



Title: Volunteer Engagement Options

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Purpose:

To follow up on implementation actions outlined in the Strategic Outreach Plan by developing a range of options that more strategically engage existing volunteers around MCWD priority initiatives.

Background:

On February 27, the Board of Managers approved a new strategic direction for MCWD's Outreach program. This new direction moves the program away from a focus on broad-based messaging about MCWD accomplishments and residential best practices, and toward context-specific engagement of audiences most immediately affected by MCWD's priority initiatives.

One component of the strategic planning process examined MCWD's "legacy engagement programming" – a group of annually-renewed contracts to provide broad-based outreach and engagement. The final plan calls for transitioning away from the broad-based outreach provided by this programming in favor of more targeted outreach, and lays out the following steps to do so:

1. Communicate programming shift to external partners
2. Improve engagement of District volunteers, including Master Water Stewards
3. Indefinitely suspend training of new Master Water Stewards
4. Discontinue consultant contract to support lake associations
5. Utilize the District's responsive program to assess lake association needs and provide a customized level of response based on issues and opportunities raised by associations
6. Strategically engage lake associations around district projects in their communities
7. Take a data-driven approach to defining MCWD's role in chloride management

Step 2, improving engagement of District volunteers, represents an important component of this transition. To carry out this step, the plan directed staff to review the current state of volunteer engagement and develop a list of options for how to best engage these volunteers in the future.

The resulting engagement options that were developed, such as volunteer liaisons to local advisory committees, assisting with priority initiative community engagement and metrics collection, reflect the Outreach Program's strategic shift in legacy volunteer engagement.

Strategic Shift in Volunteer Engagement:

1) Refocus volunteer work

Historically, the District's volunteer engagement focused on implementing stormwater best management practices (BMPs) and broad-based education focused on behavior change. MCWD's new approach refocuses the purpose of volunteer engagement, away from supporting the installation of small scale BMPs and individual behavior change, to a variety of activities and roles which support key District initiatives – in particular, capital projects that measurably improve water quality. Accordingly, volunteer recruitment and engagement will be refocused toward audiences most directly impacted by key initiatives, such as volunteers who live in District project communities or focal geographies.

2) Strategically align volunteer engagement around MCWD's key initiatives

In addition to supporting the high-value outreach with professional audiences -- policymakers, city staff and developers – primarily carried out by MCWD program staff, the Outreach program will carry out custom-tailored outreach tactics in support of the District's key initiatives. One of these outreach tactics is volunteer engagement.

Each District initiative has a unique strategic context (e.g. water centric issues, physical landscape, policy needs, communities, relationships) that require a unique outreach strategy and configuration of tactics. In some cases, volunteer engagement will play a critical role, in others it will be peripheral or absent. Future volunteer engagement will be determined by the needs of each unique outreach plan supporting the District's key initiatives.

3) Create nimble volunteer engagement, which is targeted, time-limited, and varies in scale

Rather than operating a stand-alone volunteer program, volunteer engagement will be integrated into priority initiative outreach plans. The scale of volunteer engagement, types of activities and roles, and length of time volunteers are engaged will be tailored to fit the needs of key initiatives and adjusted based on regular assessment and feedback from program staff, volunteers and other stakeholders.

Volunteer Engagement Options:

To realize the full potential of the District's volunteer program, MCWD must strategically activate volunteers in work that aligns with its key initiatives. Below is a range of high-value roles volunteers could play in the District's work:

1. Assist with community engagement efforts tied to key initiatives
2. Serve on local advisory boards and committees
3. Collect project metrics data on completed projects
4. Fulfill requests to provide basic stormwater education at community events

1. Assist with community engagement efforts in targeted communities – those with planned projects, communities at risk of flooding, etc.

As the District engages in larger scale projects and initiatives which have a broader impact on local communities, it is important to engage community members to ensure understanding, identify concerns and seek input. This is essential not only because the success of District initiatives can be impacted by local community members' perceptions of the initiative, community members can also provide valuable insight to inform various elements of the initiative.

