

Civic Governance Demonstration Case Study

MINNESOTA LAKES AND RIVERS ADVOCATES INITIATIVE

NOVEMBER 2018

Minnesota Lakes and Rivers Advocates Initiative

Civic Governance Demonstration Jurisdiction: The general jurisdiction for the Civic Governance Demonstration (made up of three sets of regional institutions) is the relationship between government and community in developing the capacity to address public problems (including water quality) that impact the common good.

Civic Governance Initiative Partners: Minnesota Lakes and Rivers Advocates, Cass County Civic Demonstration Pilot, Ramsey County Civic Pilot.

Civic Governance Demonstration Identity Statement: Civic Governance is a new approach to policymaking that produces a civic infrastructure needed to govern for the common good and sustain democracy as a just system of governance.

Civic Governance Model: Specific practices developed to test and measure the value of Civic Governance in addressing water quality problems in a particular jurisdiction.

Integrating Active Citizenship and Civic Leadership Development into Watershed Management

Why do we need a new approach to policy making within the context of watershed management?

Water touches our lives in innumerable ways every day. It is a critical economic resource. When our waters become polluted, threatened, or scarce, solutions require many stakeholders, each who must play a key role in coordination with many others for success.

Both problems and solutions to water issues are complex. We have placed the greatest responsibility for making water policy in the hands of government agencies and built largely siloed administrative infrastructures to govern water.

Challenges include;

1. Numerous federal, state, and local rules,
2. Multiple jurisdictions each having specific responsibilities for protecting water,
3. A diverse set of uncoordinated NGO stakeholders,
4. Scattered funding sources, and
5. An often-unengaged citizenry.

Water flows around and through the gaps in these regulatory and institutional systems and impairments continue.

Science and funding are not the biggest obstacles to success. We have the science, expertise and knowledge needed to improve or protect water. We also have remarkable public investments in water protection in Minnesota, totaling about \$256 million annually. But often our communities (government staff and residents alike) lack the civic mindset and political skills needed to work cooperatively, navigate the complex regulatory maze, or to leverage the complex resources needed restore impaired waters and *protect* the good quality waters we still have.

Citizens most often organize in response to specific threats like a proposed feedlot, mine, pipeline or other development that could impact clean water. The results of such organizing create controversy in local communities, are often too late to be effective, do not build a sustainable civic mindset in the community around water.

In recent years, there has been a growing sense that we have reached a point of diminishing returns when it comes to traditional ways of governing watershed decisions and managing water quality. Existing education and outreach programs, incentive programs, regulatory programs, and even civic engagement activities all have their limits when it comes to achieving sustainable impact.

A New Approach

We need a new approach to water governance that puts emphasis on the role of active citizens to advance the common good of healthy water ecosystems and to understand that as citizens, our daily choices make a difference. In this way all citizens become policy makers. All have a vital role to play in producing the common good and that role gives honor and meaning to role of citizen.

There is a growing number of local leaders with economy, efficiency and quality of service in mind who have been looking for new ways to approach watershed management. Civic Governance is one such approach. Civic Governance tests new ways of getting better environmental outcomes using existing resources. Civic Governance develops leaders willing to invest time in dealing with the complexity of a problem and invest in developing their own civic skills. Civic Governance creates the kind of civic processes that encourage collaboration and develops the ability to organize other people who care to participate. All of this is done with the intent of listening, reasoning, and acting upon common civic principles and agreements derived from a common civic process.

Civic Governance is grounded in 5 principles. We believe in:

- 1) **Human capacity** to govern for the common good, if that capacity is developed in our societal institutions.
- 2) **Democracy**, “government of the people, by the people and for the people”, **as the best system of governance**, where active citizens contribute to governing for the common good in the tension between individual interests.
- 3) **Active citizenship**, where individuals are obligated to govern for the common good in institutions of family, community, faith, education, work and government.
- 4) **Political skills**, requiring an investment in the political mindset and abilities necessary to carry out the obligation of the role.
- 5) **Democracy is essential in all institutions**, each are responsible for sustaining the democratic values of our society and ensuring the capacity to govern for the common good. Civic leaders and active citizen know they are obligated to produce this outcome

Civic leadership development is done in what is called a “**civic organizing agency**” made up of leaders who commit to testing the Civic Governance model in their role.

