



Nicola Crawhall

Charting the Way

Binational mayors coalition shares storm water management report

The Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Cities Initiative (GLSLCI) has released a new report titled “Stormwater Management in the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Basin: Cities Charting the Way Forward.” The information gathered, based on survey results from 25 American and Canadian municipalities, illustrates a changing storm water management landscape. Here GLSLCI Deputy Director Nicola Crawhall shares findings and insight with SWS Managing Editor Caitlin Cunningham.

Caitlin Cunningham: How did GLSLCI’s new report come to be? What is its primary objective?

Nicola Crawhall: GLSLCI is an organization of mayors representing over 80 cities and 14 million people across the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence region. The Cities Initiative felt it was important to support our member cities to move to a more sustainable future.

The new Green CITTs (Cities Transforming Toward Sustainability) program is designed to promote and support municipal leadership across 20 areas of operations that influence the sustainability of cities, with a view to protect water resources and coastal areas; promote low-carbon energy generation and consumption; adopt green land use and building design; and encourage green economic development.

In the program’s first year, storm water management was chosen as the priority area. We asked our members to complete a comprehensive survey on their storm water management activities; programs; drivers and barriers to change; innovative practices; concerns for the future; and preparation for changes in local climate. The original purpose of this report was to provide comparative analysis of the state of current storm water management practices, to showcase what our members are doing and to share information across a large geographic region. What we ended up with was a fascinating snapshot of a sector in transformation.

Cunningham: Please share some of the most significant findings. Any surprises?

Crawhall: Not surprisingly, most respondents identified lack of funding as their main obstacle to the implementation of storm water practices. This finding is important, however, in the context of a sector in need of significant investment to meet the mounting pressures of increased urbanization, improving receiving water quality and changing climatic conditions.

We were surprised to learn that one barrier to improved storm water practices, even in municipalities with advanced plans, is the need for greater interdepartmental coordination. Part of the solution is reorienting the organizational culture through corporate goal setting, senior-level commitment and training.

Another surprise is how much storm water continues to be managed on a lot-by-lot basis. Storm water management that figures into the beginning stages of land-use planning will be most effective.

Municipalities know that storm water contributes pollutants to water bodies, and they are taking action to reduce runoff and improve the quality of storm water entering receiving waters. However, measuring progress is tricky given the multiple sources of pollutants.

More than half of respondents answered they had measured or noticed changes to precipitation patterns in their municipality in recent years. Fewer had undertaken a climate-change risk

assessment to determine the vulnerability of their infrastructure. Even fewer have taken action to adapt to changing climatic conditions. This may be related to a lack of climate modeling at a useful scale to local communities.

Cunningham: How can municipalities apply this information?

Crawhall: We would like this report to be used by our member cities and any other cities tackling the triple challenge of increased urbanization, degrading water quality and the impacts of climate change. The report found that there is so much more that can be done in addition to basic storm water practices focusing only on lot-specific controls required in building permits. At the same time, finances are tight for everyone. So the report takes a pragmatic point of view, looking at practices in the smallest to the largest cities, and providing advice and examples of innovative practices for all sized municipalities. SWS

View the full report at www.glslicities.org.

Nicola Crawhall is deputy director of the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Cities Initiative. Crawhall can be reached at nicola.crawhall@rogers.com.

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