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Stormwater Greening Is Good for Business.

Digging into the successes and stumbles of Philly's ambitious 25-year stormwater mitigation plan.

Five years ago, Philadelphia civil engineer Dennis Shelly glimpsed a business opportunity lying out in the open — or more precisely, he spied that opportunity from 22,000 miles in orbit. Satellite images made plain an idea back on Earth that has since helped him grow a business that moves water around just below the planet's surface.

Shelly heads PEER Environmental, an engineering and design firm that in its fifth year is well on the way to revenues of \$1 million. PEER's specialty is green infrastructure — green rooftops, rain gardens or infiltration beds — on big plots of land. This, to shift stormwater so that it's absorbed into the ground and kept out of the city sewers. Shelly's clients are rewarded handsomely by the Philadelphia Water Department (PWD), which not only cuts their water bills — by as much as 80 percent, which can translate to tens of thousands of dollars per year — but also supplies grant funding to execute the projects. His job is the behind-the-scenes (well, underground, mostly) work of using gravity, stone, pipes, dirt and plants to manage how fast water seeps into the ground, where it can soak in gradually or even evaporate.

In 2010, the PWD changed how it calculated stormwater fees for large private customers, including big institutions and property owners. Instead of levying a fee based on monthly metered usage, the utility rolled out new rate calculations over several years based on how much area of a business's surface area, including roofing, was covered by impermeable concrete or asphalt — materials that channeled water away from buildings and into the overtaxed sewer system. The less permeable the materials, the higher the fee.

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