Page News & Courier "Water Matters" – June 19, 2008

MANAGING PAGE'S WATER RESOURCES THROUGH WATERSHED PLANNING

Page County took a vital step toward becoming better stewards of its rivers, streams, and drinking water supplies with the Board of Supervisors' recent approval of a comprehensive water resource program detailed in a document entitled, *Managing Page County's Water… and it's Future*.

This program provides a framework to guide water resource management through its three key elements: *education* and *outreach* to better understand our water resources; *watershed management* to ensure abundant, clean water; and *sound land management practices* to support a vibrant, growing community in balance with sustaining healthy rivers and clean drinking water.

Page County is similar to other areas in the Shenandoah Valley; our water is in jeopardy. Our rivers and lakes are filled with sediment, pollution, and life-choking algae. These are indicators of harmful land use practices. In addition, our groundwater supplies are dwindling, threatening drinking water supplies. The best way to address this serious trend is through watershed management; one of the key elements in the County's water resource program. Management of water resources is guided by *watershed plans* often begun by focusing on a particular small portion of a watershed known as a sub watershed.

At this more detailed scale, planners can identify specific pollutants and their sources, and create effective solutions. Watershed plans are prepared and adopted, and decisions regarding future development and other land uses can be made with a better understanding as to how this affects water resources. The plan will also recommend improved land use methods and practices guiding the community toward a future with healthy, vibrant waters. Locally prepared and approved watershed plans also substantially improve funding opportunities to implement specific land use actions.

At the beginning of the sub watershed planning process, water quality assessments provide a "snapshot" of stream health. Outreach and education efforts increase citizen awareness, understanding, and support. Sub watersheds are then prioritized to identify those areas most in need of restoration activities and protection. This approach focuses planning efforts, particularly useful in larger watersheds given limited staff and implementation funds.

More detailed assessments follow through field studies and discussions with landowners and citizens regarding specific issues or highly valued resources. These detailed assessments help planners map areas that need specific restoration activities to address such issues as eroding stream banks or the protection of important natural areas. Based on specific needs, planners can identify management practices that enable development and other activities to proceed with proper assurances for protecting streams and groundwater.

This is the approach planners are currently using in the Mill Creek sub watershed. Planners will work with individual landowners to recommend specific practices aimed at improving the health of water. For example, planners are currently working with local farmers in the rural portions of the sub watershed to protect important riparian lands (those lands adjacent to a stream or pond) and discussing advanced methods for managing cattle, such as cross fencing for rotational grazing. In the upper reaches of Mill Creek (near the Town of Stanley), planners are considering methods to reduce harmful nutrients from entering the Creek often generated by pet waste, leaking septic systems and excessive lawn fertilizers.

We need your help in this planning effort. Please contact the Page County Watershed Management Planning Team to provide information and to participate by calling 540-743-4808 This is the fifth in a series of articles addressing Page County's water resources.

This article was written by Wink Hastings, a landscape architect with the National Park Service at the Chesapeake Bay Program and a member of the Page County Watershed Management Planning Team.