

"Federation Corner" column
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Debunking the Chesapeake Bay dichotomy of environment versus economy

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The zeitgeist prevailing at all levels of government and public policy dictates that we can either have a healthy economy or a healthy environment.

This false dichotomy got us a Chesapeake Bay that is on life support, yet the nation's largest estuary could still be the Free State's goose that lays the golden eggs. When the white people came... there were sturgeon up to 14 feet long, and oyster reefs stretched for miles. Until the early 20th century, local bars would serve caviar instead of peanuts. Closer to home, herring came to spawn in Sligo and Rock Creeks just a hundred years ago. Alas, instead of a vibrant breadbasket, the Bay is a dump - recent study found oyster population, a keystone species, down 99.7 percent since 1980, and we now learn that much blue crab and shrimp sold as "Maryland" are actually outsourced from Louisiana and Vietnam among other places.

Does it have to be that way? Some folks came together and put an economic value on the Bay--one trillion dollars. Mind you, that's the present value, with the Bay flat-lining. So what would the Chesapeake Bay be worth if it was restored? The oyster harvest in recent years provided a meager \$15 million to the economy annually. What if we got it back to just 10 percent of the 1980 level? That could be \$450 million per year from oysters alone--just one of the Bay's countless living organisms. What if you add all of them up? How much does a pound of sturgeon caviar go for these days? We are talking about countless billion a year in revenue here. Just think of all the sustainable jobs... that cannot be outsourced! Surely progress is not only possible, but also profitable!

Of course, at this point, progress will take billions in investment and a generation of human effort, which makes it that much more important to start in earnest as soon as possible. With the planet's fish stocks in collapse, restoring ecosystem productivity in the Bay--an exclusive U.S. economic zone for fishing purposes--is a matter of food, economic, and national security. So how do we save the Bay?

Factory-farmed poultry is a huge culprit in the Bay's decline - just three companies produce two thirds of the nation's chicken, so it's a matter of accumulating the political power to regulate them into at least a semblance of accountability. Actually enforcing the Critical Areas Act of 1984 would also go a long way. Much of the damage has been done already, with the Bay's fragile shoreline developed to the hilt with million-dollar mansions, yet there are remediation steps that could still be mandated to reverse at least some of the damage.

What about Montgomery County's role in the fate of the Bay? Surely we don't have any factory farms or beachfront properties! A largely urbanized County, our biggest contribution to the problem is stormwater - the largest growing source of pollution in the Bay. As with most of these problems, solutions are available, and it is just a matter of economic vision and the political will to implement them. Specifically, a suite of vegetated Low Impact Development technologies has been created to combat stormwater at the source--green roofs, green walls, rain gardens, and bioswales that capture, slow down, and retain stormwater runoff from otherwise impervious surfaces like buildings, roads, and parking lots.

Better yet, all these vegetated technologies have ancillary benefits: improved air quality, increased green space and wildlife habitat, lower urban heat island effect, lower energy and infrastructure costs, lower heating and cooling costs, lower maintenance costs, higher property prices, higher leasing rates, and

yes... jobs, jobs, jobs! In Germany, for example, which is roughly the size of Montana, some municipalities have been mandating green roofs on all new construction for close to sixty (60) years now. Fast-forward to the 21st century--over 10 percent of all flat roofs in Germany are now vegetated, annual green roof goals are measured in square kilometers, and thousands of good-paying sustainable jobs are created in the process.

So why can't this economic boom happen in Maryland? The Legislature passed the Stormwater Management Act of 2007, which mandates all new construction to implement Environmental Site Design to the maximum extent practicable--our local version of the LID technology suite. So where are all the green roofs and rain gardens, you ask? Once again, the political will to properly enforce this law is lacking, and the Free State is falling further and further behind economic competitors like Germany, instead of creating sustainable jobs and saving the Bay at the same time!

Facing the Chesapeake Bay's stark reality and hopeful promise, what will it take to muster the political will to revive the goose that lays the golden eggs?

The views expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect formal positions adopted by the Federation. To submit an 800-1000 word column for consideration, send as an email attachment to the montgomerycivic@yahoo.com