Santa Fe honored as desert lab rat

At a Jan. 5 press conference announcing that Santa Fe had received a distinct national honor for its approach to stormwater management, Mayor Javier Gonzales juxtaposed 20th-century goals for urban-runoff management with the city's current, science-based approach. By recalling how his father, George Gonzales (Santa Fe's mayor in the late '60s and early '70s), was trained to divert stormwater as quickly as possible away from the built environment in order to protect buildings, roads, and bridges, Javier explained how he wants "to reverse that trend and slow (runoff) down as much as possible in order to create another source of wet water… and have as much water security as we possibly can."

For most of the last century, the real-estate-development industry supported Gonzales the Elder's perspective, but after decades of science showing the damaging effects of a mismanaged urban watershed, even the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency now enthusiastically promotes a 21st-century approach to stormwater including the application of green-infrastructure strategies, low-impact development methods, and water-harvesting techniques. We'll see what the next administration does with respect to science, but the fact is that 21st-century stormwater management isn't just scientific, ethical, or wise. It makes economic sense on a variety of fronts:

- When we manage stormwater using green infrastructure, we create many skilled local jobs that can't be shipped to Russia, China, Mexico, or Bangladesh.
- It's significantly less expensive to prevent urban runoff from picking up dirt upstream than it is to remove those same pollutants downstream.
- A healthy urban watershed produces positive results: happy locals who enjoy their improved quality of life, enchanted visitors who want to return to an inviting watershed, and increased populations of birds and bees to keep local ecologies biologically diverse.

The distinct honor that Santa Fe recently received from the EPA is not some official feel-good prize. It doesn't come with an oversized check. But the honor, like any true honor, comes with a duty. In this case, it's a responsibility to beta-test a new online stormwater management tool that the EPA is developing. Ultimately, this tool, the Green Infrastructure Modeling Toolkit (See www.epa.gov/water-research/green-infrastructure-modeling-toolkit), will be used by communities from sea to shining sea, but for now only five cities in the nation will have access.

Out of 19,429 municipalities, Santa Fe was the only city chosen from an arid or semi-arid region. Of the four other cities getting the EPA's nod, the average amount of annual precipitation that falls on those communities is 48 inches per year — four times more than our average. This makes Santa Fe the EPA's only lab rat for most of the western half of the country, where flash floods crash through communities like tornadoes, where clean water is a desperately needed resource, where drought is the norm, and where vegetation often won't grow without the application of a detailed, comprehensive, and profound understanding of a well-managed urban watershed.

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The City of Santa Fe's River and Watershed Coordinator, Melissa McDonald, happens to be my wife, so I'm confident that our city will be well represented during this cooperative, information-sharing process with the federal government. Here's to hoping that changes at the EPA won't derail these valuable, job-generating efforts.

Nate Downey started Santa Fe Permaculture in 1992, authored Roof-Reliant Landscaping *(2008) and* Harvest the Rain *(2010), and is the president of Perma-Design, Inc. He can be reached via www.permadesign.com or 505-690-7939.*