

HOWARD COUNTY

Key Facts

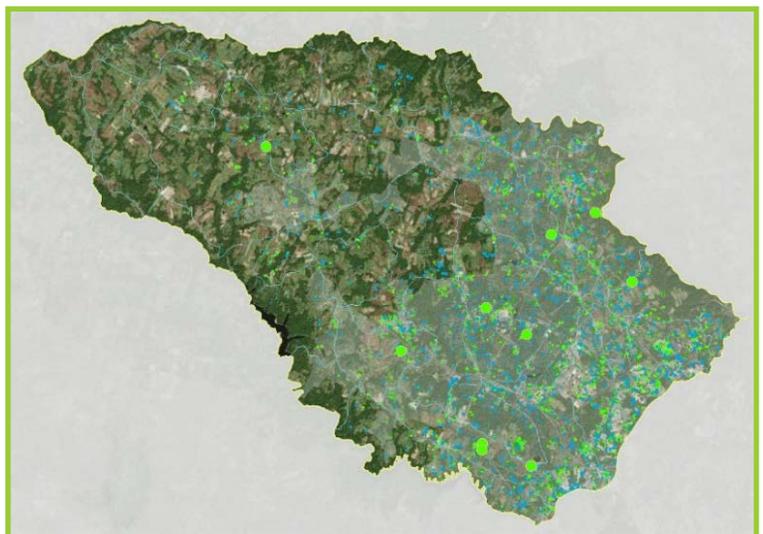
Population¹	309,284	(6 th of 10)
Impervious Acreage²	11,310	(6 th of 10)
Current Permit		
Date of Issuance/Expiration	Dec 2014 / Dec 2019	
Impervious Acreage Restoration Goal	2,044 acres	
Spending		
Projected Annual Average ³	\$26.1 million	
Spending as a Percentage of County Budget ⁴	1.4%	(4 th of 10)
Spending as a Percentage of Median Household Income ⁵	0.21%	(5 th of 10)
Average Annual Residential Fee	\$45	

Summary of County Stormwater Plan and Effort

Summary: Howard County's plans to comply with its stormwater permit demonstrate a good faith effort to commit significant resources to improving local water quality. However, the specific restoration strategy provided by the county's recently submitted Financial Assurance Plan (FAP) might raise a few questions. Unless the county changes course, it appears that Howard County could become a grand experiment on the relative value and efficacy of stream restoration projects as a means to address the impact of polluted urban runoff. According to the FAP, the county plans to achieve a significant majority of its pollution reduction goals in its current five-year stormwater permit through these restoration projects, which is unique among the 10 jurisdictions in Maryland subject to these requirements.

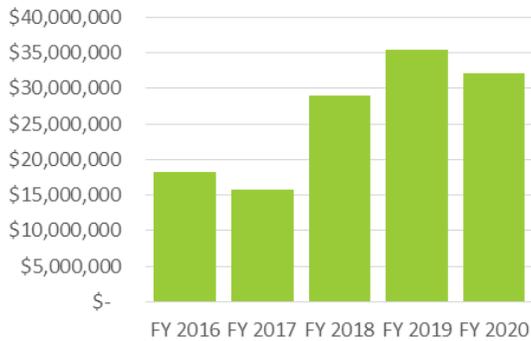
Basics: Howard County received its current stormwater permit under the Clean Water Act by the Maryland Department of the Environment (MDE) on December 18, 2014. This permit requires, among other things, that the county restore 20 percent of the untreated impervious surfaces within its municipal separate storm sewer system (MS4) by the end of the five-year permit term, expiring in December 2019. According to the county, its MS4 system contained 11,310 acres of untreated impervious surfaces, of which 2,044 acres (20 percent) must be restored. Very few capital projects to treat impervious surfaces have been completed to date under the current permit.

Level of Effort: Howard County has wisely chosen to retain its stormwater remediation fee, which is relatively modest compared to most stormwater utility fees in the United States, but which provides a very steady and reliable source of dedicated funding for the county's stormwater and watershed restoration efforts. Like most of the other nine Maryland jurisdictions, however, Howard County seeks to raise a majority of funds for these water quality improvement projects from funding sources other than its fee, such as general obligation bonds or bonds backed by the fee – a reasonable strategy given that Howard County enjoys very low borrowing costs thanks to its top notch bond rating.



