

Introduction

“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

Watershed protection presents unique opportunities for public involvement. Well managed efforts energize and involve local residents in protection of their streams, rivers and lakes, ensuring optimal implementation of a watershed protection plan by providing citizens with ownership in the care of local waterways.

The benefit to communities of focused public involvement cannot be overstated as it ensures opportunities for meaningful input from all sectors of the community and creates educational initiatives about the impact each individual has on water resources. Watershed management plan policy recommendations can then be developed reflecting the desires and needs of the community.

A well-designed public involvement program involves local residents throughout the planning process. An approach combining traditional public meetings with extensive community outreach brings in stakeholders that might otherwise be left out of the process. This type of consensus building and two-way dialogue is a cornerstone of the Brown and Caldwell team’s approach as presented in this Public Involvement Plan.

<p>A successful public involvement plan must integrate community concerns at key junctures in the watershed assessment process, establish a basis for citizen trust in the governments involved, and create a springboard for positive action.</p>
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Public Involvement Plan

Developing a Public Involvement Plan for the Alcovy River

The Public Involvement Plan developed by the Brown and Caldwell team for the Alcovy Watershed Protection Project was designed to serve as a bridge spanning the gap between project needs and community concerns. Its foundation is the vision expressed by the Northeast Georgia Regional Development Center (NEGRDC) and the Technical Advisory Committee (TAC). With ongoing input and guidance from NEGRDC staff and TAC members, the Plan evolved and reflected the direction necessary to ensure the process stayed on course.

Public involvement efforts for the Alcovy incorporated research on attitudes and opinions of key opinion leaders, and a review of media coverage on relevant issues, in order to lay the foundation for an effective program. Goals for public involvement were developed by the NEGRDC and the TAC, and mechanisms for engaging stakeholders were discussed prior to implementation. The resulting Public Involvement Plan employed a comprehensive approach to encourage the public to participate in developing a watershed protection program that will be successfully implemented for the Alcovy River.

Public Involvement Goals

One of the initial steps taken toward developing the Public Involvement program was a brainstorming session with the NEGRDC staff and TAC members of common goals for engaging local citizens in the Alcovy River Protection Project. While a healthy mix of varying views were expressed, the overriding consensus was that the public should be given opportunities to participate in the study beginning early in the process, and that communication should be two-way. From this discussion, the following goals emerged:

- ◆ 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.

Research

Taking the pulse of key opinion leaders and the media was crucial in fashioning a Public Involvement program that would ensure efficient use of time and resources. By understanding the issues and history of the area, audiences were identified, messages were specialized to meet community needs, and information was disseminated to reach the broadest segment of citizenry possible. Research for the Alcovy project consisted of four steps:

- ◆ TAC member interviews
- ◆ TAC member survey
- ◆ Informal contacts with local media
- ◆ Local news coverage review

TAC Member Interviews

Early in the process, interviews with TAC members and NEGRDC staff provided a broad overview of issues and opinions that could impact the plan process. This information assisted in acclimating the BC team, and helped identify the most appropriate mechanisms for reaching the public in impacted communities. This informal, one-on-one dialogue also allowed TAC members to make the BC team aware of possible opportunities and challenges associated with public involvement in given communities.

The following points summarize some of the main ideas expressed during these interviews:

- Stakeholder contact needs to begin as early as possible.
- Elected officials (city councils, county commissioners) need to be educated about and involved with this project from start to finish.
- The BC team needs to reach out to those who are most likely to challenge or have objections to any of the possible implementation options so their concerns can be addressed early in the process.

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- Helping the public understand the need for watershed protection is key to water resource management.
- The public needs to understand the link between land use activities and watershed protection.
- Landowners and developers will be important stakeholders in all jurisdictions.

TAC member survey

As work began on the early phases of the project, TAC members responded to a brief written survey polling their opinions on several issues including the key opinion leaders in their particular community, the likely opponents of the watershed protection study recommendations, the main drivers behind the Alcovy project, and their vision for incorporation of public input into the final plan.

Informal Contacts with Local Media

Members of the press can provide valuable information about key opinion leaders within a community, controversial subjects, and a history of local issues. Contacts with local newspapers within each of the communities represented by the Alcovy Watershed Protection Project offered insights that contributed to a heightened understanding of the areas involved.

