

CIVIC GOVERNANCE DEMONSTRATION CASE STUDY



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MN-Saint Croix Initiative

A demonstration of the Midwest Active Citizenship Initiative (MACI). MACI organizes a base of civic leaders and a new basis for policy making in the Midwest that places the obligation to govern justly and wisely in the role we all have as citizens. This base of leaders uses a civic organizing approach to implement a civic policy agenda. The civic policy agenda produces the civic capacity and civic infrastructure needed for institutions to achieve their specific goals and foster economic and environmental sustainability, while addressing the complex problems that threaten the common good. Civic Organizing makes a case for civic policymaking to sustain democracy as a just system of governance.

CIVIC GOVERNANCE CASE STUDY FRAMING DOCUMENT

Civic: The work of citizens. “Civic” is a qualifier that indicates that our work is framed in the tension between democratic principles, and that develops the capacity of all citizens to govern for the good of the whole within that tension. This sovereign right and obligation for the people to be the basis of governance for the common good in a democracy, is grounded in the meaning and role of “citizenship”, as well as the centuries of political movements and often cruel sacrifices that continue to give meaning to the words, “I am a citizen.”

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.

Civic Governance Demonstration

The Civic Governance Demonstration Jurisdiction: The Civic Governance Demonstration is made up of three Civic Organizing Agencies (cohorts). These cohorts examine the relationship between government and community in developing the capacity to address public problems (including water quality) that impact the common good.

The Civic Governance Civic Organizing Agencies are 1) Minnesota-St Croix, 2) Interstate (Wisconsin), and 3) Minnesota Lakes and Rivers Advocates (MLR).

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.

The Civic Governance Model: This specific approach, developed over 20 years of evaluating institutional governing practices, is applied to specific water quality problems in a particular jurisdiction.

This document frames the need for a new approach to politics and policy making that is grounded in the role and obligation we all have as citizens. Imagining citizenship as the public “office” we all hold in a democracy expands the current meaning of citizenship from one that concentrates solely on the legal status that title confers, to one that sees the role and capacity all individuals have to make decisions in light of the common good. Civic Governance places accountability for developing this capacity in all institutions of family, faith, community, work, learning, and government.

The authors of the case studies framed in this argument, realize that this is a new idea for our times, but also that it is grounded in the legacy of individuals and societies who have sacrificed greatly and contributed much to sustaining the word and the meaning of *democracy* as a just form of governance.

This argument is further explained and explored within three Civic Organizing Case Studies, each describing the way that the Civic Governance model has been applied to each of three separate jurisdictions. Each case study addresses:

- 1) **The Need** for change in water quality governance, grounded in evidence that the current way governance is imagined, structured, and practiced, is a key barrier to achieving good water quality.

2) How the Proposed Model Has Been Applied using the model's 3 defining documents:

- **Civic Governance Policy Agenda** which calls for investment in civic leadership development in many of our institutions (public, private, and non-profit). We argue that there is a need for civic leaders to learn how to organize a base of diverse stakeholders to the universal obligations of active citizenship (advancing the common good, contributing to solution strategies, and governing the process to ensure accountability to achieving goals), with the intent of addressing problems and policies that are impacting our ability to address key policy issues within institutions and society. Leaders can address specific policy issues at the same time they renew and enhance the ideas of democracy and active citizenship in our day-to-day lives.
- **Jurisdiction Governing Document**- Frames the way in which the agenda can be advanced in specific situations. This document includes aspirational principles as well as the skills and disciplines needed to be an effective civic leader.
- **Criteria for MACI Membership**- The basis for accountability in determining if the model meets the identified need.

3) Evidence that is documented in specific case studies, co-authored by members of Civic Governance.
(See specific case studies posted online)

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? How does that relate to the need for investing in civic leadership development for local government and leaders of community-based institutions?

Water touches our lives in innumerable ways every day, and it is one of the most important “raw materials” for manufacturing and development across many sectors of our economy. When our waters become polluted, threatened, or scarce, it necessitates the involvement of many stakeholders, each who has a key role to play in determining the common good around this critical resource.

