



## CHAPTER 3

### PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT IN THE ALCOVY WATERSHED

*“To the maximum extent possible, each State shall establish procedures...  
to encourage the public to participate in developing the protection programs...”*  
Safe Drinking Water Act Amendments, 1996

Residents in the Alcovy watershed area are concerned about protection of the Alcovy River and value its contribution to local quality of life, according to the information received through the Watershed Protection Project public involvement process. More than 500 residents in the Alcovy Basin participated in presentations about the river’s quality and impacts to it, and countless others were informed through a project website and newspaper articles. The Alcovy River is a visible part of the local landscape, winding alongside busy roads and meandering through local fields and farms. An increase in development in recent years has created a heightened interest in water quality issues among residents who see more and more erosion from construction sites, removal of vegetative buffers, and increased impervious surface areas. In addition, this study was conducted during the third year of severe drought conditions, contributing to an overall increase in interest of water management issues. This awakening awareness of water issues provided a tremendous opportunity for outreach to citizens, and the positive response to information about the project indicated an enthusiastic and engaged community. The positive result of the public involvement process includes the chance for partnering between officials in the 15 jurisdictions within the Alcovy watershed and the local residents they represent, ensuring optimal implementation of the watershed protection plan by providing citizens with ownership in the care of local waterways.

The goal of the Public Involvement process for the Alcovy Watershed Protection Project was to inform residents in the study area of the issues related to water quality and water quantity management, and to provide opportunities for meaningful input into the recommendations being considered for inclusion in the management plan.

The objectives of the process were to reach out to key stakeholders through public meetings, community meetings and one-on-one contact, to increase the knowledge level among local residents regarding protection efforts, to seek input on proposed policy tools and implementation options, and to generate opportunities for ongoing partnerships between key community groups in the watershed and the participating government agencies and utilities. A decision was made early on in the process to go beyond the traditional public meeting format, to seek a more inclusive approach where information is presented in convenient settings during meetings the public will already be attending, such as civic clubs and community groups. This approach proved successful in “going to where the people are,” rather than inviting the public to add new meetings to their already busy lives. To provide adequate opportunities for full participation, these community presentations were coupled with three traditional public meetings.



### **Starting at the End – What Did the Public Tell Us?**

In order to be of most value to those making use of this report, this section will deal first with the input received from stakeholders in the Alcovy watershed, and then discuss the public involvement process undertaken to obtain this feedback.

In general, homeowners, business leaders, developers, farmers, and others interested in the project expressed concern for long-term protection of the Alcovy. It was clear that consensus focused on the recognition that the Alcovy is a valuable resource to the communities located in the watershed. How this protection should be ensured raised several divergent issues, including private property rights, undue burden on the development community, lax enforcement of existing regulations, and equitable assessment of water quality impacts among all contributors (agriculture, cattle, development, residential, etc.). However, no key issues emerged as significantly sensitive topics among a consistent group of stakeholders. The main opportunities for public input were provided by direct interaction at the three public meetings, and the community meetings. Tables 3.1 and 3.2 detail the results from these meetings. In summary, the following comments were received:

- Interest in protecting the Alcovy River
- Concern about development impacts, especially upstream
- Concern about impacts on current activities, such as agricultural practices
- Support of policy tools under consideration
- Concern about some of the policy tools as related to who would have responsibility for implementation
- Concern about maintaining property rights
- Desire to lobby for implementation for policy tools



