

Local Government Forum Report:

Developing Collaborative Watershed Partnerships

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FORUM OVERVIEW AND OBJECTIVES

Background

Social science frameworks, including ones that enhance collaboration, inform efforts towards successful implementation that reduces pollution and restores the Chesapeake Bay. The importance of humans and behavioral change is essential to the Bay's restoration and protection effort. Investments in social capital build the support and capacity necessary to increase our effectiveness, to learn and adapt as things change, and to build community resilience as future threats emerge.

The [2014 Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement](#) articulated specific social science related commitments in the vision, principles, goals, and outcomes. Specifically, in the Agreement Principles, it states "we commit to exploring using social science to better understand and measure how human behavior can drive natural resource use, management and decision-making." This language has inspired and stimulated significant interest within [Chesapeake Bay Program](#) goal implementation teams, workgroups, and advisory committees to apply social science frameworks to our work.

Increasing Coordination and Partnership to Build Problem-Solving Capacity

The significance of increasing local governments' utilization of social science frameworks and tools that enhance collaboration, as explored through this Forum, are directly tied to the Bay Agreement strategy that aims to build social science capacity within the partnership and around the watershed. By addressing the complexities of influencing human behavior, these solutions will be more successful, effective, and long lasting. Funding organizations, like the [National Fish and Wildlife Foundation](#), have already incorporated funding strategies that advance collaborative work through its grant awards.

These recommendations identify innovative, varying, and unique community partnership opportunities and address barriers to local government-led or facilitated collaboratives that enhance and accelerate watershed restoration efforts.

Pre-Forum Planning

Extensive planning went into developing materials for the Forum that helped structure the discussion and input requested from participants. [Local Government Advisory Committee \(LGAC\)](#) staff enlisted a Forum Planning Team¹ to develop materials that included the problem statement, a set of guiding assumptions, program resources, and case study examples. A Background² detailing this information was distributed to Forum participants helping them to prepare and be aware of Forum expectations and scope to promote productive discussion and feedback. In addition to the Background, a survey was developed prior to the Forum to gain better insights into prioritizing and evaluating primary issues and concerns, and gauge interest in breakout discussions. The electronic survey was distributed to invited Forum participants, Chesapeake Bay Program staff and other pertinent stakeholders.

The Forum Planning Team held three, one and a half hour calls where their input was requested. Communication via email was used throughout the planning process to provide extensive input on materials and recommendations on who should be invited to attend to bring a comprehensive group of experts to the discussion. LGAC staff also held many individual phone conversations with members of the planning team who have led the development and implementation of collaborative case studies highlighted during the Forum.

¹ See Appendix A

² See Appendix B

Obstacles & Barriers

The seven barriers identified below by the Forum Planning Team through the survey and pre-Forum conversations are shown below. These barriers present obstacles for local governments and local partnerships to overcome. Developing recommendations to surmount these barriers are expected to result in additional collaborative partnership opportunities.

- ❖ Staff Capacity
- ❖ Technical Assistance and Resources
- ❖ Equitable Collaboration & Community Engagement
- ❖ Political Will
- ❖ Innovative Approaches
- ❖ Water Quality Mitigation and Restoration Funding
- ❖ Starting a Collaborative

FORUM PROCEEDINGS

Problem Statement

Forum participants reviewed the draft problem statement developed by the Forum Planning Team and provided input to refine it based on the wide range of identified local needs, existing programs, and resources. The problem statement is directed towards local government. The following is the agreed-upon problem statement:

As communities face increasing challenges that exacerbate competing priorities, issues related to watershed health (habitat, stormwater, wastewater, and drinking water) heighten the need for local decision-makers to enhance capacity, funding, and coordination with federal, state, regional and local partners to enable collaborative approaches that foster support and action.

The Forum Planning Team identified the key barriers to building local restoration-minded partnerships. From the identified barriers, the Team developed a set of assumptions to guide and focus the day, since this is a broad topic that involves many partners and varying local knowledge.

