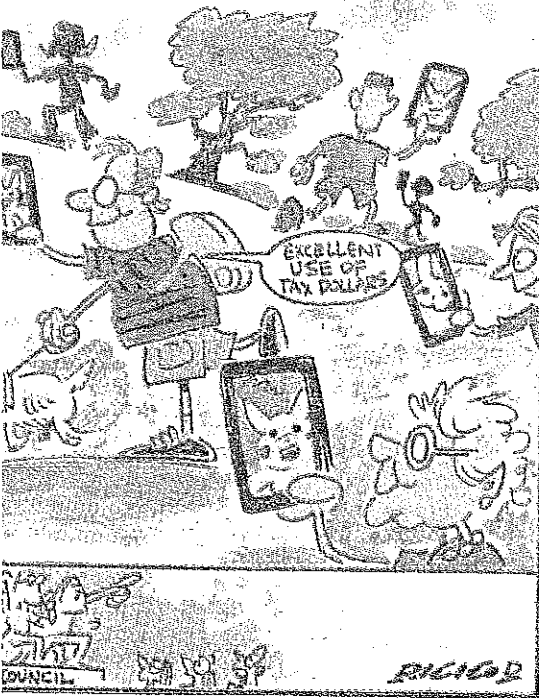


THE HARD WAY, THE HOWARD COUNTY SPENDING FROM THE SCHOOL BUDGET... ' EXPANSION...



MY WORD

A conservation project's positive trickle-down effect

Two years ago the Howard County Conservancy partnered with the Howard County Public School System to develop an environmental education program that would give high school students the opportunity for hands-on environmental science while also meeting the state-mandated environmental literacy graduation requirement.

We quickly saw this project, the Watershed Report Card, was a winner. Students are actively engaged, connections are made with social studies curriculum, elected officials and community leaders are involved, and students stay engaged, even after the school year ends.

The report card allows students to evaluate the biology, chemistry and physical aspects of a stream in their own sub-watershed. Students then assess their schoolyard for runoff, erosion, forest cover, invasive plants, nutrient inputs and contaminants, such as dumpster juice. They evaluate their data to assign a letter grade that is presented in person to county leaders through a comprehensive report card.

Student feedback on the program included, "We still need more data, but I learned countless facts about the health of the Patapsco," and "We learned about biodiversity and the impacts of certain factors on stream health."

More importantly, they formulated significant questions after their research was complete, including "What other animals are sensitive to pollution in streams?" and "Are there eco-friendly salt solutions besides road salt?" and "How does seasonality affect stream health?" These questions show us that students are interested and curious — they want to learn more. Teacher feedback was strongest on the value of giving students hands-on experience with real world issues and real world data. One teacher appreciated the opportunity to "show students science does not always end in the lab" and that students were able to "model the practices of professional scientists."

Perhaps one of the most significant developments from this project is a new stream survey tool, developed by our Howard County students in partnership with the state Department of Natural



Meg Boyd

Meg.boyd@hccconservancy.org

Resources.

Students raised questions about the first year's data, and wanted answers. By working with DNR, they were able to develop a tool that provides more accurate results on the biological health of streams. The tool is now used statewide by DNR's citizen science program, Stream Waders, which evaluates more than 100 streams. Howard County high school students have left an important mark on stream science in Maryland. Mary Weller,

coordinator of secondary science in county schools, noted that the students new stream tool "has actually improved science, and will help our community in protecting our environment for years to come."

Very important to this project was the engagement of students long after the classroom portion of their work ended. Glenelg, Oakland Mills, Reservoir and Mt. Hebron students stenciled their school's storm drains. River Hill High students removed invasive plants and Howard High students planted trees in their schoolyards. Long Reach High created a new cafeteria waste station. We are not only encouraging future scientists but are fostering a cadre of watershed steward for years to come.

Soon after the Howard County project began, we received requests from other counties to replicate the project. NOAA's Bay Watershed Education and Training grants also took notice, extending funding for an additional three years. U.S. Sen. Ben Cardin visited during a student stream study, and highlighted the student's work on the floor of the Senate. Maryland also took notice, providing two grants to expand the program's reach.

This year our local program rolls out statewide. Eleven counties have already registered to participate in our statewide effort. Student representatives from around Maryland will share their data and recommendations in May, 2017.

The Conservancy and county schools are leaving a mark on environmental education across the state of Maryland, while our students are becoming leaders in both science and stewardship.

Meg Boyd is executive director of Howard County Conservancy.

Relief for taxpayers with no children in school

I read with interest your stories regarding the Columbia Master Plan and specifically about providing affordable housing.

It's time to define "affordable housing." In Howard County, you have to dig, but eventually you find that a family of four can make almost \$80,000 per year and be eligible under the affordable housing guidelines. It is ridiculous that our super-high property taxes go to subsidize people making so much money.

Seventy-five percent of our property tax bill goes to education, but I have yet to hear about tax relief for those who have no children in public schools.

The high taxes drive older residents from their homes.

I guess then they can fit into the counties parameter of "affordable housing."

Ruth Taylor
Ellicott City