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Torrington: Balancing Smart Growth and Resource Protection

The City of Torrington is the regional center for Litchfield County, and serious about planning and smart growth issues. The approval of a new county courthouse, along with a push for the continued revitalization of the downtown, provided the impetus for an update to the city’s plans and regulations. Joining the Municipal Initiative in 2004, a task force with representation from the major land use departments in the city set goals for the initiative that included updates to the city’s Plan of Conservation and Development, revisions to zoning and subdivision regulations, the inclusion of smart growth provisions, and an update to stormwater management standards.

“We used a team approach in reviewing and revising our Regulations and City Engineering Guidelines and Specifications,” observed City Planner Martin Connor. “Even our Mayor became involved in the effort.”

In order to facilitate broad participation and review of both public and private development projects, the engineering department has developed the City of Torrington’s Standards, Specifications, Rules and Regulations. These standards were structured to follow many of the principles presented both in the NEMO workshops and the CT Stormwater Quality Manual, requiring the preparation of a stormwater management plan for both water quantity and quality for all projects that will disturb more than 1-acre of land. The engineering standards also include new stormwater-related details on roads: flexibility in road standards permit a curbside design that allows for sheet-flow to roadside drainage swales, and the permitted use of permeable materials in both roadways and driveways provides a departure from past practice in the city.

The planning department worked with the planning and zoning commission to make major changes to both the subdivision and zoning regulations. In zoning, the major change came with the recognition of different development demands between the sewered and non-sewered areas of the city. In the more rural sections, the commission appended the zoning regulations so that new development would need to meet the “net buildable area” requirements. These requirements assure that the carrying capacity of the land to accept on-site sewage disposal is met, ultimately determining the suitability of a lot for development. In the more urbanized sections of the city, the regulations now allow for higher density mixed-use development, encouraging retail on the street-level with residential uses on the 2nd and 3rd floors. Both the zoning and subdivision regulations have embraced the use of low impact development and the standards of the Stormwater Quality Manual. Greater effort has been made to bring agreement between the standards of the engineering department and the requirements of the zoning and subdivision regulations, both for consistency and to make the application process easier. The regulations also stress the preservation of the pre-development vegetation, setting forth landscaping requirements for native vegetation and eschewing the use of invasive plants.

“The NEMO Program helped educate Commission members and staff, helping us to focus on smart growth and stormwater treatment related issues,” concludes Conner. “Working together we made important changes that will be very beneficial in the future in protecting valuable natural resources. We are grateful for the guidance, insight and valuable information the Municipal Initiative brought to us and our City.”

From the NEMO Science Desk

Many folks familiar with NEMO teachings are well aware of the local and regional impacts that land use has on natural resources and the water cycle. However, the impact of global land use patterns on large scale climate patterns has been highlighted in a recent article (“Land Use and Climate Change”, by Roger A. Pielke Sr., Science, Vol. 310, December 9, 2005). Pielke cites NASA reports estimate that human development has transformed between one-third and one-half of the earth’s land surfaces.

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Build a Community Resource Inventory…Online!

Before you can plan the future of your community, you need to know what you have. A resource inventory of your town is a vital planning and review tool for your commissions, but how do you get started? The NEMO Team has been delivering the Community Resource Inventory (CRI) workshop for five years and many communities have gotten started with their inventories. However, finding and using the plethora of published maps has been a stumbling block for many. Now more! Beginning this summer, the NEMO Program will launch the CRI-Online website. The website, funded by a grant from CT DEP, is designed to be a tool that helps commissions get started in developing a customized resource inventory for their town. This “one stop shop” of map making will provide town-level maps for printing or to be inserted into your favorite GIS program. Look for an announcement on the NEMO website www.ctnemo.org.

All About Rain Gardens

Although the focus of NEMO education efforts has typically been towns personnel and commission members, it doesn’t mean the information isn’t applicable to a wider audience. An upcoming publication, created by Mike Dietz of CT NEMO and Karen Filchak (UConn Cooperative Extension), brings rain garden design to homeowners. The Rain Garden Design Manual is another step in the direction of moving from “why” to “how” in LID practices.

The manual, based on a similar publication from the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, will provide homeowners with simple, yet detailed guidance on all aspects of home rain garden installation. Topics such as where to put the garden, how large to make it, what plants to use, and how to maintain it will be covered. The manual is scheduled to be available in the summer of 2006. Copies will be available upon request from Mike Dietz (michael.dietz@uconn.edu), and the electronic version (pdf) will be available on the NEMO website.

Check This Out!

- The CT NEMO Impact Report Putting Communities in Charge is available online on the NEMO publications page or by contacting the NEMO program. nemo@uconn.edu.
- Statewide aerial photos are now available to download on the CLEAR website. Visit clear.energymap.com/data.html for:
  - BLK/WT Orthophotos
  - True-color Coastal Imagery
  - False-color Infrared Coastal Imagery.
- The CT NEMO website redesign will be launched this summer. The improved site will include an LID stormwater treatment practice (STP) section with an interactive map showing locations of various STPs around the state as well as a searchable database for engineering and construction companies familiar with LID practices. nemo@uconn.edu
Spotlight On... Torrington: Balancing Smart Growth and Resource Protection

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There is growing evidence that land use patterns, in addition to greenhouse gas production, is playing a role in climate disturbances. Although greenhouse gas production may have a larger global influence on average temperatures, land use changes seem to produce varying regional effects. Pielke cites the alteration of thunderstorm patterns due to land use changes as one mechanism that can influence regional temperature and precipitation regimes. Interestingly, while some areas may experience temperature increases, other areas may experience temperature decreases. These changes can cancel each other out when averaged out globally. However, Pielke remarks that “people and ecosystems will experience the effects of environmental changes regionally, and not as global averaged values.”

“The NEMO Program teaches us how important land use decisions can be, from the local, regional and global perspectives. The human influence on global systems is undeniable. With all of its success stories in the land use arena, NEMO is helping to tip the balance in the other direction, in favor of ecological and social balance."
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New Workshop for Those Who Get Their Hands Dirty

Karl Frey, a principal of the development firm Vespera, addresses participants of the first workshop dedicated to educating contractors about LID practices. The workshop is a collaborative effort between the Niantic River Watershed Project and CT NEMO Program.

Municipal Initiative Program produces 3 more Stellar Graduates

Spotlight On . . .

Torrington

New and Noteworthy

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• Build a Community Resource Inventory
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