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Nasty runoff? New roads just soak it in

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By Matthew Lopas
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It might look like a street repaving, but a project under way in North Portland is more like a science experiment.

The four-block stretch of North Gay Avenue between Wygant and Sumner streets will be covered with a special porous pavement. It's the second such project in the city's Innovative Wet Weather Program. The first was finished last year near Westmoreland Park in Southeast.

A $2 million federal Environmental Protection Agency grant is covering most of the projects' cost. The goal is to lessen runoff into the sewer system and reduce the damage to water quality

Not much is known about the best ways to design or maintain porous pavements, which allow the water to sink into the ground, says Steve Fancher, project manager with the Portland Bureau of Environmental Services Portland's results will be used elsewhere in the city and across the country.

Porous pavement costs almost twice as much as standard paving because of higher installation costs. The work is more labor intensive, but the price should come down as more contractors learn the technique

Last year's project on Southeast Rex Street and the North Portland job were chosen because the streets needed maintenance. The goal of both jobs is the same, but the streets will look quite different. Interlocking concrete blocks gave the southeast streets a rustic, cobblestone look. Gay Avenue, when it's completed in August, will look more like a

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normal street.

Two of the blocks will use porous asphalt that looks nearly identical to a standard street surface. The other two will use a concrete that Fancher admits looks like a big, gray rice cake.

One block with each material will be curb-to-curb porous, and the others will be porous on the parking strip but use standard materials in the center. The mix of methods are part of the experiment to figure out what works best.

It's a positive step for the city, says Peter Lavigne of the Portland-based Rivers Foundation of the Americas. He says he worries about pesticides and motor oil causing more harm to the already troubled Willamette River.

"It's just far better to capture this water on-site than to pipe it into the river," Lavigne says, adding that he hopes for an expansion of the program to sidewalks and parks.

Runoff from streets is a major contaminant, but Gwynn Johnson, an environmental engineering professor at Portland State University, says it is only a portion of the pollution in the Willamette She approves of methods to filter runoff but emphasizes the dramatic effect of industrial pollutants

Fancher says he realizes the city has a long way to go in improving water quality, and the current project is not going to solve the problem. That's why he says it is important to continue looking for innovative approaches.

"This is one of the tools that could be very beneficial," he says. Got a story idea for Green Life? Contact portland@news oregonian.com Other porous paving projects. Southeast Rex Street and adjoining streets The ReBuilding Center parking lot, North Portland Multnomah Arts Center, Southwest Portland Lucky Labrador Public House, Southwest Portland

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