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Monday, May 10, 2010 |

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[Home](#) > [News](#)> [Local](#)

Rainwater systems save for sunny days

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Published: October 25, 2008

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Local officials and environmentalists say rainwater collection systems could help the area's water needs while preserving the environment.

The Rivanna River Basin Commission hopes rainwater harvesting systems will blossom in Charlottesville and surrounding counties, said Ridge Schuyler, director of The Nature Conservancy's Piedmont program.

Rainwater which would otherwise slide off roofs, head down gutters and collect in yards would instead be piped into massive tanks and later used to water lawns or wash cars.

Not only would it be a water conservation measure, but it would reduce runoff that causes erosion and fills the Rivanna Basin with excessive sediment. Those are "the two biggest threats we face: taking too much water out of rivers and putting too much dirt into them," Schuyler said.

Schuyler is heading a Nature Conservancy proposal that would allow rainwater harvesting systems to fulfill state stormwater management requirements for developers.

He said that developers, who often store stormwater runoff in detention ponds that attract mosquitoes and can be eyesores, see rainwater as a burden.

"Let's turn that liability into an asset," Schuyler said.

The high costs, however, are causing rainwater harvesting systems to be less than appealing, Schuyler said.

The holding systems usually cost about \$1 for each gallon. A house with a 1,000-square-foot roof would require about a 3,500-gallon tank, resulting in a \$3,500 price tag.

If there was a way to drive down the cost, Schuyler said, the systems could be commonplace for homeowners and businesses.

An average homeowner with a 1,200-square-foot house in Charlottesville or Albemarle County could save nearly \$200 a year using captured rainwater for watering grass and plants or washing cars, Schuyler said.

At least 30 percent of a typical suburban household's water usage is for outdoor irrigation, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

"So, we pay money to collect the water, we pay money to distribute the water, we pay money to bring the water to our homes," Schuyler said. "And then we sprinkle it on our lawns."

The Rivanna River Basin Commission is drafting a proposal that would encourage local governments to use rainwater-harvesting systems on its buildings, Chairwoman Sally H. Thomas said.

Thomas, who is also a member of the Albemarle Board of Supervisors, said she foresees businesses and homeowners having an increased interest in the systems,

There are ways localities can encourage their use, she said. "It's the sort of thing that we can ask for in terms of proffers."

Morgan Butler of the Charlottesville-based Southern Environmental Law Center said that current development regulations don't create a lot of incentives for rainwater harvesting systems. If the state were to limit the amount of runoff, he said, there might be a greater incentive.

The Nature Conservancy is exploring ways to utilize rainwater harvesting, and Schuyler said he's creating a cost analysis formula for users.

Schuyler said he's planning to install a \$6,000 rainwater harvesting system on his house. During warmer weather it would lightly spray the stored rainwater onto his roof, cooling his house by 10 or 15 degrees and reducing his air conditioning costs.

He said the idea of harvesting rainwater is far from new — it's used most frequently in arid regions.

"They use it all over the world today where they don't have much water, and they want to capture every drop," Schuyler said. "In the olden days ... this is how people got water."