There is no doubt that water pollution presents a complex problem to solve. Our current approach to water governance has produced: 1) numerous federal, state, and local rules, 2) multiple jurisdictions each having specific responsibilities for protecting water, 3) a diverse set of stakeholders, 4) scattered funding sources, and 5) an often-unengaged citizenry. When these factors combine, they challenge even the best efforts to manage water quality well.

The good news is that we often have the science, expertise and knowledge needed to improve or protect water. Yet, it is often the case that our communities (government staff and residents alike) lack the civic mindset and skills needed to work cooperatively or to leverage the complex resources needed to solve our most serious pollution problems. These same circumstances also impact our ability to *protect* the good quality waters we still have.

The current model of water governance places the greatest responsibility for policymaking and governance in the hands of government agencies. Experience tells us that this governance model is not enough to address complex water issues. 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 real impact.

A New Approach

Given the scope and complexity of the problems we face, it has become clear that we need a new way to think about water governance that starts with putting ourselves inside the obligation of caring about and seeing the value in the common good, and to understand that as citizens, our daily choices make a difference. In these ways, we all become “policy makers”. We all have a vital role to play in producing the common good and that role gives honor and meaning to the term, “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, providing an opportunity to test new ways of getting better environmental outcomes using existing resources. Civic Governance seeks to develop leaders willing to invest time in dealing with the complexity of a problem, and who can invest in developing their own civic imagination and political skills to organize the stakeholders who impact or who are impacted by the problem. In so doing, they create the kind of civic processes that encourage collaboration and develop the ability to organize sustainable solutions to complex problems.

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 citizens know they are obligated to produce this outcome.

Civic leadership development is defined by these civic principles and done in what is called a “**civic organizing agency**” made up of leaders who commit to testing the Civic Governance model in their role. All of this is done with the intent of listening, reasoning, and acting upon common agreements derived from adherence to civic principles.

The development of a new civic imagination for politics and policy making which puts everyone inside the obligation to govern for the common good in their role as an active citizen, requires leaders to organize a tangible experience of this obligation 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.

Civic Governance Demonstration Case Study

Without a place in which to develop a new civic imagination and capacity, individuals often remain cynical about policy making, and government in general. If 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 for lack of a way and place to do so.

In addition, the civic space (institution) created for development of a new civic imagination and obligation, needs to have the capacity to expand to a scale of impact where the challenge of producing healthy land and water exists.

What Does Civic Governance Do?

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 pollution 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 a replicable 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.***

What Is the Timeline for the Demonstration?

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. The Civic Governance model creates impact over an increasing geographical and institutional scale.

Stage 1 of the Civic Governance Demonstration is dedicated to establishing a "civic organizing agency", the members of which have produced a daily practice that demonstrates their capacity to model the civic principles and standards that define the model. This model creates a new kind of civic imagination and organizes the civic infrastructure needed to support a new approach to policymaking. This often means addressing systemic barriers resulting from the institutional policies created between government agencies and their communities. These policies may be getting in the way of constructive collaborations for clean water.

However, the most important outcomes we are seeking in Stage 1, is evidence that an investment in civic leadership development (as stated in the Civic Governance Policy Agenda) improves the ability of leaders to meet organizational and watershed management goals in a sustainable way. We believe that when people organize to achieve tangible goals that are grounded in the higher aspirations and expectations summarized by civic principles and have a direct role in governing the process, they will ensure that their efforts become sustainable and are not reliant on charismatic leaders that inevitably come and go.

Why Did the Partners Choose to Participate in this Initiative?

Like many water professionals, the watershed partners that make up the demonstration, had become frustrated with the way existing approaches were working and were looking for new approaches that might show greater promise in addressing complex watershed problems. When introduced to the Civic Governance framework, each decided, through trial and error, to determine whether the Civic Governance model had promise within their own jurisdiction. Each is learning that a civic leader organizes partnerships to a civic obligation to govern for the common good, integrates Civic Governance into their role, establishes accountability to the purpose of developing a new approach to policy making, and teaches from practice. In this way, they demonstrate the meaning of civic leadership as: a civic organizer, civic educator, and civic policy, all carried out in their role.

