

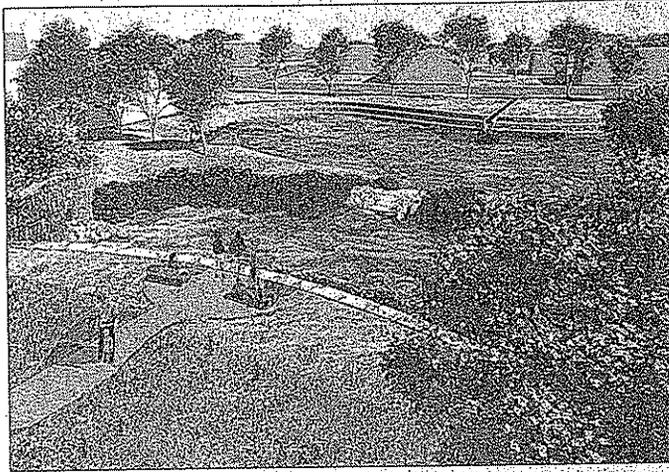
Sewer district's deliberative approach will pay off in future, just as in past

DARNELL BROWN AND JULIUS CIACCIA

Over the past two weeks, reporters Leila Atassi and Andrew Tobias wrote a three-part series about the Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District's combined sewer overflow (CSO) program, which is part of our 25-year consent order agreement with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency.

The journalists' goal was to determine whether NEORSR's program missed opportunities to save substantial money by not aggressively pursuing "cheaper" green infrastructure instead of the traditional gray infrastructure. In the articles, the authors clearly noted that the sewer district is indeed incorporating green infrastructure into its program through some very favorable terms negotiated into the consent order. In fact, other wastewater treatment agencies are seeking these enviable terms as they face the same mandates.

There is no question that our lake and the reputation of this region require action to mitigate massive amounts of sewage pouring into our environment. Over the past two decades, the sewer district has eliminated half of the 9 billion gallons of CSOs it originally had by constructing sewer interceptors and a CSO storage



HUMAN NATURE, CINCINNATI

A landscape architect's rendering shows how a \$1.9 million project by the Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District would improve a blighted area off Union Avenue in Cleveland's Slavic Village, while retaining heavy stormwater runoff.

tunnel. Fortunately, the sewer district constructed this gray infrastructure over the past 20 years at a time when construction costs were cheaper and federal dollars were still available. Consequently, we were able to achieve results at a cost of 22 cents per gallon of CSO eliminated. Because the sewer district was proactive, this cost per gallon compares more favorably with today's debatable estimates for green infrastructure. The real contrast is with what the district has accomplished over the past 20 years and recently by negotiating groundbreaking terms with the EPA, and what other cities and

agencies have yet to accomplish. As an example, some are just now starting to address the CSO problem with today's dollars and without the benefit of federal money. They are 20 years behind us, bearing the environmental and financial costs of waiting. As we now work to reduce the remaining 4.5 billion gallons of CSO, undoubtedly we must accept that this is an expensive proposition. But the sewer district is committed to doing everything we can to keep costs down, including using the favorable and flexible terms of our consent decree. These terms allow us to replace

our planned gray infrastructure with green infrastructure where and if it makes environmental and financial sense.

To that end, an often-ignored truth is that green infrastructure often doesn't accommodate the capacity of combined sewer overflows that gray infrastructure can. Therefore, we must always consider the cost/benefit ratio of incorporating green infrastructure into our program.

Our Board of Trustees, whom elected officials appoint, was thoroughly engaged all throughout a very deliberate negotiation process with the EPA. Any board member claiming otherwise was either not paying attention or, worse yet, politically posturing. With our ratepayers in mind, this board and the sewer district staff remain dedicated to considering all cost-effective options in a professional, contemplative manner and will not be like "bugs flying to a light" because something sounds good or is popular. We are convinced time will prove that our deliberative approach will pay off in the future just as it did by being proactive over the past 20 years, and will benefit our community and region.

Brown is the president of the Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District Board of Trustees. Ciaccia is the sewer district's executive director.