Assumptions

The following were our guiding set of assumptions:

- ❖ Regional partnerships and collaborations do occur and are effective.
- ❖ Creating a collaborative as part of the planning process may save time and funds and may help to reduce potential conflicts.
- ❖ Collaborative local government planning will result in a more efficient, actionable, robust, and comprehensive effort.
- ❖ Promoting effective communication, collaboration and cooperation for environmental planning and financing across the watershed will aid in these efforts.
- ❖ Local economies and budgets continue to be challenged now and in the foreseeable future.
- ❖ There is a tendency to focus on immediate mitigation needs, but longer-term green infrastructure/nature-based implementation requires a plan, energy, time, and funding.
- ❖ Changing the culture for this work is key, essentially having a plan ahead of seeking funding, and will result in building and developing the local constituents as a network of implementers.

- ❖ Successful and sustainable collaborative partnerships require more time to develop than a “project” and are founded on building trust and relationship with participants.
- ❖ Successful collaboratives share some attributes that are scalable from small, rural communities to larger, metropolitan ones, and unique needs for environmental health and resilience may vary from locality to locality.
- ❖ Pursuing projects that provide environmental adaptation and/or mitigation and also provide water quality, recreational, educational, and natural resource benefits are a priority for efficient use of limited resources and tying these multiple benefits together are important for leveraging and heightening local support.
- ❖ There are challenges with local capacity and adequate resources to address problems related to resilience.
- ❖ State policies and funding/technical assistance vary across the watershed. Frequently these policies and grant programs are not communicated well, so they may be unknown, or complicated to understand, so local governments are not willing to apply/or have the capacity to do so. Applications take time and ability.
- ❖ Partnerships are critical in helping many local governments to effectively address local watershed priorities by improving funding, capacity, coordination, and public support.
- ❖ Resources from the federal American Rescue Plan Act offer a unique opportunity to invest in infrastructure.

INNOVATIVE CASE STUDIES

Discovering What Others Have Done

Some organizations and communities have been very effective in developing collaboratives around the Chesapeake Bay watershed. The Forum Planning Team believed it was important to feature positive examples to inspire ideas, inform the dialogue, and set the foundation for our recommendations. The following case studies were highlighted at the Forum to show how the identified barriers were overcome across the Chesapeake Bay region.

❖ **Staff Capacity - [Safe Drinking Water Conservation Collaborative](#) – Eastern Panhandle, West Virginia**

The Safe Water Drinking Conservation Collaborative sprung out of a chemical spill in the Elk River in West Virginia. Source water protection planning became a requirement in West Virginia law beginning in 2014. West Virginia created the Safe Water for West Virginia Program which led to the collaborative being formed in 2018. The collaborative is a group of education community members, community leaders, and public policy makers who understand the links between protected lands and safe drinking water.

The collaborative seeks to build relationships, foster trust, develop shared outcomes and implement plans to conserve lands and enhance water quality. By working together collectively, staff capacity is increased by sharing the staff across both geographic and institutional barriers. Working together better requires dedication to the shared Vision and Mission, a high level of communication between collaborative members and a solid strategic plan with metrics to ascertain progress.

❖ **Technical Assistance and Resources - [Upper Susquehanna Coalition](#) – Pennsylvania and New York**

The Upper Susquehanna Coalition sits in New York and Pennsylvania at the headwaters of the Chesapeake Bay. Across a very large portion encompassing 7500 square miles of the upper Bay watershed, the coalition works on stream corridor rehabilitation, environmentally and economically sustainable agriculture and wetlands restoration. The coalition has three teams and works to build capacity to address nonpoint source water issues within identified focus areas.

Keys to success include strong partnerships, high-level coordination, great relationships among partners and work prioritization and delivery at a regional scale. Almost 50 partners contribute to the overall effort. The sharing of key resources, understanding where resource gaps are, and flexible funding options are fundamental to the collaborative's success. The primary partners are soil and water conservation districts who do not compete with regular district funding for this regional effort. An assortment of tools is utilized to achieve the desired goals.

❖ **Equitable Collaboration and Community Engagement - [Walkable Watersheds with the James River Association](#)** – James River Watershed, Virginia

The Walkable Watersheds program in the James River Watershed, Virginia contributes to the health and well-being of the community and integrates the “flow of water and people into a cohesive strategy.” Key elements of the strategy include building a team, developing a shared understanding, developing solutions to the communities’ issues, and implementing and maintaining momentum toward project success.

