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Lessons Learned from WREN Project Leaders by Ellen Kiley and Julie Kollar

Water resource issues are, by their very nature, local. The water we drink, the water we send down the drain, the water that drips from our roofs or puddles our streets when it rains – it is hard to find a conservation issue that is closer to home. For this reason, important improvements in water resource management can and should happen at the local level. You can make changes at your own home, but changes that benefit the whole community will require the involvement of your local municipal officials, who may be unaware of how to address local water concerns.

If you are interested in raising awareness about solutions that will protect community water resources among local officials and residents, consider applying for a WREN Grant in March 2012. Our grants range from projects that help raise awareness, to those that encourage specific behavior change like residential stormwater management using rain barrels. We went to the experts, our recent project leaders, and assembled their top tips and "lessons learned" to help you organize a successful project in your own neighborhood.

According to the responses we received to a questionnaire sent at the completion of 2011's funded projects, project leaders outlined four major issues: **Promotion, Time Management, Volunteers, and Flexibility**. Below, we'll look at each issue and how it might be addressed.

Promotion

WREN's [2011 project leaders](#) estimated their efforts reached over 44,000 Pennsylvania citizens at more than 15 major events. Good project promotion is vital to getting the message out, getting good attendance at workshops or planting days, and to attract sponsors for your events.

Jennifer Sherwood was the project manager for the "[Headwater Residents Improving Stormwater](#)" project developed by the Abington Township Environmental Advisory Council. She advises, "The most difficult challenge in this project was attracting people to the workshops. Our advice to new projects is to advertise as much as you can and to as many people and groups as possible."

Use the Internet to publish your event on your group's website, and on the websites of your project partners, including your local municipal website. This is an easy first step to creating a buzz, and it's free. It is important that people who have heard about your event have a reliable place to check for times, dates, and sign-up information. Offering information helpful to residents for posting at municipal websites is also a good way to begin a partnership and open a conversation about water resources with your local officials, which is a key part of fulfilling your WREN grant.

Advertising a community event is usually free; check with local newspapers, radio stations, and TV stations for community event listings. Don't forget to include smaller, alternative papers.



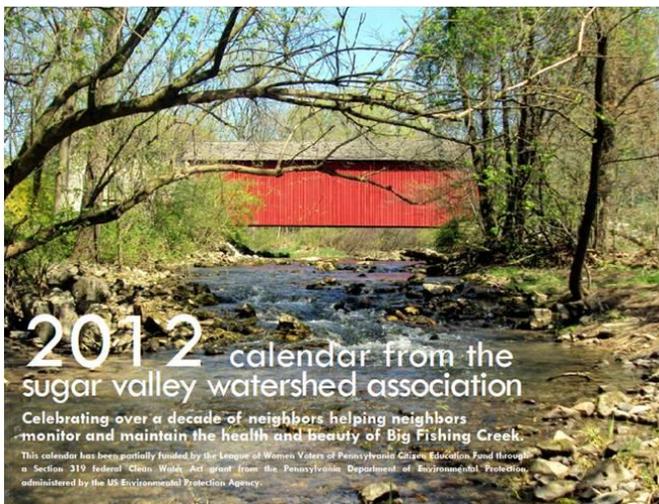
Keep an eye on those same listings for events that complement yours, and offer to cross-promote your events.

Use Facebook or another social networking site to advertise your event especially if you are trying to attract young people! In addition to newspaper and TV advertising and Facebook event listings, the [Abington EAC](#) promoted their project with information tables at local community days and sustainability events. They broadened the reach beyond the workshops by videotaping and running the educational programs on the township's community access channel.

You can also organize tasks like workshop sign-ups through services available on the web. The EAC used a service called Eventbrite (www.eventbrite.com). If you are collecting a fee for the workshop the sign-up service will collect a small percentage as a fee, but free-to-attend workshops are free to publicize.

Giveaways, coupons or other promotions can also help draw attention to your project. Ms. Sherwood commented, "Attendance was not as good at the two workshops where no take-home product was offered. The workshops at which people received either a rain barrel or tree were easier to fill and very popular."

Ask local businesses to provide a small item to give away at an event table along with your brochures. If there is a local business that provides services that complement your project (like native plants for a rain garden, or even gutter cleaning for stormwater management), ask them to provide a discount for workshop attendees.