A civic organizing agency works to development a new imagination for politics and policy making based on the civic obligation to govern for the common good. The structure of a civic organizing agency requires civic leaders to organize others to this new imagination in the places where they have the authority to act. The governing experience needs to be consciously associated with the functions of policy making as it relates to the individual’s obligation to:

1. Participate in defining water quality problems,
2. Contribute ideas for solving those problems, and,
3. Discover the challenges of governing day- to-day processes given competing political interests.

Without a place in which to develop a new civic imagination and capacity, individuals often remain cynical about policy making and government in general. Their point of view becomes the common good. If, and when, they

engage in politics and try to impact policy making, their choice is to participate within increasingly partisan and polarizing structures in which defining the common good is often not a goal. More often, individuals withdraw from their obligation to govern for the common good, with others who may or may not agree with one's view, for lack of a way and place to enter into that political process.

All these factors were integrated into the development of the Civic Governance model that:

1. **Links water quality restoration and protection work to active citizenship and a higher purpose** (i.e., all citizens in communities and institutions have a central role and obligation in a democracy to solve the challenge of water impairment and to work toward the common goal of clean water). This means owning one's role and the decisions one makes that could impact the greater good.
2. **Develops a cross-sector base of civic leaders in watershed communities through the structure of an expanding civic organizing agency.** Effort is focused on organizing those interested in and willing to engage in all aspects of the civic policy making process (including problem definition, strategic planning, leveraging the complex resources needed to advance solutions, working with all stakeholders who need to ensure water quality, and insisting upon and contributing to transparent, accountable decision-making). This requires creating the structure, process, and providing the support necessary for people to take on this new governing role. Participants integrate Civic Governance into what they are already doing to improve water quality in their existing organizational role.
3. **Establishes internal policies in all institutions** that support the obligation of governing for the common good that comes with the identity of being a citizen. Develops the civic capacity of key leaders and creates governing processes that sustain a meaningful governing role for interested citizens in watersheds. *This requires a dedication of staff resources to civic development across time, sectors, and generations.*

QUOTE: *“At the local level healthy lake and river ecosystems are a bipartisan value. But when threats emerge to water at the local level, citizens tend to organize in opposition to the given threat, resulting in more traditional and controversial “fights” in local zoning board meetings, County Commissioner meetings or at the State Capitol. These fights usually become partisan. They often divide local communities, pit citizens against local and state resource managers and regulatory agencies. These fights are always reactive and have significant political costs that diminish future water protection efforts. So, MLR began to work to develop a proactive approach that stresses civic leadership development as a Best Management Practice to promote the public good of healthy lake and river ecosystems. This grassroots is grounded in real commitments from community partnerships, each who has a key role to play in addressing complex water quality issues. We believe that this approach will not only produce better local water outcomes, but also create a grassroots constituency that is transparent and authentic and has significant and sustainable political potency.” -- Jeff Forester Executive Director of MLR*

Why Did Minnesota Lakes and Rivers Advocates (MLR) Choose to Participate in the Initiative?

MLR is a statewide organization. Their mission is to protect Minnesota's lake and river heritage for current and future generations by forging powerful links among lakes, lakes advocates, and policy makers. MLR seeks to protect the economic value of tourism, recreation and property values and to protect the quality of life for people living in Minnesota.

MLR is a 501(c)(4) non-profit, which means that the organization has an inherent political and policy mission. MLR is an example of a public policy advocacy organization. Advocacy organizations often seek to resolve imbalances of power (i.e., local lake association groups and local communities that feel that they do not have a voice in policy decisions that impact the lake they steward).

In 2015, before Executive Director Jeff Forester began to study and practice Civic Governance, MLR pursued four main strategies to serve their mission:

1. **Lobbying and advocacy** at the State Capitol. MLR employs a full-time contract lobbyist.
2. **Media** - MLR writes news releases and news stories to educate and frame issues statewide.
3. **Science** - MLR has lobbied to support lake-based science funding at the Minnesota legislature and works to get science-based data and stories out to the public and elected officials.
4. **Grassroots** - MLR has built a database with close to 200,000 names and addresses of lake home and cabin owners in Minnesota. Using direct mail and electronic action alerts, MLR leverages direct constituent correspondence to elected officials in an effort to impact legislative outcomes.

