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District stormwater management system earns national recognition for innovative engineering

MINNEAPOLIS—The Towerside district stormwater management system, designed by Barr Engineering Co. in collaboration with the Mississippi Watershed Management Organization (MWMO), recently won an Honor Award from the American Council of Engineering Companies (ACEC) as part of its Engineering Excellence Awards national competition. It was one of only 14 projects to receive this award, which recognizes outstanding engineering achievements that exemplify technical innovation and complexity and deliver environmental and social value. It received a Grand Award earlier this year from ACEC of Minnesota (ACEC/MN).

Formerly an underdeveloped industrial area, the Towerside District is the first designated “innovation district” in Minneapolis and Saint Paul, focused on creative, sustainable community development. It spans over 300 acres in the heart of the Twin Cities, adjacent to the University of Minnesota and served by three Green Line Light Rail Transit stations. The MWMO saw a rare opportunity to build a stormwater treatment system as inspired and innovative as the district itself. The first of its kind in the Twin Cities, the Towerside district stormwater system is the result of a voluntary agreement among four property developers and several government organizations to work together to treat storm runoff with effective and environmentally friendly methods, reduce stormwater management costs and provide public greenspace.

“The Towerside district stormwater system is a groundbreaking project and a major success story for all of the partners involved,” said MWMO Executive Director Kevin Reich. “It stands as a model of how green infrastructure, when proactively integrated in a district development area, can create positive outcomes for the environment, system efficiencies for buildings and ample opportunities for great public realm design.”

Barr’s design features two large biofiltration basins that collect, treat and convey runoff to a massive, 207,000-gallon underground cistern for more treatment. The stormwater receives ultraviolet treatment due to its use in the community garden, possibly the first-of-its-kind application in Minnesota. The system was sized to manage a 100-year storm event and treat the first flush of runoff before it enters the Mississippi River. Design and installation maximized flexibility to accommodate future developments and infrastructure.



“Barr was honored to assist the MWMO in designing the Towerside district stormwater system,” said Barr’s president and CEO, Ward Swanson. “It models what can be collectively achieved for the larger Towerside Innovation District and region and demonstrates the value that public-private infrastructure partnerships can deliver.”

Tested during a severe drought in 2021, the stormwater reuse system provided over 100,000 gallons of irrigation water for the developers and nearby street landscaping, parkland and community gardens. The pollinator-friendly greenspace offers stormwater-management education through artistic installations and is the heart of Minneapolis’ newest park, which will eventually connect with the city’s linked parks and trails system known as the Grand Rounds.

The initial district system supports about \$250 million in new development and contributes to local climate resiliency by reducing the burden on nearby storm sewers and offering a reliable source of non-potable water.

The successful system serves as a model for other district systems (such as stormwater, energy and parking) throughout the Towerside Innovation District and surrounding region. The benefits of the Towerside system have encouraged planning for a similar district stormwater management concept in the Upper Harbor Terminal redevelopment area, located further north along the Mississippi riverfront.

To learn more, please go to our [Towerside district stormwater management system](#) project story page. For more information about Barr and MWMO, visit [Barr.com](#) and [MWMO.org](#).

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About Barr

Barr Engineering Co. is an employee-owned engineering and environmental consulting firm incorporated in 1966. Barr solves complex challenges and delivers comprehensive solutions in the public, mining, fuels, power and manufacturing sectors. Barr’s 1,000 employee owners serve clients across North America and worldwide.

About Mississippi Watershed Management Organization

The MWMO is a public organization that partners to protect and improve water and habitat in our urban watershed. MWMO invests in people and infrastructure to support clean water and provide knowledge, scientific data and expertise to help manage our vital water resources.