

DESIGNING THE RIGHT HOOK: PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN THE WATERSHED PLANNING PROCESS

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The Rouge River Watershed is a tributary to the Detroit River, a nationally designated American Heritage River. This diverse watershed is home to 1.5 million people and includes urban, suburban and rural areas. It spans approximately 438 square miles through 48 different communities and three counties. The Rouge River is 127 miles in length, has four main branches and many minor tributaries. It is a highly urban river with little undeveloped land and extensive public access. It is one of the State of Michigan's most accessible rivers.

For those who live in the headwaters or upstream areas, the Rouge River is an attractive stream. For many who live further downstream, the Rouge River is a concrete channel on its way to the historic Ford Motor Co. Rouge Complex before it empties into the Detroit River.

Two years ago, most of the communities of the Rouge River Watershed applied for and received coverage under the State of Michigan's voluntary general storm water permit program. Among other things, the permit required that the communities create a public education plan detailing how they would educate the public regarding the Rouge River, its impairments, storm water pollution, and individual responsibility and stewardship.

At the same time, the watershed was divided into seven subwatersheds based on hydrological boundaries, rather than political ones. Each Subwatershed Advisory Group (SWAG), comprised of governmental representatives, had to create a subwatershed management plan, which included a public participation plan (PPP) to ensure that the public could comment and participate in the subwatershed planning process.

This paper will discuss the initiatives and tools used by Wayne County's Rouge River National Wet Weather Demonstration Project (Rouge Project) and Rouge communities to obtain public input and comment during the year-long subwatershed management planning process.

The PPPs, created in 1999 by the seven subwatersheds, laid the framework for public input by detailing activities that would be conducted to engage the public in the planning process. These activities included public meetings, the creation of public boards, cable television shows, and surveys.

The Rouge River communities, it would seem, had many things going for them when it came to soliciting public participation in the subwatershed planning process. The Rouge River is the site of a very successful annual citizen clean-up; it is the outdoor classroom for nearly 100 watershed schools who participate in the Rouge Education Project; it has been the focus of numerous media reports and it is a very public river that winds through fifty miles of parkland. This year, some 300 residents from all over the watershed participated in a frog and toad survey used to assess habitat in the watershed. The Rouge River is also the focus of an annual Water Festival that draws 1500 fifth-graders to the University of Michigan/Dearborn campus every May to learn how important water is in their everyday life.

While the subwatershed management planning process was moving ahead, the communities individually were fulfilling the requirements of their public education plans that were required under the State of Michigan voluntary general storm water permit. These communities were writing brochures and producing cable programming around the Rouge River. They were visiting community groups and subdivisions to discuss the Rouge River.

Given all of the above, it would seem that holding public meetings would be the easiest way to get public input. It should follow that with so much interest and excitement generated around the Rouge River, people would want to participate in planning its future. However, in most cases, public meeting participation was the most difficult to predict and ultimately the least dependable. What we found was using many different approaches ultimately gave us valuable public input. Following is a discussion of the tools and programs used and the success of each initiative.

PUBLIC MEETINGS: Initially, all of the subwatershed groups planned to have a varied number of public meetings to explain the planning process, the goals of the plan and to solicit input. Notification of the meetings were done by direct mail, community newsletter, cable television, and in some cases by local newspapers. The meetings had varying degrees of success, based primarily, it seems, on how the public in that area of the watershed viewed the Rouge. In an upstream subwatershed that had a number of viable tributaries, attendance at the public meeting was excellent. Eighty people attended the first meeting and participated in a lively facilitated discussion. In another subwatershed, further downstream in the more urban, industrialized section of the Rouge, one person showed up for the public meeting. One way to make sure the public meeting was a success, was to target riparian landowners, who had a real stake in the planning process. In two subwatersheds, the targeting of one group of stakeholders—the riparian landowners-- really paid off. In addition, it provided both subwatersheds with a mailing list of interested residents that could be used for future meetings and river-related activities. All public meetings were taped for local access cable television and distributed to the SWAG communities for broadcast to their citizens.

CITIZEN ADVISORY GROUP: This was a very focused approach to getting public input and relied on a small interested group (10-15 people) to provide comment on the subwatershed management plan and to advocate for the Rouge River. In one SWAG, each community in the subwatershed appointed one person to the group. The group met to review the planning process; to brainstorm ways to involve the public in the process and to provide input to the subwatershed management plan.

Many Rouge River communities and some of the subwatershed groups did create advisory boards to help review the goals of the subwatershed and the subwatershed management plan, especially in areas where local officials determined it may be difficult to get a large number of people to a public meeting.