Review of Media Coverage

A search of historical news articles from each local media outlet was conducted to complement the information obtained from the informal contacts with local media representatives. Stakeholders were identified, topics of interest were placed in perspective, and an ongoing picture of each community emerged.

Public Involvement Program Components

Specific components of the Public Involvement program were chosen to help achieve the goals identified for the project. Each component was designed to build on the last, and form an ever-increasing span of outreach into the community. For this reason, Public Involvement Plan components should be considered in their totality to appreciate the overall impacts. The components addressed by this Plan are:

- ◆ Tag line/Message
- ◆ Direct Communication with Stakeholders
- ◆ Broadcast Communications

Tag line/Message

The tag line selected for the Alcovy Watershed Protection Project emphasizes 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 have acknowledged the need to work in concert and have 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.

Tag line:

TEAM ALCOVY: NEIGHBORS FOR CLEAN WATER

The concepts woven into the tag line were reinforced by a number of messages:

Message #1: A cooperative spirit among neighboring jurisdictions and agencies ensure a regional effort to water protection.

Message #2: We all have an impact on the Alcovy's quality, and we can all be part of preserving it.

Message #3: Protection strategies uniquely suited to each community help all communities protect this precious shared resource.

Direct Communication with Stakeholders

Programming that involves face to face communication with stakeholders and the public is considered direct output. Direct input involves opportunities for citizens to respond directly to information that is presented through face to face communication. Direct output offers control over the content, context, and timing of information presented. Conversely, direct input allows citizens to have control over their responses and provides an opportunity for views to be expressed and reactions elicited immediately. The direct output programming developed for the Alcovy Watershed Protection Project is cited below.

◆ **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 by the BC team 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. Once interviews were completed, a report was submitted to the NEGRDC staff and the TAC summarizing the input received. In addition to the stakeholder interviews, the BC team responded throughout the term of the project to queries from concerned residents in response to the overall informational campaign. A database of the types of concerns or comments expressed was maintained and submitted to the NEGRDC staff and the TAC.

◆ **Kick-off Meeting**

The Policy Committee for the Alcovy Watershed Protection Project must be plugged in to the process from the beginning. Prior to the project field work commencing, the

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BC team hosted a kick-off meeting to present an overview of the project and establish expectations. Approximately 25 Policy Committee members heard a 30-minute presentation featuring the NEGRDC staff, a representative of the TAC, and members of the BC team outlining the components of the project. Following the presentation, attendees divided into county-specific discussion groups to develop a list of concerns and challenges relevant to each community. A closing discussion with the entire group presented this information, and offered a compare and contrast look among jurisdictions.

◆ Elected/Appointed Officials Meetings

Elected and appointed officials throughout the various participating jurisdictions are critical to implementation of the watershed protection plan. Their input was also vital to ensuring acceptable implementation strategies were presented to the public for consideration. In order to provide opportunities for information dissemination, input and answering of questions, the BC team conducted six meetings with elected and appointed officials from the participating governments. Five of these meetings were conducted in the early stages of the project, and one was conducted once the draft plan had been developed. Written briefings, including a summary of concerns and comments from officials, was provided to the NEGRDC staff and the TAC.

◆ Public Meetings

Traditional public meetings can be an effective forum for direct output and direct public input. They are a necessary part of an open and inclusive public involvement plan, as they allow opportunities for all audience members to contribute to the process. The BC team conducted three public meetings during the course of the Alcovy Watershed Protection Project. One meeting was held at the inception of the project to chart a course for the project and to introduce concepts that were integral to the public information campaign. A second meeting was scheduled for the mid-point of the project to discuss the data results and the computer modeling. A third meeting was conducted once a draft plan was available and before the final plan was adopted

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to allow further public comment on the strategies and implementation techniques proposed. These meetings were open to the general public, and featured an open house format with manned informational stations available for the first 30 minutes of the meeting, followed by a group gathering meant to solicit input from interested meeting attendees. This format was selected due to the regional nature of the project, and provided opportunities for one-on-one communication between citizens and team members. These meetings served as a complement to the next component of the Public Involvement program, Community Presentations.

