be in compliance, while also acting in a cost-effective manner, Cesan said.

While implementing the strategic plan, the town will address such issues as the timeliness of street cleaning. For example, the Adams Department of Public Works cleans the streets each spring -- disposing of salt, sand and other debris -- which prevents waste from entering the drainage system and polluting the Hoosic River.

However, the timeliness of the street cleaning is important, said Cesan. If it happens later in the spring months, then more pollutants can enter the storm water pipes, and subsequently, the river.

Cesan also said that educating the public plays a critical role in getting the word out about activities that might have a detrimental effect on natural water-bodies. Awareness programs in schools might contribute to a decrease in the amount of pollutants in storm water runoff. After all, said Cesan, recycling became successful when students brought awareness into their homes from schools.

The strategic plan also hopes to address "illicit discharges," said Cesan, which she described as "inappropriate connections between storm drainage and sewer pipes."

Before drainage systems were in place, some grungy contents of sewer pipes flowed into the river. As part of the strategic plan, the town will map out and identify these illicit discharges, which also include cracked or leaking sewer pipes and overflow from septic tanks.

"Mistakes happen over time," said Cesan. "Nobody knows about it because it's all happening underground."