

"Federation Corner" column
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Stormwater still a cloudy issue

by Carole Ann Barth
Chair, MCCF Environment Committee

Montgomery County citizens have the reputation of being environmentally savvy, but I wonder if we would have done any better than our Baltimore neighbors did on Upstream, Downstream, a study of public attitudes about stormwater. The study was conducted in 2007 by an opinion research firm (OpinionWorks) at the behest of the Baltimore Stormwater Action Coalition. Although the study was specific to Baltimore, I think it also holds valuable information for us.

Here are some of the key findings:

- Only one resident in six knows for sure that stormwater is not treated before it re enters our waterways. Most people see no connection between a spilled garbage can in Towson and floating trash in the Inner Harbor. They are more apt to think the trash comes from thoughtless tourists in paddleboats.
- Twice as many Baltimore area residents see the health of local waters getting worse (34%), rather than better (16%). The rest said the condition of the waters is not changing, or they were not sure.
- Nearly three quarters (72%) believe that trash is having a negative economic impact on the City of Baltimore—a number nearly as high as the 82% who said crime was hurting the city economically.
- Almost one quarter (22%) of the residents interviewed were not able to picture a storm drain near their home.
- In the focus groups, very few people could define a watershed, let alone name the watershed in which they live.
- A total of 83% agree with the statement “If I knew what to do to help clean up local waters, I would do a lot more.” A solid majority of 52% strongly agree with that statement.
- Once people feel personally connected to their local storm drain, they will be ready to hear a more complex message about nutrients and contaminants.
- Both print and electronic media were tested to evaluate the effectiveness of different approaches of known campaigns and materials which have been used elsewhere in the Bay region, as well as other parts of the country. Respondents were clear that they found the ads most effective when:
 - 1) They were asked them to take one, simple action.
 - 2) They were told why the action was important.
 - 3) They were given local contact information or a Web address if they wanted to know more.
- In general, the most visual concepts drew the strongest response. The most effective campaigns used uncomplicated messages, colorful graphics, and focused chiefly on the core health concerns of residents.

The above findings from the Baltimore study suggest that we in Montgomery County probably have a lot of public education to do in order to meet the new water quality requirements of the county's stormwater management permit and the new Chesapeake Bay pollution diet (Bay TMDL or total

maximum daily load.) The complete Upstream, Downstream study can be accessed online at <http://tinyurl.com/updownstream>

The following update on the county's Final Report on Artificial Turf Playing Fields, written by MCCF Education Committee Chair Paula Bienenfeld, dovetails with the above piece on stormwater. The cocktail of toxic chemicals found in stormwater runoff from artificial turf playing fields is a concern for residents living near schools where these fields are located, and to the children playing on these fields and their parents.

The final version of the Artificial Turf Report, "A Review of Benefits and Issues associated with Natural Grass and Artificial Turf Rectangular Fields" was issued on September 14. All comments are in a very large appendix. The report is available on both the Parks Department and MCPS websites. For some reason, even though it was the Council's Transportation & Environment Committee that requested a work group be formed to study the issue, the report is not available on the Council's website.

The report was supposedly prepared by a work group consisting of staff from MCPS; the Parks Department; the Department of the Environment; and the County Council. However, we have no documents to show that this is true and no documents other than the draft and final report itself to show that the work group ever met.

I have been trying for months to get some information concerning the work group, but so far have not gotten any answers to these basic questions. When were the work group meetings held? Who attended the meetings? Where are the minutes and notes from the meetings? How many labor hours were spent on this report? How much did the work group process cost taxpayers?

The report still has a number of half-truths, confused misrepresentations and basic lies about artificial turf and in particular the FieldTurf/Tarkett material used in Montgomery County. Briefly, the artificial turf is composed of tons of ground-up used truck and auto tires that would otherwise go into a hazardous waste landfill. This material includes lead, heavy metals, and known carcinogens.

It appears the approach taken by the Work Group under the aegis of the County Council is the same approach taken by groups that seek to confuse the issues and facts of global warming, or evolution; to wit, that we don't really know if this is really happening, and the science doesn't bear out the statements by scientists that it exists. Don't be confused, though. Artificial turf is hazardous and expensive. It creates heat islands that can be seen from outer space and has been documented as such by NASA.

The crumb rubber degrades and seeps into stormwater runoff; children trek it home in the form of the 'black sticky gunk' that adheres to their clothes and shoes. It is not safe. It is not even needed. Well maintained natural turf fields are better for the environment and they are safe. Period. And here's an added plus: the turf grass for those natural turf fields is grown right here in Montgomery County's Agricultural Reserve. So, we could be supporting our local farmers while doing the best thing for the environment as well as our children's health and safety.

The views expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect formal positions adopted by the Federation. To submit an 800-1000 word column for consideration, send as an email attachment to theelms518@earthlink.net