

# Desrochers: Use nature in Ottawa's storm water management



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Catherine McKenna, Minister of Environment and Climate Change and Minister responsible for Parks Canada announced new water access points for paddlers at Patterson Creek off the canal Tuesday May 10, 2016. Clive Doucet was on the water paddling and there to express his congratulations to McKenna. Photos by Ashley Fraser Ashley Fraser / Ottawa Citizen

The more people go to the Ottawa River, the more we should care about its water quality, and the more we should think about the stormwater pipes that lead into it. There is a long way to go to bring the waters back to full health.

Ottawa is becoming a poster child for water management issues, with its sinkholes so big they make it into the New York Times. To be fair, water has become a headache in most cities, overtaking fire as the leading source of home insurance claims in Canada. All cities our size intensify, and leave fewer places where water can soak up before going down our stormwater drains. And those storms are becoming more violent by the year.

The Citizen has repeatedly reported that stormwater management solutions are available for Ottawa and Gatineau, but they don't get built. The time rarely seems quite right for all levels of municipal, provincial and federal financing to come together. Why? Largely because underground pipes are not sexy projects. Even Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said so, when he unveiled his first budget last spring.

Perhaps the solution lies in making stormwater management systems more visible, and more enjoyable. Nature offers a great example. After every rain, water soaks in the ground and filters into ponds and creeks, before moving into rivers. An abundance of animals and plants find their proper place, even though large swathes of land dry up in the heat of summer. This is the cleanest, richest and most economical water treatment system there is.

Urbanists worldwide are now proposing to use the principles of nature when designing urban stormwater management systems. Green infrastructure, as some call it, is changing the face of cities from Flint, Mich. to Surrey, B.C., and from San Francisco to Singapore. Green roofs spread atop buildings, green strips run along streets and boulevards, buried creeks come to the light of day and cattail colonies develop around new stormwater ponds.

Instead of pumping tax dollars down municipal drains, this approach puts our stormwater investments in plain sight. It brings a more natural feel into town and creates places everyone can enjoy. That's more attractive from a political point of view.

With all its waterways and creeks, Ottawa has fantastic bones for becoming a model of this new approach. We even have a few long-standing, proven examples of green infrastructure. Patterson Creek in the Glebe is one. This natural creek connects to the canal, it floods in spring and gets all soaked up whenever it rains. It filters all that stormwater and lets it drip, slow and clean, into the canal. It is a boon to all the houses around it and a true neighbourhood hub.

There is a plan for creating more of these ponds, as was done recently near Algonquin College and Tunney's Pasture. And there is an agreement among experts that we need more. The only step missing is to see the landscaping opportunities and run with them.

Last summer, columnist Randall Denley lamented the lack of big ideas at city hall, saying the rail line shouldn't occupy all of our councillors' mental energy, and asked: What else have we got?

Well, we've got water. And an MP who serves as an Minister of Environment and Climate Change.

Let's hope that stronger leadership at city hall and better collaborations between departments and jurisdictions will help us reap the opportunities in today's water management challenges. Making the capital a poster child of green infrastructure would be a fitting demonstration of the Canada Trudeau wants to build: innovative, eco-responsible and urban.

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