**Planning for Clean Water: Stakeholder Assessment**

**Introduction**

ERG conducted a stakeholder assessment and outreach to planners throughout the watershed at the local, regional, and state levels. The purpose of the assessment was to hear directly from planners and planning organizations to ascertain what was on their minds, not only regarding the Bay watershed, but also what were the most pressing planning-related challenges they were facing. By doing so, it’s hoped that we can formulate content in trainings and workshops that will address both the concerns of planners and foster the goals of the Chesapeake Bay partnership.

**Background**

In 2018 and 2019, The Maryland Chapter of the American Planning Association held two successful workshops with the Chesapeake Bay Program. The workshops, “How’s that Habitat Working for You?” and another one about sea level rise (SLR) and climate adaptation, drew on Bay scientists and scientific studies. Both had follow-up activities. The SLR workshop led to some further study at Salisbury State on the monetary loss connected to SLR and habitat effects. The premise for the workshops was trying to make the connection between science and long-range planning. Recommendations made in comprehensive plan documents need to be backed up by fact-finding, including the latest science. The Bay program provides a lot of scientific study that can inform land-use decisions at the local level.

One other result of these workshops was a closer tie created between the planners who attended and the Bay program. Local planners had a new resource to use when formulating recommendations to local elected and appointed officials. Bay program staff recognized the influence local planners could have on land use decision-making. Both saw a benefit in forging closer ties. This current effort is a continuation of those first two successful workshops. This time, the effort is Bay-wide. The overall goal of this effort is to plan, design, execute, and follow-up on a set of workshops to equip local planners in the Chesapeake watershed with the knowledge and skills to more effectively plan in ways that support Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement goals and outcomes. The first step in planning is to conduct a stakeholder assessment. This document conveys the results of that assessment.

**Purpose**

A stakeholder assessment is conducted to get a snapshot of the concerns stakeholders may hold about a certain topic. Using one-on-one or group interviews, the facilitator can formulate recommendations on how to best engage with the stakeholder group. In this case, the goal is to formulate learning opportunities so that they provide the best opportunity for the Bay program partners and planners to mutually educate one another and establish closer ties. The ultimate goal is achievement of the Bay outcomes via collaboration with local planners and state agencies.

**Outreach**

Local government planners in every state in the watershed were contacted and at least two interviews conducted. Outreach was prioritized with direction from the steering committee. After initial rounds of outreach, a second round was generated based on recommendations from the first round. A series of prompting questions were used as a guide, but weren’t prescriptive (see Attachment A). They were just designed to get a conversation going. The facilitator took notes and shared these notes in draft form with the contact to ensure that the conversation was captured accurately. Over 30 people were interviewed, including the PA, DE, VA, National Capital, and MD APA chapters, individual planning directors, Councils of Governments, Planning District Commissions, floodplain managers, and associations that support planners and local government (please see Attachment B- List of Interviewees). Most interviews were one-on-one; however, there were group interviews with the Mid-Atlantic Planning Council, which is a consortium of all the APA chapters and universities offering degrees in planning in the mid-Atlantic region; the Virginia APA Chapter; and the West Virginia hazard mitigation and floodplain managers. New York proved the most challenging. Two interviews have been held to date in New York.

**Findings**

Ten major themes emerged from the interviews. Although these don’t capture every topic raised by every individual, they do capture the topics that resonated across more than one group. Themes appear below with quotes from interviews to provide some context. For more details on each theme, please refer to Attachment C, Key Themes from Interviews.

**5. Bay-wide recreation and open space preservation**

*“The idea of a Chesapeake Bay NRA has been surfaced. What could that look like? How far are we to that goal already? Is it a policy that could help achieve more open space? Are there others?”*

**4. How Bay science might inform long-range planning**

**“***So, say we met the 2025 reduction goal: Now what? Comprehensive plans can go way beyond the target year. And we have more people moving here. So how do we live under the cap? What can planners do to allow for continued growth and economic activity and yet not increase pollutant loads*?”

**3. Leveraging infrastructure funding to maximize environmental benefits**

*“We’re getting a big boost in funding to upgrade public works like WWTPs. Now how do we find the leverage to fund those other projects we know are just as important, like stream restoration?”*

**2. Plan integration for resilience**

“*We need to look at climate impacts and equity in the Bay watershed. There’s a need to ID vulnerable communities and be able to “bake in” how to address inequities into all planning documents*.”

