



Make Your Car Wash Event Eco-friendly

Car wash fundraiser season is in full swing during the summer. While these events are a popular means of raising money for worthwhile causes, such as scout troops, sport teams, school clubs, and charities, they can be detrimental to the environment if runoff is not properly managed.

The properties and parking lots used as means of raising money for scout troops, sport teams, school clubs, and charities are mostly designed to handle rain runoff, not soap and chemicals. The runoff from washing cars can harm the aquatic environment and degrade local waterways.

Soapy suds can reach a local stream feeding the Galveston Bay in as little as ten minutes. When conducting your fundraiser, follow these guidelines in order to prevent the wash water from entering storm drains where it may flow untreated to the Galveston Bay and its tributaries.

How does runoff from car wash fundraisers harm the Galveston Bay and the environment?

When washing cars in a paved area, the wash water, which contains soap and detergent, residues from exhaust fumes, brake pads, gasoline and motor oil, washes off the cars, flows off the pavement and into nearby storm drains (usually openings in the curb or gutter). Unlike the sewers that serve our homes and businesses (called sanitary sewers), which carry wastewater to treatment plants, storm drains carry any water entering them directly and quickly to the nearest stream with no pollutant removal. Soap, detergents (even biodegradable ones) can be poisonous to crabs, oysters, and rockfish, damaging gills and depleting the water of oxygen. A single fundraising event can pour thousands of gallons of soapy, oily, and gritty water into local streams.

Bay-Friendly Tip

Consider holding your car washing fundraiser at a commercial car wash. Wash water from commercial car washes goes to sewage treatment plants rather than down a storm drain. Call your local car wash to ask if they offer fundraising options for schools, teams, and charities.

Planning a Low Impact Car Wash Fundraiser

If you choose not to partner with a commercial car wash, try to incorporate these practices to reduce the overall environmental impact of your fundraiser:

- Selecting the site for your car wash is very important. When talking to property owners of shopping centers, schools or churches where you are considering holding the event, ask them where the water flows from the storm drains on the property. The best locations will have some storm water management controls in place. These controls include grass swales, sand filters, oil and grit separators, storm water management ponds, and wetlands that treat storm water before it is discharged to a stream.
- If there are no storm water management controls in place, choose a site where the wash water can soak into grass, gravel, or be diverted to nearby landscaping. This will allow the wash water to filter through the vegetation and/or soil instead of flowing directly into a storm drain. Absorbent pads, which can be purchased at automotive shops, can also be placed in the curb or grass swale to catch oils and other chemicals.



- Remove all trash and debris from the car washing area.
- Do not use acid-based wheel cleaners or engine degreasers.
- A soap-free wash is best for the environment. If you do use soaps, use cleaners or detergents labeled "non-toxic," "chlorine-free", "phosphate- free," or "biodegradable." The safest products for the environment are vegetable or citrus-based products. Using biodegradable soap does not lessen its immediate environmental impact – it simply means that the soap will degrade in time. A flush of "biodegradable" soap suds will still harm fish or invertebrates in your local stream.
- Hold a meeting with car wash volunteers to explain the following methods for reducing environmental impact:
- Use a bucket of soapy water to re-soap rags or sponges throughout the wash rather than adding soap directly to rags or sponges.
 - Wring sponges and washrags into buckets, not the ground.
 - Conserve water by using a spray nozzle with an automatic shut-off.
 - Always empty buckets into the sanitary sewer system (e.g. sinks or toilets), NOT down the storm drain.
 - Remember to clean up after the car wash fundraiser. Have a volunteer walk the perimeter of the site to pick up trash and debris and dispose of it properly.

Remember to stop and think before you allow anything to go directly into the gutter or storm drain.



For more information on the Storm Water Management Program, to report dumping into storm drains, or to volunteer contact the City of Deer Park's Storm Water Division (281) 478-7244.