Some key messages learned through this effort are the longer time frames necessary to build the team, create the plan and implement the project. In this case, the project took nearly a decade from idea to finished project. Lessons learned include fully supporting local organizations through mentorship, connecting to community leaders, managing expectations, and engaging a network of landscape professionals to assist in project completion. Listening to the community is key to project success. Including community members on the planning and implementation aspects of the project ensures a more equitable and collaborative framework for walkable watersheds projects.

❖ **Political Will - [The Elizabeth River Project](#)** – Hampton Roads, Virginia

The essence of political will lies in the collective impact model of motivation, capacity, effective process, and evaluation. The Elizabeth River Project, in Hampton Roads, VA, has as its Mission to restore the river to the highest practical level of environmental quality through partnerships. The river itself is the motivating thread through this community. In the building of political will, it is clear trust and relationship building continues to be at the forefront of any collaborative work effort.

Effective process involves all the necessary stakeholders with the plan developed through significant input from stakeholders and the general public and focuses on the river's most pressing needs. Proper input takes time, energy, and consensus approaches to ensure the best outcomes are identified. Political will is obtained through community strength and resolve to accomplish the tasks at hand and must be continually worked on. Lastly, effective monitoring and evaluation are critical to project management and the important adaptive approaches necessary for project success. Challenges to project success are engaging diverse communities and expanding representation of people of color with direct engagement as the best tool to employ.

The Elizabeth River Project has a long history in this community and has gathered a significant list of lessons learned. All organizations involved in the on-the-ground natural resource restoration need to always work on building trust where stakeholders and partners are the most important asset. Co-developing a community plan is critical to project success. Furthermore, when restoration works yield success, always celebrate your accomplishments with the community while acknowledging any miscues and learnings. Lastly, careful, yet understandable monitoring of the results can alleviate some of the community questions and create an atmosphere of continued progress.

❖ **Innovative Approaches - [Chiques Creek Restoration Initiative](#) – Lancaster County, Pennsylvania**

Chiques Creek represents one of the most innovative approaches to mandated water quality restoration in the Chesapeake Bay watershed. Its collaborative purpose is to develop local stakeholder momentum to voluntarily achieve sediment and nutrient load reductions in an impaired watershed. It received EPA approval to alter the normal Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) path to a voluntary approach based on work from local action teams and stakeholders and regional specialists from academia, government, the private sector and not for profits.

The top two challenges have been compliance with the MS4 program and the extensive nature of the impairment with over 200 linear stream miles under the TMDL. Messaging and language matters to stakeholders with differences within the watershed. Trust and commitment to the core goals are considered essential to success. Strong technical and regulatory guidance have contributed to better understanding of the Chiques Creek system.

❖ **Water Quality Mitigation and Restoration Funding - [Shenandoah Valley Conservation Collaborative](#) - Shenandoah Valley, Virginia**

The Shenandoah Valley Conservation Collaborative advances conservation outcomes through a partnership that coordinates expertise, identifies opportunities, and motivates action. The 15-member collaborative brought together under one umbrella land trusts, watershed groups, regional not for profits and agency partners working toward shared goals in water quality, agricultural vitality and protected rural landscapes. They have a shared interest in bringing success to all partners by using the collaborative as a strength to acquire additional funding and increase restoration activity.

Within the six Valley counties served by the collaborative, the top two challenges have been its ambitious goals and not quite attaining all the resources the collaborative needs to maintain a high level of restoration and conservation work. Clearly, increased funding for collaborative work is present but does require additional time and political capital. Again, increasing trust among partners, developing a formal structure and organizational backbone capable of administrative progress are essential elements for success.

❖ **Starting a Collaborative - [The Healthy Waters Roundtable](#) – Eastern Shore, Maryland**

The Healthy Waters Roundtable started as a way to enhance the capacity of the Eastern Shore jurisdictions to achieve local healthy water goals. The Eastern Shore is composed of numerous rural communities all wanting to achieve clean water goals. Collaboration and more formal partnering were the most viable means to achieve these mutual goals. The collaborative began with convening local, elected staff, sharing their needs and adopting shared priorities for their communities. Workgroups were established that worked together to obtain funding and enhance programming. One important element for collaborative formation is the additional time it takes for start-up and overcoming the inertia inherent in bringing partners together, identifying common needs and developing shared goals.

