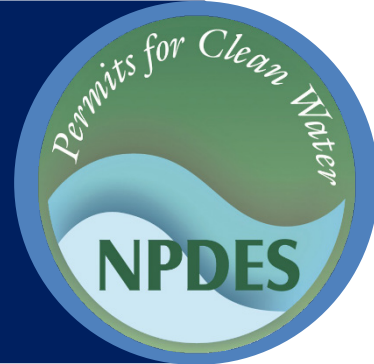




Stormwater Best Management Practice

Soliciting Public Opinion



Minimum Measure: Public Involvement/Participation

Description

Engaging community members can help municipalities design and implement effective stormwater programs. Within a community, there are specific stakeholders—individuals or groups who may have an interest in stormwater or be affected by stormwater-related activities. Stakeholders might include citizens, local school groups, community leaders, municipal and state government staff, local environmental groups, and business owners. When a municipality works with stakeholders to understand the community's motivators, barriers, needs and resources, it can meet the community where they are. By tailoring its programs, policies and outreach strategies around issues the community cares about, it may encourage residents to support stormwater-friendly practices such as greener and safer streets and/or schoolyards, stream protection or flood mitigation. Engagement also promotes a sense of ownership of water resources and improves local awareness of stormwater issues.

Benefits of Engaging Stakeholders

Increase Program Success

- Increase public support for stormwater programs and policies.
- Identify stakeholder priorities and design programs that fit the stakeholders' needs.
- Create trust between community members and decisionmakers, particularly with groups that have been traditionally underserved and overburdened.

Encourage Efficient and Economical Implementation

- Gain public buy-in during program implementation by engaging residents early in the development and decision-making process.
- Tap into local knowledge and key community members who can voice the needs of the residents.
- Increase community support for stormwater funding.



Public meetings can solicit open dialogue and offer municipalities an opportunity to receive direct feedback from community members.

Inform the Community

- Keep the public informed about the importance of stormwater management and the range of options available that can improve their community.

Considerations for Engaging the Public

Determine Goals and Objectives

The first step municipalities can take when developing an engagement strategy is to identify what information they would like to hear from their stakeholders. Do they want to understand residents' priorities; solicit general complaints and feedback; or field comments on a certain project, plan or policy? The type of engagement strategy they use will depend on the complexity and type of information the municipality is seeking to obtain.

Identify the Audience

The municipality should determine what specific groups it wants to engage with and whether those groups will be equally impacted by the respective project, plan, or policy being considered. Potential respondents may include residents, local business owners and operators, schoolchildren, and other community interest groups. In

identifying the audience, decisionmakers might ask themselves the following questions:

- Does the cost of implementing the stormwater program affect some parts of the community more than others? If so, how can implementation be more equitable?
- Will a segment of the community have difficulty understanding the program's purpose? If so, what additional resources may be necessary?
- Will the municipality find support among community members? If not, what more needs to be done?
- Does a segment of the community object to stormwater regulations or fees? If so, how do they interpret these regulations or fees (e.g., government intrusion, higher taxes) and what can the municipality do to share information on stormwater benefits and continue the dialogue?
- Has the municipality established good working relationships with large industries and businesses in the community that also have stormwater permits? If not, which ones might be targeted first to serve as a model for others?
- Is the community already part of a strong watershed organization or engaged with other community groups? If so, how can those relationships be leveraged to advance the stormwater program's goals?

Outreach and Engagement

After identifying stakeholders and asking key questions, the municipality can develop specific outreach and engagement strategies. Flyers, posters, social media posts, website updates, press releases, mailed messages and word of mouth are all helpful strategies for getting the word out. If necessary, the municipality can tailor outreach materials to certain groups, particularly if multi-lingual materials are needed. Describing the outreach and participation activities creates a *public participation plan* that will guide stormwater program managers and their public education/outreach programs. Defining public involvement activities in writing clearly lays out the community's commitment to involving the public. Additionally, if public opinion for a specific project is obtained, then this information can guide the project team and become part of the public record of the project.

Outreach and Engagement Activities

This section presents an overview of five strategies for outreach and engagement activities that range from lower to higher level of effort: informal feedback opportunities, form-based tools, meeting with the public, collaboration with existing community groups, and interviews and focus groups. When choosing a strategy for soliciting public opinion, it is important for municipalities to focus on the type of information they want to get and the level of engagement they want from the public.

