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How Two Smaller Legacy Cities Are Adopting Green Infrastructure.

Climate change has raised temperatures and intensified flooding across New England. Providence and Worcester experiment with strategies to alleviate the worst effects.

As rain sheeted across the 150,000-square-foot roof of a transit facility in one of the most flood-prone neighborhoods in Worcester, Massachusetts, things looked ominous. But instead of posing a threat, that stormwater slithered into a jumble of purple coneflower, Joe Pye weed, Russian sage, and other flood- and drought-tolerant plants growing between the complex and nearby Quinsigamond Avenue.

The transit facility, built on a remediated brownfield, represents a $90-million investment for this small city. Green infrastructure elements like that rain-absorbing bioswale were considered a must, according to William Lehtola, chair of the Worcester Regional Transit Authority Advisory Board: “We want to provide the best possible environment for the city and our customers and employees,” he said. “Not just in our buses, but in our facilities too.”

As smaller legacy cities such as Worcester and nearby Providence, Rhode Island, continue the grueling work of rebounding from the severe economic and population losses suffered since their manufacturing heydays, the green approach is gaining traction. Despite challenges ranging from financial constraints to deteriorating infrastructure, many legacy cities have realized that investing in — and, in some cases, mandating — green infrastructure yields multiple benefits. Projects such as rain gardens, bioswales, urban farming, and tree planting, whether introduced on a small scale or implemented citywide, are an effective way to revitalize public spaces, manage stormwater, improve public health, and deal with the impacts of climate change, from increased heat to floods.

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by Cyrus Moulton

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