

RAIN TO RECREATION CASE STUDY

About Lenexa, Ks

Lenexa, Kansas, which was incorporated in 1907, is a rapidly growing city in the Kansas City metropolitan area, adding about 1000 new residents per year. A city of about 47,000 residents and a daytime population roughly double that, Lenexa is home to numerous bioscience and high-tech companies as well as major corporations such as Community America Credit Union and LabOne, and soon will be the home for the Applebee's International headquarters. Lenexa has a reputation as a progressive, technology-savvy city, and yet its citizens enjoy a hometown sense of community in this city that is known throughout the area as the City of Festivals. Lenexa is the home of Shockey Consulting Services, llc.

Creating a Vision

In the late 1990s, Lenexa began developing a new, innovative approach to managing stormwater, which stemmed directly from the city's community-visioning process, Lenexa Vision 2020. City leaders had initiated this visioning effort in 1996 to provide direction and focus for changes in the maturing part of the city as well as for future development, which would begin accelerating soon in the largely undeveloped western two-thirds of the city.

Community Drivers

While Lenexa generally does not have major flooding problems, a severe flood that hit the metropolitan area in October 1998 – one of the worst in the area's history – as well as new requirements imposed by the National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) Phase II of the Clean Water Act, reinforced the importance of the community's vision and the city's efforts.

Approach

As Lenexa began to develop its new watershed management program, city officials and staff took a hard look at the way the city had been doing business. Lenexa wanted to learn from previous mistakes and find a better way to manage stormwater, particularly as new development accelerated to the west. In the past, Lenexa looked at stormwater in the traditional way as a problem that needed to be moved away quickly. Like many other cities, Lenexa moved stormwater by collecting and channeling it through gutters, boxes, pipes, and culverts. But in some areas, this led to localized flooding, erosion, and massive stream degradation, which was expensive to repair.

In its new approach, Lenexa began looking at stormwater as a community asset and a valuable resource rather than a problem, and thus created "Rain to Recreation." The goals of Lenexa Rain to Recreation are to reduce flooding, protect water quality, natural habitat and the environment, and provide new recreation and education opportunities for the community. Sheila Shockey was hired by Ron Norris, Public Works

Director at the time and the force behind this new approach. She spent a little over a year working onsite as part of the team that developed the Rain to Recreation program.

The promise of Rain to Recreation was that Lenexa would reduce flooding by building new lakes, detention basins, wetlands, streamside parks, and trails that would provide recreational enjoyment, as well as provide numerous educational programs to increase community awareness of water quality issues.

Public Education – Rain to Recreation

While developing this new initiative, the Governing Body and staff understood that it was vital to communicate with all of the city's audiences. The city would need support from many different groups including the business community, development community, the media, and neighboring cities and the county because the plan was to take a regional watershed approach to managing stormwater. Lenexa sits on four watersheds, which are shared with neighboring communities. Equally as important, it was critical that Lenexa had the support of the citizens, who would be asked to help pay for the initiative with a one-eighth cent sales tax increase. In 1999, the city conducted a citizen survey to gauge the community's willingness to pay for a watershed management program. Eighty percent of the respondents said they were willing to pay and interested in water quality as it relates to the quality of life.

The message for the various audiences was complex. This type of approach to stormwater management was not common in 2000, and it would be challenging to generate understanding and buy-in from all the stakeholders. Great effort was made to communicate with the many stakeholders, including numerous meetings and public speaking engagements by then Mayor Joan Bowman and members of a citizen support group to the economic development council, media editorial boards, chamber of commerce, development community, civic groups, PTAs, church groups, and neighborhood associations. Sheila was responsible for developing and driving this outreach program.

Funding

In August of 2000, citizens were going to be asked to help fund the Rain to Recreation initiative by voting for a one-eighth cent sales tax increase. A great deal of effort was already going into communications with the public; but because it was so important to gain citizen understanding and support of Rain to Recreation, the city decided to play to one of its strengths, and came up with a fun and innovative way to communicate the new initiative with citizens.

Each year, Lenexa hosts tens of thousands of people at annual events including the Great Lenexa Barbeque-Kansas State Championship, Community Days events including the Freedom Run, July 4th parade and fireworks, Spinach Festival, Chili Challenge, Enchanted Forest, and Old Town Lighting Ceremony.

So, in 2000, when Lenexa needed a way to communicate with citizens about the new Rain to Recreation initiative and the money that would be needed to fund it. Sheila came up with the idea of a Waterfest and worked with the incredible parks and recreation staff to hold the event.

Waterfest!

Waterfest is a unique public outreach effort that supports the Rain to Recreation concept of raising public awareness of water quality and stormwater issues by bringing neighbors together for family fun and community spirit in a festival setting. Waterfest, a free event targeted at Lenexa citizens and families, offers numerous interactive, educational booths, as well as many water-related activities including paddle boats, canoeing, cane-pole fishing, waterslides, wacky water games, children's fishpond and duck pond, and the like. The city also offers entertainment such as presentations by Operation Wildlife, "Green E," the environmental Elvis who performs songs with an environmental message put to tunes of favorite Elvis hits, and a local band called "Rain Dogs."

