

Protecting the Schuylkill River, I drain at a time

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It's hard to miss the explosions of color that appeared recently on the otherwise-drab sidewalk outside the Berks County government complex in Reading.

The pair of environmental-sustainability-themed murals — sidewalk decals affixed near storm drains a block apart along Court Street — aren't there just to be seen.

While the hope is the designs will catch people's attention, the main goal is to get people to consider where the drains lead and think twice about chucking a cigarette butt, dog droppings or other waste through the grate.

"We really hope that it makes them think about how they can help their neighborhood, what effect they have on water quality," said Shannon L. Rossman, executive director of the Berks County Planning Commission.

The decals were installed as part of an educational campaign organized by the commission and the Schuylkill Action Network, a coalition of government agencies, nonprofits and other entities that promotes improving the quality of the Schuylkill River.

The network held a student art contest earlier this year to solicit designs for decals to be installed in Berks, Chester, Montgomery and Schuylkill counties. The mural for Berks was designed by Marley Lopez, a home-schooled eighth-grader from Reading.

The decals are expected to last for at least a year.

Educational outreach is one of the



COURTESY OF BERKS COUNTY PLANNING COMMISSION

Representatives from the Berks County Planning Commission and Schuylkill Action Network installed these sidewalk decals outside the Berks County Services Center. They are, from left, Ashley Showers, a Berks County planner; and Kaitlin Tucker, Virginia Vassalotti and Michelle Knoll of the Schuylkill Action Network.

requirements of a state permit; local governments must obtain for dealing with stormwater. But local officials said the broader aim is to help people better understand how storm drains work and the consequences of polluting them.

Drains in Reading flow straight into the Schuylkill River. So any debris, litter or chemicals that go through the grate either clog the drain or end up in the river. What happens to the river in Reading affects drinking water in Pottstown and Philadelphia. Like

wise, what happens to the river in Schuylkill County and northern Berks affects Reading's drinking water.

"We want them to make the connection," said Ashley Showers, a Berks planner who works with local governments to manage stormwater.

And water pollution affects not just water quality but also taxpayers' wallets, Rossman said. The more polluted a drinking water supply, the more expensive it is to treat.

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