

## Purpose

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To provide a summary of Minnesota Pollution Control Agency's (MPCA) existing and planned civic engagement activities to the Clean Water Council's Ad Hoc Civic Engagement Work Group.

## Philosophy/Approach

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With the help of local units of government, other state agencies and experts, MPCA staff intends to develop, test and share products and services that local governments can use to involve and empower citizens and stakeholders in watershed planning and implementation processes. Rather than create a one-size-fits-all approach that is mandated by state government, MPCA staff intends to make these products and services user-centered and useful at a variety of scales (from a watershed to a neighborhood scale). MPCA staff believes that civic engagement is usually most effective at smaller scales.

The goals are to develop products and services that add real value to watershed or subwatershed projects and that set new expectations in this area. In addition, we plan to create simple evaluation tools that will measure the effectiveness of civic engagement activities. By tracking and documenting successful approaches, we can focus resources more effectively over time.

Local partners will help us to co-create these new services. However, local governments and citizens must be the leaders in civic engagement planning and implementation. In those areas, MPCA will play a supporting role.

## Ongoing Activities

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The work of the Clean Water Council and the Civic Engagement Work Group have provided the inspiration for many of the ideas being pursued by MPCA staff. To provide the support and services that some local agencies and organizations want or need, MPCA is actively developing the following:

**Interactive civic engagement Idea Bank:** The Idea Bank will be a database of civic engagement documents, products, innovative ideas, success stories, video clips, and more held within a laptop computer that can be taken anywhere and used by local governments, with the aid of a trained facilitator, when developing civic engagement work strategies and work plans.

**Strategic planning framework:** In the past, civic engagement was an afterthought in many watershed projects. In many instances, citizens were asked to provide feedback on already developed ideas and were not allowed the opportunity to significantly impact decisions or to "own" the solutions. Now, we know that there must be greater involvement among the citizens living in close proximity to a lake, river or wetland that needs restoration or protection.

When planning for citizen involvement in watershed planning and management, it is common for project teams to move immediately from problem definition to the selection of tools or ideas for citizen involvement – often without carefully considering existing conditions or other important factors unique to their community. Many projects could benefit from a more rigorous understanding of the community's capacity for civic engagement (assets and challenges) and from a more strategic approach to planning for civic engagement. MPCA is working to develop and test a set of guiding questions that provide structure and support for developing a complete and meaningful civic engagement strategy and work plan.

**Specialist network:** Civic engagement work is, in many ways, as or more complex than the technical side of watershed work. It takes expertise, savvy and a thoughtful strategy to be successful. Therefore, MPCA, local units of government and experts will need to work cooperatively to better link the civic and private lives of citizens within watersheds across Minnesota.

For example, complex conversations about water and land use are often difficult and contentious. Neutral meeting facilitators can help communities have productive dialogues about improving or protecting local waterbodies. MPCA intends to bring together a collaborative consortium of trained facilitators that would be available to projects statewide.

The MPCA has had conversations with a number of potential facilitators that could provide this service, but has not yet developed a system whereby they could be made available to projects. Other specialists and experts will be convened to provide training or support in areas such as grant writing, civic leadership, and the creative use of technology in civic engagement and education activities.

**Evaluation criteria and tools:** What is a quality civic engagement experience from the standpoint of our citizenry? How can we measure that so that government organizations can improve civic engagement approaches over time? MPCA is working with the University of Minnesota (U of M) to develop measures and evaluation tools to track the quality of civic engagement in water planning.

Eventually, we hope to develop simple tools for measuring changes in individual attitudes and behaviors that result from civic engagement activities.

**Testing new services and approaches within total maximum daily load (TMDL) projects:** MPCA staff is meeting with Regional Project Managers to determine which watershed or subwatershed projects might be ready and willing to work with us to try new civic engagement services and approaches. The goal is to begin work with them this summer and fall. MPCA will also work with other projects upon request, if time allows.

**Research:** MPCA staff continues to research civic engagement to keep up-to-date on current approaches, innovations, etc.

**Partnerships:** Staff is working to create productive alliances with other state agencies and organizations known for their expertise in this field. For example, staff has spoken with Board of Water Soil Resources and Minnesota Department of Natural Resources staff, the Citizens League, Minnesota Waters, Minnesota Dispute Resolution Center, Initiative Foundation, Minnesota Extension, The Harwood Institute, and the McKnight Foundation, to name a few. These conversations will continue as we explore whether meaningful partnerships can be developed.

**Watershed Specialist Certification Program:** The U of M, through a grant from the MPCA, is developing a certification program for local watershed specialists. This online training program will include training in civic engagement as part of the curriculum. Staff is working with the U of M to ensure that the content of that program is consistent with civic engagement discussions at the state and local levels.

**Web presence:** Staff is building a simple Web page that will share basic documents and best practices and tools we are aware of that could be useful to projects statewide. Staff will add to this over time, as we gather better information and document success stories and lessons learned.

## **Planned Activities for MPCA (2010-13)**

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- 1) Get the word out more effectively regarding what we are doing.
- 2) Improve interagency coordination on civic engagement.
- 3) Test innovative approaches in watersheds.
- 4) Develop videos, success stories and lessons learned for various audiences.
- 5) Bring local practitioners together to share their experiences and lessons learned.
- 6) Build/test the program evaluation component of the program.
- 7) Coordinate with the Clean Water Council on progress and resource needs.

## **Work Not Yet Addressed from 2009-10 Work Plan**

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- Urban runoff
- Water education