2009 Small Cities Sustainability Best Practices Award Proposal
Submitted by City of Racine, Wisconsin, US

The City of Racine (population 80,000) and the University of Wisconsin-Parkside have established Root River Environmental Education Community Center (REC) on the Root River, an important tributary to Lake Michigan. If Racine is selected, the award monies would be used for site improvements (including environmental demonstration projects such as rain gardens, vegetated swales, or other storm water management techniques), educational activities (developing an outdoor classroom area), and to increase public awareness of the REC and the social, educational, and environmental stewardship opportunities it provides.

The REC addresses an urgent need to improve social equity and connect urban individuals to the environment where they live, work, and recreate. While many urban and/or minority/low-income residents do not recognize nor appreciate the natural features that are often obscured by highly developed neighborhoods they often depend on public access to parks, beaches, and the river for recreation. Additionally, there is a lack awareness of how human activities impact environmental integrity, i.e. recreational water quality and habitat. The REC provides a venue to disseminate this important information within a context that allows for direct interaction with the natural surroundings. With the increasing discovery of environmental degradation, the negative effects of climate change, and the impact of pollution on the Great Lakes it is more important than ever to educate the public and encourage individuals to engage in lifestyles that lead to sustainable environments.

Education and demonstration projects will inform the public about the impact of storm water runoff as it relates to water quality (and the benefits of mitigation measures such as rain gardens and vegetated swales), geologic/hydrologic evolution of the Great Lakes, ecological and environmental issues, recreation and economic resources, transportation and commerce history, and commercial and sport fishing. Through these activities the REC has the potential to serve as an implementation mechanism for *Wisconsin's Great Lakes Protection and Restoration Strategy* (2006) and to address priorities articulated by the *Council of Great Lakes Governors* (http://www.cglg.org/) and echoed by the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Cities Initiative. For example, education and demonstration efforts will ensure that the public, including traditionally underrepresented groups, understand the importance of adopting "*sustainable use practices that protect environmental resources and may enhance the recreational and commercial value of our Great Lakes*" (CGLG, Priority 7). Educational activities will also be tied to research activities occurring in Racine such as the current assessment of the bacteriologic and chemical integrity of the Root River (this project has the additional benefit of serving as a knowledge base for economic and redevelopment plans along the Root River corridor within the City of Racine which include design elements capable of improving water quality). The unique location of the REC center also offers opportunities for urban families to experience recreational activities highlighting the Great Lakes through the REC connection to the Root River and Lake Michigan pathways (bicycle, canoe, and kayak rentals are available during the recreation season).

Racine wishes to promote sustainability within our community and engage traditionally under-represented individuals in environmental issues. An interested and engaged population possesses civic pride, embodies the spirit of stewardship, enhances the economic vitality of the community, and values GLSL water resources as capital assets with intrinsic value worthy of protection.