

CIVIC GOVERNANCE CASE STUDY – FINAL

November 19, 2015

Civic: The work of citizens. “Civic” is a qualifier that indicates that our work is framed in the tension between democratic principles and develops the capacity of the *populous* to govern for the good of the whole within that tension.

Govern: To rule over by right of authority; to exercise a directing or restraining influence over; guide; to define problems, contribute to solutions and act as a policy maker.

INTRODUCTION

Minnesota and Wisconsin have complex, layered, and interconnected water policies and programs intended to control pollution impacting lakes, rivers, streams and wetlands. Water governance in both states is often reliant upon the participation and cooperation of many stakeholders, including households, farmers, businesses, congregations, non-profits, academia, and government. Each stakeholder group is needed to protect the health of our waters. Many people within each state are making significant investments of their time, knowledge and skills in solving particular water pollution problems. The public also invests and leverages millions of public and private dollars to sustain water quality.

However, in spite of these investments of time, knowledge, skills and dollars, many water pollution problems persist, despite our best efforts. There is an increasing concern surrounding our ability to address the complex water problems that remain. There is a sense that continuing to rely on traditional approaches and government-centered strategies will not result in improvements to the waters upon which we all depend and deeply value.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF WATER GOVERNANCE IN WISCONSIN AND MINNESOTA

Since passage of the Clean Water Act in 1972, the federal government has delegated certain responsibilities for reducing and eliminating water pollution to the states. The Clean Water Act promotes a philosophy of federal-state partnership in which the federal government sets the agenda and standards for pollution abatement, and states are given responsibility for implementation and enforcement. State environmental agencies in Minnesota and Wisconsin have been responsible for carrying out the provisions of the law for many years.

State agencies create rules, regulations, programs, technologies, and services all aimed at meeting federal standards for controlling or eliminating water pollution. In turn, states assign primary responsibility for the day-to-day implementation of pollution abatement programs to local government organizations.

Regulatory programs aimed at treating municipal and industrial wastewater (called point sources) were at the heart of water quality protection programs for many years. State agencies administered and enforced point source programs resulting in significant reductions in the amount of pollution reaching our waterways. While these successes were substantial and noteworthy, the processes that led to these achievements did not typically include a significant role for citizens. Government was seen as the main change agent and the authority that should solve pollution problems.

During the years that government programs were mostly focused on regulating point source pollution, an interest developed in addressing other complex and challenging forms of pollution. Nonpoint source pollution (NPS) or “polluted runoff” caused by wet weather events (rain and snowmelt) came to the forefront. Nonpoint source pollution, caused by soil, fertilizers, oil, grease, toxic chemicals, salt, etc., originates from diverse locations on the landscape and wash into our waters. Given the complexities of NPS runoff, greater attention by every citizen is necessary to address and control these pollutants at their source.

In the past, water quality professionals counted on public outreach and education programs to convince watershed residents to make better land management decisions that would reduce NPS pollution. This approach has been used for decades, with some success. However, there is little evidence that creating awareness of the problem has translated into the kind of widespread implementation of best practices that are needed and were hoped for.

TRADITIONAL WATERSHED PLANNING AND MANAGEMENT APPROACHES

Traditional approaches to watershed planning and management are based on the current perceptions of the role that citizens should play in the process:

- Government and agency professionals have typically not identified with being a *citizen* in their roles at work. They often identify first with being an expert who was hired to develop the best solution to a particular problem.
- Many stakeholders outside of government may have identified with being a citizen, but may not have identified with the concept of being an *active citizen*, which includes the role and responsibility to achieve the common good. Their identity is often one of “client” or “customer” who expects services from the government. Their own role in solving water problems is often not understood or imagined.

When government staff and the public lack the identity and civic imagination surrounding the idea of “active citizenship” (where each person, no matter their title, status or affiliation has an obligation to govern with others to produce the public good of clean water), there is little common ground for addressing the critical water issues of our time.

In 2008, the MN State Legislature recognized that a more inclusive and engaging civic process was needed in watershed planning and management. At that point, state agencies were directed to do more to encourage open, transparent and inclusive public processes to protect and restore our waters. While this effort was a noble step, it did not address the need to re-imagine the identity and function of what is meant to be an “active citizen”.

There is a great deal at stake if we fail to understand the potential of organizing and collaborating with caring citizens. The tremendous passions, abilities and insights they could bring to watershed projects will remain untapped. Citizens who care will not have the opportunity to test their abilities as civic leaders and to become change agents in their communities. Powerful collaborations between government staff and local leaders will not occur and we will continue to be frustrated with our progress.

THE NEED FOR A NEW APPROACH TO WATER POLICY- MAKING

We believe that a new approach is needed that will inspire “active citizens” to play a more meaningful role in restoring and sustaining our water resources. We propose that a new approach to water policy making is needed that focuses on how institutions govern themselves. By institutions, we mean government agencies,

business, education, communities, non-profits, and families. Governing entails how an institution chooses to build and implement policies and programs, see themselves as partners with watershed citizens, and develop relationships that promote results for the common good.

Within a watershed context, how an organization governs itself has a great deal to do with whether it sees watershed residents as key stakeholders. How an organization governs itself sets the tone for how well the organization will encourage constructive tension when facing diverse points of view. Governance influences how open, transparent, fair, just, and inclusive an organization may be and whether its leaders model these behaviors consistently. How we choose to govern, and the role we claim in the process can either set a high standard for citizens, or promote the continuation of the status quo.

