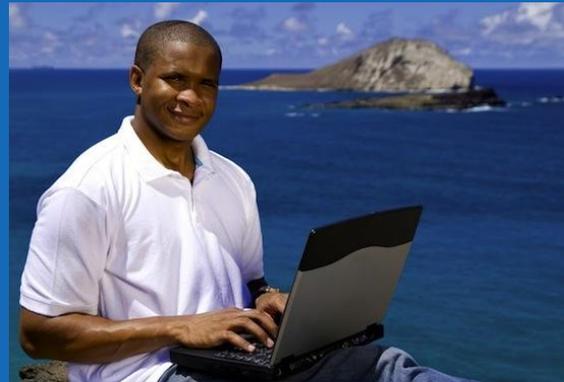




**WATER WORDS
THAT WORK**

Make a splash with your communications!



RiverSmart Homes Research Final Report
Prepared For the District Department of the Environment
June 24, 2015

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Introduction

The District Department of the Environment's RiverSmart Homes program improves water quality within city limits and downstream by helping residents install stormwater BMPs on their property. The program is highly successful – more than 6,500 participating households have participated. New applicants find themselves on a two or three month waiting list.

In August 2014, Water Words That Work LLC received a technical assistance grant from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation to research the program. We had two goals:

- Identify opportunities for improvement for RiverSmart Homes
- Learn what elements of RiverSmart Homes are most important for others to replicate

Between August 2014 and June 2015, Water Words and the District Department of the Environment interviewed, surveyed, and data mined the participating households. Along the way, we have presented DDOE with a series of in-depth reports on our findings.

This memo closes out our engagement. It summarizes the highlights of all the research, and organizes some of the observations into the conceptual model preferred by National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and the Chesapeake Bay Trust. This will help DDOE should it choose seek funds from either of these grantmakers to implement any of our recommendations.

Step 1: Overview

Program Purpose

The RiverSmart Homes program improves water quality within city limits and downstream by helping residents install stormwater BMPs on their property. DDOE and Water Words That Work LLC designed our investigation to uncover answers to four key questions about past and future participants. Here are the questions and a brief summary of what we found:

What motivates people to participate?

By and large, RiverSmart Homes participants are motivated by a desire to “make a difference” for the environment generally, or water in particular. However -- few volunteered the Chesapeake Bay specifically as a reason for signing up. Participants clearly enjoyed the opportunity to use their BMP as a conversation piece with visitors, and we believe that this accounts for the popularity of the “yard sign” option.

Only a minority of participants offered more concrete benefits – such as improved drainage, shade, etc.

For these reasons, we encourage DDOE to tout the full range of both emotional and practical benefits in its material and presentations. We believe that photos of backyard BBQs and cocktail parties with a RiverSmart Homes yard sign clearly visible would be particularly effective.

We encourage DDOE to stress environmental benefits in local and abstract terms more heavily than the Chesapeake Bay specifically. Many District of Columbia residents have no personal experience and little emotional connection to the Bay.

Once they've participated, are they using/maintaining the project they had installed?

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Yes. RiverSmart Homes participants are proud of their BMPs and are diligent about taking care of them. They love to show them off to visitors. They want them to look nice and work properly.

However, many lack confidence in their ability to care for their BayScapes and rain gardens. Here are just a few of the issues participants raised:

- Distinguishing between desirable natives and weeds
- Knowing what to expect from their plants across the seasons
- Finding replacement plants when the ones they have die

Once they've participated, are they installing additional projects on their own? If so, how often?

Not very often. Only about 1 out of 5 RiverSmart Homes participants have taken additional measures on their own after their assistance from DDOE wrapped up. There are two primary reasons for this:

- Many participants feel they have done all they can do on their property in the first round of work with DDOE
- Many participants still lack confidence in their ability to select appropriate native plants without consulting someone more knowledgeable

Although this is contrary to the principle that repeat customers are the best customers, our research suggests that DDOE may have more success reaching out to first time homeowners than going back to past participants for another round.

Our research also found that there are many more homeowners -- in all corners of the district -- who are likely to be receptive to the opportunity.

Once they've participated, have they learned more about stormwater and its effects on local streams and the community?

Absolutely. But the key issue for DDOE to consider is that most do *NOT* feel that they have learned enough about selection and care of native plants to care for them without assistance or select additional plants without consulting someone more knowledgeable.

Step 2: Target Audience

Approximately 6,500 homes – less than 2.5% of the households in the District – have participated in the RiverSmart Homes project to date. This suggests that participating households are still “early adopters” for the most part.

