



Tar-Pamlico Local Watersheds Planning Issue Assessment

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Conducted by Watershed Education for Communities and Local Officials (WECO)

NC State University

www.ces.ncsu.edu/WECO



For the NC Ecosystem Enhancement Program

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Background

WECO was contracted by NCEEP to facilitate the stakeholder involvement portion of the Tar-Pamlico local watershed planning initiative. The planning area encompasses four subwatersheds: Hendrick's Creek, Crisp Creek, Green Mill Run, and Cow Swamp. WECO will convene an Advisory Committee, which may consist of two subcommittees based on the diverse subwatersheds of focus, which will meet as needed during the project's 12-18 month time span. NCEEP chose to limit the advisory committee membership to resource professionals and local government staff. Benefits of this strategy include the potential for spending less time educating the committee on watershed issues, requiring fewer resources for the process. However, if a consensus agreement is desired of the watershed plan, it will take time to help the committee members gain a mutual understanding of the issues as well as each other's concerns.

WECO suggested completing a brief issue assessment in the watershed, to highlight issues of local concern and to make recommendations on how to most effectively involve stakeholders in the watershed planning process. In particular, some concerns noted at the outset of this project included the existence of Drainage Districts within two of the watershed planning areas. Learning to work successfully with local Drainage District boards would provide a helpful model for other areas where Drainage Districts have jurisdiction. The project poses the possibility of setting precedence, which raises the stakes for all involved, including the Drainage Boards.

Purpose of Public Involvement in Watershed Planning

NCEEP is sponsoring the watershed planning initiative to locate stream and wetland restoration projects that will provide mitigation credit, while improving the watershed functions and meeting local goals. NCEEP also has access to nutrient offset payments and buffer mitigation payments through the Tar-Pamlico Rules.

Involving the public is not only beneficial to the watershed project, but integral to successful implementation of a watershed plan. The cooperation and enthusiasm of affected parties is key to locating project sites, obtaining voluntary participation, and championing implementation of the watershed plan. While resources are limited to conducting the public participation activities outlined in the background section, knowing how to best incorporate public involvement based on the local issues can help increase the effectiveness of the watershed planning process.

Knowledge of the local interests in watershed planning is important, so that the project team can determine if and how these interests may be met through the watershed planning process.

Issues Discussed by Respondents

WECO conducted a watershed issue assessment to identify the stakeholders who need to participate in the watershed plan, and to identify the interests of local stakeholders in the watershed. The following issues were either raised during meetings with some of the stakeholders or were discussed by stakeholders in phone conversations.

Drainage Districts

Drainage Districts in the watershed area have legal agreements with the USDA that allow them jurisdiction over many of the canals that were built for agricultural purposes. In Pitt County alone, there are 300 miles of channels in Drainage Districts- more than in any other NC county. Edgecombe County has them as well.

The Drainage Districts deal mostly with large drainage areas. The travelways are the maintenance side of ditches, while trees may be located on the backside. A respondent told of a failed effort to explore the use of the travelways as greenways, stating that the board preferred to keep the drainage easement clear of anything permanent that could impede drainage or maintenance. In the past the board has preferred to leave the canals unaltered. Board members are concerned about flooding and are wary about anything perceived to worsen flooding.

Smaller drainage areas would likely be privately owned. Projects located off-line from the drainage canals would not require the board's approval, just landowner approval.

According to two respondents, the Drainage District in Pitt County asked the Planning board to manage stormwater runoff from development impacts a few years ago, but they did not come to agreement. There are concerns about development impacts on the proper functioning of the drainage canals.

Drainage districts in the area are maintained by a consultant, Mr. Charles Vandiford, with assistance from the Soil and Water Conservation Districts' staff.

Flooding

Flooding was mentioned by several respondents as an issue. Although severe flooding from past hurricanes was addressed with FEMA buyouts, the problem is still on peoples' minds. Some associate increased flooding with upstream development impacts and the inability for current infrastructure to handle the increased flow.