Volunteers can assist community engagement efforts in a variety of ways, such as:

- **Conduct community attitude surveys before and after a project.** These surveys can provide valuable data to track how attitudes change over time, identify the level of community support and flag potential issues. For example, some District projects which initially experienced community opposition gained widespread community support after the community adjusted to the change and experienced the benefits of the project. Capturing stories and data on community attitude change will be valuable for future initiatives.
- **Provide support at community engagement events.** In-person staffing at community events is a time-intensive activity, but often a valuable community engagement tool for specific initiatives. Volunteers can assist in these events in a variety of ways, such as staffing sign-in tables, serving snacks or overseeing activities. By supplementing some of the operational aspects of the event, volunteers can free up staff time to focus on presenting to and connecting with community members.
- **Assist with understanding and connecting to local community networks in project communities.** Each volunteer brings their own personal and professional network to the program, which can often assist in connecting to key audiences. For example, one volunteer belongs to an Arden Park church eco-faith group and connected group members to District information on the Arden Park restoration project. Volunteers can provide a valuable link to these networks to both disseminate and receive information related to the District's work in the community.

2. Serve on community advisory committees

Many communities within the watershed establish either temporary or standing citizen advisory committees to inform their planning processes, such as park master planning. Community members are also appointed to municipal committees like sustainability or planning committees. These committees help shape municipal policies and plans which impact land use and water resources within the watershed.

Over the years, some volunteers have naturally gravitated toward serving on these committees due to their interest in water resources. The District has an opportunity to formalize this volunteer path by supporting leadership development of local volunteers.

Some municipalities, such as St. Louis Park and Hopkins, have established citizen academies as a way to educate residents on local civics and better understand the role and function of local government. This model could be revised and tested on current District volunteers as a way to identify, train and engage volunteers to serve on local advisory committees which impact water resources and land use within the District. Connecting volunteers to local committees also enhances community engagement efforts by expanding the networks the District has connections with in the community.

3. Collect project metrics data

The District's Balanced Urban Ecology approach is centered on the triple bottom line benefits (economic, environmental and social) District projects provide to communities within the watershed. Historically the District has not collected data on the social benefits District projects have on surrounding communities. Volunteers can play an important role in measuring the benefits of this work by collecting quantifiable and qualitative metrics, such as visitor surveys or user counts, to quantify the social and community value of District projects.

Example: Minnehaha Creek Greenway Metric Collection Pilot

In 2019 outreach staff piloted a metrics collection program within the Minnehaha Creek Greenway to test out several methods for collecting social metrics data. Pedestrian counter equipment was installed to track the number of pedestrians traveling through segments of the Minnehaha Creek Preserve and Methodist Hospital sections of the Greenway. Additionally, nine volunteers were trained to conduct visitor surveys to provide more detailed information on the various visitors.

The goals of the pilot were to:

- Provide quantitative and qualitative information on how the Minnehaha Creek Greenway provides social and community value to St. Louis Park residents and workers
- Create baseline data to track how the number of visitors and the use of the Greenway changes over time and as new connections to the Greenway, such as the construction of the Louisiana Bridge underpass, are completed
- Identify issues to address and opportunities for programming or partnerships

The work provided yielded several benefits:

- Collected 184 visitor surveys which provide rich, detailed information on each visitor and their use of the Greenway, supplementing the hard data collected by the pedestrian counter
- 34 hours were worked by volunteers, saving District resources
- Provides baseline data which can be used over time to demonstrate the value of greenspace connectivity as new connections are added to the Greenway
- Detected potential educational outreach needs by identifying the majority of visitors use the Greenway to walk their dogs and pet waste may become an issue

4. Fulfill requests to provide basic stormwater education at community events.

The District receives approximately 10-15 requests per year to provide basic stormwater education at local fairs, festivals and other community events. Since 2017 the Outreach Program has increasingly relied on volunteers to table at these events as a way to increase staff capacity to focus on organizational priorities. A training was developed to educate volunteers on how to effectively engage community members at events and has been conducted on an annual basis. Engaging volunteers in this role allows the District to maintain a presence at community events and ensures residents have basic information on steps they can take to improve water quality.

Recommended Approach:

The District will be engaging volunteers in a new way that supports the watershed district's key initiatives. Rather than a static program that is renewed annually, the new volunteer approach is flexible and time limited, with the roles/activities determined by the needs of the District priority initiative and the interests of local volunteers.

To implement this new approach, the following actions are recommended:

- Identify one or two key initiatives of the District that would benefit from volunteer engagement
- Test out engaging volunteers strategically by keeping new volunteer approaches focused and time limited in the first year
- Create a system for assessing the success and value of volunteer engagement efforts and use this to inform whether an approach should be scaled up, adjusted or discontinued

Summary:

At the September 10, 2020 Operations and Programs Committee meeting, staff will update committee members on the process undertaken to date to develop the above volunteer engagement options and recommended approach to implementation. Staff will be seeking Committee feedback on the overall shift and direction of the District's approach to volunteer engagement.