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Stormwater management subject of talk

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Nearly 90 million gallons of rainwater fall on the Georgia Coast every year.

It's no surprise Brunswick — a coastal town and no stranger to king tides — experiences frequent flooding, but Jess Brown, a stormwater specialist with the University of Georgia's Marine Extension office, says there's something everyone can do to mitigate its effects.

Speaking at an event on Friday hosted by the Glynn Environmental Coalition in the backroom bar at Reid's Apothecary, Brown told those assembled that two issues are at play when discussing stormwater runoff: quantity and quality.



Quantity is a concern, she said, as it's the part that causes flooding.

Runoff also pollutes waterways by conveying chemicals and contaminants from various sources, including roofs, businesses, roadways and residential lawns. The official term is “nonpoint source pollution,” because there’s no single point the pollution originates from.

The most ideal solution is to treat stormwater, but neither Brunswick nor Glynn County has drainage sewer systems. Treating runoff is an expensive prospect, enough to make it more economical for the Brunswick-Glynn County Joint Water and Sewer Commission to spend millions in the last few years to keep runoff out of the sewer system.

It has made strides, but the Academy Creek Wastewater Treatment Plant still treats over a million gallons a day while the Dunbar Creek plant on St. Simons Island treats close to 800,000 gallons a day.

There are three methods used most frequently when dealing with runoff, all falling under the term “green infrastructure,” Brown said.

One example is permeable surfaces. Rather than traditional asphalt or concrete, permeable pavement and pavers allow water to filter through gaps in the surface and into the ground.

Bioretention is another and uses natural resources to capture and clean pollutants, she explained.

Both the county and the city have implemented bioswales in various places. A bioswale is a depression in the ground landscaped with native plants, the soil replaced with a variety ideal for filtering polluted water.

The sandy soil of the Golden Isles is already ideal for this, Brown said.

Third is rainwater collection. The Coastal Resources Division of the state Department of Natural Resources runs a program to educate the public about collecting rainwater in

barrels, she said. The office in Brunswick uses rainwater to wash the department's boats.

"There are 150 different types of (green infrastructure), and we don't have the time to go over all of them at lunch," Brown said.

In a report to be released in September called "Rethinking Runoff," the consultant Goodwyn, Mills and Cawood will detail the problem areas in the city for flooding and make recommendations for how to deal with them.

Brown also talked about some measures residents can take to play a part in reducing stormwater flooding.

The simplest thing anyone can do is to keep stormwater on their property. She described it as breaking the connection between the roof and the road by redirecting gutter spouts into gardens, ditches or rain barrels.

Rainwater collection barrels can save a single home hundreds of dollars a month on their water bill and if they live in the city limits, earn a 25% credit on stormwater utility fees implemented in 2018.

"Mine, I use it to water my flowers and hose off noisy children," Brown said jokingly.

Rain gardens are like small-scale bioswales and can spruce up a yard.

A program offered by marine extension to encourage these gardens has yielded six in the city limits so far, enough to mitigate runoff from 8,000 square feet of pavement, Brown said.

For more information, visit bit.ly/coastalRGprog.

Some area residents were not so pleased with the recommendations.

“They all seem to me to be things you have to do after the natural solution is already destroyed, and they’re things taxpayers have to pay for,” said Robert Randall, who lives in the Fancy Bluff area.

Brown said the city’s study and runoff regulations are intended to address that and the county also has regulations intended to minimize runoff. She said she couldn’t speak to how well they are enforced, however.

In the city, the municipal government is dealing with historic architecture and a drainage system neglected for decades but has few resources to address it. That’s why there is a need for a stormwater utility fee.

Randall and others also mentioned instances in which large tracts of forested land had been cut and graded for development, asking what the county was doing to allow it.

GEC Executive Director Rachael Thompson said her organization also lobbies for more strict regulations, but the county lacks a tree protection body due to no one applying for the Tree Advisory Board. In addition, property development interest substantially derailed a rewrite of the county’s zoning code that would have included further protections, she said.

She advised attendees to speak with their elected county and city commissioners to push for more regulation of tree clearing and stormwater runoff management.