

What matters to Easton? Nurture Nature Center releases report on environmental concerns

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Gabby Saoazar of Easton talks about science near the suspended sphere at the Nurture Nature Center. (ED KOSKEY JR. / SPECIAL TO THE MORNING CALL)

EASTON — Litter, recycling, traffic and pedestrian safety and walkability are among the top environmental issues that matter most to Easton residents, according to a two-year community needs assessment conducted by Easton's Nurture Nature Center.

Nurture Nature Center is a science-based community organization that works to engage the public in learning about local environmental risks. The Easton Matters study assessed environmental concerns in Easton's four neighborhoods: College Hill, Downtown, South Side and the West Ward.

Nurture Nature Center asked for input on local environmental concerns and priorities through a public survey, interviews with city officials and leaders of community-based organizations. It also conducted neighborhood focus groups in 2014 and this year. A community-wide forum was held this spring. The study was made possible by a grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services.

"We as a center have always focused on flooding, but we realized there were a lot of other types of environmental concerns people have," said Kathryn Semmens, the center's science director.

Residents "genuinely love their neighborhood and neighbors and value the walkability of a small town with a vibrant downtown," the study says. Issues raised most often related to litter and recycling, traffic, pedestrian safety and walkability. Street trees and sidewalks were also discussed. While most residents appreciate the benefits of street trees, the costs associated with their upkeep are a significant negative barrier to widespread adoption by residents, the study says. Homeowners are responsible for having arborists prune trees and must replace sidewalks that get torn up by large tree roots.

Providing education and reduced cost options for sidewalk replacement can start to address this challenge, the study says.

There is a desire for more green space, as well as access to healthy, affordable food, and easier access to the Delaware and Lehigh rivers. But the study says Easton also has a lot to offer, such as pocket parks, the Easton Farmer's Market and Public Market, bike racks, and Free Little Libraries scattered throughout the city.

Such initiatives should be expanded and improvements to pedestrian safety, walkability and traffic control are urgent needs, the study says.

In the Downtown, the city could explore more effective traffic control mechanisms, such as changes to bus routes, the addition of bike paths, truck ordinances for Centre Square, and a sound barrier for Route 22 should be a top priority, according to those who responded to the study.

In the West Ward, the city might look at limiting the number of cars per household through a permitting program, and examine ways to increase walkability to reduce the need for cars, the study suggests.

In College Hill, more stop lights and crosswalks as well as speed limits at certain times of day could help address traffic concerns, the study says.

In the South Side, the study says, the installation of footbridges and additional street lighting could encourage more pedestrians.

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EASTON ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS

- Downtown:** Traffic, trash, food access
- South Side:** Access and mobility, food access, waste, rivers
- West Ward:** Traffic and car congestion, street trees, green space, litter and garbage
- College Hill:** Traffic, herbicide and salt use, trees