Each partner has taken a slow, measured, strategic approach as they tested this collaborative model of watershed governance. This has not required any of them to give up existing programs or authorities. Rather, it has meant they use their time differently to produce better results. Civic Governance requires them to track the value of taking the time to develop themselves more fully as civic leaders, to bring their staff or associates along with them, and to slowly introduce others to the Civic Governance model.

What Activities Have the Partners Been Focused On in the Minnesota St Croix Civic Organizing Agency?

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 strengthens.

Consequently, partners in this Initiative are working inside their organizations to change existing processes and policies so that active citizens can participate in solving complex water pollution problems, learning and practicing key civic skills and disciplines in the process.

What Have Been the Benefits of Civic Governance?

Since 2016, we have gathered enough evidence to show that members who have consistently applied the Civic Governance Model have achieved better outcomes in key areas of their organization's work. Some examples of how civic governance is making a difference are outlined below.

Mille Lacs SWCD:

- The SWCD Administrator, Susan Shaw, is making the case that there is value in investing staff time in developing community-based partnerships, whose members use the same principles, standards and disciplines to organize and sustain partnerships (such as watershed teams).
- Mille Lacs SWCD has found Civic Governance to be very effective in helping to restructure internal staff meetings and supervisor/staff relationships. SWCD staff meetings now encourage structured conversations, improved transparency, monthly staff check-ins, civic work plans, and better accountability for achieving organizational goals and civic participation.
- Personnel hiring practices have shifted so that greater focus is given to hiring individuals who understand their role as a civic leader in the community, and as someone who can organize active citizens to be a part of watershed planning and implementation projects.

Civic Governance Demonstration Case Study

- The Mille Lacs SCWD Board is being introduced to the value of developing an organizational Governing Document which places the obligation to govern within the role each of us has as citizens. This document would not change existing authorities of the board in conducting day-to-day business. Rather, it makes the case for civic leadership development as a key to achieving the SWCD's organizational goals.
- The SWCD Administrator is exploring the use of Civic Governance as a framework for bringing together all key watershed organizations as they develop a One Watershed, One Plan document for the Rum River.

“The Mille Lacs SWCD is now using the Civic Governance model to assist us in our decision-making processes. Civic Organizing leadership training has, and is, supporting our work within the organization and as we work in the community. While we have been learning this framework for several years, the sincere application of its concepts and the changes we have made because of it, have occurred over the past year. The first dramatic change we made was a commitment to meet regularly, one-on-one with key stakeholders. This is a significant change in how time is scheduled and valued. The outcomes have unquestionably been worth all the hours spent. Board members report that time spent one-on-one with staff has been valuable and meaningful in preparing for the larger governing meetings. After a whole year of reprioritizing the way we spend our time, the staff consensus is that we would not go back to the old way of doing business unless we were required to. Staff is now able to generate sincere interest in and gather valuable input from individuals we work with, not just polite interest and no action.” — Susan Shaw, Administrator, Mille Lacs SWCD

Ann Lake Watershed Alliance (ALWA):

- ALWA leader, Jeff Hamme, has spent considerable effort developing himself as a civic leader. To lead his organization in a new way, he has created a draft Governing Document that makes the case for civic leadership development as it relates to meeting his organization's goals.
- Jeff has succeeded in modeling a new approach to governing his organization, moving from a strict advocacy position to one that seeks mutual understanding in the community and which values decision making that reflects the common good. His new approach contributed to organizing key stakeholders around the idea of permanently protecting an important buffer area adjacent to Ann Lake.
- Jeff is organizing a small group, consisting of one community member from ALWA and one government member from Kanabec County SWCD, to expand his organization's leadership base and support their role as active citizens to achieve bullet # 1 above.
- Jeff strengthened the community-government relationship by organizing Ann Lake watershed township leaders to their role as active citizens in the water quality improvement effort related to bullet # 2, above. Organizing key stakeholders, both community and government, to the task of mitigating the excess nutrient levels in Ann Lake, will also contribute to improving water quality downstream, including the St. Croix River.
- Currently, Kanabec County's approach to protecting water quality is by establishing policies with little to no public input involved. Jeff is working with government officials and community members, using and teaching Civic Governance principles and standards, as a new approach to establishing and implementing a policy that truly reflects the common good of water quality.

