

BWSR lauds Minnehaha Creek's Hayman for integrated approach



DEFINING URBAN

ECOLOGY: "To me, a balanced urban ecology is really creating the relationship between the natural space and the built environment. It's really the area between those two, and it doesn't have to be in conflict," Michael Hayman said. "In fact, they can work in harmony with one another and further the community benefit and the economic benefit and everything else that goes along with having these great projects."

Michael Hayman has made a career of connecting water-quality improvement to economic development and green space in the heart of the Twin Cities metro.

Minnehaha Creek Watershed District's (MCWD) director of projects, Hayman helped to develop the MCWD's [balanced urban ecology policy](#) — a focus exemplified in its decadelong work to integrate water resource improvements with community development in the Minnehaha Creek Greenway, a series of interconnected projects situated along the creek's most degraded stretch.

"I think balanced urban ecology is really where we aim to find the nexus of community, natural space and economic prosperity," Hayman said, "working with the fact that great places, great communities are underpinned by strong natural assets."

Hayman was named the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) [2023 Outstanding Watershed District Employee](#) on Nov. 30 during Minnesota Watersheds' annual conference in Alexandria.

In his nomination, MCWD Administrator James Wisker highlighted Hayman's 10-plus years developing the [Minnehaha Creek](#)

“ We saw an opportunity for water resource management to be more impactful. ”

— Michael Hayman, on the MCWD's balanced urban ecology approach

[Greenway](#), a corridor featuring stormwater treatment, green space, transportation connections and residential development in Hopkins and St. Louis Park.

Together, those projects treat stormwater from 500-plus acres, connect communities to nearly 110 acres of restored green space, and — for the first time since the 1940s — make available public access to the creek via 2.4 miles of trails and boardwalk. Related work restored 30-plus acres of wetlands, remeandered 1.5 miles of the creek and reconnected it to its floodplain.

Wisker's nomination also noted Hayman's collaborative work centered on Wassermann Lake in Victoria, where water-quality improvements have set the stage for the lake's potential removal from the state's impaired waters list.

"Michael has demonstrated an unparalleled commitment to MCWD's vision," Wisker wrote. "Michael's

Left: While leading new staff on a tour of projects in late 2023, Minnehaha Creek Watershed District Director of Projects Michael Hayman cleared and raised a carp barrier just downstream from Wassermann Lake.

Center: Hayman was named BWSR's 2023 Outstanding Watershed District Employee. BWSR Assistant Director for Regional Operations Justin Hanson, right, presented the award on Dec. 6 at the MCWD office in Minnetonka.

Right: Hayman, at left, was among the MCWD staff members conducting a post-construction assessment of a carp barrier at Highland Bridge in Minnetrista. The largest carp barrier the MCWD constructed as part of its Six Mile Creek-Halsted Bay habitat restoration, it is on Six Mile Creek.

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MCWD

leadership has been essential to advancing impactful capital projects that transform perceptions of what can be achieved.”

Hayman’s ability to develop partnerships and integrate planning efforts resulted in more than \$8 million in state and local grant funding for MCWD-led projects.

Before the MCWD adopted its balanced urban ecology policy, Hayman said it was challenging to engage corporations or cities based solely on the impacts of stormwater management or ecological restorations. The key: communicating the benefit to them — such as the bottom line or tax base or community service or transportation.

That required Hayman to stretch beyond his role as a water resource professional. Learning about transportation planning, economic development, tax financing, planned-unit development and land-use processes has allowed him to effectively communicate about the MCWD’s projects and vision.

“His systems thinking have positioned him as a leader in economic development and water planning, regionally respected by peers in the municipal planning and private development community,” Wisker wrote in the nomination.

Details

BACKGROUND: Michael Hayman grew up in St. Cloud and enrolled in St. Cloud State University (SCSU) intending to major in biology. But an opportunity with a company specializing in pool, foosball and darts led to a business degree. Hayman later returned to natural resources. He earned an environmental science degree from SCSU in 2009, and then interned at the Sauk River Watershed District before becoming its ditch and permit coordinator. Hayman joined the Minnehaha Creek Watershed District about 12 years ago as a planner. Today Hayman manages a team of four who oversee project planning, acquisition, funding, design and construction.

ADVICE TO YOUNG WATER RESOURCE PROFESSIONALS: “Connect yourself and surround yourself with mentors in the fields outside of natural resources to really start to understand other community aspects and what it takes to create these vibrant spaces, whether it is in community development or economic development or transportation planning — those very spheres that naturally meet the natural-resource planning sphere because of the land-use connection to water resource planning,” said Hayman, who encourages co-workers to learn other aspects of regional planning. “Watershed districts are very unique. We’re not just water resource professionals. We’re really planning on a regional scale. We’re dealing across, in our instance, 29 communities, 29 municipalities, multiple counties, countless private development entities.”

The American Society of Landscape Architects in 2023 recognized Hayman and the MCWD with the Community Design Excellence Award for efforts to pursue balanced urban ecology, noting the combination of improvements benefiting both the environment and the community.

Asked what he’s most proud of, Hayman said it was the opportunity to work with Wisker and with Director of Policy Planning Becky Christopher to shape the MCWD’s future.

“I really view this as an award for Minnehaha Creek Watershed District, where I’ve had the opportunity to

work with many remarkable individuals each and every day,” Hayman said via a video acceptance message filmed while he was out of state visiting family.

In early December, Hayman attended a ribbon-cutting for a 116-unit affordable housing development at 325 Blake Road in Hopkins — the current Minnehaha Creek Greenway project he’s most excited about. The [MCWD-led project](#), a joint effort with the city of Hopkins and other partners, involves a 5-acre restoration that will treat runoff from 270 acres, provide creek access and trail connections, and establish a neighborhood on a former industrial site.

“It will really demonstrate what we mean when we talk about balanced urban ecology and creating a space where the community from residential, commercial and natural spaces all come together in one really amazing place,” Hayman said. “That project in particular really does stand out because it does feel like the true ethos of balanced urban ecology, where we’re connecting land, water and people in a way that I don’t know has really been done by a watershed organization.”

Hayman credited the foresight and tenacity of the watershed district and its board of managers for making such work possible.

“It’s been a real opportunity to learn and grow in my career from an urban and regional planning standpoint that goes far beyond water resources or natural resources,” Hayman said.

Each year, BWSR celebrates local government staff members’ excellent work advancing conservation efforts across the state. BWSR presented Olmsted SWCD Manager Skip Langer with the 2023 BWSR Outstanding Soil and Water Conservation District Employee award on Dec. 12 during the Minnesota Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts’ annual conference in Bloomington.