

# GROWTH READINESS FOR GEORGIA: WATER QUALITY MATTERS

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**Abstract.** Georgia communities will soon benefit from a new program for planners, public works, and local elected officials. The program helps communities learn how land use decisions affect water quality, and then make informed choices about managing growth. It helps them comply with regulatory requirements.

The program's target audience, planners, public works, and local elected officials, are intimately involved in the day-to-day, nuts-and-bolts of their community's land use and water quality decisions. Through the program, they will receive training, presentations, maps, references and technical assistance. The program helps them explain simply and succinctly the complex issues and choices surrounding land use and water quality in their community. It helps them build consensus for development rule changes that permit communities to both grow and preserve their precious and vital water resources.

The session will describe plans for this program in Georgia, and how a similar program is producing results for planners and public works officials in Tennessee.

## INTRODUCTION

The paper describes a new program planned for communities in Georgia, called the Georgia Urban Nonpoint Source Reduction Program. The program will help empower local governments to address the link between land use and water quality. A steering committee led by the Georgia Department of Community Affairs is developing the program. They are basing the program on existing best practices.

With more than 2,500 local elected officials in Georgia serving 159 counties and 532 cities, keeping those officials informed and ensuring an understanding of issues affecting the management and protection of water resources in the State is a tremendous challenge. Over the next decade, water resource management and the regulatory issues pertaining to water will be the most critical environmental challenges facing many local governments. Eighty-six local governments are required

to implement Phase II Storm water Management Programs, and of those, 26 cities and 29 counties have water bodies within their jurisdictions included on the 2002 Section 303(d) list of impaired waters. Unlike many of the environmental issues that local governments have faced in the past, water issues must be addressed on a regional or watershed basis to be truly effective.

## BACKGROUND

Local elected officials look to their staff planners and public works officials to address water issues faced by their community. These officials are intimately involved in the day-to-day, nuts-and-bolts of their community's land use and water quality decisions. Several existing best practices are in use in other states to help all of these officials effectively address these issues.

### **University of Connecticut's Non-point Source Education for Municipal Officials (NEMO)**

The University of Connecticut's NEMO Project is an educational program for local officials. The Project's premise is that better land use decisions are the key to protecting communities' natural resources, character, and long-term economic health. People making land use decisions are the project's target audience – local officials serving on land use boards for cities or counties. The Project uses research-based, non-advocacy professional outreach education to foster better land use policies and practices.

The NEMO Project was conceived originally as a pilot project to assist local officials in three Connecticut coastal towns. It sought to protect water quality of Long Island Sound. The pilot created a land cover database for the state of Connecticut to identify nitrogen source polluting the Sound. Three branches of the University of Connecticut: the Cooperative Extension System, the Natural Resources Management and Engineering Department, and the Connecticut Sea Grant College Program recognized the educational potential of the land cover information. Together they formed the NEMO

Project in 1992 and developed the initial NEMO educational program. Since that initial effort, the partners have broadened the Project's educational offerings and geographic information system capabilities. NEMO has worked with almost two-thirds of the 169 municipalities in Connecticut, and the National NEMO Network has funded projects in 19 states. NEMO staff conducts about 150 educational workshops a year. (NEMO, 2005)

### **Center for Watershed Protection Better Site Design and Rapid Watershed Planning**

The Center for Watershed Protection is a Maryland-based non-profit founded in 1992. Local governments, activists, and watershed organizations rely on technical tools from the Center to help them protect their water resources. The Center's tools are based on good science and on-the-ground application. Their tools encompass watershed planning, watershed restoration, storm water management, watershed research, better site design, education and outreach, and watershed training. In particular, two of their publications are excellent resources for local officials seeking to address water quality issues caused by land use decisions:

**Better Site Design: A Handbook for Changing Development Rules in Your Community.** This Handbook offers local officials a comprehensive, rational approach to evaluating and changing their development rules so that growth has less impact on water quality. The handbook outlines 22 model development principles that communities can integrate into their codes, ordinances and zoning. It offers implementation details and a detailed rationale for each principle. It also examines current practices in local communities, details the economic and environmental benefits and presents case studies from across the country.

