Citizens League

Common ground. Common good.

Citizens League Action Group on Energy and the Environment

RAIN GARDEN PROJECT CHARTER

CITIZENS LEAGUE

Founded in 1952, the independent, non-partisan Citizens League is one of the nation's premier citizen-based "good government" organizations. The organization is distinguished by its pioneering process that involves citizens in studying public issues and developing policy solutions.

Based in Saint Paul, the Citizens League focuses on public policy issues at the local, metropolitan and state levels. Over the years, the Citizens League has been one of the most effective agents of change in Minnesota public policy. The Citizens League's impact can be seen in areas such as public finance, regional government, education, transportation and health care.

The 1,800 members of the Citizens League contribute their time and money not as agents of special interest groups or single-issue devotees, but as citizens who are concerned about the quality of life in Minnesota and the Twin Cities.

The Citizens League builds civic capacity in Minnesota by identifying, framing, and proposing solutions to public policy problems; developing new generations of civic leaders who govern for the common good; and organizing the individual and institutional relationships necessary to achieve these goals.

http://www.citizensleague.org/

ACTION GROUP ON ENERGY AND THE ENVIRONMENT

The Citizens League rallied up young individuals looking to get involved in their community and organized an action group around the broad topic of energy and the environment. The action group members include:

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Sean Skibbie (co-chair)	seanskibbie@yahoo.com
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CHARGE

The Citizens League charged our action group with the following tasks: Narrow our focus to a specific environmental question we can act on; do research to learn about the question; make a recommendation on how to answer the question; and put that recommendation into place.

QUESTION

How can we reduce the amount of polluted storm-water runoff that enters our local lakes, streams, and rivers?

PROBLEM: Polluted storm-water runoff

Polluted storm-water runoff is a big problem in urban areas, where it is difficult for storm-water to soak into the earth's surface. Rainwater flows faster over paved and compacted surfaces, allowing it to pick up pollutants such as litter, organic particles, pesticides, fertilizers, gas and oil, and other residue before entering the storm-water drains. This polluted water then finds its way into our lakes, streams, and rivers. In Minneapolis and Saint Paul, our storm-water drains into our surface waters (lakes, streams, etc.), eventually ending up in the Mississippi River, with little or no filtration.

SOLUTION: Rain gardens

Rain gardens are native plant gardens designed to collect rain water from impervious surfaces (roads, sidewalks, or roofs) to infiltrate, filter, and evaporate the runoff, thereby reducing the amount of storm-water (and accompanying pollutants) from entering our streams, lakes, and rivers. Rain gardens are strategically placed in shallow depressions in the ground so that the plants act as a sponge to draw water into the soil. Native prairie plants are ideal for rain gardens because they are hardy and deep-rooted. The middle of the rain garden will hold water during a heavy rain, so the runoff can gradually soak into the ground, rather than running off into storm drains. Compared to a patch of conventional lawn, a rain garden allows about 30 percent more water to soak into the ground. Each rain garden may seem small, but collectively they produce substantial neighborhood and regional environmental benefits.

The benefits of installing rain gardens include the following:

- Reduce polluted runoff from washing off into storm sewers, and eventually into nearby streams and lakes
- Help replenish our groundwater supply

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- Improve the water quality of our lakes, streams, and rivers
- Help protect streams and lakes by reducing the flow of water
- Provide valuable wildlife habitat
- Reduce bank and shoreline damage where storm drains empty into streams and lakes
- Reduce the need for costly municipal storm water treatment structures
- Help protect communities from flooding and drainage problems
- Enhance the beauty of yards and neighborhoods

In addition, a rain garden project can serve as a good hands-on learning experience for school children.

MISSION

To improve water quality, while educating students about environmental issues and raising environmental consciousness, through the installation of rain gardens built in collaboration with educators, students, and other community members.

ACTION

Work in collaboration with local schools and other partners (e.g., Public Achievement, colleges, community organizations) to involve students in the installation of rain gardens at their schools (or other appropriate sites).

STEPS

- Identify interested schools and obtain their commitment to the project
- Consult with school personnel to determine roles and expectations
- Determine best location for rain garden (based on soil type, location, grading, partnerships, etc.)
- Consult with school personnel and education experts to develop education component (will depend on grade levels and school needs)
- Consult with environmental experts to design the rain garden (and involve students in the design to the extent possible)
- Install rain garden with help of volunteers and students

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VISION

We hope that our project will have a double impact. First, the rain gardens will have an environmental impact by reducing the amount of polluted storm-water runoff that reaches our lakes and streams. Second, the school children will learn valuable lessons from participating in this hands-on learning experience. In particular, we hope the experience will:

- help increase students' awareness of environmental impacts and consequences
- help develop students' sense of environmental and civic consciousness and responsibility
- empower the students to realize that small efforts on their part, combined with others, can make a big difference
- equip students with skills and knowledge they can take home to share with their families, inspiring some students to install rain gardens at home or to consider other environmentally friendly practices

In addition, the environmental and educational benefits can continue, as future cohorts of school children are involved in the maintenance of the rain gardens (although maintenance is low once plants are mature).

We believe that this small project, through its contributions to the environmental education of children, will foster ongoing environmental benefits produced by the children in the future.

SUPPORT

Financial support:

- This initiative is made possible with a $2500 grant from the Comcast Foundation to the Citizens League for youth organizing.
- If additional funding is needed, we plan to seek grants from our local watershed districts and other environmental organizations.

In-kind support (contributions of supplies and equipment):

- Applied Ecological Services is planning to donate plants.
- We will seek support from construction and landscape companies in lending equipment.
- We will seek support from citizens, parents, and nonprofit organizations in lending tools.

Providing advice:

- We are working in consultation with environmental and educational experts.

Providing labor:

- The rain gardens will be built with the help of the Citizens League Action Group members, Public Achievement leaders, students, and other volunteers.