



## Earth Gauge™ Washington D.C – The Built Environment

### Environmental Information for Broadcast Meteorologists

*This fact sheet is part of a series on key weather-environment topics for the DC Metropolitan area. The Earth Gauge™ Healthy Communities project is designed to provide basic background information on environmental impacts in major U.S. urban areas, as well as simple messages meteorologists can deliver to their viewers.*

Due to urban growth, the population of Washington D.C. has increased 35.5 percent with a resulting 40.9 percent consumption of the surrounding land area. As urban landscapes grow, associated environmental impacts in the community are often observed, including changes in air quality, water quality, flooding, and temperature extremes.

#### What is the Relationship between the Weather and the Built Environment?



**Air Quality:** Areas where land uses are separated (such as residential and commercial properties sited in different areas) often have a higher number of vehicle miles traveled per person. Cars are a primary source of air pollutants, including key ingredients for ground-level ozone pollution, which is of particular concern in Washington D.C. during the warm, sunny summer months.



**Water Quality:** Pavement prevents rainwater and snowmelt from soaking into the ground. Instead, water runs over paved surfaces and into storm drains, picking up any pollutants it encounters along the way. It is generally accepted that when 10 percent of a watershed is paved, aquatic ecosystems begin to show stress; over 30 percent, they are considered impaired.



**Flooding:** Heavy rain events in urban areas can overload storm drains, gutters, and pipes. As water accumulates, it can overwhelm the capacity of sewer pipes and local rivers and streams, leading to flash flooding. Floodwater can damage property and contaminate drinking water supplies.



**Temperature Extremes:** Because pavement absorbs and traps heat, cities tend to be warmer than surrounding areas – a phenomenon known as the “urban heat island effect.” The effect can be especially pronounced in areas that have lost significant amounts of tree canopy. Elevated city temperatures result in increased energy demand for air conditioning, increased air pollution, and heat-related illnesses and deaths.

#### Learn More about Weather and the Built Environment

**Washington Smart Growth Alliance** researches and identifies smart land use and transportation options in the DC Metropolitan area. [www.sgalliance.org](http://www.sgalliance.org)

**EPA Smart Growth Program** houses resources on many built environment topics. [www.epa.gov/smartgrowth](http://www.epa.gov/smartgrowth)

**Smart Growth America** works to support coordination of development, transportation, revitalization of older areas, and preservation of open space and the environment. [www.smartgrowthamerica.org](http://www.smartgrowthamerica.org)

***Flip this page over to find simple messages and tips about weather and the built environment you can use during your on-air weather report.***



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### **Making the Connection: What You Can Say On-Air**

Here are some simple facts and tips you can provide to your viewers to help make the connection between weather and DC's built environment. Help your viewers understand the environmental impacts of a changing landscape, and how they can reduce their own impact.



#### ***Trees – Nature's Air Conditioners***

Loss of tree cover in urban areas can result in urban heat islands –where pavement and other hard surfaces absorb and trap heat, making the city feel three to ten degrees warmer than surrounding natural areas. Heat islands can result in higher energy demand for air conditioning and can contribute to heat-related illnesses and deaths.

**Viewer Tip:** Get planting! Planting on the east and west sides of your home can help to shade from heat during the mid-afternoon sun – walls that are shaded can be up to 36 degrees cooler than unshaded walls. Consider choosing deciduous trees (trees that lose their leaves in the winter), which will block sun during the summer, but allow warming sunlight through during the winter.

#### **Tune Up**

As rain water flows over streets, yards, driveways, and sidewalks, it picks up dirt, oil, pesticides, and other chemicals and carries them into storm drains, which are direct pathways to our rivers and streams! This urban storm water runoff is responsible for impaired water quality in more than 1500 miles of streams assessed in the Chesapeake Bay watershed.

**Viewer Tip:** Help protect water quality in the Chesapeake Bay watershed by properly disposing of car chemicals. If you change your own oil or antifreeze, be sure to take used fluids to a service station or hazardous waste collection facility - never dump them in or near a storm drain. Remember, antifreeze is highly toxic to animals and pets, and both oil and antifreeze can contaminate our water.

Not sure where to go? Visit [www.cleanup.org](http://www.cleanup.org) or call 1-800-CLEANUP to find a collection facility in your area.



#### ***Nighttime Heat***

Pavement and buildings in Washington D.C. absorb and trap heat in the city, and temperatures can be several degrees warmer in the city than surrounding natural areas. At night, these “hard” surfaces gradually release stored heat and raise night time temperatures, offering little relief during extreme heat events.

**Viewer Tip:** Asphalt, tar, and other dark pavement and roof surfaces absorb and hold heat, even after the sun sets. Thinking about adding or replacing a walkway at your home? Consider using materials that are less likely to absorb heat, such as gravel, grass, or mulch. Not only will these materials stay cool, but they'll also allow rain water to soak into the ground instead of running off into the street.

#### ***Transit Trek***

One study of Americans using public transportation found that they spend about 19 minutes per day walking to and from transit stations. Not only does using public transportation reduce the number of cars on the road and decrease air pollution, but it may also help Americans fit in the recommended 30 minutes of exercise per day.

**Viewer Tip:** On nice days, consider walking to the bus stop, transit station, or all the way to your destination. You can learn more about Washington D.C.'s transit system and map out a route by visiting [www.wmata.com](http://www.wmata.com).