Advocacy organizations typically seek solution strategies that:

- Advance a legislative agenda based upon a defined need. They can often take on an adversarial role, calling for government or positional leaders to regulate specific behaviors.
- Develop member mobilizing skills and messaging, but do not typically help members develop complex political skills.

The focus for organizing for MLR was on changing or developing government regulations or leveraging funding to address specific needs, like shoreline property tax cuts, aquatic invasive species prevention, nutrient loading of lakes and rivers, salt pollution. The role of staff was to be an advocate, administrator, communicator or subject matter expert. The MLR Board created institutional policies and budgets to support these roles and practices, the use of expertise, outreach and education through the media, and mobilization.

In step with the traditions of advocacy, MLR spent considerable time lobbying for their member's interests at the State Capitol. However, in recent years, the organization began asking itself, "How do we better forge powerful links among our constituents at the local level as well?" In considering what this might look like, MLR needed to look at how its organization was structured and determine if MLR could change it.

As a 501(c)(4) non-profit organization, MLR cannot receive grant or foundation dollars and is dependent upon membership contributions to do their work. Contributions are not tax deductible, and so tend to be rather small. This structure posed challenges to MLR having broader impact, particularly at the local level. The question became, "Without hiring and training additional staff, how is it possible to create a broad cross sector base of citizens to advance water policy across the state?"

Executive Director, Jeff Forester and the MLR Board identified other critical gaps in MLR's ability to fulfill its mission:

- Many people at the local level feel frustrated/disenfranchised by the current political process,
- There is a growing sense among its members that state agencies were disconnected from their problems and needs,
- Many members viewed government as service delivery organizations and were frustrated by lack of responsiveness,
- There was a belief among members that key decisions that impacted them had already been made at the capitol, before public meetings were ever convened. This contributed to a sense of powerlessness and an inability to influence the status quo,
- Watershed residents and lake leaders had a sense of being victimized by government programs, or unhappy, instead of feeling empowered and collaborative,
- At the same time lake leaders talked privately about their own challenges in organizing effective, sustainable lake associations (e.g., the lack of consistent decision-making processes, members who were not interested in taking an active role in addressing water quality issues unless it impacted their own property, members who expected quick answers to complex problems, and members who lacked the time and energy to contribute to the work, etc.),

- Members of lake associations are often just as “siloes” at the community level as government is at the state and federal levels. Lake leaders were often not engaging leaders within local businesses, congregations, schools, government, etc.), in a way that produced solutions that are backed by the community,
- One Executive Director could never adequately represent, advocate for, or engage all people across the state, except by polarizing and over-simplifying the problems as “us vs. them”,
- The MLR board, while providing good fiscal oversight, had a narrow role and was not actively engaged in advancing the organizational mission on a day to day basis,
- Most lake associations in MN were insular, not well-coordinated with other lake associations and not focused on achieving successes beyond their own community or county,
- Membership levels and success at the MN Legislature had begun to stagnate.

Jeff Forester and the MLR Board identified several key strengths upon which MLR could build:

1. With over 500 lake associations in Minnesota, and a membership that includes cabin owners who live in districts across the state, there is both a good potential for organized local action and a geographically dispersed constituency. MLR could meet people where they already were,
2. MLR has built a good reputation at the MN Legislature and in the public over its 25- year existence,
3. MLR is non-partisan,
4. There is an increasing interest and passion for water issues in both public policy circles and in the media; and a very real and pressing need in terms of rapidly degrading water resources,
5. Key MLR board members were convinced that it was time to try a new approach and were willing to apply their passion for change to their role within MLR.

In 2014 Jeff Forester was introduced to Civic Governance after leadership development as a a Humphrey Public Policy Fellow and a Shannon Leadership Fellow. The Civic Governance framework seemed to provide a powerful solution strategy and so Jeff put forth considerable effort testing the concepts. He changed his philosophy and day-to-day approach to leading change. This required a great deal of self-reflection; learning, transformation, as well as time spent testing a new message and organizational purpose with his constituents. In turn, Jeff worked with his board to introduce them to the Civic Governance framework, used training in civic leadership development to shift the organization from more traditional advocacy organization structures and strategies to one driven by the need to develop civic leaders and an engaged citizenry across the state in a common mission to protect Minnesota’s lakes and rivers from degradation.

