
WATERSHED AUDIT GUIDANCE

EXPANDING PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR CLEAN WATER

Success in preserving our remaining clean waters and restoring those degraded is directly dependent upon public support. This support must come from large number of individual voters, not just a few watershed organizations. Fortunately, it is easy to mobilize watershed resident support, provided they are shown how clean water issues directly affect their welfare and are asked to actions which will clearly resolve clean water threats.

Focus on Most Cherished Waters

Many newcomers to clean water advocacy focus on highly-regarded, but distant waters like the Chesapeake Bay. While most folks do care about these waters, the depth of concern is far greater for waters that directly affect their daily lives.

Hunting Creek provides example. About a decade ago CEDS was helping Hunting Creek advocates. The Creek flows into the Patuxent River - a Chesapeake Bay tributary. We surveyed watershed residents about their willingness to support candidates pledging support for restoring just one of these three waters. Following are the results: 44% would support a candidate who just spoke about the Chesapeake Bay, 83% for the Patuxent River, and 100% for Hunting Creek. In other words, residents were more likely to support a candidate who committed to restoring the waters closest to their homes.

Neighborhood Waters Focus = High Response

About 80% of all U.S. residents live in suburban-urban areas where most waters are degraded by stormwater runoff and other impacts. In the east, many homes are within a 5- to 15-minute walk of one of these degraded waterways. While mostly small, headwater streams they none the less can become the focus for mobilizing widespread public support for clean water. The reason is that these degraded streams flow through many of the neighborhoods in which most people live. These waters could be a tremendous recreational and aesthetic neighborhood asset. More importantly, flowing waters draw children like a magnet. Regrettably there are legitimate health concerns about children playing in these waters. Since all parents know it's near impossible to keep a kid from playing in a stream, the only recourse is to clean up the stream.

Pollution Awareness + Actions = Support

If we only informed parents that neighborhood waters were polluted then the result would either be denial or many deaf ears. However, when we also ask parents to support an action which would clearly make neighborhood waters more child-safe then widespread support is the usual result. For example, we might inform residents that their neighborhood stream likely has elevated bacteria levels due to pet waste runoff and ubiquitous sewerline leakage. In the same message we ask residents to support a neighborhood pet-waste-pickup public education effort while showing how similar efforts substantially lowered neighborhood stream bacteria levels. It is vitally important to also link the easy action to a logical next, more challenging step. This next step could be asking residents to sign a petition urging local elected officials to test neighborhood sewers for leaks then make any needed repairs.

Here's an example of what a first message to neighborhood residents might look like:

I recently learned that the stream flowing through our neighborhood is not as clean as we would like it to be. Because of this I'm reaching out to you and our other neighbors about a first step that will make the stream a cleaner place for our children to play. Disposal stations like that pictured here have made streams like ours safer by reducing the pet waste washed from our lawns with each rain. Please sign the online petition at [\(url\)](#) urging our homeowners association to install a few of these stations in our neighborhood.



Including the photo of a child playing in a stream emphasizes the importance of the issue. A second message would update neighborhood residents on pet waste progress and introduce the sewerline issue. Because the pet waste petition asked for email addresses and cell numbers you now have contact information for future education-mobilization.

Elected Officials & Clean Water Accountability

Through emails, texts, and social media neighborhood residents would be updated on pet-waste progress and

how their elected officials responded to the call to action on first one clean water issue then the next. Prior to the next primary election neighborhood residents would be reminded of which officials were supportive.

Watershed Alliance of Neighborhoods

Elected officials will be far more responsive if they know that most of the neighborhoods in their district and throughout a watershed participate in these clean water campaigns. Plus, they would have the public (political) backing needed to win tough battles like improving compliance with our clean water laws. Further background on this approach can be found on the *Making Neighborhood Waters Child Safe & Friendly* webpage: <http://ceds.org/childsafewaters.htm>.

Other Cherished Waters

CEDS has had a number of cases where it was easier to mobilize support by focusing on impacts to a lake or a groundwater aquifer rather than a neighborhood stream. The mobilization effort is always more successful if the focal waters are close to people's homes. After all, as former U. S. House of Representatives Speaker Tip O'Neill was fond of saying *all politics is local*. This is certainly true when it comes to mobilizing public for clean water. In other words, while it's OK to say an action will benefit distant waters like a Chesapeake Bay, the emphasis should be on waters that directly affect people's lives. This approach requires more time in message targeting while the rewards far outweigh any added time or cost.

Easily Understood Issues

Those new to clean water advocacy tend to focus on things like permit conditions, interpretations of law, or other issues which are more difficult to explain. These issues also tend to be secondary to actions needed to make our waters cleaner. These issues should be put on hold until the attention of a large number of watershed residents has been captured through a stepwise progression from issues such as pet waste, to sewerline leakage, to the more complex. Once elected officials realize an advocate has the ear of a large number of voters the more esoteric issues will be easier to win.

Convincing Regulators They're Wrong

It is surprising how often new advocates engage in the exercise of trying to convince regulatory officials that they are wrong. Usually this wasteful exercise begins when regulators dispute advocate data showing a need for action. The advocate then embarks on a quixotic effort to find just the right study or science to convince regulators they are wrong and must act. What the advocate fails to realize it that usually regulator resistance has far more to do with politics than science.

Success would come more quickly if instead the advocate focused their efforts on convincing the elected officials who oversee the regulators that an ever growing number of watershed residents believe the problem is genuine and want action.

Construction sites offer a classic example of this scenario. The soil erosion and mud pollution from a single site can damage three miles of downstream waters with recovery taking up to a century. Most watershed advocacy newcomers focus on reporting erosion-sediment control violations to inspection agencies. The advocates then become frustrated when violations are either not (or just minimally) resolved because the regulators claim they have no authority to act. When advocates engage large numbers of people in highly-visible [construction site surveys](#) compliance with this clean water law improves dramatically. Here's why.

Clean water advocates generally provide little ongoing support for regulators while the development community is continually pressuring agency directors and elected officials to relax standards. Therefore, when an advocate complains about a clear violation of the law the inspector may literally lack the authority to act. In other words, the problem is political, not one of science or the law.

Nonprofits & Electoral Action

Maximum benefits come from holding elected officials accountable for taking specific actions to improve water quality. However, most established watershed groups are nonprofit (501(c)3) organizations which are prohibited from influencing voters about elections. Fortunately, there's a number of solutions.

First of all, a nonprofit is free to educate watershed residents about the status of clean water law compliance and the actions needed to preserve and enhance their waters. Many groups don't do this because they depend on government for funding. Nonprofits can even hold candidate forums where they and watershed residents can pose hard questions.

Second, there are several organizations that routinely rank elected officials with regard to environmental voting records like the League of Conservation Voters and the Sierra Club. A number of local affiliates of these and other groups exist in many states and would be free to rate incumbents on their success in implementing actions and providing the oversight needed to ensure better compliance was the result.

For further guidance on electoral action see Chapter 42: Electing & Retaining Decision-Makers, in *How To Win Land Development Issues*: ceds.org/pdfdocs/HTW.pdf.