EXISTING PARTNERSHIP: The Gateway Partnership was an existing group of stakeholders that was created to lead the effort for environmentally responsible redevelopment in the downstream, urban corridor of the Rouge River. It is a collaborative effort among Wayne County government, corporations, local communities and academic and cultural institutions. This particular area of the Rouge River is highly urbanized and represents in some ways, the worst the Rouge River has to offer. A good portion of the River is a concrete channel against a backdrop of graffiti, trash and neglect. It is also the site of many historic and cultural institutions like the University of Michigan at Dearborn, historic Greenfield Village and Henry Ford Village and the Ford Rouge Complex. The Gateway Partnership is providing a forum through which a consensus approach can be implemented for the revitalization of the Rouge River. This group includes many of the communities of the Main 3-4 SWAG and was the perfect stakeholder group to create the goals for the subwatershed management plan. Some of the projects being discussed for this portion of the Rouge River,

include removing portions of the concrete channel, restoring a former river oxbow for fish breeding areas and creating a riverfront park with public boat access. This already existing public body was an excellent alternative for getting stakeholder review of the subwatershed management plan, particularly when only one person showed up for the Main 3-4 public meeting to discuss the subwatershed management planning process.

MAILINGS: In some cases, communities used mailings to publicize their list of goals for their subwatershed. One city mailed a Rouge Repair Kit, which is a homeowners guide, to residents with a list of subwatershed goals inserted in the front cover and a contact name and phone number for comments. It was a good way to ask for citizen input as well as educating residents about their responsibilities in restoring the Rouge River.

SURVEY: This was also a good way communicate with residents and garner information. Nearly all of the subwatersheds used a survey to solicit input from citizens. In most cases, valuable comments were generated. The survey was handed out at public meetings, mailed to citizens or distributed at community events, like household hazardous waste days. The survey used by most of the subwatersheds asked citizens their attitudes about the Rouge River; what problems they saw in the Rouge River and what activities, if any, the respondents would participate in to help the Rouge River. (See Attachment I) In one subwatershed, where nearly half in attendance filled out the survey, the responses confirmed what officials saw as problems in their area of the Rouge River – soil erosion, higher volume and velocity and log jams and debris. A survey was also helpful for those communities that had low participation at public meetings. It allowed communities to gauge attitudes and priorities of residents who weren't interested in attending a public meeting but who would take the time, in the privacy of their own homes, to fill out a survey. In one community, 532 surveys were mailed out and more than 10% (79) were returned. The survey results supported the goals and their priority as created by SWAG members. The survey showed that respondents were most interested in information on water quality and the survey also confirmed that citizens preferred getting information about Rouge River matters in their community newsletter or in direct mailings as opposed to public meetings. The survey also gave the community a list of 11 residents who were interested in participating in a Stakeholders' Advisory Group.

DISPOSABLE CAMERAS: This seemed like a great idea at the time. The Rouge Project bought a number of disposable cameras to be distributed at the first round of public meetings. Citizens were asked to sign out the cameras and use them to take pictures of the things they liked and disliked about the Rouge River. They were asked to mail back the cameras or deliver them to municipal offices. They were given a list of possible photo possibilities that the Rouge Project was interested in. The pictures would then be used to illustrate the subwatershed management plan and as discussion points at future public meetings. Each subwatershed was given 25 disposable cameras to distribute to citizens at the public meetings. First of all, few cameras were returned, which was expected. But in many cases, when the cameras were returned, we found that rather than taking several pictures of different Rouge-related scenes, people fixated on one scene and took the same picture over and over.

So remember, when planning public participation activities, communities should not depend on one method to solicit public input, but should use a menu of activities and tools to garner as much input as possible.

- Get to know your constituency. Look at the methods that have worked when public comment was needed on other issues. Sometimes it's easier to go to where the citizens are than to try to get them to come to you. Use existing groups and public boards and commissions for comment and input.

- Take advantage of tools already available, such as local access cable television, township and city council meetings, community newsletters and community web sites. Plan to visit existing community events such as household hazardous waste collection days and community festivals to distribute surveys.
- Many of the subwatersheds learned the hard way that they should not simply have depended on public meetings. As mentioned previously, public meetings are hard to predict and therefore the least dependable for soliciting public input. Public meetings are important, but should be held in conjunction with other activities.

For instance, one subwatershed utilized many different means for communicating with its citizens. First of all, many of the subwatershed communities posted the draft subwatershed plan on their web sites. They held workshops and focus groups. They mailed out surveys. One community collected over 400 surveys from participants at a household hazardous waste collection day. They distributed six-page booklets to every resident which detailed the state of the Rouge River with contact information about how to get more involved and give input to the plan. In addition, two citizen-driven creek groups were initiated because of the subwatershed management planning process. A representative of one group provided extensive comments about the Plan as it related to a local creek. Additional group comments as well as a letter of support from the group as a whole is also being provided.

In conclusion when soliciting public comment, don't reinvent the wheel. Use what you know, use what has worked in the past and remember; sometimes even the best ideas fall flat.