

# The Municipality

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# Learning Our Lessons: Stormwater Management

Andy Radig, Communications Coordinator, City of Oshkosh

Historical maps of the City of Oshkosh reveal the many creeks and watersheds that existed long before development occurred. Like many Wisconsin municipalities, Oshkosh is nestled around bodies of water. There is still water flowing through 124 different watersheds in Oshkosh, finding its way to the Fox River or Lake Winnebago, but it must now make its way through an elaborate maze of systems designed to carry or temporarily hold stormwater. The city created the Oshkosh Storm Water Utility in 2002 to manage the water, but much more remains to be done.

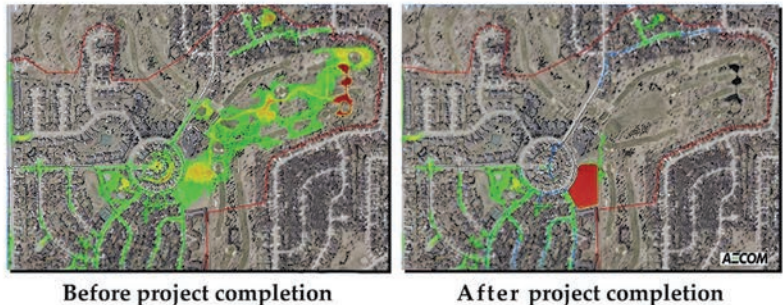
Oshkosh's Comprehensive Plan recognized the correlation between urban development and the need for stormwater management as early as the 1960s. As recently as 30 years ago, city residents generally considered flooded streets to be an acceptable form of stormwater retention after an intense rain event. Continued development, an increase of street flooding events, and public concern has grown as the years passed, but there was a lack of funding for these types of projects.

Recently the technology has improved to better track rainfall and its effect on the infrastructure in the city. Design standards have also improved, paving the way for infrastructure that avoids street flooding.

Oshkosh City Manager Mark Rohloff commented, "The Storm Water Utility has utilized data to determine the best targeted approach to new stormwater projects using a comprehensive planning process." The utility completed its first project in 2005, a flood-control basin and channel. That was followed up in 2007 with another flood-control basin and storm sewer improvements in an east side neighborhood. 2008 saw multiple high-intensity rainfall events, and reignited the urgency to continue with projects. Residents who had been skeptical were coming around to seeing the value of the projects. Things were improving!

The Storm Water Utility continues to use all of the tools available to it to address the city's needs. This includes stormwater detention basins, pump stations, storm

## Westhaven Subdivision Storm Water Project 4.94" Total Rainfall Event



*The green, yellow and red areas illustrate flooding that occurred in two separate storm events before and after the Westhaven Storm Water Detention Basin project was completed. The basin is located at the solid red area in the "after" image, demonstrating its effectiveness diverting excess storm water from this Oshkosh subdivision.*

sewer improvements, and innovative projects such as an underground detention basin in a dense urban location underneath the Oshkosh City Hall parking lot. A project might be located at the top of a watershed to alleviate the problems upstream before the water reaches a more populated area. The city has found that there usually isn't a single solution, rather a combination of tactics. The results of these efforts are demonstrating their value every time there is a substantial rainfall. Residents who had problems are not experiencing the same issues. Street flooding is not as prevalent as it once had been. This is not to say that there still aren't localized problems with basements and streets being flooded, but these are reminders of the importance to continue planning for future projects.

A recent high-intensity rainfall event had Oshkosh resident Marie Weber watch the water rise in her basement, waiting for the stormwater infrastructure to carry the flood away. When asked to assign a grade to the city's stormwater management in 2012, another resident said, "I'd give them an 'A' for effort, but a 'D' for results." Others had varying opinions, but the appropriate grade to be assigned is likely an "incomplete," since the results were promising but more work remained to be done.

The Storm Water Utility has approximately \$150 million in capital assets reflecting a growing list of completed projects. The utility uses a methodical approach to completing projects, walking the fine line between progress and keeping the Storm Water Utility rates economical. Residents are seeing improvements. One project completed 10 years ago on Melvin Avenue utilized a combination of a lift station and larger storm sewer, yielding results for the watershed that are ongoing today. For those who live in areas where projects are awaiting their turn to receive funding, residents' patience is key. And, perhaps, a bit of luck so that overwhelming rain events don't occur!

Another challenge for the Storm Water Utility is to continue to reinforce and communicate the value of the work that's being accomplished. Residents need to be reminded that the utility is making great progress, and is serving the needs of residents from all areas within the city. The confidence in progress serves to reinforce the need to continue moving forward with the work.

As the City of Oshkosh Public Works Director James Rabe said, "Flooding and stormwater quality impact all of us, either directly or indirectly." The city and Storm Water Utility are working toward the goal of turning the "Incomplete" grade into an "A." Developing watershed plans, carrying out planned projects, and reinforcing the positive outcome while keeping rates in check is how we make progress. History shows us how stormwater used to flow in our city, but we're making progress on effective solutions for stormwater management for generations to come.

#### About the Author:

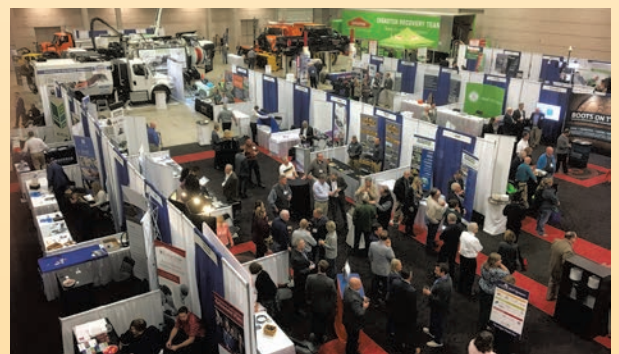
Andy Radig is the Communications Coordinator for the City of Oshkosh. He worked previously as Multimedia Coordinator for the City of Wisconsin Rapids. A native of Oshkosh, Andy had also served as past president of the Friends of Oshkosh Community Media and as a board member of Wisconsin Community Media. Contact Andy at [aradig@ci.oshkosh.wi.us](mailto:aradig@ci.oshkosh.wi.us)



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