

Rain garden offers beauty, function

By LOUISE WREGE - HP Staff Writer | Posted: Monday, July 3, 2017 6:00 am

BENTON TOWNSHIP — A rain garden full of flowers and greenery soon will replace almost 20 parking spots at Wightman and Associates along Pipestone Road in Benton Township.

While the rain garden will be pretty, it also will filter pollutants out of rainwater runoff from the parking lot before it flows into the stormwater system and, eventually, into Ox Creek, said Ben Baker, landscape architect with the engineering, surveying and landscaping company.

The Wightman project will minimize pollution and demonstrate to other property owners what they can do on their own land, said Marcy Hamilton, senior planner with the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission in Benton Harbor.

“That way, we have something right here in the water shed, right in the mall area, that people can come and see,” she said.

The project is being paid for in part by a state grant. Hamilton said she has been working with property owners in the mall area and along the Pipestone Road corridor, which includes Celebration Cinema, Lowe’s, Home Depot, Walmart and Meijer.

Bids for the project are due July 14. One bid is for a company to take out the asphalt where the rain garden will be and to put in soil. Baker said part of the work should be done by Sept. 1. The second bid is for a company to furnish plants. He said fall is the best time to plant a rain garden.

Baker said staff members at Wightman already have donated their time to do the engineering and to come up with plans for the project. To further save money, he said Wightman staff might also plant the plants. He said the project is expected to cost about \$24,000, with the state grant paying for half.

“That’s a fairly large, developed area,” he said. “A lot of it’s paved and impervious. Rain falls and hits those parking lots and roofs and buildings and flows off straight into the storm drains and right into the creek. We’re looking at what we can do on those sites to slow that water down, to capture it, to let it actually infiltrate into the ground.”

He said a rain garden is only one option. Other options include green roofs or permeable paving that allows stormwater to move through the surface to filter pollutants from the water.

Hamilton said Ox Creek, which flows through Benton Township and Benton Harbor, was identified by the state as being one of the most polluted waterways in the state.



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A rendering of what the rain garden at Benton Township’s Wightman & Associates is expected to look like when done.

She said the rainwater runoff from the mall area flows into Ox Creek, which then flows into the Paw Paw River, the St. Joseph River and, eventually, Lake Michigan.

“This is part of a larger project for the Paw Paw River watershed,” Hamilton said.

Work to clean up Ox Creek is being funded in part by a three-year, \$600,000 grant the Southwest Michigan Land Conservancy received from the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality in 2015.

Part of the conservancy’s project is preserving land along the Paw Paw River and some of its tributaries, Hamilton said.

Hamilton said many of the businesses in the area were built decades ago when the philosophy was to get stormwater off the property as quickly as possible. Unfortunately, that means all the pollutants end up in the water, she said.

“If you think of the land before any development was here, when the rain would fall, most of it would be taken up by trees and plants and filtered into the ground and then goes through the ground to the creek,” she said. “Now, with all this impervious surface, it gets routed quickly into the storm drain and it hits that little creek and kind of blows it out and blows all of the life in it out.”

Businesses built today must address stormwater with installations such as retention ponds.

Hamilton said she also has been working with farmers to reduce the amount of pollution flowing into Ox Creek from their farms.

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