**Rapid Watershed Planning Handbook.** The Handbook offers a comprehensive, practical guide to creating an effective watershed plan quickly and cheaply - often more than a local official would need. However, in it are techniques that local officials can use to reduce future developments impact on water quality by adjusting allocations in their community's land use and zoning plans. (Center for Watershed Protection, 2005)

### **Tennessee Growth Readiness program**

The Tennessee Growth Readiness program has reached over 300 planners and public works officials serving 270-plus communities since its start in the fall of 2003. Of these, officials serving over 180 communities have evaluated development rules and identified changes that will reduce growth's impact on water resources.

The Program began with the premise that Tennessee communities are determined to grow and prosper. Jobs

are needed to keep communities whole. New revenue enables them to maintain and enhance community services. Yet they cherish their legacy of natural beauty and bountiful water. The Tennessee Growth Readiness program helps communities learn how land use decisions affect water quality. It gives them resources to comply with regulatory requirements, and to make informed decisions about how to grow and prosper without losing the quality of life that Tennessee's natural resources afford them.

The Program is for planners and public works officials. Officials from four communities helped develop and pilot the program for their colleagues in other communities. They worked with the Tennessee Department of Agriculture, UT's Water Resources Research Center, Southeast Watershed Forum and Tennessee Valley Authority, to build the program from existing best practices by the University of Connecticut, State of Alabama and Center for Watershed Protection. The program is a charter member of the National NEMO Network.

Program workshops and technical assistance considered as a whole supports communities' logical progress toward reducing the impact on water resources as they develop. Here is an outline of program resources:

**Leadership Training.** Participants learn to make presentations and gain support for different approaches to how their community manages growth.

**Site Planning Roundtable Management Training.** Participants learn to evaluate their development rules against model principles, and to lead a consensus building process for adopting new principles and planning practices.

**Land Use Planning for Water Quality.** Participants learn to make land use allocation decisions that reduce the impact of future growth on water resources. These decisions complement new development rules.

**Action Planning.** Participants develop a work plan for changing their development rules and processes. The work plan outlines specific actions and responsibilities for participants.

**Multiple Jurisdiction Review Workshop.** Participants identify how they can work together across jurisdictional boundaries on changes to development rules and processes.

**Community Growth Readiness Workshop Series.** Through a series of workshops, community opinion leaders come to consensus on changes to their community's development rules and processes.

## DISCUSSION

The Georgia Urban Nonpoint Source Reduction Program will develop the capacity of local governments to address urban water quality issues on a watershed basis. To accomplish this goal, elected officials and their staff must have a reliable and creditable source to turn to for information, including water resource tools that are locally based but have regional or watershed level impacts. The program will offer communities:

**Information Clearinghouse.** Local governments need a single point of contact to use when they are seeking State or Federal assistance to address issues related to water quality in their community. Establishing this point of contact and from there providing local governments with a statewide network of qualified public and private sector experts and programs to choose from will allow them to easily access the assistance they need.

**Tools to Link Land-use and Water Quality.** Creating the link between land-use and water quality is essential for local governments. Developing tools and resources that promote smart growth principles, including model ordinances, best management practices, and public education materials will allow local land-use planners to promote quality growth and enhance water quality within their communities.

**Local Government Training and Technical Assistance.** Relying upon the invaluable network of qualified water and planning professionals in the State, the Georgia Department of Community Affairs will convene resource teams to provide one-on-one technical assistance to local governments seeking help in addressing water quality issues. A series of workshops to address various water quality issues will be held around the state, and a database of technical inquiries will be maintained to both track assistance and recommendations given and encourage peer to peer exchange of ideas and solutions.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The Georgia Department of Community Affairs, by developing a program built on existing best practices, will offer an exceptional menu of assistance for local governments. As the Department and its steering committee make this program ready for communities, they welcome the involvement and support of others in Georgia who are interested in how land use decisions effect water quality.

## LITERATURE CITED

NEMO Nonpoint Education for Municipal Officials, <http://nemo.uconn.edu/about.htm>, accessed January 7, 2005. NEMO's Reason for Being.

Center for Watershed Protection, <http://www.cwp.org/>, accessed January 7, 2005.