

A Tale of Two Universities:

How UW-Madison is helping and hurting our path to a cleaner Madison

An Op-Ed by Brent Denzin, Attorney and Equal Justice Works Fellow

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Next time it rains in Madison, you can grab your umbrella and witness two events that speak volumes about the declining water quality in Madison's lakes and rivers.

First, on Johnson Street, just behind the Educational Sciences Building, you can see UW-Madison's newly constructed porous pavement pilot project. On Friday, September 29th, 2006, UW-Madison's Physical Plant and Office of Transportation Services began the project to showcase porous pavement as a potential solution to our growing stormwater pollution problem. Stormwater runoff is currently the largest source of water pollution in Wisconsin. On average, street and parking lot runoff has a higher concentration of sediment, fecal coliform, and other key pollutants, than many of the industrial discharges that we strictly monitor. Sprawling big-box retail parking lots, like the ones that line the Beltline, can generate up to 600,000 gallons of polluted stormwater during a one inch rainstorm--16 times more runoff than the fields they replace.

According to EPA, porous pavement can absorb stormwater, recharge the groundwater, and help remove up to 95 percent of the sediment and 65 percent of the phosphorus that leaves our paved areas. Porous pavement has gained popularity throughout the U.S. (including recent projects in Philadelphia) and has been used in Europe for the last 20 years. Nonetheless, it is relatively new in Wisconsin and UW should be commended for pushing us in the right direction.

However, as you ponder this new approach to polluted runoff control, you should also consider that just blocks away--at UW's own Charter Street Heating Plant--our runoff problem is at its peak. The Charter Street Heating Plant annually stores roughly 125,000 tons of coal, tire-derived fuel and woodchips in piles outside the Plant. The only barrier between these large piles of coal, which range from 10,000-16,000 tons at any one time, and the neighboring student housing, bike path, and storm drains is a poorly constructed 1-2 foot wall and a chain link fence. Here, during routine rainstorms, you will likely witness the lowest in environmental protection that UW-Madison has to offer.

Due to the outdated design, the Charter Street Heating Plant spills a steady stream of black runoff down its driveway during most rainstorms. This dirty runoff flows across the bike path and sidewalks, into the curbside drains at the corner of Spring Street and Mills Street, and directly into Lake Monona. Like all of the storm sewer inlets that line Madison streets, this polluted runoff is untreated.

Ironically, the Charter Street Heating Plant is run by the same UW Department that is conducting the porous pavement study. While Plant managers say that the Plant was designed to drain coal pile runoff to a sanitary sewer facility for treatment, the Plant now stores and burns three times more coal than it did in 1970's when the drainage bowl was

built. In addition to the oversized pile, trucks track coal waste on to city streets and the train tracks outside the yard are saturated with coal dust.

The same University, same department; two drastically different approaches.

As Madison residents we should applaud UW for their innovative porous pavement project, while at the same time urge them to apply that same creativity to stop dirty coal water from leaving Charter Street Heating Plant.

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