Table 3.1. Community Meeting Summary Chart

Group	Date	Estimated Meeting Attendance	Input Received From Group
Lake Jackson Homeowners Association Tom McLean	10/99	200	This was the annual meeting of homeowners living along Lake Jackson. Questions focused on water quality protection of Lake Jackson, and how the project might help ensure this protection long-term. Residents seemed supportive of the project, and interested in how their upstream neighbors were developing.
Monroe Business Association Cheryl Williamson	11/99	23	Questions raised by this group focused on concerns about the water quality in the Alcovy, about requirements for fencing of livestock out of streams, and enforcement of the recommended guidelines. When asked, the group stated that industrial-based growth would be most beneficial to their businesses, and that in 20 years they believe the community will be a healthy mix of residential and business developments. They indicated that the quality of life in Walton County would best be impacted by a healthy environment, a planned environment and thoughtful placement of growth.
Industrial Authority of Monticello Stone Workman	2/1/00	6	Following an overview presentation about the project, this group inquired as to why they should be interested in the project, and asked how they could assist. They expressed no obvious concerns about the project.
Turtle Cove Property Owners Association Vickie Bailey	2/8/00	50	This group stated it supports any efforts to protect water quality in support of aquatic and recreational uses of Lake Jackson. They asked how they could support the project. They also asked about the location of a planned reservoir. The group stated that boaters should be better educated about ways to protect water quality in the lake, and that there should be some method of trapping trash coming into the lake from upstream. The group also suggested that a partnership be formed with AmeriCorps and the Civilian Corps to provide labor for projects such as planting trees, dredging the lake, and performing water quality testing.
Social Circle Rotary Club Frank Sherrill	2/14/00	25	This group of community business leaders expressed interest in the project, and asked questions related to enforcement of any proposed policy tools. No specific policy tool recommendations were cited as concerns.
Greater Walton Builders Association Anita Smith	2/17/00	100	This group raised no significant concerns, although they expressed interest in remaining informed of the project.
Newton County Smart Growth Betsy Moorehouse	3/2/00	Estimate unavailable	Jennifer Fine of the Northeast Georgia Regional Development Center attended this meeting in a support role, with the main presentation being given by the Georgia Wildlife Federation on issues related to the Alcovy.
Covington Kiwanis Club Dr. John Sieweke	3/16/00	100	The group seemed pleased with the project efforts, and raised no concerns about any particular policy tools.
Newton Clean and Beautiful Vicky Giles	5/22/00	25	The group seemed pleased with the project efforts, and raised no concerns about any particular policy tools.
Monroe Kiwanis Club Don Shedd	5/22/00	15	These were Walton County residents. At least one member of this group expressed concern about impact fees, and the fact that developers may be asked to bear much of the burden with many of the implementation tools. A written survey of the group found that the majority supported all of the policy tools, with three of the members expressing concerns about several of the options, including transferable development rights (TDRs), revision of site design standards, improved stormwater ordinance, riparian buffer ordinance, impervious surface limit, and the land acquisition program.



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Group	Date	Estimated Meeting Attendance	Input Received From Group
Social Circle Garden Club Linda Cobb	6/29/00	20	Attendees for this meeting were from Newton and Walton Counties, not just Social Circle. The group expressed a great deal of interest in the project, and indicated that water quality is a significant concern. Some expressed concerns over water quantity, and cited the recent drought. The group was supportive of most of the policy options, although they did express some property rights concerns and a few were wary of government land acquisition as an option.
Neighbors of East Newton Betsy Bledsoe	10/17/00	60+	This group expressed a great deal of interest in the project and the issues, and asked many questions. They expressed general support for all of the policy tools presented, with no one tool raising any red flags. Several in this group had heard a presentation by Laurie Fowler at another forum months ago, and had requested additional information at that time about TDRs. The group expressed interest in remaining informed about the project.
Piedmont Cattleman's Association Ricky Wheeler	7/13/00	70	This group was given the written survey following the presentation, but only one was returned completed. This forms expressed interested for all the policy tools, except for questions about voluntary conservation easements, land acquisition program, and TDRs. The comment on the form was, "I agree that we need to make sure we keep our green space." One of the questions raised by a member of this group was, "How much pollution from cattle grazing areas will be allowed before cattlemen become regulated by EPD?" Two other individuals from Oxford expressed concern over sedimentation onto their property from adjacent development.
Gwinnett Sierra Club Lisa Journey	10/25/00	20	This was a very enthusiastic group, and supportive of all of the policy tools which were presented. Group members were generally unfamiliar with the Alcovy River, although most had heard about the recent spills. Information was given to them about the Gwinnett Open Land Trust. This group requested a copy of the final report, so that they could lobby for implementation of the policy tools.
Walton County Cattleman's Association William Carlan	10/17/00	45	This group of Walton County cattlemen were interested in learning about the components of the Alcovy River Watershed Assessment and subsequent Protection and Implementation Plan development. They expressed concern about development occurring in Gwinnett County and the lack of effective sediment and erosion control practices. The group indicated they would like to see the water quality model developed as part of this project accurately represent the sediment loadings from Gwinnett to assess the impact on the Alcovy River watershed. One audience member requested that the Protection Plan include guidance on what Walton County should do in terms of safe water supply if a tragedy, such as a major chemical spill, were to occur. Another audience member commented that erosion and sedimentation has long been occurring in the Alcovy River watershed and that the developed model should account for such "natural" processes. It was explained to this gentleman that the model does account for natural in-stream sediment re-suspension processes. One individual expressed interest in TDRs. Another group member took the position that storm water controls required on developments was already doing all that could be done, that erosion is a natural phenomenon (the Grand Canyon was cited as an example), and that sediment or stream bank erosion should not be a concern.

