



PART OF THE USA TODAY NETWORK



ASBURY PARK PRESS

A New Way To Manage Flooding From Polluted Runoff

*By Ed Potosnak and Chris Sturm
June 19, 2018*

The [issuance last week of 47 advisories of high fecal bacterial levels at New Jersey beaches](#) highlights an important issue facing our state: We need a permanent way to address our polluted runoff problem.

When it rains, water rolls off hardened surfaces, such as parking lots and rooftops, that prevent it from being absorbed into the soil for natural filtration. This runoff picks up everything its in path, including bacteria, debris, chemicals and other pollutants, before ending its journey in our streams, lakes and oceans. As a result, many of our waters are [too polluted to meet standards](#) for fishing and swimming, and, when polluted runoff closes our beaches, our [\\$44 billion coastal economy](#), which employs more than 838,000 people, is put at risk.

The damages caused by flooding and polluted runoff in New Jersey wreak havoc on our wallets, communities, infrastructure, and our environment. No one can forget [last month's record-breaking storm](#) in Burlington and Mercer counties, which dropped more than four inches of rain in one day. We know that stronger storms like that one will become more frequent, dropping more rain in less time, exacerbating flooding and severely threatening the viability and capacity of our stormwater infrastructure.

In New Jersey, upgrading and maintaining the infrastructure that deals with polluted runoff and flooding is estimated to cost close to \$16 billion. Meanwhile, the local governments on the front lines of these problems face a wide array of other pressing budget needs. Too often, maintaining and upgrading existing stormwater management systems is ignored. And local regulations to address runoff typically apply only to new construction, leaving the bulk of the already developed land without any effective runoff prevention systems.

But, there is a solution – and it is working in 40 states, including Pennsylvania, Ohio, Texas, and Florida, and would work here in New Jersey. The Clean Stormwater and Flood Reduction Act, which will be voted on by the state Senate on June 21, would allow local governments to manage their stormwater infrastructure as a utility, similar to how drinking water and sewage are managed. This bill would allow the implementation of a fee for polluted runoff, which property owners would pay based on an estimate of how

much runoff they generate. An existing local government or local or regional authority would manage this fund and dedicate the proceeds to stormwater management solutions. The bill requires transparent reporting on the use of the funds.

The Clean Stormwater and Flood Reduction Act offers a more equitable way to manage polluted runoff, since any property that generates runoff would be charged. This means that properties that currently do not pay for sewer service -- large parking lots, for example -- would bear their fair share of the cost of managing runoff. Tax-exempt organizations would also have to contribute their fair share. Successful models from other states highlight the cost savings for flooding management, the local employment benefits, workforce development opportunities, and climate mitigation value.

The Clean Stormwater and Flood Reduction Act is permissive; it does not require or mandate local governments to do anything. But it does provide counties and municipalities the opportunity to generate much-needed new funding to manage and prevent polluted runoff. And it includes ways property owners can reduce their costs by keeping rain off hardened surfaces entirely -- for example, through green approaches such as rain gardens, green roofs and other features that allow rain to seep back into the ground where it falls.

Flooding affects everyone; from delaying a commute home to submerging a basement, flooding and polluted runoff pose significant economic and public health threats. New Jerseyans now have a prime opportunity to establish a permanent mechanism to prevent this pollution, protect our water resources, generate good local jobs, and build healthier communities for generations to come.

Ed Potosnak is executive director of the New Jersey League of Conservation Voters.

Chris Sturm is managing director for policy and water at New Jersey Future, a nonpartisan nonprofit organization that promotes policies and practices for sustainable growth and development in New Jersey.