

Rainwater harvesting can save residents money

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An eco-friendly water collection system that can save you money and protect Victoria's water supply will be unveiled Sunday.

The Victoria County Groundwater Conservation District unanimously approved a \$3,800 grant Friday that will do more than just reimburse the group that asked for it.

The grant, which reimburses the Victoria County Master Gardeners Association for an installed rainwater harvesting system, is a key step in the groundwater district's plan to promote conservation and public water education.

"Any use of rainwater is non-use of groundwater or surface water," Garrett Engelking, general manager of the water district, said during its regular meeting Friday. "I think it's an excellent opportunity to demonstrate this system to the public."

The system is a series of gutters, piping and two 3,000-gallon tanks that captures rainwater. It's estimated the Master Gardeners will harvest about 72,000 gallons of water a year, enough to nourish its 19 educational gardens.

Those gardens - the Victoria Educational Gardens, at 333 Bachelor Drive near Victoria Regional Airport - will be unveiled to the public at 2 p.m. Sunday during a ceremony open to everyone.

"Anything that can be done, particularly at the airport as it presently exists, is a great idea," said Victoria County Judge Don Pozzi, an audience member. He added that the rainwater-harvesting system helps complement an aging water and sewer system at the airport.

Since the rainwater system is gravity driven, it doesn't require electricity, which translates into zero energy costs and ozone pollution.

"These little things add up," Jerry James, Victoria's director of environmental services, said.

If others in Victoria County follow suit - one Victoria County Extension agent hopes that up to 25 percent of the population will within five years - savings to energy costs and traditional water usage could mount quickly.

"By not using treated municipal water, you're decreasing costs," Englelking said,

It's unknown just how much money the Master Gardeners will save over time. It depends on rainfall amounts and how often they're forced to use municipal water. Similarly, residential savings differ depending on rainfall levels and the type of harvesting systems installed.

Engelking added, though, that the Master Gardeners will also save on rising fertilizer costs since rainwater already contains nitrogen and phosphorous, natural fertilizers.

"We're hoping this will catch on in the county," said Blanche DeLeon, the grant writer and a Master Gardener intern, who repeatedly thanked the district for its support.

It is estimated that 1,000 to 1,500 students tour the gardens yearly - in addition to countless adults - proponents are hoping users of the rainwater system will spike.

At least two homes in Refugio County that have implemented whole house rainwater harvesting systems, which collect and filter rainwater to be used for drinking, bathing, flushing and landscaping, Engelking said.

MORE WATER EDUCATION

As a supplement to the groundwater district's public education initiative, it also updated the crowd about a \$5,000 grant approved months ago to fund the schooling of area teachers - 18 from Victoria schools and one from Faith Academy, to name just a few.

The teachers will be taught about water during various field trips to water treatment plants and other areas, and then be given curriculum to pass on to students.

A hiring freeze

The district tabled discussions about hiring a full-time field technician who would be charged with regularly collecting data from county wells, as well as maintaining a county weather station.

Debate surfaced about the technician's salary, which was proposed at \$30,000 a year, not including fringe benefits, gasoline reimbursement and upkeep for the weather station.

The total cost could be equally divided between Victoria and Refugio counties, as well as Bee County if it opts in next week during its regular meeting - thus dropping costs to each district to \$13,000 yearly.

Goliad County's water district opted out of the joint effort, instead deciding to collect the data from within, Engelking said.

The data collected by this technician would give district members detailed information about water levels during different seasons and add to a database collected by the Texas Water Development Board.

While some district members questioned \$30,000 salary, others said a qualified technician couldn't be hired for anything less. Since Engelking said the district has until August to hire somebody, other options will be reviewed.