In addition to these community meetings, three public meetings were held. The first was conducted shortly after project startup to provide an overview of the study and address any initial concerns from the public. The second was held at the mid-project point to provide more in-depth findings from the study, and solicit specific responses to proposed policy tools such as conservation



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subdivisions, increased enforcement, etc. The third was conducted prior to the final report being submitted to the NEGRDC, requesting comments and additional feedback. All three meetings were reasonably well attended, and residents took advantage of the opportunity to provide their specific concerns and issues, as well as ask questions related to their particular interests. Summaries of these meetings, including questions and comments from local residents, can be found in Table 3.2.

**Table 3.2. Public Meeting Summary Chart**

Public Meeting Date and Location	Estimated Meeting Attendance	Meeting Format	Input Received From Group
January 20, 2000 Monroe Municipal Auditorium	40	The first hour of the meeting featured an Open House format with five different information stations for the public to visit: 1) "What is Team Alcovy," 2) "Why is Team Alcovy Necessary?" 3) "Data Collection and Sampling," 4) "Modeling," 5) "Alcovy Challenges and Opportunities." In addition, Elaine Oakes of Walton County Clean and Beautiful provided an educational booth. Following the Open House, a group question/answer/comment session was held.	During the group Q&A session, residents asked questions about the sampling program and what would be sampled, what type of data would be available on the website, if any recreational facilities were being considered as part of the project, if a baseline watershed is being used for comparison purposes, how the final outcomes of the project will be used, what the study team expects to find, how is the data being shared with the public, what type of coordination is being done on TMDLs with the State.
May 4, 2000 Newton County Judicial Center	25	The meeting opened with an introduction to the project and a challenge to residents in attendance to "roll up their sleeves" and prepare to participate. An overview slide presentation followed explaining the various implementation options for consideration including stream buffers, conservation subdivisions, site design standards, voluntary water conservation, stormwater ordinance, conservation easements, and constructed wetlands. Following the slide presentation, attendees were invited to visit information stations illustrating the various implementation options, and to ask questions one-on-one with project team members and share input on the options. Residents were asked to "cast their vote" by marking the options that were appealing to them as well as those that were not so appealing. Residents were reminded that their "votes" were not cast in stone and will be used by the project team as indicators of what implementation options may be feasible for this project.	Results of the "voting" conducted at the meeting was as follows: YES votes were cast for Revision of Site Design Standards, Improved Stormwater Ordinance, Impervious Surface Limit, and TDRs. A mix of YES and NO votes were recorded for Conservation Subdivision Ordinance, Voluntary Conservation Easement Program, Land Acquisition Program, and Riparian Buffer Ordinance. Other comments recorded at the meeting included: lack of support from commissioners to support innovative planning ideas, concern over intrusion into wetland areas, privacy would be compromised by Conservation Subdivisions, developers generally select the options which are the cheapest, less growth is better, water conservation measures should also be emphasized, septic tanks should be restricted to protect water quality, and TDRs are perhaps too complex for some communities.



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Public Meeting Date and Location	Estimated Meeting Attendance	Meeting Format	Input Received From Group
November 9, 2000 Newton County Judicial Center	40	The meeting opened with a one-on-one discussions at information stations that illustrated implementation options. This was followed by an overview slide presentation on project findings and plan recommendations. Following the presentation, a group question/answer and discussion session was held. For the remainder of the meeting, attendees were given the opportunity to voice written or verbal comments.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Is there a plan to continue long-term monitoring?</li> <li>■ Should a citizens watershed committee be formed to continue this cause?</li> <li>■ Did the study determine a rate of change regarding previous surfaces vs. impervious surfaces?</li> <li>■ Do the project modeling projections correlate to EPD projections?</li> <li>■ Is this a 4-county joint effort, or can each county select its own implementation options?</li> <li>■ How important is enforcement in the success of a management plan?</li> <li>■ Due to weather variations, how accurate can the modeling results be?</li> <li>■ Will the recreational uses of the Alcovy be considered when determining future wastewater discharge limits?</li> <li>■ Who will do long-term modeling, and who will analyze the data?</li> <li>■ In building the model, was it taken into account that Newton County plans to install piping to the proposed Bear Creek Reservoir?</li> </ul>

A side issue raised by residents at several meetings and through individual comments, although not contained within the study objectives, was related to the proposed Bear Creek Reservoir in Newton County. Residents were unclear about how the study might relate to this reservoir project, and several expressed their opposition to the proposed reservoir due to perceived adverse impacts to the river.



