**ST. MARY'S PARKING LOT RECEIVES ECO-MAKEOVER. RAIN GARDENS WILL PREVENT POLLUTION FLOW INTO CREEK.**

THE CAPITAL By PAMELA WOOD, 08/03/09 (also published in the Washington Times)

When Gerald Winegrad was a kid, he played baseball on grassy fields behind St. Mary's Catholic Church and School in downtown Annapolis. The Capital Work is under way to remove parts of parking lot islands at St. Mary's Catholic Church and School and replace them with rain gardens. Discussing the project are, from left, St. Mary's parishioner Gerald Winegrad, Anne Guillette of Low Impact Design Studio and Mel Wilkins of the Spa Creek Conservancy. The project is paid for mainly with a grant from the Chesapeake Bay 2010 Trust Fund.

Over the years, as the church congregation and school enrollment grew, those grounds were paved over and turned into parking lots. Those parking lots serve as a highway for rainwater, sending it rushing into nearby Spa Creek where it deposits chemicals, nutrients and sediment and fouls the water. Now there's an effort to undo some of that damage.

With a grant from the state government, a partnership is installing nine rain gardens to absorb and treat the stormwater. If all goes as planned, there should be 70 percent fewer nutrients and 90 percent less sediment flowing into the creek from the site. "This is hopefully just the beginning," said Anne Guillette, of Pasadena-based Low Impact Design Studio, who drew up the plans for the rain gardens.

Last week, crews from Bay Ridge Lawn & Landscape and Eden Contracting went to work scooping out the compacted dirt in the parking lot islands. Curbs will be cut away to direct water into the scooped-out areas, which will be filled with water-loving plants. The rain gardens will allow the stormwater to percolate gradually into the groundwater, just as it did before the area was paved over.

"They will capture the runoff," said Winegrad, a former state senator who heads the St. Mary's environmental stewardship committee. The construction work will be done by mid-August before school is back in session - and a volunteer planting day is being planned for October.

The work is largely being paid for with a $104,000 grant from the state's Chesapeake Bay 2010 Trust Fund. Initially called the "green fund," the fund is a pot of money for on-the-ground pollution-control projects. Initially conceived as a $50 million fund, it has been whittled down through budget cuts to just $8 million.

The church also is kicking in at least $5,000, in addition to volunteer labor. Students at the school will water and maintain the plants. The parking lot at St. Mary's was identified as a potential project during a study of the creek watershed that was commissioned by the Spa Creek Conservancy. It's large and therefore sends a significant amount of pollution to the creek.

Volunteers with the conservancy worked on the project with the St. Mary's environment committee, the Redemptorists who own the land and the folks who operate the historic Charles Carroll House next door, where one of the rain gardens will be located. There also were additional layers of approval because of the site's historic nature. Another complicating factor was that the church needed to make sure no parking spaces would be lost in the project.

Shepherding the project through all the approvals was Spa Creek Conservancy volunteer Mel Wilkins. He said that in urban cities and towns like Annapolis, doing these kind of "retrofits" is the best way to help the environment. The project at St. Mary's is one of several retrofits coordinated by Spa Creek Conservancy volunteers. Heritage Baptist Church on Forest Driver already has rain gardens, and projects are in the works with The Rockfish restaurant in Eastport and the St. Anne's Parish House up the street from St. Mary's.