A clear scope of work, developed jointly with the partners will add flexibility, reduce costs, streamline implementation, and grow staff capacity over time. In screening the various collaboratives and their start-up times, it is clear that it may take an additional 6- 12 months to overcome this initial inertia. However, it is also routine to attain faster implementation following the initial start-up time with reduced staff load and more project funding.

LOCAL NEEDS IDENTIFICATION

Information Gathering and Survey Results

Based upon significant feedback collected from the Forum Planning Team as well as the results of an LGAC survey conducted prior to the Forum, local needs were categorized into the following seven topic areas directly related to the identified barriers shown above.

Using these topic areas as the core focus of the day's discussion, Forum attendees went into seven virtual breakout rooms with a designated facilitator who was a subject matter expert leading the conversation. A notetaker was present as well to document the conversation using a Google document with the virtual Zoom platform. The results of each breakout session are summarized below.

Staff Capacity

The ability to maintain sufficient staff to accomplish the organization or collaborative's work is an essential success factor. Pooling the resources of all participating organizations is important particularly if different participating organizations have different specialties. Also, geographical limitations are an important benefit in sharing staff. The "circuit rider" model has proven effective in sharing and extending limited staff resources.

In addition, utilizing different staff for grants development and management is a critical function. The use of internships within collaboratives could be a useful tool for stretching staff resources. Greater coordination in organizations as one way to increase staff capacity was identified as an important element before or after collaboratives begin their work.

As collaborative work begins, conduct strategic planning or other work to identify areas of shared need. Using in-kind match within organizations can foster greater collaboration and maximize grant opportunities for staff resources. Not only staff but other resources such as equipment can build collaborative partnerships.

Technical Assistance and Resources

Natural resources restoration work requires ample technical assistance and resources. Aligned with the staff capacity issue, technical assistance needs to be placed where it is most effective and flexible enough to move across different geographical work areas. Building this technical assistance capacity at the local level builds trust, cooperation, and credibility. Identifying the local needs in advance is a key stage in building collaborative work.

Collaborative efforts require purposeful approaches to acquire the necessary skill sets for various types of technical assistance. Part-time or voluntary positions could offer a start for technical assistance needs but may not offer long-term solutions. These part-time positions are hard to prioritize in normal funding cycles and may be easier to acquire through the grant process.

The circuit rider approach has had success through the years as one way to spread technical assistance resources over project or geographic areas. Short-term circuit rider appointments are not as useful as they do not allow for the long-term trust building and increased credibility. Strong leadership skills in communities is an essential element in fostering technical assistance resources by supporting and cultivating partnerships and bringing energy and passion to the work.

Equitable Collaboration & Community Engagement

The concept of equitable collaboration enforces meaningful engagement of all involved, including acknowledgement of resource, capacity, and funding limitations, to name a few, to reach the common goal of the partnership. The growing understanding of the importance of equitable collaboration and full community engagement as a part of natural resources restoration is an important evolution in local planning work. All communities need to have restoration work completed and collaborative equity efforts and local community buy-in are success factors for this work. These success factors are important first steps to gaining the necessary trust between communities.

There are a number of challenges to ensuring an appropriate level of equitable collaborative work. Demographics such as primary language, rural-urban interfaces, and historically under-resourced or red-lined areas, to name a few, are important in overcoming the barriers and challenges to equitably engage all communities. Often, community block grant funding is an option for funding environmental projects.

Building success through short-term project work is often a stimulus for further restoration work activity. Working through already existing community partnerships and/or developing existing collaboratives in an inclusive manner is a way to further engage communities historically uninvolved in environmental work. The opportunity to participate in leadership and partnership training in communities would be an important step to moving forward for restoration work. Utilizing the business community as a partner is an excellent way to better engage communities.

Political Will

The concept of building political will for environmental restoration work has historically been a lower priority for many localities, particularly if there is not a regulatory driver or some other pressing need. Furthermore, elected officials are constrained for time and must usually learn the issue first then strive to do something about it. Grassroots efforts can build trust and credibility but sometimes take longer than the elected official is in office.