In 2015, the MLR board developed a new strategic and collaborative vision for co-producing public solutions to lake and river water quality problems. As Jeff began to meet with lake associations across the state, he shifted his usual messaging to something new – he encouraged members to claim their own jurisdiction and begin working to develop relationships with local civic leaders both inside and outside of government and build “civic infrastructure” around their local water resources. Jeff quantified and measured lake association contributions statewide - over \$6.2 million and 1.25 million volunteer hours annually. At the State Legislature, Jeff began advocating that policy makers leverage this local investment by lake associations in the public resource by providing greater local control, increased civic engagement, and the need to direct greater funding resources to the local level to address water issues.

Since then, the MLR board has taken a slow, measured, strategic approach as they tested a more transparent, positive, collaborative governing approach. In some ways, this turns on its head the traditional notion of non-profits being top-down, single-issue, advocacy organizations, and shifts it to one that identifies and then develops skilled civic leaders and active citizens ready to roll up their sleeves to solve local and statewide problems. Civic leaders, working in tandem with MLR, can have greater impact on local, state and national policies that impact lakes and rivers.

How Has the Initiative Been Working?

In 2012, MLR had no lake association members, but over 6000 individual members. MLR was a typical service-delivery advocacy organization. The Executive Director did the heavy lifting for its' members. In 2014 Executive Director Jeff Forester began to study and practice Civic Governance. Over the past 4 years, the Executive Director has put forth a significant effort to shift the vision and purpose of his organization. First, he worked with his board to reimagine their mission and values related to lake and river advocacy. Next, Jeff and two other MLR members became members of an Organizing Agency (cohort) where they learned about how to become stronger civic leaders. As they have learned together, the three partners have developed into an effective team, developing a new kind of civic imagination around their work across the state. By using the same civic principles, standards and disciplines, the three leaders are able to set a consistent tone in their lake and river advocacy work, improving their ability to get organizational goals accomplished and to more broadly spark the civic imaginations of their constituents.

What Solution Strategy Has the Initiative Focused On?

At the heart of the civic governance framework is the idea that democracy can best thrive when it is actively modeled within all institutions. When these institutions provide the space where citizens can practice democracy and develop themselves as leaders and active citizens, our ability to work together for the common good increases.

Consequently, MLR is first working inside the organization to change existing processes and policies. Staff and Board members participate in solving complex water pollution problems, each learning and practicing key civic skills and disciplines in the process. The idea here is to build civic infrastructure and community capacity for addressing public problems inside the organization first so that MLR can better support civic development in communities across Minnesota

What is the Timeline?

The Civic Governance Model (Demonstration) has 4, 5-year long stages. Each stage moves its membership closer to a sustainable civic organization within an ever-expanding base of institutional partnerships. In stages 2-4, the Civic Governance model creates impact over an increasing geographical and institutional scale.

The MLR Demonstration is now in its third year of Stage 1. Stage 1 of the Civic Governance Demonstration is focused on testing the capacity of its civic leaders to create a new kind of civic imagination and the civic infrastructure needed to support a new approach to policy making. This means addressing barriers that may exist between government agencies and their community which may be getting in the way of constructive collaboration for clean water.

During Stage 1, the Initiative seeks to demonstrate that Civic Governance improves the ability of initiative partners to meet organizational goals, create an effective network of civic leaders that have a direct role in reaching those goals, and ensure that the work will be sustainable, no matter what leader is heading the effort.

What Have Been the Challenges?

The challenge of changing existing systems has been well-documented. People would often rather cope with changes happening to them, rather than lead out with a change strategy. It is one thing for leaders to know there is a need for change in order to achieve greater accountability (both within and outside their institution), but it is quite another to try an unfamiliar approach for improving internal operations if that leader is uncertain about the outcomes, and there are already overwhelming demands on their time.

Those who agree to pilot Civic Governance need to own that they are the *object* of change as well as the *agents* for change, and that it will require a 2-3 year commitment of their time to feel a level of comfort and confidence (grounded in evidence) of the value Civic Governance brings to their institution.

Civic leaders start with the understanding that the way leaders currently spend their time (their practice) can be the root cause for why they cannot produce the outcomes they had hoped for. They need to own their own role in “setting policy” and begin to incrementally change: 1) the way they use their time, while still producing outcomes that are currently expected, 2) the messages they convey in all situations to reflect the meaning of the civic principles and standards, and 3) the way they practice their role.