We learned a great deal about these households, both from what they told us directly and what our data mining partners was able to uncover. According to our research, RiverSmart Homes participants largely represent a tight cluster of shared demographic and lifestyle traits. Not surprisingly, a strong interest in the environment is one of those traits. But others that are less obvious include:

- High likelihood to be charitable donors
- High degree of financial stability
- Mid priced (for the District) homes
- Likely to be foodies

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One of our deliverables for this project is a list of 50,000 households – 20% of the total households in the District - whose demographic and lifestyle habits most closely resemble the households who have already participated. This list will be very useful to you if you need to proactively promote RiverSmart Homes in specific sub watersheds.

One caveat – the quality of this information will steadily degrade as individuals on the list move, age, or pass away. If you wait more than three years to use this list, we would encourage you to contact us for a fresh one.

Step 3: Desired Behavior

RiverSmart Homes assists residents with the following behaviors:

- Creating rain gardens
- Installing rain barrels,
- Planting native landscaping
- Installing pervious pavement,
- Planting trees

Although all of these BMPs have a similar focus – reducing stormwater volume and improving stormwater quality – we believe these behaviors can be subcategorized as follows:

- Living BMPs – rain gardens, trees, and native landscapes
- Material BMPs – pervious pavement and rain barrels

The target audience will perceive the benefits and barriers of BMPs in these two categories differently. E.G. Rain barrels don't attract wildlife and native plants won't burst if they are left full of water in the winter.

Step 4: Benefits and Barriers

Barriers

Lack of knowledge is the first barrier that prevents households from doing their part to control polluted runoff. All of the RiverSmart Homes participants have overcome this barrier. But even once a homeowner understands that they have options to prevent water pollution right in their own backyard, the remaining barriers are still high:

Perceived Barriers of Living BMPs:

- **Knowledge:** It's one thing to understand how what causes stormwater and how this contributes to water pollution. It's another entirely to know what types of natives plants are appropriate for the property, where to get them, or how to care for them
- **Skill & Equipment:** It's no small matter to find the right spot for a big hole, dig it, and dispose of the dirt. Once the plants are in the ground, what care do they require?
- **Cost:** Buying and renting equipment, and purchasing appropriate plants have significant costs. Even more importantly, inexperienced homeowners may *perceive* the costs to be higher than they are and feel disinclined to investigate.

Perceived Barriers of Material BMPs

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- **Knowledge:** It's one thing to understand how what causes stormwater and how this contributes to water pollution. It's another entirely to know how to match a rain barrel to roof size or know what alternatives to asphalt and concrete might work on a property.
- **Skill & Equipment:** It's no small matter to cut open a gutter or tear out asphalt.
- **Cost:** Buying and renting materials and equipment have significant costs. Even more importantly, inexperienced homeowners may *perceive* the costs to be higher than they are and feel disinclined to investigate.

We believe that the success of RiverSmart Homes is due to the high degree of customer service to help individual homeowners select appropriate BMPs and get them installed. *The personalized assistance and handholding is somewhat more important than the cost share* -- although the cost share component is also indispensable.

These barriers are stubborn. Even after working with the RiverSmart Homes program to plant natives in one part of their property, many homeowners would be nervous about selecting plants for another part of their yard without assistance. A homeowner who worked with DDOE to replace their driveway is still likely to feel butterflies in their stomach about cutting open their gutter.

On a more positive note, we found no evidence that concern about others' perceptions ("What would my neighbors say about that ugly rain barrel?") to be a barrier for the participating homeowners. On the contrary, we found that participating homeowners prized their BMPs as conversation pieces and were eager to show them off. That might be different in suburban areas where HOA rules may dictate landscaping choices and manicured lawns are prized.

Benefits

By and large, RiverSmart Homes participants are motivated by a desire to "make a difference" for the environment generally, or water in particular. However -- few volunteered the Chesapeake Bay specifically as a reason for signing up. Participants clearly enjoyed the opportunity to use their BMP as a conversation piece with visitors, and we believe that this accounts for the popularity of the "yard sign" option.

Only a minority of participants offered more concrete benefits -- such as attracting wildlife, improved drainage, shade, etc.

Perceived Benefits of Living BMPs

- "Makes a difference"
- Conversation Piece
- Attractive at certain times of the year
- Attracts wildlife
- Doesn't require watering or fertilizer once established

Perceived Benefits of Material BMPs

- "Makes a difference"
- Conversation Piece
- Upgrade from worn out or cracked asphalt/concrete (pervious pavers)
- Ready source of "organic" water (rain barrels)
- Easy to maintain

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None of our homeowners framed the benefits to themselves using regulatory or policy language: WIPS, TMDLs, consent decrees, etc. You have done a good job keeping that type of jargon out of your communications with homeowners and we encourage you to continue that.

