

Development in My Backdoor

The following information was provided by Don Wauthier's-Berns, Clancy, and Associates,- presentation at the IADD Annual Conference.

Every single minute of every day, America loses two acres of farmland. Illinois ranks 5th for losing the most prime farmland. These statistics are not very shocking to residents of rural America. What once was the World's Best soil intended to feed the world is drastically being swallowed up by developers. We are now suddenly growing concrete.

In the 1800s, farmers dug man-made ditches for the sole purpose of turning unproductive swampland into lush, fertile farm ground. The same valuable farmland generations of agriculture producers have farmed to earn a living and feed the world.

Our ancestors understood that drainage is an essential utility. These man-made ditches today serve the same purpose of draining storm runoff as they have for centuries. The only difference is some ditches drain acres of farmland and others drain miles of concrete.

A common water barrier most districts are facing is outdated drainage systems never intended to handle urban runoff. Development in general can create numerous problems for adjacent landowners, drainage districts, and the entire watershed.

- Stormwater from developed areas can cause downstream flooding.
- Inadequate drainage outlets can hinder "REASONABLE" development.
- Erosion during development can result in downstream sedimentation
- Field tile that drain adjacent farmland can be damaged by development
- Increase costs for drainage maintenance to the landowner and/or district
- Drainage channels can be disturbed or obstructed by development and may be unsafe for an urban setting.
- Access easements for channel maintenance can be obstructed by development.
- Urban development in floodplains can result in flooded buildings and hazards to life and property.

A highly debated issue on all levels of government is stormwater and urban development. In order to communicate with community leaders on the importance of drainage and controlled development, it is essential for drainage commissioners and landowners to participate in the Development Review Process. At the IADD Annual Conference, Don Wauthier, from the engineering firm Berns, Clancy, and Associates, walked attendees through the Development Review Process and provided insightful information on educating local officials.

Wauthier warns the Development Review Process is a stacked deck. The developer is proposing a multi-million dollar investment to projects; the city and/or county have an economic interest in promoting growth; Political influence always is a key factor; and urban dwellers have much different ideas about development impacts. In addition, it is important to recognize that city/county staffs are not drainage specialists.

It is essential to monitor development projects in your local area closely. Commissioners are encouraged to track local zoning committees, stormwater committees, or perhaps flooding committees for the county and municipalities. Some smaller towns conduct all business in village meetings. No matter the size of the municipalities, the minutes must be recorded. Local papers and website are good source to monitor action.

Once face with a development project within your district's boundaries, Commissioners must be Proactive not Reactive. During any the process, it is essential to understand that facts and documentation is the deciding factor not emotions.

Wauthier offers these Proactive steps to address impacts upon Drainage Districts:

- Gather Easement and Right-of-Way Data
- Update and Document Easement and Right-of-Way Data
- Obtain Court Reaffirmation of Easement/ Right-of-Way
- Record Easement / Right-of-Way
- Gather Historical Records and Documents
- Inventory Condition of Facilities
- Prepare Current Maps
- Update Assessment Rolls / Increase Collections if necessary
- Adopt Development Regulations
- Annex Benefited Lands

In summary, all commissioners and landowners in a Drainage District recognize that drainage is imperative. Unfortunately it is probably the most taken for granted utility. Elected Officials will be quick to make deals with developers to increase economic growth. It not uncommon for officials to waive several drainage structures necessary to control stormwater effectively. In addition smaller community leaders do not recognize, as state in the Illinois Drainage Code, that no one can connect or disconnect to drainage district's outlets and/or adjacent landowners' outlets without permission.

Even if you are not facing development in your area, it is essential to educate the community and especially elected officials on the importance of good drainage. A Drainage District can choose to pass a Development Ordinances, Resolutions, or clear protocol for development activities within the district's boundaries.

Frustration in the development process is a common. The Development Process is very complicated and networking with other commissioners and drainage experts at IADD Educational Meetings may place you on the fast track. Be a Vigilante in monitoring development activities. As a Drainage Commissioner, you are the best expert on the water flow of the land. So do not be fearful to participate in the process. Finally, build community relationships and learn how to "Deal Yourself In" to the Development game.