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## Nashville flood drives argument for more green space

Advocates: Tragedy offers opportunity

*By Anne Paine*  
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Advocates for more green space in Nashville say last month's flooding has given the idea of balancing conservation and growth new emphasis.

Open land can act as a sop for floodwaters, and the topic drew more attention than originally planned at meetings earlier this month for <http://nashvilleopenspace.wordpress.com/>>Nashville: Naturally.

The public-private <http://www.landtrusttn.org/openspace.html>>project is exploring ways to make the city healthier and more economically vibrant through the right mix and network of development and natural areas.

"For the most part, people said any tragedy presents you with an opportunity," said Bob Brandt, a founding board member of the <http://www.landtrusttn.org/index.html> >Land Trust for Tennessee and a member of the Metro Parks Greenways Commission. "That's what we have here."

At two meetings June 3 seeking public input on saving and enhancing open space in Nashville, benefits discussed included decreasing the flood risk. Impenetrable pavement and traditional buildings are among contributors to quickly rising floodwaters like those seen during last month's unprecedented rainfall.

"This is a chance for Nashville to get a grip on managing flood plains," said Brandt, who helped conduct a session at the meetings.

"Most were very sympathetic to preserving more open space. The opposite of that contributes to the flooding. Along Mill Creek and the Harpeth River areas are where you have huge swaths of pavement."

In many parts of town, including Bellevue and Antioch, normally calm waterways turned into sprawling torrents headed for the Cumberland River.

One map presented at the meetings showed the city's tree canopy with blocks of forested green that run through much of the far north and northwest of the county, down to the southwest. But other areas had a few patches at best.

The meetings drew about 250 people to help with suggestions for the Nashville project spurred last year by Mayor Karl Dean's [http://www.nashville.gov/mayor/green\\_ribbon/index.asp](http://www.nashville.gov/mayor/green_ribbon/index.asp)>Green Ribbon Committee.

The Land Trust for Tennessee is overseeing the open space planning, with funding from the Martin Foundation. The <http://www.conservationfund.org/> >Conservation Fund is the consultant. A public

summit will be held Sept. 15 before a final report is done.

## Green space incentives

About 18 percent of Metro Nashville is open space or waterways. But about half of that — about 30,000 acres — could end up being developed, according to Nashville: Naturally research.

Options for increasing urban green spaces could include acquiring more parkland, encouraging or requiring more green space during development and educating property owners about programs to put pieces of their undeveloped lands into protected easements, which can bring a tax break. Groups like the <http://www.westmeadeconservancy.org/> West Meade Conservancy are already doing this.

Another element that could, by coincidence, add more green space is a buyout program for property owners in the floodway.

For public safety reasons, Metro, in consultation with state and federal officials, is looking at purchasing properties deemed too hazardous for homes or offices. Parcels acquired through the voluntary buyouts, which officials initially plan to offer to about 200 people, will revert to green space.

Fifty-four properties had been purchased and converted to green space through the mitigation program in the past five years.

Linking green space, historical and cultural sites, shops and the community at large is key to Nashville: Naturally.

"It would be exciting to have more incentives for builders to have more green space and walk-ability in their plans," said Anna Altic, an East Nashville real estate agent who attended one meeting.

She wants a city with "more connectivity," achieved with more places for walking and bicycling, and would like downtown to be a hub with spokes going out to neighborhoods like Waverly-Belmont and Sylvan Park.

Margo Farnsworth, who also attended a meeting, focused on the water issues as senior research consultant for the Cumberland River Compact.

"Sometimes people try to out-engineer Mother Nature," she said, referring to building more dams or widening channels.

"Green infrastructure and mimicking the natural hydrology of a watershed just gives you so much more bang for your buck."

For example, at its property where Aldi is located in East Nashville, H.G. Hill Realty put in trees and a natural swale on the parking lot to slow and filter water, so it can sink into the earth rather than rush down the street and into storm sewers. Increasingly, new buildings have plant-covered roofs to help with cooling and to use and slow rainwater runoff. These include the Freeman Webb building in Green Hills.

Buffers of trees and plants along waterways filter runoff, too, and keep creeks and rivers cooler and cleaner for aquatic life and drinking water supplies.

"Don't build right up to the edge of a stream," Farnsworth said. "Let the banks and the flood plains act

like the sponge they were designed to be."

Such practices can reduce flooding, she said, but wouldn't prevent it in the case of rainfall like Nashville received in early May — more than 17 inches over two days in some places.

## Undeveloped assets

Undeveloped land, once viewed as unproductive, is now considered an asset that can add economic benefit and vitality to a community, said Steve Morse, director and economist of the Tourism Institute at the University of Tennessee.

When it comes to protected green space, Nashville has about 18 acres of dedicated parkland per 1,000 residents, compared with 128 acres in Jacksonville, Fla., and 35 in Austin, Texas, according to the Trust for Public Lands.

Nashville does still have large stretches of undeveloped property to the northwest and southwest, but how that might change is the question.

"The country is urbanizing even more," said Jean C. Nelson, president and CEO of the Land Trust for Tennessee.

The city also is competing with towns in other states for good-paying jobs and tourists.

"We've got to get ahead of the game," she said. "We're going to need many more places for people to live and work. We've always been this beautiful place, but we can't take it for granted."

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