

# WATERSHED IMPROVEMENT IMPLEMENTATION AND PROJECT FUNDING, GWINNETT COUNTY, GEORGIA

Pete Wright

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AUTHOR: Engineer, Gwinnett County Department of Water Resources, 684 Winder Highway, Lawrenceville, GA 30045

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## INTRODUCTION

Gwinnett County completed a *Watershed Impact Assessment* and *Watershed Protection Plan* in 2000 that identified the need for improvements in areas of the County that have been adversely impacted as a result of stormwater runoff. To address these conditions, the County began a comprehensive, performance-based Watershed Improvement Planning (WIP) program focused on improving and protecting water quality and conditions in streams. Included in the WIPs are prioritized lists of Capital Improvement Project (CIP) recommendations such as Best Management Practice implementation and stream restoration and stabilization projects. To date we have completed WIPs for approximately 290 square miles, or 2/3 of the County, with Capital Improvement recommendations on the order of \$150,000,000.

Due to lack of funding, initially about the only means to implement recommended Capital Improvements was to scrounge for leftover funds in unspent budgets or apply for Grants and hope our applications would be successful. As a result of WIP efforts, however, policies and programs have been developed, or have evolved, to fund recommended watershed improvements. The following identifies some of the funding sources being used to implement WIP/CIP recommendations at a number of locations in Gwinnett County.

## FUNDING SOURCES / PROJECTS

### Grants- Section 319(h)

One of the first efforts in the implementation of WIP CIP recommendations was applying for 319(h) Grants through the Georgia Environmental Protection Division. Using the Crooked Creek WIP as a supporting document, a Grant was awarded for the *Crooked Creek BMP Retrofit Project*. The total project budget is \$600,000 with Grant funds in the amount of \$360,000 and local match of \$240,000. Recently, the County was also awarded a similar Grant for Watershed Improvement Implementation in the Lower Yellow River Watershed, also supported by the associated a WIP. For the Lower Yellow River Grant the project budget is \$1,000,000 with Grant funds in the

amount of \$600,000 and local match of \$400,000. Construction for the Crooked Creek Project at Conifer Crossing Apartments is scheduled to begin in the spring of 2007. Engineering for the Lower Yellow River Grant is just beginning.

### Clean Water State Revolving Fund Loans

As a result of the WIP efforts, the County was in position to apply for a Clean Water State Revolving Fund Loan through the Georgia Environmental Facilities Authority and became the first agency in Georgia to be granted a SRF loan for the design and construction of non-point source improvement projects. The loan amount is \$5,000,000 with a 3% interest over a 20 year period. Currently, the *Collins Hill Park and Riverside Parkway BMP Improvement and Stream Restoration Projects* are under construction with the Martin Heights BMP and Stream Restoration Project scheduled to begin construction soon. These projects were recommended in the *Upper Yellow River and Sweetwater Creek Watershed Improvement Plans*.

### Site Specific 404 Permit Mitigation

Having completed the Sweetwater Creek WIP, the County was also in position to provide the Georgia Department of Transportation Site Specific stream mitigation credits for the 404 Permit for the I-85 / SR 316 Interchange Project. GADOT provided the funding of approximately \$1,600,000 to construct the *McDaniel Farm Park Stream Restoration and Buffer Enhancement Project* consisting of about 2400 feet of stream restoration and stabilization and 27 acres of stream buffer enhancements. The major construction is complete with buffer plantings scheduled to be completed in spring 2007.

Also in the Sweetwater Creek Watershed, a Site Specific mitigation plan has been prepared based on WIP CIP recommendations for the proposed Old Norcross Pump Station Project, a Gwinnett County Department of Water Resources project requiring a 404 Permit for impacts to wetlands and stream resources.

Without the *Sweetwater Watershed Improvement Plan*, funds required to provide mitigation for these projects would have likely gone to mitigation banks or sites outside of Gwinnett County. The WIP program provides a

means to keep funds in Gwinnett County where the losses occurred and make improvements at locations where needs have been identified.

### **Section 206 -Aquatic Ecosystem Restoration**

Having completed WIPs in the Jackson, Beaver Ruin, and Crooked Creek Watersheds helped establish a priority for partnering with the Army Corps of Engineers under Section 206 of the Water Resources Development Act of 1996 for Aquatic Ecosystem Restoration. This cost share program has a Federal contribution of 65% and a local contribution of 35%. Initial cost estimates and budgets were set at approximately \$7,000,000 for each watershed. Preliminary Restoration Plants have been completed for each of these watersheds with Jackson Creek being given the highest priority. Due to Federal funding issues these projects are currently on hold.

### **Gwinnett County Stream Buffer Mitigation Bank**

As a result of the 75-foot stream buffer requirement in North Metropolitan Georgia Water Planning District, many land owners and developers were concerned that this would overly restrict reasonable use property. To address this concern, Gwinnett County developed a program that includes a variance procedure if it is demonstrated that the 75-foot buffer would overly restricted reasonable use of property. Variances may be granted provided that mitigation for the loss buffer is done on site or an in-lieu fee is paid to a Stormwater Mitigation Fund. Funds collected go to implementation WIP/CIP recommendations. In the first year of the program funds collected were approximately \$1,300,000, 4 times the amount originally anticipated. These funds have gone toward implementation of a number of watershed improvement projects believed to more than compensate for the lost buffer.

### **Umbrella Stream and Wetlands Mitigation Bank**

To facilitate implementation of WIP/CIP recommendations Gwinnett County has also established the *Gwinnett County Umbrella Mitigation Bank* with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. This program is intended to help leverage funds used for watershed improvements and keep funds in Gwinnett that would otherwise go to the purchase of mitigation credits out of the County. This mitigation bank allows for stream and wetland credits to be created and deposited in the Bank through the implementation of recommended CIPs. The Bank is a commercial bank and credits are available for Gwinnett County Departments, Gwinnett County Board of Education, Georgia Department of Transportation, and the private sector as well. Proceeds from sale of credits will go toward implementing WIP CIP recommendations.

### **Gwinnett County Stormwater Utility**

One last Funding source that has been made available is the result of implementing the Gwinnett County Stormwater Utility in 2006. The CIP costs estimates developed in the WIPs were used to project funding requirements for watershed improvements. Funding for watershed improvement implementation started relative low in 2006, but is anticipated to gradually increase over the next several years as the Watershed Improvement Program grows.

## **CONCLUSION**

With the establishment of these funding sources, the major challenge is now acquiring access to the property where watershed improvements are recommended. Projects on property owned by the County or by willing, co-operating partners eliminate most access issues, a major obstacle for implementation, and therefore move quickly toward implementation. Projects now being implemented are located on properties owned by Gwinnett County, such as parks and open space, and willing WIP project participants including private property owners, the Gwinnett County Board of Education, and the Gwinnett County Land Trust. As an incentive to potential partners, Stormwater Utility Credits have also been made available to property owners for providing access to recommended CIP locations. Although the protection and improvement of water quality and conditions of streams is the primary goal of our Watershed Improvement Program, aesthetics and perceived improvements to the urban environment are also essential to gain the public support necessary for the Watershed Improvement Program to be truly a success.

## **LITERATURE CITED**

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