**1. Water quality and hazard mitigation co-benefits**

*“What is the link between the increase in natural hazards such as flooding and Bay water quality?”*

Another theme that resonated among rural planners concerned agriculture, in particular, approaches to promoting farmland preservation. Promotion and preservation of agriculture as an economic driver is a shared concern, as is promotion of agricultural BMPs with co-benefits for hazard reduction. Application of different agricultural BMPs is varied across the watershed. One topic of interest may be “ground-truthing” BMP practices to help refine Bay modeling.

**10. The OneWater approach and how it benefits the Bay**

*“The One Water approach is a good concept to highlight in regard to connections the Chesapeake Bay outcomes. We’ve (PA) pushed the concept as far as we can. Currently that’s through the state water plan.”*

**9. Smart Growth and the Bay**

*“We need to get back to the basics of planning and the hard choices that need to be made about where growth goes and where it doesn’t. We can’t answer these equity questions without addressing this. If land use is sprawled, then so are the resources, to everyone’s detriment*.”

**8. Stormwater and wastewater management**

*Septic systems are a problem and getting worse. There’s a general lack of concern about growth on septics.”*

**7. Planners’ talking points about the Bay**

*“One potential topic for a workshop would be providing planners with what they need to educate homeowners on the Bay….some basic materials planners could use to communicate about the program and why it’s important.”*

**6. What do small towns need to know about the Bay program?**

*“The smaller and more rural jurisdictions have budget issues and staffing shortages. They need to maximize the value added of everything they need to work on.”*

Regarding venues, there is already a robust network of training available to planners in the watershed. All the State APA chapters, as well as several consortia of APA, offer training. A list of possible venues including monthly webinars, annual meetings, and bi-annual workshops is provided in Attachment D- Venue Chart. Peer learning was mentioned as an ideal several times, and is the common approach used for nearly all training offered to planners. Planners learn best listening to each other.

One overarching concern raised by planners in all jurisdictions and levels of government is the perceived burden the Bay Program places on them, and all the competing priorities at the local level. “Tell me how you can make my job easier, not harder…” has been a common comment. There are many demands placed on local planners. Planning cycles for various programs rarely align. Regulatory compliance is a high priority, but the various regulations and other high priority initiatives are sometimes perceived as conflicting with one another. For example, there is an effort to promote solar power as an alternative in Virginia. Planners are reporting that this appears to be occurring in productive farmland and forested areas, which is arguably contrary to preservation efforts, among other issues. A related issue concerns MS4 permitting. Towns experiencing growth struggle to comply with the permitting requirements. They often don’t have any capacity to absorb the additional work. “Tell me how you can make my job easier…” is a perception worth keeping in mind as a framework for all communication and training.

**Recommendations**

**Use existing venues.** We recommend that training be offered through the existing network of webinars and workshops, since this is the source that planners turn to already. It’s often very difficult for local planners to get away for training. Some are also prohibited from traveling out of state. However, planners are used to attending the annual state chapter meeting, or attending weekly or monthly webinars sponsored by their chapter. Setting up entirely separate workshops may make access more difficult. The APA State chapters are ready and interested in working with the Bay Program to co-sponsor training.

**Offer CFM Credits in addition to AICP-CE**. There is also the possibility of working with the State chapters of the Association of State Floodplain Managers (ASFPM). Especially in rural and smaller communities, the planner is also the floodplain manager. Certified Floodplain Management (CFM) accreditation is arguably a higher priority for many rural and small-town planners than AICP continuing education. Also, offering CFM credits will heighten the possibility of outreach to the more rural and upstream portions of the Bay watershed. ASFPM and APA have frequently cooperated in offering joint credits, especially in topics related to hazard mitigation and climate readiness.

**Put the local planners first in content delivery.**  “How did they do that…? How can I do that…?” are the most pressing questions asked when presentations are made to local planners. Peer learning as a preferred approach was raised many times by the interviewees. Each major theme should be developed with planners providing most of the content. Plan implementation, which planners often refer to as planner’s “tools,” are key. If a jurisdiction has managed to use a model code to remove impervious surfaces or has retrofitted their main street using Green Infrastructure that also revitalized an area, the step-by-step of how that was done is what they want to hear about.

Putting the planners first will optimize peer exchange among the group. For example, the topic of plan integration for resilience can feature projects featuring SLR buy-outs and coastal restoration in the Middle Peninsula in VA, along with flood hazard reduction through stream restoration in WVA. Connections to the Bay program outcomes can be made, as well as any particular resources Bay program partners may want to feature.

A suggested format may include:

* Two presentations from planners in the Bay area, ideally from different jurisdictions.
* A State representative or sponsor of the practice.
* A Chesapeake Bay representative to present resources available.

