

Crofton church wants to save creek

Just behind St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, Crofton, wetlands form the headwaters of Beaver Creek.

But since both the church and the community predate storm water management systems, storm water runoff has eroded the creek's banks. That storm water also picks up pollutants when it crosses impervious surfaces, such as parking lots.

"The first one inch of rain has all the pollutants," explains Dick Lahn, director of the Chesapeake Bay String of Pearls Project, adding that in Anne Arundel County, more nutrient pollution occurs from suburban storm runoff than from farms.

Mr. Lahn and Anne Pearson, director of the Alliance for Sustainable Communities, contacted local churches in effort to persuade residents to collect rain water instead of sending it plunging down gutters and along curbs into the creek.

The message resonated at St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, not only because the headwaters were on its property, but because the Vatican has been concerned about the environment.

"We are trying to embrace the leadership of the Vatican by being good stewards of the environment," says Nolan McCoy, project manager for the just-completed expansion and restoration of the church and director of facilities and real estate for the Archdiocese.

"Beaver Creek meanders through so much of our community," says Father Edward Connelly, pastor of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton. "A small stream can have a big impact."

The timing couldn't have been better. Because the church was undergoing an expansion, backhoes were on site to take soil samples. Ms. Pearson's group commissioned an engineering firm to do a study, which found the design of the church's parking lot, with a grassy median, ideal for a rain garden.

A rain garden is a low spot, planted with native plants, designed to absorb water. Mr. McCoy explains that unlike a storm water management pond, a rain garden

“allows water to dwell in the ground long enough to seep back into the ground and replenish the aquifer.” A storm water pond collects the water and meters the amount of flow into the creek, but still dumps the water into the creek. A rain garden requires careful construction, and maintenance of the plants and garden.

The engineering report said that a rain garden could be constructed at the church for \$9,000. If the church could provide \$4,000, Ms. Pearson offered to apply for a \$5,000 grant from the Chesapeake Bay Trust. The church agreed, and allocated \$4,000 in the building budget. Ms. Pearson submitted the application a month ago, and the church is waiting to hear.

“If it’s approved this year, we’ll immediately go to construct it,” Mr. McCoy says. “If it’s approved next year, we’ll do it next year.” Volunteers who like to garden will help maintain the plants.

Mr. McCoy adds that Crofton residents also have used rain barrels to collect water from their gutters or installed rain gardens on their own property, efforts the church has promoted with a bulletin insert.

“This is a very important project,” says Father Connelly. “I do think on a local level each and every community can begin to take measures that in the end will have a positive impact.”