

Program aims to help Morris County businesses protect watershed

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Damon Lofton of Morris Plains takes his kayak out of the water after spending a couple hours paddling down the Whippany River in this 2010 file photo. / staff photo

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A step toward collaboration of Morris County businesses, government and community action groups was the goal at the inaugural River Friendly Business Program held last month by Rutgers University.

Sponsored by Rutgers University's Water Resource Program, the Rutgers Cooperative Extension of Morris County and the Whippany River Watershed Action Committee, the three-hour event was attended by more than 60 people including heads of local agencies, corporate executives and county planning interest groups concerned about the need for sound water quality actions in overall business eco-planning.

The goal of the River Friendly Business Program is to work with businesses to “adopt various sustainable practices that can reduce their environmental impact on local waterways,” said Christopher Obropta, director of the New Jersey Water Resources Program at Rutgers Cooperative Extension.

A voluntary, low-cost certification program, the Rutgers River Friendly Business Program for Morris County enables businesses to adopt environmentally friendly practices to help protect water resources in the county while improving their bottom lines.

After establishing baseline standards for an individual business, Obropta showed how the program focuses on incremental improvement in four critical areas: storm water management, by reducing connected impervious areas on rooftops and/or pavement by 20 percent; water conservation, by optimizing outdoor irrigation of lawns and landscapes by 15 percent; lawn maintenance, by converting 20 percent of traditional lawn to either a “low-mow” area or meadow; and wildlife management, by enhancing wildlife habitat.

Heather Desko, Assistant Watershed Protection Specialist at New Jersey Water Supply Authority, said benefits of this certification program have already been realized by some organizations near the Raritan River in Middlesex and Somerset counties, including Sanofi Aventis, Raritan Valley Community College, Johnson & Johnson in Somerville, Duke Farms in Hillsborough as well as seven golf courses.

Watershed protection in Parsippany

Art Vespignani of the Whippany River Watershed Action Committee and Parsippany Mayor James Barberio shared successes with the program.

Vespignani explained how his committee has tackled the big areas of water improvement by investigating and providing watershed management solutions in problem areas for member municipalities. He said that “current work is more around little projects of working collectively and incrementally to improve the quality of the river.”

Barberio said the township has worked with the Rutgers Cooperative Extension and Whippany River Watershed Action Committee on a “variety of green infrastructure projects that illustrate both the storm water management and the water conservation aspects of the Rutgers River Friendly Business Program.” The projects, he said, are aimed at improving water quality in the Troy Brook, a tributary of the Whippany River. The Whippany River is part of the Passaic River Watershed which provides water for millions of people in the New York metropolitan area.

Another significant and visible project is the installation of rain gardens at the Parsippany Municipal Building and at Tivoli Gardens, a local apartment complex.

“Rain gardens are strategically located near the downspout of rain gutters or curb cuts,” he said. “Instead of downspout water flushing onto the street or sidewalk, into the parking lot and storm sewer system and then to the stream, the water enters the rain gardens and is absorbed into the soil and used by the plants. In addition to reducing runoff, rain gardens filter pollutants and are aesthetically pleasing.”