

## Let it Rain ECOS Implementation Grant Request - “Connecting the Drops: A Water Story”

**Background:** *Let it Rain* is a stormwater program initiated by the Winooski Natural Resources Conservation District (WNRCD) in 2011 as a way to coordinate efforts to improve water quality via the use of low impact development (LID). The program was designed as a result of growing concerns over the impact of stormwater on natural waterways and the role of LID strategies as part of the solution. Though in its early stages, *Let it Rain* is already measuring success through its incentive program that provides financial reimbursements to landowners who choose to voluntarily install green infrastructure improvements on their properties. However, we are finding broad gaps in the public’s understanding of the issues and attainable solutions to improve water quality.

**Project Summary:** A critical, and often times difficult, component of engaging with the public is sparking an interest that translates to action. Concern for water quality in Lake Champlain has dominated local news media for the past few years. Unsightly and dangerous blue-green algae blooms, high bacterial loads and few but high-intensity rain events contributed to poor water quality and ultimately beach closures. The increased awareness of water quality concerns in the basin has led to a spike in dialogue across sectors as we seek to find solutions to the serious environmental threat posed by inadequately managed stormwater.

The WNRCD aims to continue public awareness with a call to action in the 2013 summer season. We propose a public art and education display in downtown Burlington where art, public participation, science education, and environmental stewardship will highlight stormwater’s impact on Lake health and steps each of us can take to improve it.

This effort will use the well-developed model managed by the Lake Champlain Regional Chamber of Commerce that has displayed professionally-painted fiberglass bears and cows on Church Street to bring attention and funds to charity causes. Unlike previous art displays on Church Street, the *Let it Rain* exhibit will directly address a social and environmental issue by utilizing rain barrels (a symbol of water conservation) as the canvas. Each barrel will have one page of a story about the path of a single drop of rain that falls on Church Street and speeds its way towards the Lake, written by a local author. To mimic the path of urban rainfall, the painted barrel’s display will start at the top of Church Street (at the fountain) and trace a path towards College Street and then down the hill toward the lake. As individuals walk the path to each barrel and learn pieces of the story, they will be walking closer to the lake and The ECHO Lake Aquarium and Science Center where related educational displays will be available for those who wish to learn more. Permeable pavement, rain gardens and rain chains are currently on display outside of ECHO in the adjacent parking lots and outdoor seating area. Associated signage will link the message from the rain barrel display to the installed practices at the waterfront and educational opportunities inside the museum will serve to increase the depth of the public’s discovery.

*ArtsRiot*, a local art-promotion organization will manage a kickoff event on Church Street in the late Spring with live music, giveaways and live rain barrel painting demonstrations to draw increased attention to the cause and the display. Organizations working in water conservation and stewardship will be invited to participate in the event and provide educational materials to the public. In an effort to reach a wider audience and in recognition of the diversity of people who inhabit and visit the Burlington area, the urban stormwater story will be displayed in both French and English. All of these efforts will be in collaboration with other related stormwater programming of the *Chittenden County Stream Team*, *Friends of the Winooski River* and the WNRCD. A strong collaboration between ECHO, WNRCD, The Church St. Marketplace and *ArtsRiot* make this endeavor inclusive of multiple goals of the ECOS implementation grant program and will provide an opportunity for significant public engagement, education and, we believe, translation to community action and hence, a cleaner Lake Champlain.