Thinking Regionally and Acting Locally in the Rahway River Watershed

Education is essential to helping people understand how stormwater moves through a community, but effective education requires more than presenting technically accurate information. Information should be relevant to the audience, grounded in familiar examples, and clear about why the information matters. In the Rahway River Watershed, that means helping municipal leaders, residents, and community partners understand how local decisions affect flooding, water quality, and the health of the watershed.

A series of stormwater utility presentations developed for municipalities throughout the Rahway River Watershed provides one example of how these principles can be put into practice. The first presentation, hosted by the Westfield Green Team one rainy night in March, set the stage for the series. The presentation guides audiences through the fundamentals of stormwater management, including the sewer systems that carry runoff and the relationship between rainfall, runoff, and river conditions. It also helps audiences understand how watersheds respond during storms and why the timing of water entering the river matters. By connecting these concepts to familiar local conditions, the presentation makes stormwater management more tangible and actionable.

Several strategies used in the presentation can apply broadly to public education on complex environmental issues. The presentation uses local examples, simple graphics, and plain language. It uses familiar community references to show how stormwater moves through neighborhoods and into the watershed. It also invites questions and discussion throughout, which helps municipal staff and residents connect the material to their own experiences. Together, these strategies make technical information easier to understand and create space for meaningful discussion about potential solutions, including green infrastructure—nature-based strategies, such as planting trees, removing asphalt, and installing other best management practices that slow runoff, reduce flooding, and improve water quality.

Stormwater utilities give communities a practical way to put ideas into action. These municipal programs create a dedicated funding mechanism for stormwater management, with funding based on the amount of impervious surface on a property. By offering credits to residents and property owners who reduce runoff from impervious surfaces, utilities encourage more effective stormwater management while also creating a dedicated way to pay for it. Connecting education

to concrete tools like these can also help audiences see how broader environmental concepts translate into decisions and actions within their own communities.

The Rahway River Watershed Association plays a central role in that work. As a watershed organization, it brings together people who care about the river and the communities connected to it, with a focus on education, stewardship, and long-term protection of the watershed. Its strategic plan identifies education as one of its priorities, reflecting the organization's belief that informed communities make stronger environmental decisions. The stormwater utilities presentation supports that mission by helping communities understand the systems that shape their neighborhoods and by encouraging them to think regionally while acting locally.

That regional perspective matters in the Rahway River Watershed, where conditions in one municipality can affect those downstream. Protecting the watershed requires coordination, shared understanding, and sustained public engagement. The Rahway River Watershed Association helps build that connection by serving as a convener, educator, and advocate for healthy waterways and resilient communities.

This presentation also reflects more than a decade of work through New Jersey Future's Jersey Water Works Green Infrastructure Subcommittee, especially the Stormwater Utilities Subcommittee. Over that time, the group has helped expand public understanding of stormwater utilities and supported important statewide progress, including New Jersey joining 42 other states and the District of Columbia with legislation authorizing stormwater utilities in 2019 and four municipalities in New Jersey joining the over 2,100 stormwater utilities formed nationwide. This progress demonstrates the importance of sustained education: building familiarity with a complex policy tool over time can help communities better understand their options and make informed decisions about applying that tool locally.
If you represent a municipality in the Rahway River Watershed, consider hosting a presentation about Stormwater Utilities and email Dr. Kirk Barrett at president@rahwayriver.org.

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