In some cases, a major goal of the project is to create an attractive and educational "giveaway." The [Blair](#) and [Clinton County Conservation Districts](#) both produced colorful [calendars](#) to encourage beneficial farming practices, with helpful listings of local conservation events and seasonal water resource management advice. For these projects, choosing vibrant, memorable images is vital to the project's success and demonstrates community pride when local photos are used, as Clinton County did. A picture of happy people installing a rain barrel or planting a rain garden will convey positivity about the importance of these projects. This is known as the "picture

superiority effect." The late Steve Jobs was renowned for his use of images, because concepts are much more easily grasped and remembered if presented as images. Make good use of pictures of people working together in a beneficial behavior for your own community project!

Time Management

At some point in the course of your project, the unexpected will happen to you, your volunteers, or your project partners. Kelly Williams of the [Clearfield County Conservation District](#) observed, "The most difficult challenge was time management. After receiving the grant we had several events (such as moving) take place during the latter part of the grant year that couldn't have been foreseen, and they definitely used up much of my time."

Whether it's a family crisis or an unexpected work crunch, something will happen that takes time away from your project or event planning. Anticipate this problem by building extra lead-time into each phase of your project. Don't forget to allow sufficient review time for any publications or

educational signage being created for the project. Accomplishing your objectives with plenty of time to spare never hurts, but missing deadlines can lead to increased costs and missed opportunities.

Other organizations have their own time management issues as well, so allow extra time when working with other groups. This is especially true for government organizations or schools, which may have extra paperwork or reporting requirements to fulfill.

“Our most difficult challenge was coordinating the busy schedules of the partnership and finding dates that did not have possible conflicts for the participants of the program,” said Brian Pilarcik of the [Crawford County Conservation District](#). When scheduling, get your event on the calendar early. The calendars of your event venues, project partners and intended audience can fill up quickly.

Volunteers

Finding and keeping good volunteers is essential to the success of your project and your watershed group. Equally important is knowing when to ask those volunteers for help. “The most difficult challenge was organizing the [Cover Crop event](#),” said Beth Futrick of the [Blair County Conservation District](#). “I was responsible for lining up the venue, menu, and speakers, plus managing the budget. This was a daunting task for one person.” If the number of tasks involved in your project is too large for one person to easily handle, form a committee and divide up the tasks. In the process, you may discover your volunteers have previously untapped skills or resources, like photography or hands-on building experience.

Scott Koser of [Clinton County Conservation District](#) was delighted with the enthusiasm demonstrated by grant partner [Sugar Valley Watershed Association](#), who “far exceeded the effort that was expected in producing the final project (farming best management practices calendar).” You will also help avoid a time management crisis should something unexpected happen to an overwhelmed project manager.

There is another important category of “volunteers” – your local municipal officials. Building partnerships with municipal officials is an important part of each WREN project, and vital to a project’s success.

Janie French of [PA Environmental Council](#) commended the leadership demonstrated “by Etna Borough to fully engage the Borough Council to actively develop a [\(downspout\) disconnection program](#).” Janie felt that having the Borough Manager on board helped in “targeting local leadership and offering peer to peer education (as) keys to gaining support.”

You may be uncomfortable with picking up the phone and calling a commissioner, or attending a meeting to speak to a council member, but making that personal effort is the best way to get the support of your elected officials or municipal employees. “Letters, faxes, and emails were sent to the various municipal offices and public notices were put out in the local newspapers,” Rachel Kester, of the Trout Unlimited Project, reports. “However, most of the municipal officials who attended agreed to do so after receiving an invitation by phone or in person from one of the project partners. This just goes to show the importance of making personal contacts with your local elected officials.”

Flexibility

During the course of the project, you may find that your plans have to change. Scheduling conflicts can cause serious problems, as Jim Wilson of the [Northampton County Conservation District](#) discovered.



Lehigh Valley Clean Water Summit
THURSDAY, SEPT 29, 2011 • 4:00PM - 8:30PM

To provide tools and resources on drinking water protection for county and municipal officials, councils, commissions and boards; community watershed organizations; public water providers; and other interested groups and individuals.

