New trash wheel and other environmental projects around Patapsco and Back River to be funded by $1.7M settlement

Marcus Dieterle

The Back River Wastewater Treatment Plant near Baltimore. Photo by Kristian Bjornard/Wikimedia Commons.

The Trash Wheel family will be gaining a new member – its first in Baltimore County.

Slated to be installed on the Back River, it will be the fifth trash-collecting water wheel in the Baltimore region.

The new trash wheel is one of 21 environmental projects that will receive grants totaling $1.7 million, state and local officials announced Tuesday at Cox's Point Park in Essex along the Back River.

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"These projects, they're going to provide real benefits to those communities that have really faced pollution for too long," said Maryland Secretary of the Environment Serena McIlwain at a news conference Tuesday. "But they're not just going to address the damages of the past; they're actually going to create new opportunities for those communities. They're going to improve their lives now and into the future."

The money comes from the settlement of a lawsuit that Maryland Attorney General Anthony Brown filed on behalf of the Maryland Department of the Environment. The settlement requires Baltimore City to address pollution from the Back River and

Patapsco wastewater treatment plants, the two largest such facilities in the state of Maryland.

Baltimore Mayor Brandon Scott said state and local officials have worked together to bring the two wastewater treatment plants into compliance. But the work is not finished, he said.

“For decades, we know communities in Baltimore City and Baltimore County suffered real harm from wastewater pollution and they suffered alone, without the support they needed from their government and without action. But today, we are doing things differently.”

Since 2022, nitrogen pollution is down 60% at the Back River plant and 78% at the Patapsco River plant, McIlwain said.

Scott added that phosphorous levels are down more than 80% at both facilities.

The Chesapeake Bay Trust is distributing the funds to community-led projects to improve environmental conditions around the wastewater treatment plants. Selected projects include efforts to clean up trash, test water quality, improve stormwater management infrastructure, expand green spaces, plant native vegetation, establish community composting, and increase outdoor recreational opportunities, and more.

Dr. Jana Davis, president of the Chesapeake Bay Trust, said her organization specialized in helping community groups to get their “feet wet and hands dirty” by leading their own projects.

“You guys are doing the work that we need to keep places like this and make new places like this for all of us to access,” Davis said.

Baltimore County Executive Kathy Klausmeier highlighted that improving the Chesapeake Bay watershed is not only imperative to the health of the region’s residents, but also important to fueling a strong economy that relies on local waterways.

“These waterways feed into the Chesapeake Bay, and a healthy Chesapeake Bay feeds tourism in our area,” Klausmeier said. “This is a great place for tourists to come, and it makes it stronger for the local seafood industry and our residents.”

Marcus Dieterle is the managing editor of Baltimore Fishbowl, where he covers the environment and education (among other topics). He helped lead the team to win a Best of Show award for Website of General… More by Marcus Dieterle