Other challenges in applying Civic Governance include:

- Current approaches to water governance require that we produce a large scale of impact before we have laid the foundation for supporting and sustaining that impact,
- Current members of the civic organizing agency need to meet all previous tasks of the organization while still providing enough time to learn and practice Civic Governance and to prove the value of the model to achieving organizational goals,
- The Director will need to maintain enough support from his board, and time to sustain the MLR Organizing Agency (learning cohort). In time, they need to become fully engaged in the organizing process,
- Members of the MLR Civic Organizing Agency who are learning the Civic Governance Model need to continue to expand their base of civic leaders who, in turn, can train other leaders on the ground as they work on important lake and water quality issues.

What Have Been the Benefits of Civic Governance?

Since 2015, there has been enough evidence documented to show that members who have consistently applied the Civic Governance Framework have been able to get better outcomes in key areas of their organizations’ work. The framework has proven useful in a wide variety of organizations and circumstances. Some examples of what is working well are outlined below.

- MLR has developed a Civic Governance Governing Document and annual work plan that drives their vision and activities related to Civic Governance,
- In 2015, MLR co-hosted a statewide Aquatic Invaders Summit where a new Local AIS Action framework was developed. A key portion focuses on building local capacity of local lake groups and engagement of the grassroots around AIS work,
- In 2017, the MLR Board took a year-long training on Civic Governance from Peg Michels, author of the Civic Governance framework,
- In 2017, MLR collaborated with the Citizens League and the Initiative Foundation using grant funds provided by the Clean Water, Land and Legacy Amendment to create two new Civic Governance projects in Ramsey and Cass Counties. There are participants in both of these counties that want to develop themselves into Lead Organizers so they can teach others about Civic Governance,
- MLR has gone from having zero lake associations as members in 2012 to becoming the largest lake association organization in Minnesota, now with more than 225 lake association members and over 6000 individual members,
- Revenues have increased by 35% since 2015,
- MLR’s media presence has increased significantly over the same period,
- The Civic Governance Demonstration Pilots in Cass and Ramsey Counties have expanded to include resource managers, county commissioners, park board members, businessmen, watershed professionals, Tribal members, university staff. Together, they have created a New Infestation Response Plan, that has been used in many other areas of the state, begun new bio-control pilots for Eurasian Watermilfoil infestations, and are testing eDNA to measure lake health,
- At the Capitol, legislators are beginning to talk about the great work the lake associations are doing to protect the public good,
- Grassroots participation in the legislative process has grown from a few hundred emails/letters/calls per year to over 10,000 last year - these are authentic communications with citizens communicating directly with their elected officials on issues important to their communities,

- Lake Associations have begun to meet 1 on 1 with their elected officials at both the local and state levels, share their newsletters with them, provide field trips of local water issues, and to get feedback on their efforts, and
- Jeff Forester feels a momentum building and has been pulled along by others who want to have greater impact in their communities.

The Aquatic Invasive Species Coordinator for Ramsey County, Justin Townsend, said of his work in the Ramsey County Civic Governance Demonstration Pilot, “Aquatic invasive species by nature require strong relationships between partners to properly manage. Ramsey County, its lake associations, and partners have fostered a positive working relationship focused on prevention, early detection, and response planning through civic governance. Diverging opinions still exist, but now they enhance the conversation rather than derail it. Adoption of new techniques happens quickly, and best practices are refined in a way that seemed unattainable before. This can be seen in experiments to use eDNA for early detection, development of a new infestation response plan now used statewide and talks of using weevils to control Eurasian milfoil in the next year. Following the civic governance structure and principles will ensure that Ramsey County Lake’s partner organizations remain leaders in AIS prevention and management.”

For MLR, the big difference since utilizing Civic Governance principles is that that the organization is now more authentic, transparent and proactive. By organizing people and groups at the local level who are working each day for the public good, and asking them, as policy makers, to leverage their considerable energy and volunteerism. Said Jeff Forester, “MLR member organizations have increasingly become part of the solution rather than remaining focused on the many problems we still have in our lakes. Groups are becoming more proactive and less reactive leading to less public controversy and better solutions being implemented on the ground. By starting at the local grassroots level, using an effective, transparent, engaging and fair process, we can advance solutions within all levels of government that have broad public approval, resolving conflicts before they ever develop into something that requires legislative attention.”

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