Urban areas are shown in light gray shading.
Sub-watersheds are delineated with light blue lines.
Completed impervious surface and watershed restoration projects are shown in bright green.

Restoration Spending



In most years between 2015 and 2020, Howard County plans to spend between \$20 and \$40 million on stormwater and watershed restoration projects, with two-thirds to three-quarters of the funds coming from the county’s capital budget. This spending, which is detailed in the recently submitted county FAP and the county’s latest six-year Capital Improvement Program, represents a relatively robust commitment of resources. For example, the county’s average annual impervious surface restoration spending reflected in its FAP ranks 4th (out of 10 counties) on a per capita basis and as a percentage of the county’s overall budget, and 5th as a percentage of county median household income. Additionally, the projected spending plan in the FAP ranks 2nd highest in terms of spending per impervious acre.

The relatively high level of projected spending per acre likely reflects the county’s capital-intensive restoration strategy for meeting its stormwater permit obligations, generally avoiding some of the low value alternative permit compliance practices and accounting gimmicks that some other jurisdictions have decided to focus on. Indeed, Howard County projects the highest per capita spending on stormwater permit compliance in its capital budget among the 10 counties and ranks fourth in terms of the percentage of the county’s overall capital budget dedicated to stormwater and watershed restoration work.

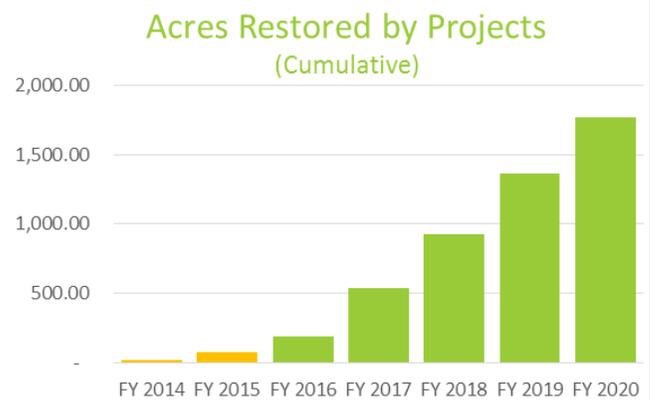
Restoration Strategy: As noted, Howard County’s stormwater and watershed restoration plans reflect a robust commitment of resources and significant level of capital investment in water quality, public health, and local construction and engineering jobs. But although the county has demonstrated a strong fiscal commitment to water quality, the specific mix of stormwater and other alternative watershed restoration projects identified in the FAP should raise some questions. In particular, Howard County’s strategy relies on one type of project – stream restoration – to a far greater extent than any of the other nine jurisdictions subject to the same stormwater laws in Maryland. While stream restoration projects are an essential tool for restoring many watersheds, they do nothing to reduce the volume of polluted runoff from a storm sewer system that finds its way to local waterways.

Moreover, the county is spending so much on stream restoration that it could have the effect of crowding out other forms of traditionally accepted stormwater projects, which allow rainwater and snow melt to infiltrate into the ground and filter out harmful nutrients, sediment, and toxic substances instead of ending up as polluted runoff to neighborhood creeks. Like any investment strategy, there is always risk in relying too much on any one particular option.

One other minor issue with the plan that Howard County included in its FAP is that it appears to be planning to undertake significant efforts in the final year of its permit to pump out septic systems in the county. There is certainly some value to providing septic pumping services, but this practice does nothing to mitigate the impact of polluted urban runoff from stormwater and carries none of the environmental, health, or economic benefits of investments as innovative stormwater projects designed to treat or eliminate impervious surfaces. The county should explore whether to fill any projected gaps needed to comply with its stormwater permit with more high-impact and high-value stormwater projects and keep its septic system pollution reduction efforts as part of a separate program.

Notes

- ¹July 2014 Estimate, Maryland Department of Planning
- ²MS4 Annual Report and Financial Assurance Plan (FAP)
- ³FAP
- ⁴Uniform Financial Reporting for Fiscal 2013 and FAP
- ⁵U.S. Census and FAP



For More Information
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