**Develop a curriculum**. Most webinar offerings sponsored by APA Chapters run about 1.5 hours. Starting with the themes above, we can work with the Mid-Atlantic Planning Council to develop a webinar run-of-show agenda on each topic. To maximize peer exchange and minimize presentations, we could consider pre-recorded presentations, and recording of all webinar offerings with links cross-posted to the participating APA chapters and Divisions. All the webinar recordings could be collated to create a “Highlights Reel” for use at the National Planning Conference, or featured on APA’s accreditation website. For Bay content, we can build on the framework already provided in *A Local Government Guide to the Chesapeake Bay.* ERG/PG also already has a robust set of training modules on hazard mitigation and water quality that was developed with EPA and FEMA Region 3.

**Pick the key messaging.** As part of the curriculum, consider developing a 3-minute introduction that serves as a leit motif for each webinar offering. The “info-mercial” could include basic facts about the Bay, the Bay Program, and why it’s important for planners to be engaged. Ideally, this introduction would be developed with a few key planners to ensure the content hits on the “why” for engagement, and the offer to partner. Explain the co-benefits of incorporating the Chesapeake Bay resources into all required plans. How can we make their job easier? How can we help planners with the day-to-day details of working with property owners, developing ordinances, drafting comprehensive plans, complying with MS4 permitting, and working with local political leaders?

**Provide a plug-and-play rubric to develop the webinar content.** Planners will be encouraged to present if there is a simple format for them to follow when developing content. Instructions on what should be included in a presentation, how to pre-record a presentation or provide video, and holding a practice session with the facilitator will help ensure there is reassurance of support for the presenters.

**Start with less controversial topics**. Some topics raised by planners may be contentious, or may carry an extra amount of political overtone. The suggested format is designed to maximize cross-collaboration to avoid politics, to the extent possible. We also recommend that we start with topics that don’t have much prima-facie controversy and work up to those that may. For example, how Bay science might inform long-range planning is a logical extension of the successful planning workshops already held.

**Consider dove-tailing a longer workshop with an APA scheduled conference.** Trust-building and co-learning can happen with webinars, but an in-person format is better at addressing the meatier topics that planners have brought up. Consider working with a Chapter or Division of APA to append a workshop to a scheduled meeting in order to dig into a topic. Topics such as “What Happens after 2025?” can’t be answered in a webinar format. Dialogue is needed to understand the topic fully and collaboratively search for some answers. Starting now, it may be possible to build in a Chesapeake Bay workshop for the National Planning Conference (NPC) in the Spring of 2022 to occur before or after the conference. A Run-of-Show agenda can be developed for use as a pre- or post- workshop half-day event. Certainly, a presentation of Planning for Clean Water “highlights” should be submitted to NPC with the State APA Chapters as co-sponsors.

**Just start.** With all the opportunities to provide co-learning available, it might be best to just schedule the first few webinars now, instead of waiting for the next in-person event. The logical group to work with first appears to be the Mid-Atlantic Planning Council. Depending on the topic, it would also be beneficial to engage ASFPM chapters and APA Divisions (such as Hazard Mitigation, Rural, Environmental, etc.).

**Next Steps**

**Develop 3-minute “Info-mercial.”** Provide thebasic facts about the Bay, the Bay Program, why it’s important for planners to be engaged, and how it will make their jobs easier.

**Draft Run-of Show Agendas**. Mock up agendas for a 1.5 hour webinar, a hybrid workshop, an in-person workshop, and shorter “water cooler” webinars on selected Bay resources of interest to planners.

**Cross-walk Bay Agreement Outcomes with Assessment Findings.** This will help to ID Bay expertise to tap in creating webinar content, and illustrate what outcomes resonate the most with local planners.

**Contact the Mid-Atlantic Planning Council to schedule webinars and develop a curriculum.** Provide a briefing on this stakeholder assessment to the Council to elicit their feedback.Starting with the water-cooler topics such as “what’s happening at the Bay program” scientific information planners can use, or a “peek under the hood” of Bay land use modeling may be a preferred approach to ensuring all participants have the same level of education. Build out a schedule for 1.5 hour-long webinars to be sponsored by the Council.

**ID and partner with an APA State Chapter or other Planning Conference to offer Half-Day “Deep Dives.”** Webinars could build up to a longer event to provide an opportunity for more directed dialogue around a particular topic. The half-day in-person or hybrid agendas would be used to deliver this content. Another alternative may be partnering with an APA Division, such as the Small Town and Rural Planning Division, to offer specific content for these stakeholders.