



Regional Cooperation and Public Involvement

CHAPTER 14

REGIONAL COOPERATION AND PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

Citizen involvement is critical to the successful implementation of recommended watershed protection policies and practices. Water resource management is a joint venture, requiring a commitment from all sectors of the community: businesses, land owners, citizens, agricultural interests, developers, community leaders and elected officials. Each sector influences land use and land management decisions, which in turn affect water resources; therefore, community individuals must first understand their role in helping to protecting water quality and then take ownership in identifying and solving problems (or preventing foreseeable ones) in order to affect change.

The Alcovy River is a valuable resource for drinking water, recreation, and for support of its unique ecology. Citizens have repeatedly expressed interest at community presentations and public meetings, and within individual discussions in preserving its unique qualities. The Alcovy River Watershed Protection Project was only the first step in a long-term process of creating a communal legacy of water quality protection. The optimal time to cultivate this interest is now, on the forefront of the projected rapid growth. Considerable time and effort has been invested in providing stakeholders with information necessary to make informed decisions concerning water quality protection. These community stakeholders can become key leaders for influencing public opinion, and are a tremendous resource for creating a springboard for long-term citizen action.

Often, people are simply unaware of the steps they can take to influence policy decisions and other initiatives to protect water quality. This chapter provides avenues for sustained public involvement in the management of the Alcovy River and offers several productive outlets for citizen energy and interest. An increasing number of state and local governments have recognized that trained and motivated citizens can provide valuable input to decisions regarding watershed protection. Below are some recommendations for continued public involvement in the Alcovy River Watershed Protection.

Alcovy Watershed Council

Members of the Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) and other stakeholders involved in the Alcovy project have expressed a desire for the establishment of permanent Alcovy Watershed Council. The primary mission of the Council would be to gauge the success of implementation of the Watershed Protection Plan. Regularly held meetings would provide a forum for regional discussions regarding policy changes, ordinance enforcement, and other local implementation efforts. Council members should include, to the extent possible,



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representatives from all 15 city and county jurisdictions within the watershed. Each county may want to consider appointing a watershed coordinator to assume this role. Other potential council members could include former TAC members, elected officials, City and County Planning and Code Enforcement representatives, Public Works and Water and Sewer Authority officials, state Environmental Protection Division representatives, Soil and Water Conservation Commission (SWCC) and Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) staff, water resource professionals and representatives from interested community groups.

The Alcovy Watershed Council should capitalize on the successful partnering effort begun with the Alcovy Watershed Protection Project between regulatory agencies, local officials and community groups. Such a partnership would ensure the continuation of regional cooperation for effective growth management and water quality protection. The continued data collection and model calibration is paramount to the accuracy of future watershed assessments and the success of planning efforts. Thus, the Council may also act as a steering committee to direct future water quality monitoring and data collection and to coordinate with the Northeast Georgia Regional Development Center for model development.

The Council would continue the dialogue between jurisdictions and would encourage upstream and downstream neighbors to work together to address common watershed issues. Formation of such a group would harness the energy and creative ideas of a broad spectrum of interested parties. The council should provide quarterly or bi-annual progress reports to the elected officials and the public on watershed plan implementation. There are many examples around the country as well as in Georgia of successful watershed groups working to protect water resources on a basin-wide scale.

Community Watershed Groups

Natural partners to the Watershed Council are local Community Watershed Groups. These groups would be citizen-based with an emphasis on coordinating grassroots efforts for protecting water quality. With a goal of helping residents “get their feet wet” in the Alcovy, these groups could work with existing community programs in their area, such as Adopt-a-Stream, and facilitating the formation of others. These community groups would be a valuable resource to the Watershed Council and local officials in extending community outreach and education efforts. These groups would also provide a forum for local discussions and report to the Watershed Council on issues of importance to the community, ensuring that the public remains connected to the process. Oxford College is a possible vehicle for organizing monitoring efforts in Newton County. The Newton Smart Growth is an organization interested in efficient development planning.



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Citizen Soil Watch Groups

The Upper Chattahoochee River Keeper has developed a Citizen Soil Watch program. Several such groups are active in and around the Atlanta area. The goal of the program is to educate citizens concerning proper erosion and sediment control practices and who to contact when there is a problem. Training courses are given to equip citizens with the tools necessary to properly identify erosion and sediment control failures. A scorecard is used to rate various practices, and a model letter has been developed for reporting to local code enforcement officials. The limitations of such an assessment must be recognized. All assessments are conducted from public right-of-ways to avoid conflicts of public access to the property, and therefore are not as complete as normal routine inspections. However, the overall goal is to identify gross, obvious problems that have a high probability of adversely impacting downstream waterbodies.

The most successful citizen soil watch groups are those that work cooperatively with local governments. It is recommended that all citizen complaints be funneled through a trained representative of the soil watch group. This representative would then be responsible for filtering out unwarranted complaints to avoid the potential problem of overburdening enforcement officials with a flurry of phone calls and letters.

Adopt-a-Stream

Giving residents an opportunity to get their feet wet in neighborhood streams often creates the greatest buy-in to county-wide protection measures. The Georgia Department of Natural Resources Environmental Protection Division Adopt-a-Stream program trains citizen volunteers to collect and analyze water quality samples, conduct biological assessments, and document stream and watershed conditions. Adopt-a-Stream groups also conduct visual surveys, improve stream habitat, and conduct stream cleanups. Both Newton and Walton County have Adopt-a-Stream programs; however, membership has declined in recent years. Local governments can offer support to these groups in the form of increased publicity (water bill stuffers, local access television, newsletters, etc.) or through sponsorship of training classes (providing speakers, materials, meeting space, etc.).

Educational Curriculum

Educating future generations of citizens and water consumers is a valuable way to ensure long-term change in behaviors impacting the Alcovy River. Local governments can create an attachment to issues specific to their community by encouraging educators to include them in classroom assignments. *The Water Source Book*, designed for grades K-12, is a tremendous resource for introducing water resources issues into classrooms, as is *Project Wet*. Developed with teachers, water industry professionals, and others, both of these curricula



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have been approved by the State of Georgia for inclusion in classroom lesson plans. They each offer hands-on activities for students, guidance materials for teachers, and a matrix for identifying which elements address specific teaching goals. Water resources issues can be used in science, art, language, social studies, mathematics, and other disciplines to illustrate basic principles, while also conveying the water resource management message. With little effort, local governments could personalize the curriculum to include information specific to the Alcovy River and its challenges. Appendix I gives some general recommendations for protecting streams.

Partnerships

Reaching out to interested stakeholders within the watershed creates opportunities for successful partnerships. During the course of the Alcovy Watershed Protection Project, hundreds of residents were accessed through community presentations made at local civic and professional association meetings. Local governments can partner with these groups to sustain the open lines of communication established at these presentations. Requesting regular placement (yearly, quarterly) on meeting agendas to offer updates, provide educational information, and receive input would be a first step toward assisting key opinion leaders within the community in making informed decisions. These opinion leaders also often contribute to community understanding of issues.