We have often seen conservationists tout native plants and landscaping as “low maintenance,” as they generally don’t require watering or fertilizer. We think the jury is out on that whether that is a credible benefit to tout. The homeowners who participated in this study expressed more anxiety about their native plants than their ornamentals. They can get personal advice and replacement ornamentals at Home Depot or any other lawn and garden retailer. With the native plants, they feel like they are on their own.

One benefit that participating homeowners clearly want is a credit on their stormwater utility fee. However, more than a few homeowners reported that they had a hard time claiming that credit for the RiverSmart Homes BMP and would appreciate some assistance with that.

Step 5: Positioning Statement

We would recommend the following positioning statement:

“We want District of Columbia residents to see a RiverSmart Homes sign in a yard as the mark of a responsible, forward thinking, and upwardly mobile homeowner.”

Step 6: The Four “Ps”

Everyone who has taken an “Introduction to Marketing” program has learned about the “Four Ps” marketing mix. It takes some creativity and non-literal thinking to conceptualize a social marketing effort using these labels, but NFWF and CBT prefer it. So here we go!

Product

In your case, the “product” is really a “service.” Onsite consultations, recommendations, and installation of stormwater BMPs. The only real areas of dissatisfaction that participating homeowners voiced with your product are:

- Homeowners sometimes have to wait a while to get the service they expect
- Sometimes there is some miscommunication between DDOE, homeowners, and the contactors

We are convinced that a high degree of personal attention is one of the keys to your success. However, we think that there may be room for you to offer some of this attention remotely, rather than on the property. Could you serve more homes with the same amount of resources if you:

- Conducted the intake calls with homeowners on the phone – while examining the property using Google Maps, Zillow, USGS soil and topographical maps, and other online resources.
- Had homeowners use their smart phones to email you photos and video of potential BMP sites

Price

By any measure, the price for homeowners to participate is low. Participating homeowners do pay a (very modest) amount for the services they receive from the RiverSmart Homes program. Our research suggests that this generous cost share you offer is important. Even more importantly, you offer the cost share upfront -- rather than making it conditional upon a successful installation.

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But in this conceptual model, the “price” also refers to anything else the homeowner may feel they forgo to participate. And we didn’t really come across any. We did *not* have many reports from participating homeowners about:

- Lost time raking leaves or caring for native plants
- Usable yard space lost to BMPs
- Inferiority of pervious pavers to traditional asphalt and concrete
- Etc.

Place

In a traditional commercial marketing context, the “place” might be a retail store, a telephone order, an online store, etc. It refers to the location where the transaction is conducted.

For the RiverSmart Homes program, we have little to say about place. Homeowners apply for and receive your assistance at their homes. We don’t see any reason to change this. However – it may not be 100% necessary for DDOE staff and contractors to be onsite with the homeowners. It may be possible to stretch your limited staff resources by:

- Offering “virtual” consultations where DDOE staff and contractors examine the property using Google Earth, Zillow, Skype, smart phones, etc.
- Offering virtual post-installation workshops on native plant care and weed identification
- Creating online communities where RiverSmart Homes participants can meet and swap tips amongst themselves (perhaps with an occasional word from the professionals)
- Etc.

Promotion

The RiverSmart Homes program relies almost entirely on word-of-mouth to find participating households. Given that the program has a two or three month waiting list, we understand that DDOE staff feel little urgency to experiment with other methods. Here are three promotional opportunities that emerged from the pack for future consideration:

- **Yard Signs.** Participating households were eager to have a small, tasteful sign they could place in their yards beside their project. These signs would invite visitors to inquire about the project and create more opportunities for word-of-mouth to occur.
- **Testimonials.** Many of the participating households reported they would be willing to speak up on the program’s behalf at neighborhood meetings, or to allow prospective participants to tour their properties to see the work that has been done.
- **Promising Households.** We have provided DDOE with a list of 50,000 households – approximately 20% of the households in the District – that our data mining vendor believe most closely match your participating households. We believe you will experience higher rates of success mailing, calling, and distributing door hangers to these households than you would with District population at large.
- **Neighborhood Listservs.** The District has a strong and somewhat unique culture of neighborhood email lists and social media groups. In our research, participating households indicated they thought this would be one of the most promising ways to promote the program.