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Harvey shows why Houston must use Green Infrastructure

City ranks low in its support for natural stormwater solutions

HOUSTON — Hurricane Harvey has shown the need for better stormwater solutions in Houston, and one of the most important is Green Infrastructure. But while these natural drainage features are already being used in a few places in Houston, the city’s official support for Green Infrastructure is low. Houston ranks fourth among the state’s five biggest cities for Green Infrastructure policies, according to the “Texas Stormwater Scorecard,” a new study released today by Environment Texas and Galveston Bay Foundation.

Houston scored 50 percent on the “Texas Stormwater Scorecard,” which was produced by Environment Texas Research & Policy Center. The study used a modified version of a checklist from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to evaluate Green Infrastructure policies across Texas. Austin came in first with a score of 90 percent, while San Antonio ranked second with a score of 65 percent and Fort Worth ranked third with a score of 60 percent. Dallas ranked last with a score of 40 percent.

The score represents the percentage of common municipal stormwater policies that have been implemented in each city. The Environment Texas study found that while Houston has implemented good detention requirements for new developments, it doesn’t provide the regulatory and financial incentives for using Green Infrastructure that have been effective in other U.S. cities.

“Green Infrastructure isn’t a term that most Houstonians know, but they should,” said Brian Zabcik, the Clean Water Advocate at Environment Texas, a member-based nonprofit group.

“These features use plants, soil, and natural drainage to capture and cleanse rain where it falls, which can cut runoff. That’s crucial for cities that get as much rain as Houston does,” Zabcik added.

Green Infrastructure can reduce flooding severity when combined with conventional stormwater features, according to Dr. Phil Bedient, the co-director of the Center for Severe Storm Prediction, Education and Evacuation from Disasters (SSPEED) and an engineering professor at Rice University.

“Any city would have flooded with the massive amounts of rain that fell on Houston during Harvey,” Bedient said. “But parts of Houston are flooding during much smaller storms, like the 4-6 inches that fell

in October 2015 and the 10 inches that fell in January 2017. Green Infrastructure can catch those amounts of rain.”

Some Green Infrastructure features, including rain gardens, green roofs, permeable pavement, and rain cisterns, are known as Low Impact Development (LID). Examples can be found across Houston, including the rain gardens along Bagby Street in Midtown, the permeable pavement at the Dunlavy in Buffalo Bayou Park, the rain cisterns at New Hope Housing’s Sakowitz Residence, and the parking lot bioswales at the offices of the Harris County Flood Control District.

Larger features can be built on a neighborhood or regional basis, such as the constructed wetlands at Buffalo Bend Nature Park, and the detention ponds that double as recreation spaces at Arthur Storey Park, Willow Waterhole Park, and Exploration Green.

Scott Jones, Director of Advocacy at Galveston Bay Foundation, explained that in addition to making floods worse, runoff from buildings and roads also causes water pollution.

“Houston-area rivers, bayous, and creeks drain into Galveston Bay,” Jones said. “Stormwater carries pollutants from yards, streets, parking lots, and businesses—everything from plastic and Styrofoam litter to fertilizers to pesticides and pet waste.”

“These pollutants can harm the people who use the Bay for recreation, and can hurt the fish and wildlife that depend on a healthy Bay, but we can reduce these impacts by using Green Infrastructure and LID features at our homes and businesses,” he said.

Many professionals in the development industry are beginning to incorporate Low Impact Development into the projects they work on, according to Julie Hendricks, a board member for the Houston chapter of the American Institute of Architects (AIA).

“Low Impact Development handles stormwater the way nature would do it,” Hendricks said. “Nature tends to solve problems beautifully and efficiently, which is why LID features are ones that we can love. LID features have a slew of other benefits besides flood mitigation—they clean water, create habitat, and provide beautiful places for people to use.”

The “Texas Stormwater Scorecard” evaluated cities by a checklist of ten key stormwater policies: flood detention requirements; water quality requirements; GSI/LID regulatory credits; stormwater retention requirement; regulatory incentives; financial incentives; stormwater fee discounts; capital project construction; street construction; and education.

The full report is available at <http://environmenttexascenter.org/reports/txe/texas-stormwater-scorecard>.

Environment Texas advocates for clean air, clean water, and preservation of Texas’ natural areas on behalf of 35,000 members and activists statewide.

The mission of the Galveston Bay Foundation is to preserve and enhance Galveston Bay as a healthy and productive place for generations to come. The Foundation was incorporated in 1987, and is a Section 501(c)(3) non-profit organization.

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