

## In tight times, volunteers help cities stay green

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ST. PAUL, Minn. - When local governments start to slash budgets, rain garden projects aren't likely to make the cut. Neither are composting experiments in the school cafeteria. Nor tree inventories, even with a voracious insect coming to town.

So when the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency announced it would line up volunteers for environmental projects across the state, many governments and schools jumped at the chance to participate.

GreenCorps, a new state program that receives federal AmeriCorps money, was overwhelmed by the number of people willing to work full time for nearly a year for little more than an \$11,400 stipend and help with student loans. More than 120 people applied for 18 full-time slots.

Environmental volunteering is about to expand nationwide. Legislation signed this year by President Barack Obama expands national service programs, including those that focus on clean energy. The \$5.7 billion national service bill triples the size of the AmeriCorps service program over the next eight years. At the same time, the economic downturn has increased the demand for volunteers.

AmeriCorps already has more than 8,000 members working for more than 400 programs across the country that focus on environmental issues, and officials expect the new legislation and a heightened interest in the environment will boost the number of volunteers.

"Most Americorps members are fairly young," said Siobhan Dugan, an AmeriCorps spokeswoman. "Particularly for that age group, (the environment) is something that they are very interested in."

Like GreenCorps, some of the AmeriCorps-funded programs are run by state agencies. Others are administered by local governments or nonprofit groups. Each program is different, with volunteers doing everything from removing invasive plants to sampling water supplies to helping people make their homes more energy efficient.

In Minnesota, the 18 full-time and four half-time workers are split into several job categories: urban forestry, school waste prevention, energy conservation, local food systems and "living green" outreach.

"It's a unique opportunity to both achieve environmental goals while providing support to local governments, schools and nonprofits that are facing tough times," said Stephanie Souter, who manages the program for the MPCA.

In early October, four volunteers who will work in urban forestry toured two sites in the Twin Cities area to learn about projects being overseen by city workers. They toured several rain gardens in the St. Paul suburb of Maplewood, which is using the gardens to control stormwater drainage and to limit the pollutants that reach streams and lakes. In St. Paul, the group met with city arborist Karl

Mueller in the neighborhood where the state's first infestation of the tree-killing emerald ash borer was found last spring.

GreenCorps member Zach Jorgensen will help Mueller and others in the city's parks department update an inventory of St. Paul's trees in parks and along streets. Emerald ash borer and threats like it that can kill a whole tree species make having an inventory important as cities arrange to replace the trees, Mueller said.

"This is a pretty important time, especially with this new find of emerald ash borer in our city. It's important to have extra help," Mueller said.

Jorgenson, who just got his master's degree in landscape architecture, said although he was concerned about the size of the stipend, GreenCorps will pay off \$4,725 of his student loans after he completes the work. The volunteers also get health insurance.

"It's a great opportunity," said Jorgensen, 32, of Minneapolis. "I'm getting experience at a time when it's really hard to get experience and find a job."

In Duluth, former city parks worker Judy Gibbs went without work for a year before getting into the GreenCorps program. She will serve the city again by coordinating volunteers on urban forestry projects.

"They've been pretty short-handed," Gibbs said. The low pay is no issue for her: "I get to focus on something I really love. It's more about getting this work done."

GreenCorps organizers expect interest in the program will be high even when the economy recovers, and they hope this year's pilot will prove its worth.

"We'll be monitoring the environmental outcomes and the success of the first year, and assuming that success, then we'd like to continue it in future years," Souter said.