

## Rain garden improves environment at welcome center

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MARLOWE – Surrounded by picnic benches, wide expanses of grass and wooden bridges, the new rain garden at the Interstate 81 southbound Welcome Center provides an area for travelers to relax while benefiting the local environment.

Wednesday, local and state agencies held a dedication ceremony to commemorate the installation of the rain garden, which was a collaborative project by the West Virginia Conservation Agency, the West Virginia Division of Highways and the Eastern Panhandle Conservation District.

“The site before the rain garden had a considerable amount of runoff from the parking lot, grass area and the buildings that was discharged right here. It drains a little over five acres of that, and 1.25 acres is pavement and buildings. We had a good location to capture and treat all the water at one spot,” said Steve Sites, WVDOH environmental coordinator for District 5.

In addition to filtering area run-off, the rain garden also benefits the Chesapeake Bay project by contributing to the state's efforts to reduce the nitrogen, phosphorous and sediment that flows into the Chesapeake Bay.

According to Carla Hardy, watershed program coordinator for the WVCA, by 2025, the state's goal is to have reduced 33 percent of nitrogen, 35 percent of phosphorous and six percent of sediment entering the Chesapeake Bay from West Virginia streams.

The WVCA also fulfilled an educational component through the project by incorporating design input and plant species selection from members of the Hedgesville High School FFA. Additionally, a plaque was stationed at the Welcome Center, informing visitors on the function and benefits of the rain garden.

Hardy believes the location of the rain garden is ideal, both in its proximity to the Potomac River and because the rest stop is highly visible and receives so many visitors.

“The aesthetics of it being a much nicer area, and then habitat improvement for insects and wildlife. There's also a nice education sign that talks about rain gardens and their benefits. We really wanted to be able to pull people from the Welcome Center down this way and be able to utilize the area,” Hardy said.

Construction on the rest stop began in the fall of 2011 and planting began in 2012. All of the plants selected are native to the state.

The rain garden was funded through a federal Chesapeake Bay grant that required a local match from the WVCA, whose funds are distributed by the EPCD. The required local match was less

than \$10,000, and the WVCA was able to supplement some of the local match through in-kind services provided by the West Virginia Division of Highways.

An additional reason the rest stop was selected as the site for the rain garden is because the area was a hardship for the WVDOH to maintain. The rain garden will require less maintenance, and Hedgesville High School FFA will partner to help maintain the garden.

Upcoming WVCA projects in the Eastern Panhandle include implementing a rain garden in the Sleepy Creek watershed in Morgan County.

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