Educating local officials is an important step in obtaining their involvement and support. Holding focus groups or symposiums for elected officials is one way to educate and inform. There are key differences between urban and rural areas as related to restoration work and ways to accomplish it. Larger cities and towns may have MS4 and be required to do restoration work. The willingness and ability to understand and believe in the science of any issue is critical to each locality's response.

Collaborative work in rural areas where geography is a limiting factor may be easier than in densely urban areas where funding may be more accessible. Additionally, rural areas are typically more traditional, have less staff and technical capacity, more dispersed land use such as forests and less incentive to conduct environmental work. Consistent messaging in any community builds political will, trust, and credibility. Use of the media in constructive ways to build identity and relationships is one method to build political will.

Innovative Approaches

Utilizing innovative approaches to increase on-the-ground restoration depends on a number of factors including past local relationships and trust-building and work toward shared values in communities and localities. Jurisdictions vary on how they approach issues including environmental restoration and a one size fits all approach does not typically yield success.

The required funding typically resides above the locality level within the state or federal government. Localities can first begin establishing solid, working relationships in advance of the on-the-ground implementation efforts. Localities or municipalities of similar size should see similar environmental issues and want to solve problems collectively versus individually. Innovative approaches also include partnering with not for profits and localities when appropriate to do so. Innovative approaches should be considered an opportunity rather than a barrier

The Multiple Storm Sewer System (MS4) structure offers an ideal structure for innovative thinking on environmental issues. MS4 localities can partner with non-MS4 localities to utilize MS4 requirements to achieve credits. Furthermore, linking the business community with environmental restoration work is an innovative way to achieve restoration progress. Keeping the message local boosts the success of many environmental projects. One example is the concept of a stormwater fee where the funding can be matched by other funding entities. The city of Salisbury, Maryland is currently going through that adoption process.

Innovative approaches require a renewed focus on communications where the local voice is trusted. Local ballot initiatives can be helpful in eliciting these types of approaches through participatory governing. Lastly, the idea of shared capacity and public/private partnerships are key to adopting innovative community approaches.

Water Quality Mitigation and Restoration Funding

Collaborative approaches work well in the arena of on-the-ground mitigation work and funding. Many funding organizations are moving toward a collaborative funding model to increase restoration opportunity and impact. In many communities, if we engage with partners, share in-kind and other resources such as equipment, project success can be achieved. As small successes lead to bigger ones, more partners join, and more success becomes probable.

One excellent example is the James River Riparian Buffer project. The James River is a large river system extending from western Virginia to the Chesapeake Bay. The project was divided into three regions based on the geography and need present. Forest buffers were needed in the west to oyster restoration needed adjacent to the Bay. Partners were invited for this project based on their expertise, staff capacity and overall project need.

The stronger an organization can present and attain collaborative approaches through leadership, trust-building and relationships, the more funding opportunities are present. Increasing project capacity through shared cost, shared technical expertise and shared administrative cost can build project success. Simplification of the process can bring benefits for all in working together better.

Needed Startup Time

Collaborative work often requires more time to overcome project inertia than engaging problems singularly as one organization. If relationships are not already established between entities, then time is required to build the necessary trust to move forward collectively. Overcoming any past failures in working with partners can lengthen the time further.

Initially, the identification of common needs is a requisite factor to engage potential partners with. Frequently, the hesitancy to jump into a project is based on the unknowns of time and funding commitments, balancing costs with benefits, and the short duration most elected officials spend in office. As typical with most collaborative work, the building of relationships and trust are key to overcoming project inertia and start-up time needs. Some ways to overcome the barriers include communicating the needs in a compelling, convincing way using science and data, creating a welcoming environment with elected officials to initiate the conversation and relationship-building, and having the “right” people at the table.