Lower Mount Bethel Township Welcome Center
7701 Martens Creek-Belvidere Highway, Bangor, PA 18013

4:00pm - 4:15pm: Registration
4:15pm - 4:25pm: Welcome & Opening Remarks
Jan Wilson, Watershed Specialist, Northampton County Conservation District
4:25pm - 4:55pm: **Source Water Protection: An Essential Tool for Water Supply Protection**
Julie Kallas, Project Director, The Water Resources Education Network - A project of the League of Women Voters of PA, Citizen Education Fund
4:55pm - 5:25pm: **Source Water Protection Technical Assistance Program Overview**
Joe Hebelka, Hydrogeologist, PA Department of Environmental Protection
5:25pm - 6:15pm: Catered Dinner
6:15pm - 6:45pm: **Evidence-based Regulation of Water Withdrawals through the Planning Process**
Robert Stanfield, Chair, Tascum Township EAC, Bucks County
6:45pm - 7:15pm: **Upper Mount Bethel Township Groundwater Study**
Tim Higgins, Project Director, Gas Services, LTD
7:15pm - 8:15pm: **Source Water Protection & the Water Cycle: Maintaining the Balance**
Brian O'Brien, Professional Geologist, B.F. Environmental Consultants, Inc.
8:15pm - 8:30pm: Closing Remarks & Evaluations

Registration form on second page.
For questions or more information, contact Jan Wilson, Northampton County Conservation District, 610-746-1871 or at jwilson@northamptoncc.org. For questions for the benefit of the summit (i.e., Project or event of interest), call Jan Wilson at 610-239-9877.

This workshop has been funded by the League of Women Voters of Pennsylvania Citizen Education Fund through a Section 319 Federal Clean Water Act grant from the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection, administered by the US Environmental Protection Agency, with additional funding provided by the Martens-Jacoby Watershed Association.

Workshop organizers: Northampton County Conservation District, Upper Mount Bethel Township Environmental Advisory Council, Portland Borough Authority, Water Resources Education Network & Martens-Jacoby Watershed Association.

\$10 registration fee includes workshop attendance, materials & dinner

“The greatest obstacle to the project was scheduling the Lehigh Valley Clean Water Summit on May 21, when several Lehigh Valley colleges were holding graduation ceremonies, and folks in general didn’t want to spend a springtime Saturday indoors all day at a workshop,” he said. “The lesson learned was to schedule workshops in March, April, September or October.” Mr. Wilson rescheduled the Summit for September, and had a nice turnout including the assistants to several legislators.

To ensure the success of the project, think about your target audience and schedule events with them in mind. Keep an eye on your community’s calendar of events; if a particular date is crowded or completely empty, there may be a reason! When choosing a venue for an event, keep track of contacts you have made with alternative spaces in case you need to find a new home for your event at the last minute.

Positive surprises also require you to be flexible. People who see or participate in your project may ask you to present it to a completely new group. This is a great opportunity to expand upon the success of your project, but you may require additional volunteers or resources.

Ms. Williams was able to share one aspect of her project, a water cycle bracelet, with the HMS School for Children with Cerebral Palsy because a parent observed her presentation elsewhere and expressed interest.



Kristen Vitkauskas of the Roaring Creek Valley Conservation Association realized the [Community Rain Garden project](#) she created at the local middle school was also, with a few small additions, a bee- and butterfly-friendly garden. Taking steps to become certified as an official pollinator garden by the [Penn State College of Agricultural Sciences](#) allowed her community to benefit in multiple ways from one project. Following up on opportunities like these may even introduce you to new project partners, helping to extend your reach in the community, and sustain the effort beyond the grant.

Putting together a successful [WREN community watershed education project](#) requires organization, dedication and passion but everyone who cares about making a real and important difference in their communities can do it. Keeping these four vital areas in mind will help assure the success of your project, whether you are undertaking your very first WREN project or are a seasoned water educator!

For more information, visit the WREN websites: <http://wren.palvv.org> and www.sourcewaterpa.org

These grants were made possible through funding from the [Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection & EPA](#) The [Water Resources Education Network \(WREN\)](#) is a project of the Citizen Education Fund of the [League of Women Voters of Pennsylvania \(LWVPA-CEF\)](#). WREN is a nonpartisan informal collaboration among organizations and public officials working for the protection and management of Pennsylvania’s water resources, both surface and ground water, through grass-roots education and informed policy-making. WREN provides training and grants for local coalition building to promote community awareness and development of public policies necessary to protect Pennsylvania water resources.

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