



Pervious pavement at the city of Elkhart Environmental Center increases on-site storm water infiltration. It is among many practices recommended by the Elkhart River Alliance.

# Rural and urban folks join to fix their watershed

A small group of concerned citizens grew to a broad coalition of partners determined to improve the health of the Elkhart River watershed. The Elkhart County Soil and Water Conservation District has been at the forefront of the effort.

**W**HEN a neighborhood association raised concerns about sediment in a pond in northern Indiana, it ignited a discussion across a whole watershed.

Residents around Goshen Pond Dam learned that the sediment was a symptom of a much larger problem in the 447,000-acre Elkhart River Watershed. With the help of the Elkhart County Soil and Water Conservation District and the state Department of Environmental Manage-

ment (DEM), the group set out to do something about the problem.

"The pond was a sediment trap and was full of purple loosestrife," says Nancy Brown, program manager at the conservation district. "They asked whether there was anything we could do. I felt the best way to get funding was to address how the sediment got there, and said we would do that and look at related issues."

The district contacted a watershed specialist with the Indiana DEM. "We met with the association and presented a plan for assistance for watershed planning," says Brown. "Their group said they were totally in agreement and formed a steering committee called Elkhart River Alliance."

"That original homeowners association took on this big project. I am amazed at the ability of a small neighborhood group to adopt a whole watershed. Even though

their original interest was their neighborhood, they saw a need to address watershed issues on a watershed basis," Brown says.

Soon the group formed a nonprofit corporation, the Elkhart River Restoration Association, and began to reach out to interested parties across the watershed. It found plenty, including local and state government, sportsmen's group, conservation districts, Extension, property owners, farmers, sportsmen, naturalists, youth organizations, service clubs, industries and churches.

The watershed stretches across four counties and is a half-and-half mixture of rural and rapidly growing urban areas. The district had good contacts in both sectors because of its program work in rural and urban conservation. "We can say we work with both of you. When fingers are pointed, quite honestly, we can say we hear the opposite side from the other group," Brown says.

Assisted by an Environmental Protection Agency 319 grant obtained through the DEM in 2006, the group embarked on a year of planning and two years of implementation. The work is daunting, because the watershed is in rough shape. Most sections of the river – in both rural and urban areas – are impaired waters. In addition to excessive sediment, it has problems with E. coli bacteria, nutrient loading, rapid land-use changes that degrade the watershed's hydrology, loss of wetlands and wildlife habitat, and land and water user conflicts.

"We're not protecting something pristine. We're trying to fix something that's broken," says Brown.

Perhaps the group's biggest accomplishment was to get diverse groups and individuals in the watershed to realize they all played a part in its problems, just as they would all have a role in nursing it back to health.

A Water Management Plan is now in place to do that. Ongoing funding is an issue, but if determination counts, the group is in good stead. "I've never



**Bioretention areas are among practices recommended by the Elkhart River Alliance in its efforts to restore health to the Elkhart River Watershed. The Elkhart County Soil and Water Conservation District is joined by other partners in the effort.**

worked with a group with such passion," says Brown.

The management plan outlines a set of goals, each accompanied by objectives for implementation. The plan prioritizes objectives and action items and identifies responsible parties to implement actions. The plan has milestones and measurable goals for short- medium- and long-term.

Goals include:

- Sustaining the financial and institutional capacity of the group itself;
- Reducing soil erosion and sedimentation;
- Reducing E. coli levels;
- Reducing nutrient loading;
- Increasing preservation, restoration and appreciation of open space and maintaining land-use balance; and
- Developing an outreach and education program to keep a broadened group of stakeholders involved and informed.

Work is already under-way. Cost-share programs support agricultural and urban best management practices. They are

funded by state and federal program dollars.

Two demonstration sites are being developed – one urban and one agricultural. The urban site is the city of Elkhart's Environmental Center, where conservation district staff has installed a rain garden, pervious pavement and a bio-retention area in a parking lot. The agricultural demonstration site focuses on exclusion fencing and alternative watering for livestock. Both sites will be showcases for educational programming. "I like to tell the staff we're doing the same things at both sites. The practices are just a little different," says Brown.

The district is also training a cadre of volunteers for water monitoring in each of the Elkhart's 37 sub-watersheds. "We're a district, and this is what districts do – educate."

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