One other key element to getting past the inertia is the idea of organizational scope and scale. Inviting not only individuals but organizations is important to ensure a complete picture. This multi-level involvement brings different ideas to the initial conversation and allows common expectations and desired outcomes to be pursued. There may be a longer-term role in education and awareness building unanticipated at the beginning of the project work development.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

The following six recommendations came from the Forum participants through the moderator-led small group work. LGAC recommends the following:

- 1. Increase funding support and identify new and additional revenue streams and other incentives for forming collaboratives and increasing restoration project work.***

Funding both project implementation work and staff support continue to be at the top of many localities' resource needs. Funding organizations like NFWF, have already transitioned their funding allocations to a more collaborative-based approach as using collaboratives have proven to yield more successful and sustainable results. Identifying new or re-directed revenue streams can help with funding collaborative planning and implementation efforts. Increasing funding opportunities to meet Bay restoration goals is a critical aspect of our collective work. Concepts such as working with local leaders to consider ballot initiatives and working more regionally can address these critical funding needs.

- 2. Utilize regional entities such as planning district commissions as planning frameworks to increase local/community stakeholder involvement and further collaborative restoration work.***

Regional planning organizations can serve to facilitate collaborative formation. These organizations are prepared to bring constituencies together to develop joint needs and identify common ground, and can take the burden of that planning element off localities and allow for focus on collaborative, on-the-ground implementation activity. In addition, regional planning organizations know the localities well enough to both identify possible collaborators and where the community and restoration needs may be greatest.

- 3. Utilize the American Rescue Plan and subsequent federal recovery and funding to plan for increased collaboration and project implementation at the local level.***

Unprecedented federal funding opportunities may provide opportunities for localities to conduct restoration and infrastructure work. It is also important to step back and consider how collaboratives and partnering can increase the quality and quantity of work completed to restore the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries. Working together from the beginning of project work could identify more and better opportunities to utilize the increased funding. Additionally, federal and state agencies could play a significant role as partners in the identification and distribution of this federal funding.

- 4. Increase engagement between local governments and local and regional not for profits to find joint areas of need and identify opportunities to share resources.***

Localities, both urban and rural, struggle to identify partners with common needs. For rural localities, geography and distance can thwart the ability for collaboration. Local or regional not for profit environmental organizations can provide, at minimum, a sounding board to hear ideas but also can serve as a full partner for project work. For example, in the city of Annapolis, MD, the Back Creek Nature Park has partnered with the local Riverkeepers to keep a community area clean for residents. A continued effort is being made to secure additional partners and the

Maritime Museum has now joined the group not only to use the facility but to assist in maintenance and clean-up work. This example highlights the importance of localities to do their part in taking that first important step in contacting the not for profits organizations within their communities.

5. *Partner with MS4 utilities to increase collaborative restoration work, particularly in under-resourced communities.*

Much of the environmental restoration work for the Bay watershed involves voluntary efforts. While these continuing efforts are critical for Bay restoration, MS4 localities are required to perform maintenance and restoration work as a part of their ongoing permit. Many MS4 localities are engaged with their communities at a high level. However, this may not be the case for all MS4 localities despite concerted and sincere attempts to do so. In addition, MS4 localities should be asked to identify needed project work in under-resourced communities and focus a proportional amount of this work in these communities.

6. *Expand local government community-based leadership development training and make the training more accessible at the local level.*

Successful collaboratives often begin with a passionate, strong leader trained in a number of key skills. While these types of training are available throughout the Bay watershed, the awareness of these types of training is limited and often does not get into the local community, particularly underserved communities. Local community involvement and trained leaders are critical to identifying and pursuing community-based projects. Like the Rural Leadership Program in PA where local citizens are asked to participate, local residents better identify with a leader rooted in the community, whom they trust and have an existing relationship with. Bay communities need to identify potential leaders and make them aware of these opportunities. This liaison role for localities can increase access for many communities thereby leading to an increase in on-the-ground restoration work.

CONCLUSION

This Forum allowed local elected officials and subject matter experts throughout the Chesapeake Bay region to come together and highlight that we are at a critical time for local governments to consider how to utilize social science principles and work more collaboratively to achieve restoration project progress. Municipal officials have a unique opportunity to champion local collaboratives to fully support and influence local implementation. While there are challenges related to using collaborations to impact environmental action, local governments can take advantage of their unique community position by focusing on mitigation actions that protect physical, social, public health and environmental public assets. Local governments cannot do this without the support and engagement of important stakeholders including federal, state, academic, philanthropic, and private sector partners to make these recommendations a reality.