

Lessons Learned: Opposites Attract Attention for Water Protection

Local officials and local kids – two very different groups to focus on to get your WREN project off the ground.

By Ellen Kiley

Every year we take a look back through the projects that earned WREN grants, make a list of what worked and what didn't, and distill down wisdom from our project leaders into Lessons Learned that we share with our readers. This is our 2013 **Lessons Learned** article, a compilation of helpful tips to new project leaders and old hands alike that we hope will help your efforts.

There ain't no rules around here. We're trying to accomplish something. — Thomas Edison

This year's **Lessons Learned** focuses on two very different groups in your community: your municipal officials, and children. These groups are incredibly different, but both are vital to the success of your WREN Water Education project. We'll talk about a few ways to bring these two groups together during your project, to the benefit of all involved.

Municipal Officials

Leaders think and talk about the solutions. Followers think and talk about the problems. — Brian Tracy

Every project funded by a WREN grant must include a local municipality as an active partner in order to be eligible to receive the grant. This means that you, as a project leader, will have to get the buy-in of your local officials at the very beginning of the process. The simplest way to do this is to *be* a municipal official — WREN welcomes grant applications spearheaded by local communities in conjunction with other local groups. However, of course, not every project leader can have such connections, and they are certainly not a requirement for a successful project. If you are involved in your community, you may already be acquainted with someone in your local government. Don't be afraid to use such personal connections if you have them. Talk to the people you know. If he or she is not the right person to talk to for your project, ask for an introduction to the appropriate official or staff member.

If you find yourself without any personal connections to your local officials, attend a meeting or two of the township supervisors or borough council. They can be very enlightening to help you learn about the "pain points" in the community, which may include environmental concerns such as flooding or stormwater issues. Most municipalities maintain an online presence which will provide you at least with the names and possibly photos of your local government members, and the times and locations of municipal meetings that are open to the public. Otherwise, you can find this information in the local newspaper or at the local government office. Introduce yourself to local officials, especially those who are members of committees that would benefit from your project (for example, Parks and Recreation or Public Works Department).



Mr. Rissler, Project leader for Terre Hill Borough, is pictured third from right. Photo shows the Borough being recognized by DEP for completing an approved Source Water Protection Plan.

According to project leader and Mayor Robert Rissler (third from right) of **Terre Hill Borough** (Lancaster County), “The best way to ask is to personally visit the people and not to ask through email. Involve the people who were asked to participate.”

It may be possible to present your intended project during the public open comment period, or if a bit more time is needed (5 - 10 minutes), contact the municipal secretary or manager to request a brief time slot on the municipal meeting agenda to pitch your proposal. You don't need a full-court audio-visual press, but a well-rehearsed proposal (with a few simple visual aids) that fits into your allotted time will show that you are both serious about your project and well organized.

Be sure to present the benefits of the project from the viewpoint of the municipality, and answer the key question, "what's in it for them?" What problems does the project solve for local officials, how does it contribute to improving quality of life for residents, or potentially lower pollution risks or reduce long-term costs for the municipality? Share any testimonials about how a similar effort worked well for nearby municipalities. Discuss how the officials can be confident that your group will successfully complete the project. Do you have any feedback from residents to show that the community wants or supports such an effort? What active role do you envision the local officials or staff will play in the project? Budgets are tight - are there costs or in-kind match the municipality will be expected to fund?

Once you have made your initial contacts and proposals, be sure to follow up with interested officials. There may also be a reporter present covering the municipal meeting from a local newspaper or television station; introduce yourself to him or her as well to network, and be sure to get contact information. Sometimes this simple act of courtesy can lead to excellent press coverage down the road for your project.

Another way to get involved with or to contact your local government may be through the Environmental Advisory Committee, or EAC, if one exists in the municipality. The members of an EAC are appointed by local elected officials to advise the various committees and commissions on managing, promoting and protection of local natural resources. Project leader Gina Craigo of the **Friends of High School Park** had the assistance of her local EAC for her project titled “*We All Live Downstream: Cheltenham Township Protecting its Waters.*” Members of the Friends of High School Park also attended workshops and gave valuable feedback on programming. Cheltenham Township’s EAC is now interested in expanding an initiative to encourage residents to install rain gardens and barrels. If your locality has an EAC, its members can be very helpful. They will know whom to contact in your local government, and they may be very willing to help with your project.



Friends of High School Park Project at work on rain garden

If your area does not have an EAC, maybe it is time to form one! An EAC must be established by local ordinance, which will require garnering the support of your local officials — something you were going to do for your project in any case. It may seem like a huge undertaking, but consider that an interested and involved EAC in your community will not only help your project, but any other conservation projects that others in your community might propose. Check out the resources available at the [EAC Network website](http://eacnetwork.org/start-now/), (<http://eacnetwork.org/start-now/>) for more information, including a copy of the EAC Handbook.

Children

We may not be able to prepare the future for our children, but we can at least prepare our children for the future. — [Franklin D. Roosevelt](#)

“Overall, I think the township responded better to the students than they would have if I had gone through the same steps myself.” — [Matt Pluta, environmentERIE Program Manager and WREN Grant Project Leader](#)

The educational component is the most important part of a WREN grant project. The goal is to raise awareness and deliver grass roots education, not just for the sake of knowledge, but to effect change in our communities — specifically how we protect, conserve and manage our water resources. It might not seem that educating children is the best way to change how adults understand and use water, but recent research suggests otherwise. Children who learn about water conservation share that knowledge with their parents and have a real effect on how their families use water.