Each strategy has its own tradeoff between the degree of involvement and the number of stakeholders that can participate. For example, interviews and focus groups will give municipalities an opportunity to ask tailored questions so participants can give detailed, targeted feedback in a conversational setting; surveys allow for more participants but typically require more generalized questions and responses. Municipalities may consider combining multiple strategies depending on the type of information they are seeking and the variety of stakeholders from whom they plan to solicit feedback. Costs will vary depending on the level of staff and resources a particular strategy requires.

Informal Feedback Opportunities

Informal feedback opportunities include any open solicitation for comments from the public, including an online comment form, social media posts, a request to send comments via email or phone number, a suggestion box in a public area, or a staffed information table at a local event. Municipalities typically use this strategy to seek input while developing or revising municipal separate storm sewer system (MS4) program plans or local stormwater ordinances. However, they can also use this method to solicit general feedback anytime.

Note that this strategy is more passive than the other methods discussed in this fact sheet. Therefore, it is more likely to attract responses from residents with a special interest in the topic, particularly those with strong negative opinions or complaints. It is also not ideal for targeting specific groups or demographics. However, its open-ended nature allows respondents to submit specific, thorough comments.

Examples of Informal Feedback Opportunities

- Salem, Virginia, welcomes its residents to submit comments on a variety of stormwater related topics via its [Stormwater Comment Form](#).
- Bethel, Connecticut [Stormwater](#) webpage provides an email address for residents to submit questions, comments or concerns on the town's annual MS4 report maintenance requirements.

Form-Based Tools: Surveys and Questionnaires

Form-based tools include surveys and questionnaires that require participants to respond to specific questions, provide opinions about an issue, or rank priorities. The [EPA Public Participation Guide](#) explains how surveys and questionnaires can gather information from the public. Surveying stakeholders to identify public perceptions, expectations and desires can inform stormwater managers about appropriate steps to take and misconceptions to dispel about their stormwater programs. They can also be used in a municipality's annual report to show change and improvement throughout the year.

Depending on the nature of the form, respondents can provide input over the phone, in person, on the web or via mail. If a municipality mails forms to residents, it should include return postage to encourage responses. Form-based tools are an effective strategy for reaching many people or compiling statistic data about a community. However, as with informal feedback opportunities, these types of solicitations typically have a low response rate and tend to appeal mostly to participants with a particular interest in the survey topic. Therefore, results may not be representative of the entire population surveyed.

Example of Form-Based Tools

Five cities in Washington collectively [surveyed residents' stormwater runoff awareness, attitudes and behavior](#) in 2019.

Additional Form-Based Tool Resources

- The University of Illinois Extension provides a [community survey tool](#).
- Chapter 3 of the Community Tool Box, "[Assessing Community Needs and Resources](#)," has helpful tips on conducting surveys and qualitative assessments.

Meeting with the Public

Municipalities can host meetings with the public to inform stakeholders about local water quality issues and allow them to contribute ideas and express concerns in real time. Public meetings can take many different formats, including town hall meetings; workshops; and charettes, or collaborative problem-solving sessions. Though potentially staff and resource intensive, guided breakout discussions can engage residents and build a significant amount of trust with the community. Feedback is likely to be more candid and people can discuss their concerns in conversation rather than having to speak in front of a large group, which many people find intimidating. [EPA's Public Participation Guide](#) lists various meeting formats and summarizes their applicability and strengths.

Municipalities can also consider hosting open house meetings. An open house meeting provides more opportunities for the project team and public to interact informally. An open house uses information stations staffed by project team members, allowing the public to talk with those involved in the project to learn more and provide input. This type of format is useful to gather input from participants who may not feel comfortable speaking in front of a group. It is good practice to have two team members at each station so one can focus on speaking with participants while the other records input.

Consider scheduling meetings at times and locations that will accommodate people's work and home obligations. Minimizing travel time and having the meeting during hours when most people are available can increase meeting participation. Virtual meetings may be a more accessible option for stakeholders who face transportation or scheduling constraints. The Massachusetts Department of Transportation's "[Guidelines for Successful Virtual Public Meetings](#)" is a helpful resource for municipalities interested in hosting virtual meetings. Municipalities can notify stakeholders of an upcoming public meeting via mail, social media, website postings, word of mouth, flyers or posters. In these advertisements, municipalities can include

information about the intended audience, the type of information they are seeking to solicit, and why stakeholders should participate. For communities that don't have access to good quality internet, municipalities can distribute hardcopy materials to churches or libraries and provide a call-in number for people to participate in virtual meetings via phone.