An increasing number of civic leaders agree that a **new approach to water governance and policymaking** is needed. Several experimental policy pilots were begun in 2013 that promoted research and development projects to include citizens from government agencies, non-profit, community-based organizations, and academia. These pilots put a **new governing framework** to work within a variety of organizations and existing water-related programs. We have been testing this new approach for water governance for several years with the plan to scale up slowly, where there is interest and a commitment to innovation.

WHAT IS THE CIVIC GOVERNANCE FRAMEWORK?

Civic governance offers an opportunity to address complex, challenging problems through an authentic citizen involvement process that promotes the need to produce measurable outcomes for the common good. The civic governance approach depends on a non-partisan, citizen-centered, transparent environment that builds trusting relationships and addresses an organization's internal governing structures that may be barriers to engaging multiple stakeholders and solving complex water problems. The governing framework supports the idea that creative tension is often needed among varied interests in order to identify and realize results for the common good.

Essential to the success of this process is the recognition that each person, no matter their title or expertise, is a citizen and a policy maker, no matter what agency, organization or position one holds. Civic Governance encourages stakeholders to suspend judgment, exercise civic imagination (a new concept of citizenship) and cultivate their civic leadership skills while leveraging existing resources to find productive solutions to public problems. This approach ensures long-term sustainable action for the common good.

Civic governance requires a personal approach that is respectful, accountable and active. This dynamic process builds broader stakeholder participation and responsibility. Through strategic listening and a willingness to consider diverse points of view, one learns to appreciate that at times people must address conflict openly and constructively in order to make progress together. Community organizers using the civic governance practice model active citizenship, and motivate others within a framework of collective action and collaboration. Astute political awareness and engagement are keys to the success of civic organizing. This approach recognizes the need to negotiate and compromise, while remaining accountable to common civic principles and standards for governance.

Citizens begin to gather and learn about other points of view in order to shape the next steps in addressing a particular problem and to get work done by working one-on-one with key stakeholders. It involves:

- 1) Shaping purposeful and strategic group meetings to foster productive outcomes. This demonstrates a respect for people's time and the need to achieve a common civic purpose;

- 2) Providing meeting evaluations and a written summary of outcomes ensures participants have a chance to help shape approaches and to accurately reflect on meeting activities; and
- 3) Continuous improvement through the evaluation of process and outcomes. This provides an accurate record, reduces redundancy, inspires accountability and guides purposeful actions.

This work begins by asking everyone to examine their own role as an “active citizen” within their particular institution. This work requires a change in mindset to involve citizens rather than solely depending on a customer service approach. The civic governance model and practice is tested within each person’s day-to-day work with the goal of expanding the role citizens play in all aspects of watershed management. This new model produces a different kind of civic mindset and internal governing structure that sustains democracy as a just system of governance while also meeting water quality goals.

To achieve responsible and sustainable water quality goals, institutions must allow adequate time for citizens within their institutions to test and develop this model. Institutions that support the time of key leaders to build an “active citizen” model will have much greater success in achieving sustainable water quality goals. As we witness the success of this new approach, institutions will begin to realize a greater capacity to manage our water resources in a more responsive, accountable and trustful environment.

Attachment

Things We Can Do Together to Help Water Quality

Potential Actions That Could Improve Water Quality

- Determine major decision makers within the jurisdictions in the watershed and attend meetings to learn about their interests, policies and partnerships related to water quality and their communities.
- Attend township, county and agency meetings to evaluate interests and responsibilities related to water quality.
- Evaluate your own practice of being an active citizen and determine your role and responsibility in achieving water quality improvements.
- Identify gaps within and between jurisdictions that may inhibit positive and trustful relationships.
- Be transparent, non-partisan and non-judgmental in working with others.
- Understand the important role citizens play in managing our water resources.
- Promote the role of citizens as key governing members in your day-to-day work.
- Assist others in recognizing what it means to be a trusting, responsible and accountable partner in addressing complex water quality issues.
- Buy non-toxic cleaners at home when possible.
- Increase/improve soil health on your property to increase soil tilth and infiltration of runoff.
- Reduce, reuse, recycle materials as much as you can.
- Keep oil off streets – address leaking oil from cars.
- Save electricity – generation of electricity often means burning coal. Burning coal emits mercury into the air which can then rain down into lakes and streams.
- Keep lake home septic systems in good condition.
- Do not dispose of leftover drugs down the toilet or drain! Ask a pharmacist for proper disposal methods.
- Buy non-toxic health and beauty aids and products.
- Limit pesticide/fertilizer/salt use around the home.
- Increase infiltration of stormwater on site (put downspouts on the grass or direct water into a rain garden).
- Clean up leaves/garbage/debris/pet waste in your street gutter.
- Leave natural vegetation near the lake shore to increase infiltration, reduce shoreline erosion and improve habitat.
- Become involved in local planning efforts to manage your watershed.
- Optimize use of pesticides and fertilizers on cropland to minimize runoff from fields.

Potential Organization/School Actions to Improve Water

- Reduce water use in schools (toilets, faucets, washing machines, dishwashers).
- Use non-toxic cleaners, soaps.
- Clean up oil spills in parking lots.
- Review cafeteria meat/milk sources to ensure alignment with water quality stewardship.
- Increase infiltration of snowmelt and rain water on school site (permeable pavement, rain gardens, community gardens).
- Ask if parking lot maintenance is managed by people who have road salt application training – idea is to minimize application on parking lots and sidewalks while getting the job done of protecting people.

- Become involved in planning efforts related to your local watersheds.
- Create a new or join an existing organization that aligns with your values and interests in water quality improvements.
- Support existing institutions already doing water quality work and help influence water resource policies.