[Environment Erie St. George School Rain Garden.](#)
Ribbon cutting ceremony.

Perhaps your community’s children can affect more than just their own households. Project Leader Matthew Pluta of [environmentERIE](#) has involved the students in the [“St. George School Rain Garden Project”](#) in Millcreek Township from the very beginning. “It’s most effective to include students from step one,” he said. An educator from environmentERIE engaged the 7th-grade students in the classroom, teaching them about stormwater management and the design of rain gardens, mirroring the planning and work going on to plan the actual garden that would soon be installed at the school.

The students designed a presentation for local officials, complete with handouts and a brochure, with the help of their teacher. Then, eight of those students stood in front of the Millcreek Township Board of Supervisors and shared what they had learned.

“Several of the supervisors expressed their interest in proper stormwater management and applauded the students for spearheading such an influential project,” says Mr. Pluta. The students, now in 8th grade, were invited to share their presentation with the township’s Planning Commission at a future date. **“Overall, I think the township responded better to the students than they would have if I had gone through the same steps myself.”** Students from grades 5 - 8 got their hands dirty before the ribbon-cutting ceremony at their rain garden, getting the garden’s plants into the ground. “Involve the students in the process,” says Mr. Pluta, “and they will take ownership of it.”

A school may be the easiest place to find children to educate, but it isn't the only place. The Boy Scouts of America, the Girl Scouts of the USA, and service clubs like 4-H all have environmental education elements in their programs. The Boy Scouts have merit badges for Environmental Science and Sustainability. The Girl Scouts have a [Forever Green Rain Gardens program](#).



Eagle Scout Colin McCrossan (R) leading Bryn Mawr Troop # 19 during Garrett Hill Coalition rain garden installation October 2012 with John Nystedt, Delaware Riverkeeper Network (L).

Project leaders Paul Overbeck and Sara Pilling of the [Garrett Hill Coalition](#) worked with Bryn Mawr Boy Scout Troop #19 on their project titled "[Managing Stormwater in Our Back Yards: Valley Run, Radnor Township.](#)" As part of this project, they installed a rain garden in Macrone Park. "They will not forget watching the truck dump its tons of sand and soil," says Mr. Overbeck, "or working alongside the engineer and scientist who designed the garden. The project gave the Scouts first-hand experience with rain garden design and construction. They can claim to have helped to build a lasting township feature." ([Garrett Hill Project Press Release](#))

Originally developed through a successful collaborative effort between EPA and the Girl Scouts of the USA (GSUSA), GSUSA developed a Patch for Girl Scouts who complete the requisite number of activities. Because of the popularity of that project, EPA developed a generic version for schools, science clubs, and community organizations interested in watershed protection, known as the [Watershed Patch Project](#).

4-H provides a [4-H₂Online](#) program for students from middle school to high school. [4-H Stream Teams](#) is a new opportunity for youth in Pennsylvania (conducted by Penn State Extension) that are interested in water, environmental awareness, science, and their local community. Young people participate in hands-on learning experiences and take part in implementing a water based community service project in their own neighborhoods. Collaborating with these groups can be beneficial for everyone involved.

Celebrate Success

If you receive a WREN grant (or any other grant) for your project, be sure to celebrate your initial success with a press release. A press release doesn't have to be a sterile recitation of figures, numbers, and an alphabet-soup of partner organizations. Design your press release to convey your enthusiasm for the project! Include quotations from your partners (or even yourself) that communicate excitement about the events and programs you have planned. Describe the big picture: what will people have fun learning at your event, outline how they'll make new friends, and help their community. Connect the hearts and the mind will come along. Where possible, include any quality photographs you have available that are related to your project and a logo for your organization. A well-crafted press release is an important tool for communicating not just with the media and the community, but also with potential future partners for your project.

When your project is completed, a celebratory event with your project partners is in order. Be sure to invite your

local officials and any child or youth groups that took part in the project. Both the Environment Erie and Garrett Hill Coalition projects above hosted ceremonies to open their rain gardens, with both local officials and the children who helped plant the gardens in attendance.



Project leader Josh Quattrone of the **Borough of Ridgway** hosted a ribbon-cutting ceremony in celebration of the interpretive sign that was the cornerstone of the “Big Mill Creek Watershed: Education through Interpretation” project. The sign, located at the Ridgway Reservoir, describes the impact of acid

rain deposition and other nonpoint source pollution on local water supplies and the steps being taken to remediate it. One of the local dignitaries in attendance was state Representative Matt Gabler — perhaps as a result, the ceremony and the sign were featured in the local paper. Don't forget to send out your press release! Every successful conservation project is worth sharing and promoting.

For additional Lessons Learned for WREN Projects, please see [2012 Lessons Learned](#), and [2011 Lessons Learned](#) articles. Consider becoming a project leader for our 2014 WREN Grant Round.

*Losers always have an excuse;
Winners always have an idea.
Losers fix the blame;
Winners fix the situation.
Losers make promises;
Winners keep commitments.
Losers let it happen;
Winners make it happen.
Losers say, "Why don't they do something?"
Winners say, "Here's something I can do." — Unknown*

Study referenced above: “Child-orientated environmental education influences adult knowledge and household behavior.” P. Damerell, C. Howe and E.J. Milner-Gulland. 12 February 2013. Web. 30 October 2013.
<http://iopscience.iop.org/1748-9326/8/1/015016/article>

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