



## Regional sewer district picks 20 "green" infrastructure projects for \$42 million program

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**Dave Davis, The Plain Dealer**  
By

CLEVELAND, Ohio--The finalists are in.

After months of work, officials with the **Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District** unveiled 20 so-called "green" projects Wednesday that are in the running to receive a combined \$42 million earmarked for reducing flooding and the discharge of untreated sewage into local waterways.

The green infrastructure program, which is being funded by ratepayers as part of the sewer district's \$3 billion in court-ordered system improvements, is one of 10 being used as a model for other large cities by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. The federal agency now must approve the overall plan with the Ohio EPA and the U.S. Department of Justice.

But by early next year, residents in some Cleveland neighborhoods will begin seeing changes: The peeling back of concrete and asphalt to create ponds and park-like green spaces, the demolition of abandoned homes in favor of community gardens, and the installation of green streetscapes, among other improvements.

The projects, contained in a 148-page report being sent to regulators, must be completed in the next eight years and range in cost from \$735,000 to \$15 million each.

They are comprised of many pieces and are as varied as the problem they are meant to help fix -- **combined sewer overflows** or the discharge of untreated wastewater into Lake Erie and its tributaries.

The sewer district, which serves Cleveland and 61 suburban communities, currently dumps an average of more than five billion gallons a year of sewage mixed with rainwater, typically during storms when the sewer district's



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Damien Forshe shows a tilapia fish being raised at his urban farm, the Rid-All Green Partnership, in Cleveland's Kinsman neighborhood. Rid-All is part of a 23-acre Urban Agricultural Innovation Zone that was picked Wednesday for a \$9 million sewer district project to capture and clean stormwater.

treatment system exceeds capacity. It is under court order to reduce that figure to a few hundred thousand gallons a year in the next 25 years.

But what the projects unveiled Wednesday have in common is that they all tie community redevelopment and partnering with local organizations to the district's goal of dramatically reducing sewer overflows.

"This is great news," said Damien Forshe, who with two childhood friends started an urban farm in Cleveland's Kinsman neighborhood. The **Rid-All Green Partnership** sits on about an acre in the 23-acre Urban Agricultural Innovation Zone, one of the projects picked Wednesday.

Sewer district officials proposed spending about \$9 million to manage stormwater in the area and possibly create a system to capture and clean it for agricultural use. They expect the project will keep 7.2 million gallons of stormwater out of the sewer system a year.



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Pepper plants growing inside a 30- by 72-foot greenhouse at the Rid-All urban farm in Cleveland.

"We can really use that water," Forshe added. "It's a win-win-win situation for everybody."

Kyle Dreyfuss-Wells said that the sewer district looked to provide a lift to worthwhile projects already in the works. She is the sewer district's manager of watershed programs.

"We want this to be very much a partnership with communities," she added. "We're not the planners here. We're the stormwater managers."

Sewer district officials actually proposed projects totaling \$102 million that would eliminate an estimated 95 million gallons of stormwater annually from the sewer system. That's double what regulators required.

But they expect that as they drive deeper into the projects that some will drop off the list for legal or engineering reasons. They plan to meet Jan. 13 with federal officials, who must approve the overall plan but not individual projects.

"We have to do a deeper dive and see which of these projects we are going to construct," said Kellie Rotunno, the sewer district's director of engineering and construction.

"The big hope is that our first and earliest green projects will be wildly successful," Rotunno added. That would open the door for the sewer district over the next 25 years to swap green projects for so-called "gray" ones,

heavy construction projects such as the seven massive tunnels the district is building to store wastewater during storms.

Urban planner Terry Schwarz said the sewer district's green infrastructure program has the potential to transform Cleveland neighborhoods, improving property values and quality of life. Schwarz heads **Kent State University's Cleveland Urban Design Collaborative**, which is providing assistance in the development of the Urban Agriculture Innovation Zone.

When asked if the sewer district was doing enough green projects, Schwarz said, "It's too soon to tell."

Green infrastructure is an accepted practice in terms of stormwater management, capturing that first inch of rainfall on a site, but it hasn't been fully tested in terms of controlling the large volume of wastewater that causes combined sewer overflows, Schwarz said.

"That's one of the things that makes this project in Cleveland pretty interesting," Schwarz added. "I think it's the prudent course of action to do these \$42 million in projects and see what works and what works really well."

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