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“Civic Governance has redefined my role as a citizen. It’s not just about voting, or challenging elected officials in public hearings, it’s about taking responsibility for finding a solution to things that impact me. That solution is not just about me, but also about the common good of clean water. And ultimately it means investing time in using my leadership to build a sustainable and civic lake association in which active citizens in each generation can continue the work.” -- Jeff Hamme, Ann Lake Watershed Alliance

Kanabec SWCD:

- The SWCD Manager, Deanna Pomije, has been using civic governing practices for three years, expanding on the work of her predecessor, Kelly Osterdyke. Her efforts began with her requiring new staff to use the same civic practices they use to develop civic skills within the organization, in the community as well. Staff position descriptions make this expectation clear.
- Staff within the SWCD see the benefit of Civic Governance and have started the work of putting the principles into practice. Work continues with helping the SWCD Board become more familiar with the various civic governance policies.
- Deanna intends to further familiarize the Board with the civic principles, standards, and practices, with the hope of approving a Governing Document of their own.
- In partnership with ALWA, the SWCD continues using a new civic approach to accomplish a significant water quality goal -treatment of Ann Lake to reduce the high internal phosphorus load. Because of a common interest in, and understanding of Civic Governance principles, Kanabec SWCD has been able to work efficiently and constructively with the Ann Lake Watershed Alliance. In recent years, the two organizations have worked cooperatively on various water quality projects and are currently expanding projects to include a partnership with the local Township. ALWA and Kanabec will be working together to share the Civic Governance framework with the Township. It is hoped that together, the three organizations can create an effective partnership focused on improving water quality in Ann Lake.
- Civic Governance has also been useful and successful for the SWCD in its work on Fish Lake. Active citizens have demonstrated leadership skills and an interest in improving water quality. At a recent annual meeting of their Association, individuals voluntarily spoke on key water quality challenges, which they had individually researched. The SWCD will continue to use Civic Governance skills and disciplines with Fish Lake leaders, with hopes of creating a meaningful, cooperative partnership with the lake association.
- Kanabec SWCD has an idea to expand their Civic Governance practice working with the Snake River Watershed Management Board. This may be a larger undertaking, as this is a two-committee group, representing four counties. Going forward over the next 3-4 years, they will be tasked with pursuing the creation of a ‘One Watershed One Plan’. Work is only just starting on this Plan.

“As a result of using Civic Governance skills and disciplines, the Public Forum we held where we discussed an expensive water quality treatment to Ann Lake was impressive. There was good attendance, but above all there was good, interactive discussion. It was one of the best meetings of my career. Continuing the Civic Governance approach as we go forward, I believe, will result in more community involvement and a greater understanding of our water quality issues.” --Deanna Pomije, District Manager, Kanabec SWCD

What have been the challenges?

The challenge of changing existing systems has been well-documented. Oftentimes, people would rather cope with difficult changes happening ‘to them’, rather than lead out with a change strategy that is proactive. 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 experiment with 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 2-3year 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.

The ultimate goal of the Civic Governance Demonstration is to make a case for incorporating this approach within personnel, program, and leadership policies in order to build and sustain effective, just and equitable partnerships between government, community organizations and individuals. By so doing, we can improve our ability to solve complex public policy issues within communities and across regions.

Related challenges in applying the Civic Governance model include:

- Current approaches to water governance can sometimes be unrealistic in that they require us to produce a large scale of impact before we have laid the foundation for supporting and sustaining that impact;
- We have limited capacity at this point to teach and practice Civic Governance at scale;
- The three civic leaders will need to maintain enough support from their boards, and enough time to sustain the MN – St. Croix Organizing Agency (learning cohort). In time, the organizations’ boards will need to become fully engaged in the organizing process which will require them to try new practices in their roles; and
- The three partners will need to continue to expand their base of interested citizens and other civic leaders who can work with them to accomplish important water quality goals;

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