When organizing Waterfest, Lenexa set out to achieve the following goals:

- Create a unique event that would attract Lenexa citizens, particularly families with children, to learn about the importance of the city's innovative Rain to Recreation initiative and the funding that would be necessary, as well as a variety of water quality, stormwater and other environmental issues.
- Provide a fun and festive atmosphere for neighbors to gather and enjoy water-related activities and celebrate water as a community asset.
- Partner with various environmental groups who would provide interactive, educational booths about water quality and stormwater management and further support the city's watershed management initiatives.
- Provide a venue for soliciting public opinion on project elements including park facilities

Lenexa's Rain to Recreation Waterfest was successful in the following ways:

- The first Waterfest was held in July 2000, prior to the election in which citizens were asked to approve a one-eighth cent sales tax increase to assist in the funding of Rain to Recreation. Waterfest served as a communications tool that was coordinated with other communications efforts regarding the need for Rain to Recreation. The sales tax was approved by an overwhelming 78-percent margin.
- Waterfest was so well received, the city decided to make it an annual event, which now attracts several thousand citizens each year. At the event, the city receives valuable input from citizens about the city's Rain to Recreation efforts, and has the opportunity to demonstrate how funds are being used toward vital projects.
- The city has been able to keep costs down in several ways including:
 - Securing federal water-quality grant money administered through Kansas Department of Health and Environment
 - Partnering with local businesses to provide food and other items
 - Promoting Waterfest through numerous communications tools already in existence to cut down on promotion costs

- Each year, Waterfest continues to draw media attention. The promotion and coverage adds to the positive message citizens receive about the city's efforts to deal with stormwater issues and protect water quality, whether or not they attend the event
- Lenexa partnered with various environmental and civic groups concerned with water quality and environmental issues. Some of the groups that have participated by hosting booths at Waterfest include: Johnson County Household Hazardous Waste program, Johnson County public Works and Wastewater, Blue River Watershed Association, Kansas Alliance for Wetlands and Streams (KAWS), Project WET, Sierra Club, Mid-America Regional Council, US Army Corp of Engineers, EPA Region 7, Grow Native-Missouri Department of Conservation, Kansas Wildscape Foundation, Habitat for Humanity's ReStore, Operation Wildlife, as well as the city's Rain to Recreation watershed management division and the city's Parks and Recreation Department.
- The city's Rain to Recreation initiative and Waterfest have served as models for other communities locally and throughout the country.

Waterfest, is an annual event that continues to provide an important outlet for the city to fulfill its Rain to Recreation mission of public education and outreach to increase awareness about water quality issues, solicit citizen input, provide water quality-sensitive alternatives to common behaviors, and inform citizens of the city's efforts to address flooding problems.

Continued Community Support

In 2004, citizens were asked to renew the one-eighth cent sales tax increase for an additional five years, which would fulfill the 10-year funding plan necessary for Rain to Recreation. The annual Waterfest was again an important tool that was used in coordination with other communications efforts – including a speakers' bureau and Rain to Recreation video sent to homes associations and other groups in the community – to inform citizens about the city's Rain to Recreation progress. Since Lenexa's first Waterfest and successful passage of the sales tax increase, Lenexa has completed its first two regional lakes, which provide regional retention in the developing part of the community, and very soon will offer new opportunities for education and recreation. In the 2004 election, citizens once again passed the tax increase by a 78-percent margin. Shockey Consulting Services was hired back again to help educate the public about the importance of funding this program.

Outcomes & Accomplishments

Shockey Consulting developed the long-range financial model for the program, developed the organizational structure, assisted with hiring staff, prepared ordinances to implement best management practices, developed the business plan and then updated it once the program was underway and operating. As a result of this work, capital projects were designed and implemented to address problems and create recreational amenities as promised.

Problems Addressed

Lenexa completed or has projects underway for all known flood control and stream bank erosion problems.

Created Recreational Amenities

The Rain to Recreation system consists of shared detention facilities, regional retention facilities and streamway corridors. Through Rain to Recreation, Lenexa citizens will enjoy more than 500 additional acres of parks and open space. Lenexa also is creating a system of greenways throughout the city, acquiring additional acres of parkland along stream corridors.

Featured Project Descriptions:

- Lake Lenexa Regional Detention
- Mize Lake Regional Detention
- Flat Rock Creek Stream Restoration
- Parkhurst Stream Restoration
- Manchester Park Stream Restoration
- Brentwood Neighborhood Flood Control
- Hidden Woods Pond Restoration

Lenexa's Rain to Recreation program aims to reduce flooding, protect water quality and natural habitat and provide educational and recreational opportunities. For more information, visit www.raintorecreation.org.