During the meeting, municipalities should ensure they convey information effectively. Graphics, such as photographs and charts, are an effective method of conveying concepts and information. Municipalities should schedule a question-and-answer period and a time for comments to give stakeholders an opportunity to offer input and express their opinions or concerns. The Institute for Local Government's "[Preparing for Successful Public Meetings](#)" checklist provides pointers on how to effectively share information, facilitate discussions, and create a welcoming environment during public meetings. Journalists and broadcasters can also prepare summaries of public meetings after they take place to let the public know what was discussed, when the next meeting will occur, and how to get involved.

Additional Meeting Resources

- American Rivers' "[When a Bandaid's not enough](#)" stormwater utility toolkit provides tips for running a successful public meeting.
- EPA's [Public Participation Guide](#) has a section on public meetings.
- The Institute for Local Government's [Meeting Resource Center website](#) provides tips and resources on how to host effective meetings.
- The [National Charrette Institute](#) housed at Michigan State University provides resources on organizing a collaborative, design-based, multi-day engagement event.

Collaboration with Community Groups

Municipalities can join or host meetings in collaboration with existing community groups such as neighboring local governments, nonprofits, cultural and volunteer organizations, and other public entities to gather insight into their opinions on stormwater management. These organizations can offer their expertise and unique perspectives while working with municipalities to identify stormwater solutions that meet their needs. This format allows for in-depth information exchange and long-term

coordination. However, depending on the level of engagement, it may take more time while only engaging a limited number of residents.

Municipalities can begin this process by reaching out to local environmental organizations, such as water utilities, watershed organizations or university environmental groups. Sanitation districts, planning commissions and other government agencies may also serve as collaborative partners. A municipality may also consider forming a citizen panel or community advisory committee made up of members representing various community groups. Panelists can work together to create consensus recommendations that best fit the overall needs of the groups represented in the committee. Conducting a stakeholder analysis ensures that the panel includes—and fairly represents—all necessary groups.

Example of a Citizen Panel

- The [Massachusetts Stormwater Management Updates Advisory Committee](#) is made up of members representing various state and local organizations.
- The City of Charlotte (North Carolina) has a [Storm Water Advisory Committee](#) that provides guidance and public input on the community's stormwater services.

Additional Community Group Collaboration Resources

- EPA's [Public Participation Guide](#) has a section on citizen advisory boards.
- The Middlesex Council of Governments and Merrimack River Watershed Council's [Developing an Effective Stormwater Education and Outreach Program for Your Community](#) offers tips on how to engage with community organizations in Part B, Step 5.

Interviews and Focus Groups

The most intensive strategies for engaging with the public is conducting one-on-one interviews with a community member about a specific topic or organizing a focus group with about eight to 15 select attendees who represent a larger population. Interviews and focus groups can be tailored for specific residents or communities to capture more accurate, nuanced

feedback. For example, to solicit input from an immigrant community whose residents primarily speak English as a second language, a small focus group will likely be more effective than a large public meeting with other stakeholders who could overpower the conversation.

The EPA Public Participation Guide offers information and tips for conducting [stakeholder interviews](#) and [focus groups](#). Establishing a welcoming environment encourages participants to provide open and honest feedback. It may mean meeting with attendees in their own neighborhoods, conducting interviews over the phone, or hiring a facilitator who is a member of the community or speaks the participants' primary language.

Additional Interview and Focus Group Resources

- Chapter 3 Section 6 of the Community Tool Box, "[Conducting Focus Groups](#)," offers guidance on planning and conducting focus groups.
- Chapter 3 Section 12 of the Community Tool Box, "[Conducting Interviews](#)," provides strategies for conducting effective interviews.

Additional Resources

- The Michigan Economic Development Corporation's [Six-Step Guide to Public Participation](#) is a step-by-step guide to organizing a public participation strategy.
- The International Association for Public Participation's [Public Participation Toolbox](#) provides a comprehensive list of strategies and summarizes their advantages and drawbacks.
- The Green Infrastructure Leadership Exchange has produced a [State of Equity in Public Sector](#) report that details challenges and strategies for promoting equity internally and through public outreach.
- The [Water Infrastructure Toolkit](#) put together by River Network serves as a comprehensive guide to water infrastructure, funding, and promoting equity through the lens of affordability and access to clean water.

Additional Information

Additional information on related practices and the Phase II MS4 program can be found at EPA's [National Menu of Best Management Practices \(BMPs\) for Stormwater](#) website

Disclaimer

This fact sheet is intended to be used for informational purposes only. These examples and references are not intended to be comprehensive and do not preclude the use of other technically sound practices. State or local requirements may apply.