Some FEMA buyout areas mentioned include:

- Greenville: The city owns some Millbrook Ave. lots. ECU and Greenville own most of the creek parcels along Green Mill Run.
- Edgecombe County: An abundance of lots available from buy-outs. These are left as open space, and adjoining landowners can lease them for \$1/year. Building is not allowed, of course. Approximately 130 properties are left.

Edgecombe County is adopting new floodplain maps that will go into effect on Nov. 3, 2004.

Growth and Economic Development

Edgecombe County in particular seems to have been hit hard by industry closings recently. It is considered a "Tier One" county, meaning it has a higher than average unemployment rate. They are seeking economic development as the textiles industry has declined. They are also still rebuilding from the effects of Hurricane Floyd.

In addition, an internet search of environmental issues in the watershed planning area revealed that on April 30, 2004, the Rocky Mount Metro area (Edgecombe and Nash counties) was declared by EPA to be in non-attainment status for air quality. Local officials and NCDENR fought unsuccessfully against the declaration. An immediate impact is that vehicle emissions test will now be required. There is concern about how the declaration will impact economic development. (Dailysoutherner.com)

If an economic development interest is sought, the *Gateway Partnership* is an economic development group for Nash and Edgecombe Counties.

Wildlife, Open Space, Recreational resources

Some wildlife concerns include the nuisance of beavers in the watershed areas, and also the potential of rare mussels in the area. The NCWRC staff interviewed was unsure of the presence of mussels, but mentioned that NCWRC involvement in projects would be warranted if there were any found in the planning area.

Natural resources found in-between 10th St. and Elm St in Green Mill Run are used as an educational resource (note- unsure if this corresponds with Elm St. Park). Although professors from ECU take their ecology classes there, the area is impacted by culverts and runoff from a parking area. Some interesting resources in the area include fossils and old oyster beds.

The Upper Coastal Plain Council of Governments recently completed the Open Space Strategy/Conservation Plan for Edgecombe and the other 5 counties in its jurisdiction. This was completed on July 1, 2004 and sent to NCDENR's Office of Conservation and Community Affairs. The planning effort involved a diverse group of stakeholders, with the final plan including an inventory of open space and managed open space, including planned open space and future focus areas.

Also, Pitt County is currently undergoing greenway planning.

Land use planning and environmental policies

Edgecombe County's Planning Board will be updating the Land Use Plan in the next few months, although they do not anticipate a lot of development in the near future.

Local governments in the area are adjusting to the new Tar-Pamlico Basin rules. The Town of Tarboro will be adopting an ordinance in September, and Pitt County is developing a buffer ordinance. Currently, the state must enforce the Tar-Pamlico buffer rules in the watershed areas. One respondent commented that many people do not adhere to the buffer protection guidelines.

It was mentioned that some developers have complained about the new rules, but overall, respondents did not think the Tar-Pamlico rules seem to be a major concern for citizens.

One respondent strongly suggested involving other agencies to prevent problems with implementing projects. They cited the difficulties of getting permits from NCDWQ to make in-stream improvements. In particular, the Town of Tarboro had an arduous time trying to create a wetland with a CWMTF grant.

Agricultural Efforts

The local resource agencies, such as SWCDs and Cooperative Extension, work with agricultural producers to implement Best Management Practices (BMPs). In particular, the Martin County NRCS and SWCD are working to implement riparian buffers. So far this year 625 acres of riparian buffers have been created on 28 tracts of land using the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program. CREP pays for 90% of the work. Long term no-till cotton is very popular in Martin County using EQUIP funds. Currently NRCS has 300 active contracts, signing approximately 100 contracts/year.

There is little storage of animal waste, some lagoon closures of abandoned lagoons.

As mentioned in other counties, there are a lot of agricultural programs for implementing BMPs, but few people to manage them.

