

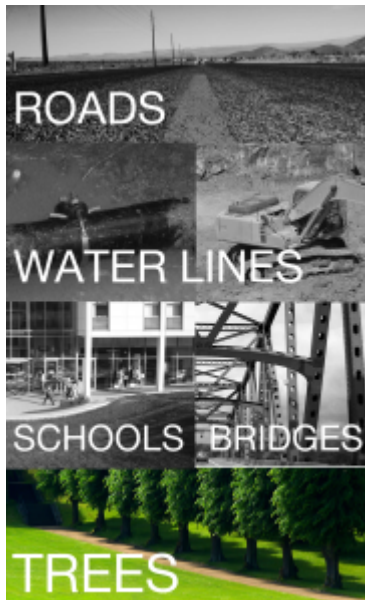


Community and Economic Development in North Carolina and Beyond Blog: Urban Forests as Local Government Infrastructure

By Jeff Hughes

Article: <https://ced.sog.unc.edu/urban-forests-are-clearly-green-infrastructure-and-require-investment/>

This entry was posted on October 23, 2012 and is filed under Community Development, Downtown & Main Street, Financial Assets, Natural Assets, Sustainable Development



“Green Infrastructure” — What is it? Who is responsible for it? How do you pay for it?

Difficult questions and ones that many including our staff at the at the Environmental Finance Center are seeking answers to.

There appears to be a growing trend in some communities to recognize and support infrastructure investments that are able to provide long term community and economic benefits without relying on massive amounts of steel and concrete. Cities like Philadelphia have adopted decentralized green infrastructure as a philosophical and pragmatic alternative to more traditional centralized infrastructure to address specific environmental problems such as impaired water quality. By investing millions of dollars in rain gardens, green roofs, and increased tree planting in addition to and in some cases instead of centralized stormwater conveyance and treatment facilities, the city hopes to improve water quality and the quality of urban life at the same time (ask the average city dweller what provides them wider community benefits – additional green space and forested shade or off site stormwater treatment facilities see what they say).



I read an article a few weeks ago describing the history of the urban forest where I live in the downtown area of Durham. I had wondered over the last few years why so many of the majestic oaks throughout the city seemed to be coming down through a combination of disease and gravity. It turns out that the trees in the city where I live was largely the result of a significant infrastructure investment made in the 1930s to 1950s. An investment in capital that has paid dividends for years, but which now sadly has reached the end of its natural life. Reflecting on this cycle and the infrastructure replacement challenge it represents I could not help but see similarities to the water infrastructure challenges we are facing. The tree lined streets and wooded urban parks that give so many cities their character seem to have much in common with the water and sewer line infrastructure that run under those streets. Both required significant initial investment, both require on-going maintenance, both provide public benefits. And unfortunately as many cities are discovering, both types of infrastructure have finite lives and eventually require significant reinvestment.

By many accounts, aging water and sewer infrastructure and other types of critical infrastructure remains undervalued and underfunded; however it has captured media attention and has been the focus of many high profile studies and reports. The loss of urban forests, a real threat in some areas, still remains a buried concern in many areas of the country. It's not just the city of brotherly love that has noticed the value of green. Living up to their name as the City of Oaks, Raleigh is an example of a NC City that has tapped into the community benefits of urban forestry and has treated planting trees as a local government capital responsibility. The City not only maintains an active urban forestry program, but includes significant funds for tree replacement in their capital budget alongside road repairs and water line replacements. Now that so many cities are finally starting to pay attention to the infrastructure under the ground they walk on, maybe it's time to beginning looking at the infrastructure over their head.