◆ Community Presentations

Presentations to community groups are a more effective method for reaching the public in some cases, and this involves going out to people rather than inviting people in. Speaking to trade, civic, or other organizational meetings gets the word out to a community that already has many time demands, and which otherwise may not become engaged in the process. It also focuses the discussion and reinforces specific messages. For example, speaking to a group of cattlemen at their monthly meeting provides an opportunity to inform this particular group on how they can be involved with watershed protection while ensuring that their concerns are heard. Working with the TAC and the participating governments, the appropriate level of direct public interface was scheduled by the BC Team to functions as a bridge between the Alcovy watershed group and the community. This ensured an open line of communication was maintained throughout the project. The BC team conducted up to 20 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 by a written survey asking for responses to questions related to the challenges and opportunities that exist for protecting the Alcovy.

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The goal of this type of presentation was to gather the information necessary to tailor implementation strategies that are viable options for each jurisdiction. A summary of all meetings, including public comments, was provided to the NEGRDC staff and the TAC.

◆ **Outreach Partnerships**

As local residents become informed and stimulated about watershed protection efforts, they seek positive outlets for their energy. Governments can harness this dynamic resource by providing opportunities for ongoing water quality programs. Adopt-a-stream groups, girl scout and boy scout merit badge programs, neighborhood stream clean-ups, and citizen erosion control monitors are just some of programs which can be established. The BC Team identified and established dialogue with existing federal, state, private sector, or non-profit organizations already active in the watershed study area, and presented options to the participating governments for worthwhile partnerships.

◆ **Support Materials**

A variety of informational materials were necessary to support the multitude of public presentations. The BC team developed and provided display boards, maps, and a PowerPoint presentation as needed for public/community meetings; a briefing document for the TAC and elected/appointed officials; and other informational materials as determined appropriate by the NEGRDC staff and the TAC.

Broadcast Communications

Components of the Public Involvement program that involve communicating information through a medium other than face to face communication were considered broadcast communications. Although the entity issuing the communication sacrifices control of placement, editing, context, and timing, it is a vital part of a comprehensive public involvement program. This communication channel allows citizens to respond in a form other than face to face communication,

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such as in writing. This is often a preferred method for some stakeholders as they have the added benefit of time to craft their message, and a record of having issued it. The broadcast communications developed for the Alcovy Watershed Protection Project are cited below.

◆ Newsletter Articles

Many stakeholder groups within the Alcovy study area produce newsletters to share information of interest to their members. These communication pieces were seen as an effective method for reaching important constituents. The BC team developed and distributed six informational articles for inclusion in community newsletters. The articles focused on project overviews, project updates, data results, computer modeling, potential implementation strategies, and human-interest stories. The articles were distributed to groups of stakeholders identified by the TAC, and others as identified throughout the project duration.

◆ Web Site

The internet is becoming more widely used as an information retrieval tool for the public. The BC team developed a publicly accessible web site providing one-way project-related information. Coordination for this site was through the TAC to determine the best approach to site location, links, and format of information.

◆ Media Relations

An informed and involved media is imperative to a successful public involvement program. As the recognized source of news within a community, the media have a responsibility to provide local citizens with the tools they need for informed decision making. At the inception of the project, the BC team prepared and distributed a press kit to major media in the watershed study area. This kit included maps, fact sheets, a contact list, and a project kick-off press release. In addition to the press kit, the BC team prepared and distributed throughout the duration of the project to major media in the watershed study area four project milestone press releases and three feature

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press releases focused on special interest stories such as partnerships with Scout troops.

◆ **Technical Briefing Document**

A technical briefing document was prepared and submitted to elected and appointed officials for use as an informational aid throughout the project. It contained project overviews, participating jurisdictions, project goals, and information about each of the project components.

Conclusion

By tapping the expertise of its public involvement professionals, the BC team put into action the vision of the Alcovy Watershed Protection Project group for public involvement. A public involvement program was executed that supported policy changes and successful implementation, as well as meeting regulatory requirements, EPD expectations, and the needs of the Alcovy watershed group and its publics. This program integrated community concerns at key junctures in the watershed assessment process, established a basis for citizen trust in the governments involved, and created a springboard for positive action.