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It's raining, it's pouring – BC Communities are leading the way

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We turn on the tap and it's there. It rains, and then the water disappears. A stream flows along next to a residential neighbourhood, but others lie underground, captured in pipes and forgotten. All in all, most of us don't give much thought to our urban watersheds, unless there's a crisis. However, managing our water resources effectively is going to be a critical factor in how well we adapt to climate change.

Fortunately, over the past several years there's been some significant, highly collaborative work done in BC to begin to help make our communities more resilient and adaptable. The aim is to improve the management of urban watersheds through the implementation of green infrastructure policies and practices.

[Beyond the Guidebook 2010 Implementing A New Culture for Urban Watershed Protection and Restoration in British Columbia](#) ^[1] tells an important story of how communities throughout British Columbia are adopting a new approach to urban watersheds. The heroes of this story include local government officials, planners, engineers and developers from a number of different regions, such as the Okanagan, Vancouver Island and Metro Vancouver, who have been shifting the way that they manage urban watersheds. The [Green Infrastructure Partnership](#) ^[2] (of which West Coast is a founding partner) has also played an important role in sharing new ideas, encouraging regional cooperation and dialogue, and facilitating the exchange of experiences from different regions. [Beyond the Guidebook 2010](#) will be launched with a presentation on September 27 at the annual [UBCM convention](#) ^[3] being held in Whistler.

But what has changed? The overall approach described in this report is based on "designing with nature." Municipalities have extensive and specific tools under the [Community Charter](#) ^[4] to manage rainfall events within the part of the watershed that falls within their boundaries; regional districts that have established a drainage service also have jurisdiction. However, in exercising these powers, local governments traditionally focused on "stormwater" management, a technical exercise with the emphasis on containment and diversion—making sure the water was collected and transported away from urban development.



The shift has involved thinking more holistically, and integrating “rainwater” management into resource, land-use and community design decisions. On undisturbed land, when rain falls, much of it simply soaks into the ground, where it is either stored or becomes part of underground flows. Urban development can greatly reduce the surface area available for rainfall to soak into the ground, meaning that the water ends up being diverted directly into storm drains, and streams. This creates issues around stream health, because:

- sudden increases in volumes during rainfalls flush out streams and watercourses; and
- oil and other pollutants are released directly into streams along with the water.

As well, less water is stored in the ground to be available for vegetation during dry-weather periods.

The new approach is to design urban areas in such a way that their natural capacity to absorb and manage rainfall is restored. One technique is to create topsoil requirements at the planning and design stages. Together with the Green Infrastructure Partnership West Coast [released a primer for local governments](#) ^[5] on topsoil planning earlier this year.

A key challenge in ensuring urban stream health has been getting all the players involved in the community to move in the same direction. The model that has evolved through the outreach work around rainwater management has become known as “Convening for Action” and involves bringing everyone together in a workshop setting to share experiences, talk about barriers, and find solutions.

To assist in the process, West Coast created a policy and legal tool called the “Shared Responsibility Matrix”. The matrix, featured in *Beyond the Guidebook 2010* identifies the players along with the various instruments that govern their actions. For example, municipal governments might receive direction from the Official Community Plan, and the actions of developers might be controlled through bylaws that require onsite rainwater management facilities. The idea is to first identify the desired outcomes for the community, and then get the regulators, developers and designers together to identify any barriers and work out solutions, guided by the matrix.

Beyond the Guidebook 2010 quotes former West Coast staff counsel Susan Rutherford on the purpose of the Matrix and Convening for Action:

Once we know what we want our watersheds and neighbourhoods to look like, the next step is to decide what the tools are that will get us there. All of uswhether we are regulators, developers or designersneed to understand and care about the goal if we are to know our role in relation to it and to create the future that we all want.

Moving forward, the next challenge is to complete and implement rainwater management plans in communities around the province, and to ensure that they are both affordable and effective in restoring the health of our urban watersheds. Although many communities have accepted the concept of “designing with nature”, many of the plans described in *Beyond the Guidebook 2010* are still in their early stages of implementation. Along with its official launch at the upcoming UBCM convention, *Beyond the Guidebook 2010* and the lessons learned to date will be presented this October at the [BC Hydro Power Smart Forum](#) ^[6] in Vancouver, the [Vancouver Island Economic Summit](#) ^[7] in Nanaimo, and the

Rain to Resource Workshop [8] in Kelowna.

By Deborah Carlson, Staff Lawyer [9]

Beyond the Guidebook 2010 green communities Green Infrastructure Partnership urban watershed protection

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Links:

[1] <http://wcel.org/resources/publication/beyond-guidebook-2010-implementing-new-culture-urban-watershed-protection-and->

[2] <http://www.waterbucket.ca/gi/?sid=5&id=13&type=single>

[3] <http://ubcm.ca/EN/main/convention/2010-convention.html>

[4] http://www.bclaws.ca/EPLibraries/bclaws_new/document/ID/freeside/03026_01

[5] <http://wcel.org/resources/environmental-law-alert/it's-amazing-just-how-important-topsoil>

[6] <http://wwe12.bchydro.com/businessevents/forum/>

[7] <http://www.viea.ca/index.php?page=73>

[8] <http://www.bcwwa.org/seminars/RtoR.htm>

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