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Conservation efforts must include cities, officials say

By **BILL SLAKEY**

Courier Staff Writer

Controlling soil erosion and water pollution isn't just for farmers anymore, according to local soil conservation officials. It's for builders, developers and urban homeowners.

As federal and state lawmakers begin to regulate non-point source pollution — or pollution that rainwater picks up as it flows across the land — city dwellers and builders face the same control problems as farmers do, said Jeanette Winegarden, chairwoman of the Black Hawk County Soil and Water Conservation District board.

"The same as you have non-point source pollution off the fields, you have non-point pollution from lawns and streets," Winegarden said.

In an effort to address urban run-off, the Soil and Water Conservation District hosted a conference to educate local builders and developers on soil conservation and related issues Thursday.

Sessions ranged from regulation of development in the flood plain to cleanup of underground storage tanks and erosion control at construction sites.

"This is a good chance to at least find out where to go for information," said Jeff Koch, president of the Home Builders Association of Northern Iowa, which helped organize the conference.

Koch said builders hope to address the problems of urban runoff voluntarily to make strict regulations unnecessary.

"I don't know that any of these are problem areas, but we're trying to address them before they become problems," he said.

The program also covered crucial information for anyone selling property, said Larry Moser, vice president of the Waterloo/Cedar Falls Board of Realtors, another conference sponsor. For example, uncapped wells, underground storage tanks or the condition of a septic system could all affect the value of a property.

"If these items are apparent on a property, they are things buyers and sellers need to know," Moser said.

"Every topic covered in this program comes up in our business," said John Monaghan of Town and Country Homes in Waverly.

Above all, Soil Conservation Service officials hope developers and builders will look closely at the conditions on the land before building, said Ben Clausen, who helped organize the program.

Only by looking at the landscape instead of specific building sites will city dwellers and builders avoid drainage or other problems, he said.

"The land has limitations. You've got to think of the land almost like you do people," Clausen said. "The land can't do everything. Farmers know that, and we've got to get builders and buyers to know that."