

What is Meant by “Civic Engagement” in Water Quality Planning?

Our most pressing and challenging water quality problems are largely caused by nonpoint sources of pollution. Unlike point sources, managing nonpoint sources of pollution requires not only the involvement of the general public and stakeholders in the development of watershed planning documents, but also that many individuals change the ways they manage personal behaviors on the land. Civic engagement (or public involvement) can no longer be viewed as a necessary administrative requirement, but rather as the key to success for most watershed restoration and protection projects.

The Clean Water Council interprets its role as:

- 1) supporting agencies and local governments in involving watershed residents in restoration and protection projects
- 2) encouraging more residents to take leadership roles in water quality studies and restoration plans
- 3) encouraging residents to make changes on the ground that can benefit water quality

It has been and will continue to be challenging to accomplish these goals. For example, residents are often not aware of or do not understand government-led water planning activities, face personal time constraints which make it difficult to become involved, or are apathetic about civic processes. At this point in time, civic engagement in water planning is typically sporadic and often very limited in scope across Minnesota. Residents have too commonly “outsourced their civic duty” to organizations they believe will represent them. Citizens will need to reclaim a greater role in the democratic process of improving and protecting water resources.

Government agencies and their staff must also be willing to change their approach when interacting with citizens. Instead of driving solutions from the top-down, agencies and local governments must seek to empower local leaders when addressing water quality problems and in developing solutions. Civic action is a valiant effort taken to preserve a common good and must be better supported by government agencies if any real improvements in water quality are to be achieved.

New tools and protocols are needed to increase civic involvement in watershed planning processes. These will require local government staff to actively seek out and recruit participants, to increase transparency during planning processes, to provide a safe environment for participation, and to see residents and stakeholders as equal partners in the process, not as a problem to be handled.

Changing the personal behaviors of residents is equally challenging. Residents may lack awareness of the problems and solutions, may be apathetic, may be concerned about the cost of compliance, time needed to comply, the level of difficulty of a new behavior, etc. Convention holds that residents gain knowledge and change behaviors from being exposed to facts, scientific evidence and informational materials. We believe this is a false assumption upon which to develop water quality restoration and protection programs in the 21st century. Rather, research shows that the public’s judgments are developed through a different process that is much more complex and multidimensional than we might think. What we have not yet fully utilized is the potential of peer pressure to encourage others to change behaviors; neither have we fully explored the ways in which economic incentives and disincentives could nudge people in a desirable direction for water quality.

The questions before us are, “How will the efforts we take from this point forward produce greater results?” “What are the successful elements of existing programs we can take forward and what needs to change substantially?” “How can we better encourage citizens to lead their own local water planning processes? How will we join them on this difficult journey?”

A New Direction

Civic engagement in local water planning processes

The goal of this Work Group is to increase the number of residents and interest groups that are willing to take a more active role in the democratic process of creating watershed plans. Rather than government officials developing and driving a one-way, top-down planning process, it is our goal to encourage and support planning processes where government officials actively seek out and utilize the general public and stakeholders in a two-way planning process which makes the most of the talents and perspectives they bring to the table.

Our vision is that residents and interest groups will be involved from the earliest stages of a water planning process. Their level of involvement will be a matter of choice, with varying levels of activity possible throughout the process, as they determine appropriate. Their involvement will be seen as proactive and substantive, rather than reactive at the end of a process. Residents, stakeholders and scientists will be seen as equals in the complex process of protecting water resources, with residents being valued for the indigenous knowledge they bring to the table. Scientists will continue to play a critical role by providing the data and analyses for residents and stakeholders to use in their deliberations. This process will take time, requiring multiple and varied opportunities for deliberation and dialogue.

Civic engagement will require that more funding be focused on hiring local staff who bring a wide variety of skills to the process, including planning, meeting design, and facilitation. These individuals will have the skills to master relationships and encourage dialogue among the myriad of residents and organizations that have a stake in water quality protection. Facilitation services will be widely available to help people have respectful, productive discussions. Rather than seeing these kinds of activities as a “black hole” for resources, government and residents will understand that in the final analysis, this will be money well-spent.

Voluntary behavior changes

Civic action must occur at the point where specific sources of pollution have been identified and areas have been targeted for implementation activities. Rather than attempting to educate and change the behaviors of everyone in a watershed or subwatershed, residents or private entities owning properties or areas causing the greatest impacts will be targeted whenever possible.

Most of the resources available for implementation efforts will be used at the project level. Policymakers and project managers will move beyond simple awareness-building and education activities for residents. While education is an important component of encouraging behavior changes, it is not, by any means, enough to accomplish real water quality improvements within a watershed. Careful analysis of each unique watershed and its residents will provide a strong base from which to work. Projects will have a greater potential for success when they employ a targeted and methodical approach based on research and deliberation. Each project should study and then address both psychological and infrastructure barriers to behavior change.

A more diverse box of tools must be considered and brought to bear in each watershed including economic incentives or disincentives to behavior change, regulatory programs, creation of new social norms of behavior where appropriate, and greater use of one-to-one communication and peer pressure within targeted areas to encourage behavior changes. Ultimately, by using a comprehensive, methodical, yet targeted approach, behavior changes may come within our reach.

Finally, sound methodologies to evaluate and track improvements in civic engagement (measuring changes in both participation in planning activities as well as changes in individual behaviors) will be developed so that continuous improvements can be made.

Civic Engagement and Action Vision Statement

The Clean Water Council’s vision is to increase the number of Minnesotans who understand their own role in achieving and maintaining healthy lakes, rivers and wetlands and will act accordingly. A greater proportion of individuals will be personally responsible for changing behaviors that impact water quality. At the same time, more residents will become active leaders and participants in the democratic process of creating water restoration plans and the common good of clean water in their watershed.

Civic Engagement Goals

- State and local agencies and residents will work collaboratively and with regularity to develop water quality goals for impaired and non-impaired waters as well as the means for achieving those goals. This effort will be sufficiently funded to ensure success.
- Using research, citizen input and a broad array of tools, local government organizations will develop incentives and disincentives to change individual behaviors that negatively impact water quality.
- Enough individuals will change behaviors in targeted areas of a watershed so that improvements in their waterbody can be documented or so that pristine waters continue to be protected.

Civic Engagement Roles and Responsibilities

State agencies: State agencies will support the knowledge and action components of civic engagement by providing residents with the technical information needed to evaluate and manage the health of their waterbody. In addition, agencies will provide financial and other support to local organizations and agencies to create and achieve solutions. State agency managers will identify barriers to engaging the public within their own organizations and work to address them.

Local governments: Local governments will seek to engage a broader spectrum of the public throughout the various stages of watershed planning activities. Staff will make an effort to go where the residents are to recruit participants to their planning processes, going beyond the “usual suspects”. Residents will be more respected for the capacities and resourcefulness they bring to the process.

Residents/stakeholders: A greater number of residents and stakeholders will answer the call of citizenship by participating in watershed planning processes that encourage learning, critical thinking, dialogue, the sharing of personal knowledge and values, and to personally participate in actions that are meaningful and achievable.

Clean Water Council: The Clean Water Council will identify the core elements needed for effective civic engagement using the major watershed framework. The Council will advocate for the delivery of those elements.

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