Working with Landowners for Voluntary Projects

Pitt County in particular has worked on educating officials and citizens about water quality issues, so citizens in this area are likely to be receptive to a watershed management project. Regarding projects on private property, as in most rural areas, landowners (farmers) are accustomed to short-term easements. If the property is in a floodway, it may be easier to convince farmers to agree to a permanent easement. However, one respondent mentioned a positive benefit of permanent easements- it puts a cushion between landowners and the IRS.

Other watershed restoration efforts

A number of activities are currently aimed at watershed restoration in the planning area. These include:

- Natalie Jones, NC Division of Soil and Water Conservation, has an agriculture sediment grant with NCDWQ for Chicod Creek and Contentnea Creek. Grant includes monitoring and implementing agricultural BMPs to reduce sediment.
- Greenville has an Environmental Advisory Committee, a citizen appointed group. Uli Alsentzer is chair. The Committee has a Greenways subcommittee.
- The Tar-Pam River Foundation has a grant with Upper Coastal Plains COG for a project in a creek south of Tarboro, Cokie Swamp.
- A stormwater wetland was built at an elementary school in Pitt County (Stephen Smith, Pitt County Planning)
- Elm St. Park, Greenville- NCDWR grant for implementing swales and bioretention with the Neuse Team.

Observations based on issues heard:

Most of the stakeholders contacted have expressed a strong interest in participating in the project. There are a large number of stakeholders due to the various jurisdictions falling in the watershed planning areas. Managing the process to meet the interest of the various stakeholders will be challenging- forming subcommittees based on watershed areas would make sense to keep it more manageable.

Drainage Districts pose a challenge. Keeping them involved, through Mr. Vandiford , the SWCDs, and direct contact will be important throughout the planning process. Since it is perceived that this could be a precedent-setting project, stakeholders will be very cautious to make sure that their interests are being met before agreeing to anything. One respondent who is familiar with the Drainage District board in Pitt County suggests that the board will not be open to altering anything in the Drainage District right of ways. Active involvement and outreach regarding the mutual benefits of projects will be important. A public meeting or workshop targeted at the District Boards and SWCD boards is suggested at some point in the process.

The local governments have faced a number of new regulations in the past few years in the form of the Tar-Pamlico Rules, the new air quality non-attainment declaration, and the Phase II Stormwater rules (which impacts Edgecombe and Pitt Counties and the City of Greenville). Local governments are currently enacting local policies in response to these new rules. Assistance with policy issues may be appreciated as they tackle these new initiatives, particularly education of the public. The air quality issue seems to have provoked a larger outcry than any new water quality regulations, judging by the numerous media articles found. A perceived lack of fairness due to the transient nature of air pollution could be driving this issue.

From the interviews with local resource professionals, it doesn't appear that water quality issues are a hot button issue. However, this issue assessment did not involve interviews with non-government stakeholders. There could be issues of concern that we are unaware of since we have not yet involved the general public. Such issues could include flooding and private property rights. For this reason, a public workshop is warranted during the planning process to make sure the plan is adequately addressing public concerns.

Tar-Pamlico Watersheds Advisory Committee

The following organizations have agreed to send a representative to serve on a Watershed Advisory Committee:

City of Greenville Public Works, Stormwater Dept.
Eastern Carolina University
Edgecombe County SWCD
Edgecombe County Planning Dept.
Edgecombe County Cooperative Extension
NC Cooperative Extension Service, Neuse Education Team
NC Wildlife Resources Commission
NC Clean Water Management Trust Fund
Pitt County SWCD
Pitt County Planning Dept.
Martin County SWCD
Southeastern Drainage District
Tar-Pamlico River Basin Association
Town of Tarboro Public Works Dept.
Town of Tarboro Planning Dept.
Upper Coastal Plain Council of Governments

Sources: Interviews with stakeholders from above-mentioned organizations, and the Daily Southerner (a Tarboro newspaper). The Daily Reflector (a Greensboro newspaper) was also searched.