

**PW** **BUSINES**

**THE POWER** **OF**  
**GREEN**

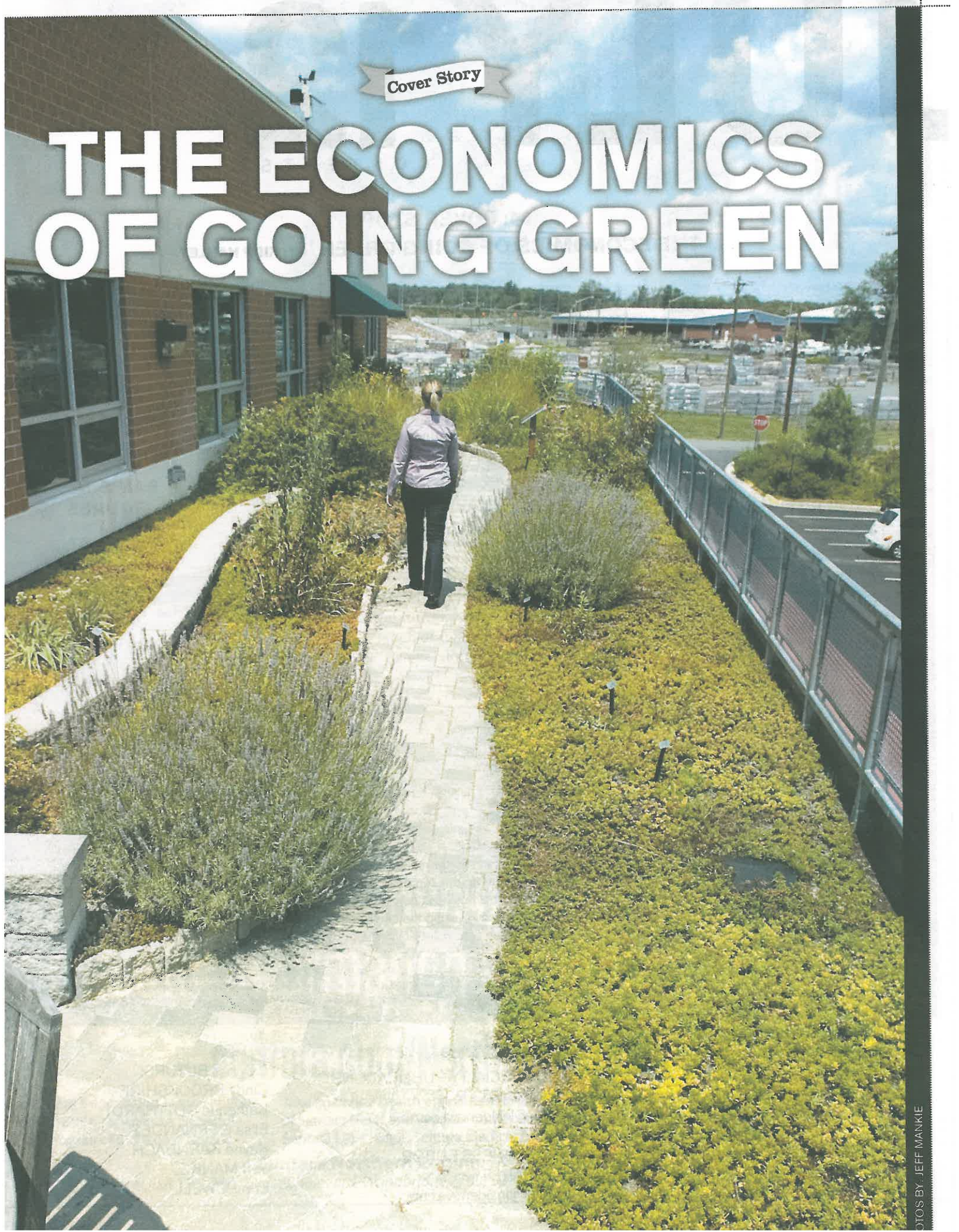
**A BRIGHTER FUTURE?**

» The costs and benefits of  
investing in the environment



Cover Story

# THE ECONOMICS OF GOING GREEN





**B**efore he built his facility in Gainesville seven years ago, Wetland Studies and Solutions President Michael Roband looked into getting a LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certification.

He ended up with sticker shock.

Receiving the U.S. Green Building Council's certification would have required \$100,000 and mountains of paperwork, Roband said.

Instead, he borrowed what he could from the bank and made his building as environmentally friendly as his budget would allow.

Eventually, Roband paid for the certification. As it turned out, the facility was good enough to be designated LEED Gold -- the second highest standard set by the council.

Many businesses have been going greener but not all of them can afford recycled walls, a rooftop garden and solar panels like Wetland Studies and Solutions. The biggest hurdle to protecting the environment is the upfront cost. Everyone wants to save some green, but not necessarily the kind that grows on the ground.