## The Public Involvement Plan – How Was Public Input Gathered?

The Public Involvement Plan for the Alcovy Watershed Protection Project was designed to serve as a bridge between project needs and community concerns. Working from the vision expressed by the Northeast Georgia Regional Development Center (NEGRDC) and the Technical Advisory Committee (TAC), the approach was crafted and formalized in a comprehensive Public Involvement Plan (Appendix A). The Plan incorporated research on attitudes and opinions of key leaders, and a review of media coverage on relevant issues, in order to lay the foundation for an effective program. Goals, as developed by the NEGRDC and the TAC, were as follows:



- Employ an easy-to-understand format to foster informed public opinion about the importance of water quality in the Alcovy.
- Seek to understand the values and attitudes of stakeholders.
- Provide opportunities for meaningful input and feedback on recommended solutions.
- Create a foundation for ongoing programs supporting citizen involvement in Alcovy water protection.
- Design and employ a basin-wide approach with flexibility for individual jurisdictions.
- Incorporate public input into the Approved Management Plan, and encourage broad-based support for Plan implementation.

Mechanisms for engaging stakeholders were discussed prior to Plan implementation. The resulting Public Involvement Plan employed a comprehensive approach to encourage the public to participate in developing a watershed protection program that could be successfully implemented for the Alcovy River. As the project moved forward, this Plan evolved and reflected the direction necessary to ensure the process stayed on course. Discussed below are the components of the Plan.

**Message.** The message selected for the Alcovy Watershed Protection Project emphasized the protection of a precious natural resource, and the regional nature of that protection. All of the jurisdictions and agencies within the four counties participating in the project acknowledged the need to work in concert, and committed to a comprehensive plan to preserve the unique ecology of the Alcovy.

Local residents were brought onto the team to extend these protection efforts beyond regulatory requirements. The message, reflecting this cooperative effort, was: ***TEAM ALCOVY: NEIGHBORS FOR CLEAN WATER.***



The fundamental concepts woven into the message were:

- A cooperative spirit among neighboring jurisdictions and agencies ensures a regional effort to water protection
- We all have an impact on the Alcovy's quality, and we can all be part of preserving it
- Protection strategies uniquely suited to each community help all communities protect this precious shared resource

**Stakeholder Interviews.** A comprehensive list of stakeholders was developed based on input from the NEGRDC staff, the TAC, participating governments, and other relevant sources. Stakeholders are those members of the community having significant involvement or interest in the watershed study project. From this list, 15 of the identified stakeholders were selected by the TAC to be contacted for an informal interview. The goal of the interviews was to garner suggestions on how best to engage the public in the process, and to solicit input on groups that should be contacted for scheduling of informational presentations and input sessions about the project. The stakeholders participating in the interviews represented a variety of backgrounds and interests, including developers, farmers, planners, environmentalists, academics, concerned citizens, etc. These individuals provided valuable information about concerns of interest to particular communities and jurisdictions, as well as guidance on how to reach interested residents within the watershed. Interview summaries were provided to the TAC for consideration in the planning process.

**Public Meetings.** The BC team conducted three public meetings during the course of the Alcovy Watershed Protection Project. These meetings were open to the general public, and featured an open house format with manned informational stations available, followed by a group gathering intended to solicit input from interested meeting attendees. Announcements about these meetings were placed in the form of paid advertisements in the major newspapers within each jurisdiction. In addition, notices were mailed to the stakeholder list and were posted on the project website. These meetings served as a complement to the Community Presentations component of the Public Involvement program.



**Community Presentations.** The BC team conducted more than 15 community presentations. These meetings were scheduled by contacting groups identified by stakeholders, and from information provided by the TAC. Concepts important to the policy recommendations included in the final protection plan were introduced based on guidance from the TAC and the Policy Committee in order to address the specific needs of each community. These presentations used the format of a 15-minute presentation, followed by a question/discussion period, and followed in some cases by a written survey asking for responses to questions related to the challenges and opportunities that exist for protecting the Alcovy.



**Newsletter Articles/Press Releases.** The BC team developed and distributed press releases for inclusion in community newsletters and local newspapers, focusing on project overviews, project updates, data results, computer modeling, and potential implementation strategies. Press releases were also forwarded to all major media in the watershed study area throughout the duration of the project detailing project milestones and announcing all public meetings.

**Web site.** The BC team developed a publicly accessible web site providing project-related information ([www.teamalcovy.com](http://www.teamalcovy.com)). The web site was a valuable tool in providing timely information to the public, and included information about upcoming community presentations, public meetings, and other news of interest. The site also included an extensive sampling data section which provided scientific sampling data for all of the river sampling sites, as well as easy to understand explanations of the findings.

### **Recommendations for Ongoing Public Involvement Efforts**

The “Team Alcovy” public involvement process has established a link with stakeholders within the impacted communities, and ongoing public outreach efforts reinforce the successful implementation of the Watershed Plan and long-term protection of the Alcovy. Mutually-beneficial partnerships could be maintained with groups already responding to the watershed protection message. These groups, and a list of contacts, were identified previously in Table 3-1.