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Comment: Stormwater utility a step in the right direction

Laura Brandes / Times Colonist
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It is encouraging to see the steps the City of Victoria is taking to move away from a system of stormwater management to one rooted in rainwater management. As our cities and urban landscapes continue to grow, it is crucial that local governments begin to seriously consider how cities are built, how they grow and how they interact with the natural environment.

If cities are to thrive for future generations, they must learn to respect and better integrate the natural water cycle. As a starting point, this means rethinking outdated pipe-and-convey systems (which move water off the land as quickly as possible) and shifting toward approaches that recognize rainwater as a valuable resource. By mimicking the natural water cycle and allowing rainwater to be absorbed into the landscape where it falls, there is real opportunity to reduce pollution, restore urban creeks and streams, and reduce the burden caused by major storms on existing, aging stormwater infrastructure.

If we don't begin to fund and implement new systems now, we will find ourselves paying down the road as old pipes and outdated infrastructure continue to be pushed to their limits.

Transitioning away from a system of stormwater management does not simply mean doing old things better. Rather, it means fundamentally shifting our relationship with water in our daily lives. Three principles are crucial for moving from a stormwater to a rainwater approach:

• Reducing the amount of impermeable surfaces by changing the way we build and retrofit our communities.

• Using rain as a resource and as a viable decentralized source of water for non-potable needs.

• Integrating decision-making across and within jurisdictions on a watershed scale.

Many cities around the world are already putting elements of these principles into action, including Philadelphia, Portland, Seattle and Kitchener-Waterloo.

The current approach to managing stormwater runoff in Victoria is not a sustainable long-term option, either financially or environmentally. I agree with Coun. Lisa Helps' comment that Victoria's stormwater utility will be a welcome step into the 21st century.

Evidence that new approaches to stormwater management are needed is seen across the province and country. The large-scale floods that affected Calgary and Toronto (and surrounding areas) this year is one example. As well, underneath most of our cities — including Victoria — is expensive drainage infrastructure that demands constant (and increasingly costly) maintenance.

Implementing a stormwater utility in Victoria will be an important step in changing the way this city manages and governs its stormwater. This stormwater utility, coupled with incentives and rebates for green infrastructure, has the potential to create a real impetus to better manage Victoria's rainwater in concert with natural systems.

Incorporating green infrastructure into urban design is important for addressing a range of sustainability issues — from climate change resilience to pollution due to stormwater runoff, to better management of groundwater.

Victoria is already home to some wonderful existing examples of how green infrastructure can be used to improve and enhance the functioning of the natural environment, including Dockside Green, the Atrium building and the Fisherman's Wharf Park rain garden. As a community, we can certainly do more.

The City of Victoria has been working toward its new stormwater program — and stormwater utility — for nearly two years. Having been at some of the stormwater planning committee meetings, I believe this program has the potential to catalyze significant positive change in this city.

As Victorians, we all have an intimate relationship with the rain. For nearly half the year, the skies are grey and we're prepared to settle in for days — and sometimes weeks — of blustery, rainy weather.

Not all this rain need become polluted runoff. The city's stormwater program offers an opportunity to better understand and explore the connections between rainwater, stormwater and urban runoff. In addition to being a step into the 21st century, this program is a step toward better respecting and valuing our water resources, so we can better weave the natural water cycle it into the fabric of our city.

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