John Heltzel of Manassas-based architecture firm AIA works with residential and commercial clients. He said about 80 percent of the people he sees think about incorporating green technology into their home or commercial site.

However, 30 percent opt for what he called "low hanging fruit" while only 10 percent actually follow through on a significant "green" project.

"For 95 percent of them, it has to make financial sense," Heltzel said. "What's the return on investment? Is it 1 to 5 years? OK. If it's 10 years, forget it."

### TOO MUCH REGULATION?

The cost of going green could rise soon because of government policies on pollution.

Stricter regulations are coming for those that live in the Washington D.C. area. Prince William County is part of the Chesapeake Bay Watershed, and like every other community, will be held to a higher standard when it comes to development practices.

This spring, Prince William County increased its storm water management fees in order to comply with the new regulations, which will start to take effect in the summer of 2014. This will allow for a larger Public Works staff to monitor water quality and storm water runoff issues. But it will also have a financial effect on everyone from the commercial and residential developers to the people who occupy the buildings they construct.

While developers worked with the county on these fees, they think a little more give and take on related issues would help.

Developer Mark Granville-Smith said if design standards were relaxed for a certain parcel of land in Prince William, he could build a community with even less impact on the environment.

For instance, Granville-Smith said, he could reduce the amount of hard surfaces that don't absorb water if he was allowed to build shared driveways or didn't have to meet the requirement that a one-acre lot have at least 100 feet of land between the home and the street. That could ultimately reduce his costs, as well, he said.

Granville-Smith said he always tries to go above and beyond minimum county and state standards when it comes to protecting the environment. In his proposal for a mid-county development, which the Prince William Board of County Supervisors rejected a few months ago, there would have been nearly 200 acres of permanently protected land for public use.

He also said he makes sure his homes are as energy efficient as they are practical.

"Every one of my developments, we always try to exceed environmental requirements," Granville-Smith said. "We put a great emphasis on saving trees. ... The county should offer incentives to do that."

Fellow developer Scott Plein agreed. He has a similar setup at a recently approved Piedmont II -- an extension of the Piedmont residential development off U.S. 15 in Haymarket. Piedmont II will feature five miles of hiking trails that will be open to residents and the general public.

"It's not just about regulation," Plein said. "It's also about being flexible at the staff level, political level and business level."

"How do we work with our resources and at the same time provide needed homes and business locations? We have to be more creative and open-minded about developing," Plein added. "How do we incentivize development? It should be a holistic approach instead of a regulatory approach."

Prince William County Development Services Director Wade Hugh works with developers on site plans and permits. Depending on the construction site and the amount of work being done, Hugh said there's a great deal of negotiation between county officials and developers regarding the environment.

However, Hugh noted, going green isn't a decision made only by the county or the developer. Residents and homeowners associations must do their part, too.

"What are you doing with your lawn? Are you treating it with chemicals? There are 400,000 people out there (in Prince William County)," Hugh said. "Everybody thinks about construction up front, but everybody has a responsibility."



## ENVIRONMENTAL TRADEOFF

Companies like Wetland Studies and Solutions and Angler Environmental are getting lots of business these days because of the federal government's scrutiny of watersheds and streams.

Founded in 1991, Wetland Studies and Solutions helps developers and agencies like the Virginia Department of Transportation with everything from the federal permitting process to solutions for water quality issues. That includes stream bank mitigation.

The law requires developers to offset any environmental impact their projects have on wetlands and streams. They must account for every tenth of an acre of wetlands or 300 feet of stream that's affected and restore that amount of property within the same geographical area.

Wetland Solutions is working with California-based SunCal on Potomac Shores – a massive, mixed-use development that will be built in Woodbridge along the Potomac River.

SunCal spokesman David Soyka said he's unclear how the new environmental regulations coming to Northern Virginia will affect the cost of the Potomac Shores project. However, the company is used to dealing with federal agencies and time-consuming red tape in some of their California-based projects, he added.

For example, Soyka said, SunCal's Mandalay Bay project in Oxnard was "the first new marina community built in 30 years in California because of the length of time for approvals."

The timing of these regulations also concerns Granville-Smith. With the economy still fragile, he said these new rules for developers could drive prices too high for buyers.

"We are always trying to do the best we can to meet the environmental standards," Granville-Smith said. "[But] at what point does environmental regulation become excessive? At the end of the day, the consumer is the one that pays for all of this."



The solar panels on the roof account for 20 percent of energy used at Wetland Studies and Solutions, Inc.



The Wetland Studies and Solutions, Inc. received LEED certification for their building which is environmentally friendly and energy efficient.



Developer Mark Granville-Smith recently proposed a development in mid-county with nearly 20 acres of open space.