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August 12, 2016

The Honorable Gina McCarthy
Administrator
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
1200 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20460

Dear Administrator McCarthy:

Thank you for your support of the Local Government Advisory Committee (LGAC) and your consideration of ongoing advice and recommendations. We support the work of the EPA and hope that our input is of value. We appreciate your personal leadership in guiding the agency's mission to protect the environment and human health.

A common theme seems to reoccur with noted frequency in much of the work of the LGAC - the lack of clear channels, information distribution, and explicit communication at all levels of government. There appears to be an assumption that pertinent information will trickle up and down the levels of government, eventually reaching the place where it would be most valuable, whether local, tribal, state or federal governments. In addition, getting information into the hands of the public, often where it will do the most good, must be a priority for all levels of government. Unfortunately, this assumption is often wrong. For example, we have recently seen the widespread confusion amongst local governments regarding the protocols for testing lead concentrations in water. In this time of increasingly challenging public health and environmental issues, we need to act effectively so that information will reach all relevant parties. It has become a common theme in all of our deliberations and recommendations that there is a pressing need to improve governmental communication and transfer of information among the EPA, state, tribal and local governments, and getting that information out to the public. We are putting forward our findings and recommendations that might aid the EPA to better facilitate communication.

Background

Communication and transfer of information is crucial for helping local governments address environmental problems. In order to protect the health of our citizens, we need to be informed of any environmental issues that may arise in order to mediate the problem. Because communication practices are so important to the well-being of our communities, the LGAC has often submitted recommendations regarding actions which may enhance this communication network.

Despite EPA's efforts to keep us informed at the local level, it sometimes takes a long time for us to hear about environmental issues, policies and resources,

all of which are necessary to help our citizens. We realize that life is getting faster, and that all Americans are bombarded with masses of information every day. How do we break through the loads of data and words and ideas to get information to the place it needs to be? Although the Agency has many educational resources for local governments, particularly on the EPA website, many local officials are unaware of these resources. We think it is imperative that officials are better informed of problems and are prepared to act to solve challenging environmental and public health issues. We think that the public needs to know so that they may make informed choices.

Here are our findings and recommendations:

Findings:

- Information sharing among federal, state and local governments is sometimes inadequate and ineffective, and often defaults to trickle down approaches.
- EPA has developed many effective communication strategies for national environmental policies that could be used by states, tribes and locals to enhance the transfer of information and sharing of information through best practices, etc. Likewise, we think EPA would like to know about information sharing of best management practices in individual state and local governments.
- EPA has tools and resources that states, locals and tribes could utilize to enhance communication for the benefit of the environment and public health, yet many of these tools are not known and readily available.
- EPA has begun an enhanced communication network to improve the safety of our nation's drinking water. This approach is tailored to addressing states with the hope of expanding to localities.
- EPA develops communication strategies on an individual rule, regulation, and/or policy initiative; however, there does not appear to be a comprehensive strategy across the agency and EPA regions for communication and information sharing with state, tribes and local governments.

Recommendations:

- EPA should develop a comprehensive strategic plan for communication and information transfer across all program offices and EPA Regions aimed at effective communication and information sharing. One example where the LGAC found this most effective was Plan EJ 2014 (and the newly released Plan EJ 2020) and how it clearly communicated the aims and articulated outcomes. This method can also be used and adopted by all levels of government.
- EPA should look at ways to serve as a facilitator to assist the intergovernmental partnership to be more effective through information sharing, tools, and resources.
- EPA should form partnership agreements with states and tribes that include communication and outreach components.
- EPA Regional offices should be charged and empowered to work with their intergovernmental partnerships to increase the dialogue and information exchange with states, local governments and tribes in their regions.
- The EPA Administrator and Senior leaders should continue to make site visits with local/tribal representatives, state representatives and federal representatives in the case of environmental/ecological disasters or emergency situations.
- The EPA could sponsor an annual contest to highlight best public communication strategies or practices used by tribes, states and localities.
- The EPA should continue to work on the Local Government Portal and explore other means of communication, such as a forum or blog where relevant parties can post information and updates. This will increase transparency in governmental processes between both the government and the general public. This can also serve as a database for information relevant to the issue, and holds individual parties

- accountable for their actions. To remain updated, people may sign up for email alerts every time someone posts to this site. To keep the site organized, only pre-approved members (members of governments – EPA included) would be allowed to post, but everyone is allowed to view and comment. The site could be maintained by the regional office of the EPA, who will ensure there is constant and active communication among the various governmental agencies.

We believe that in order to create a cleaner and safer environment for all, all government entities need to be fully informed and engaged. The Local Government Advisory Committee appreciates all the ongoing efforts of the EPA to acknowledge the role of local governments in protecting our environment and the public health of our citizens.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Robert A. Dixon".

Mayor Bob Dixon
Chairman