

People, Partnerships, and Communities

The purpose of the People, Partnerships, and Communities series is to assist The Conservation Partnership to build capacity by transferring information about social science related topics

USDA Natural
Resources
Conservation
Service

Social
Sciences
Team

Rebuilding Your Local Work Group

What is the topic?

This publication looks at ways of renewing interest in local work groups and maintaining a high level of excitement toward the work group's tasks.

Why is the topic important?

The locally led conservation planning process has proven to be an effective way to increase local participation in the management and protection of natural resources. Part of the reason this process is successful is because it brings stakeholders together to identify local resource problems and to work together to address these issues. Participants develop a sense of ownership toward the problems through the work group process. Creation of a local work group is effective for identifying issues, setting the schedule for developing community and individual conservation plans to address these issues, and helping to find resources to execute the plans. However, not all work groups continue indefinitely with unbridled enthusiasm.

Who benefits from the information?

The Conservation Partnership and local community members will benefit from this information because it will increase participation and enthusiasm in the locally led planning process.

What is a Local Work Group?

There are at least two related local work groups that have an interest in conservation activities. The roles of these groups are a little different. The one group is the USDA Local Work Group and the other may be the Conservation District Stakeholder Input Group. The differences are spelled out in great detail on NACD's Farm Bill Implementation Toolkit that can be accessed on the Web at www.nacdnet.org/FB/mod2.htm.



USDA Local Work Group

The purpose of this group is to support "the conservation needs assessment developed by community stakeholders ... to tailor USDA programs and priorities to address the natural resource concerns." Convened by the local conservation district(s) or NRCS field staff, the local work group provides a local perspective on USDA program policy and funding recommendations. The membership is composed of Federal, State, County, tribal, or local government representatives, and does not include non-government individuals, but public participation is encouraged.

They make recommendations to state technical committees and the NRCS State Conservationist on priorities, practices, policies, and maximum cost share rates.

The Conservation District Stakeholder Input Group

This group can also be led by the Conservation District board members and personnel, and is made up of representation from a wide range of local citizens, agency staff, and private businesses. The Stakeholder Input Group is an important element in the locally led conservation process. As its name implies, it gathers input for the locally led effort from interested stakeholders in the community.¹ Moreover, the Stakeholder Input Group is encouraged to proceed through the following without regard to any particular program or programs:

- Obtaining public participation
- Assessing conservation needs
- Identifying and prioritizing needs
- Setting goals
- Identifying programs and funding sources
- Developing area wide conservation plans
- Implementing plans
- Measuring performance

Some characteristics of the Conservation District Stakeholder Input Group are similar to the USDA Local Work Group in that each has a wide range of local members, but differences lie in the amount of flexibility and authority of each group. The Stakeholder Input Groups can have non-governmental representatives and also make recommendations on a wide range of priorities and programs.

This paper makes suggestions on strengthening both of these local work groups.

Rebuilding and Maintaining a Working Group

Oftentimes sustaining involvement and interest in a work group becomes a challenge, particularly when dealing with long term plans. Perhaps your group is experiencing one or more of the following:

- Leadership has changed or key players have moved and left the work group;
- The people who need to be involved have not been included;
- Very little seems to get accomplished;
- Conflict has caused misgivings and distrust among the group; and
- Interest and participation in the effort seem to be waning.

In situations like those cited above, the local work group is ineffective, goals are not being attained, and the natural resource needs are not being addressed. What can be done then to renew and maintain the local work group? Following are a few ideas that can help get the group back on track.

- Develop or revitalize your strategic plan
- Create an environment of trust
 - a) Involve the community
 - b) Make personal contacts
 - c) Provide regular feedback

¹ Find this information and much more at the following Web site, <http://www.nacdnet.org/FB/index.htm>

Develop or Revitalize Your Strategic Plan

Strategic plans can be complicated or simple and straightforward. If a local group does not already have a strategic plan, then they should create one. If a work group has a strategic plan, then it may need to be revisited. Districts can either develop plans internally or seek professionals to assist them. Strategic plans normally weave together concepts from business planning, long range planning, total quality management, strategic planning, coordinated resource management, and so on.

Local work groups may need to create a strategic plan to get their work done. Strategic plans are typically made up of the following elements:

- Vision - describes the future dream or the overall idealistic purpose
- Mission - describes the organization as it effectively carries out its operations
- Goals - milestones that are specific and attainable
- Alternatives - more than one way of attaining each goal
- Alliances - people and organizations working together to help reach goals
- Actions - behavior performed by a certain time
- Evaluation - specific ways of measuring whether goals are attained
- Modification - adjust plan if actions do not achieve goals

Since our goal here is to revitalize the work group, we will focus specifically on the vision, mission, and goals, which, if done correctly, can bring renewed life to a work group.

(Re) Creating a Vision

For our purposes, a vision is how you want the big picture to end up. The “I Have A Dream” speech of Martin Luther King, for example, was part of his vision. Creation of a clear vision needs to be congruent with personal values and ideals. The similarity of the work group’s vision and the personal values of each member is one of the keys to sustaining people’s involvement. A vision based on shared values enables people to identify the reasons they became involved in the conservation cause. When people are able to internalize the vision, they are more likely to stay involved in and committed to an effort or project.



A vision taps into a local issue. For example, if one of the natural resource issues the community has identified is water quality, *why is water quality important to each individual member of the work group?* Are they concerned about drinking water? Is their focus recreational — swimming, fishing, boating? Connect those reasons to values and ideals — in other words, why is boating important to them? Does it represent quality time with the family? Is it connected to health? Aesthetics? Identifying the “why’s” creates the foundation for writing a vision statement that will resonate for each member of the work group. The vision statement then becomes a vehicle for renewing and maintaining the local work group.

Note: It is important to periodically *revisit the vision* in order to sustain participation and enthusiasm. It allows people to (re)connect their personal reasons with being part of the work group.

There are many ways to revisit your original vision statement or to create one from scratch. The vision needs to be something that is ideal, but achievable. Since people are usually not very good at writing in a group, one way to minimize this problem is to have each member of the group contribute in some way toward the vision. This could be through brainstorming, drawing a picture, daydreaming sessions, writing individual statements, or comparing your community with an ideal community. Then, have one or two good writers develop the wording for these visions. Have these writers combine the visions into several statements and then have the group select their top one or two. If it is difficult to reach agreement, conduct a simple vote or see PPC 011 in the *People, Partnerships and Community* fact sheet series entitled, *Prioritizing Issues or Concerns: Using the Paired Comparison Technique*. Using this technique enables the group to compare each vision with one another. To access PPC 011 online, use the following URL:

Mission Statements

Agreeing on a mission statement is much like developing a vision statement. Everyone needs to participate and come up with an agreed upon mission statement. One way of accomplishing this task is to ask Conservation District members to tell “who you are,” “whom you serve,” and “how you serve them.” The same process that operates in creating the vision statement can operate for creating a mission statement.

Set Goals and Celebrate

It’s been said that you can’t hit a target if you don’t know what the target is. Not having clearly defined goals follows the same principal. Creating goals, committing to them, and occasionally revisiting them will help maintain the local work group. The goals should be specific, measurable, and consistent with the vision. Commit to them in writing: “By (date) the (natural resource issue) will (outcome).” This

type of commitment helps create measurable outcomes and also keeps people involved and focused.

Periodic celebration of achieved goals is important. It allows the work group to

step back and see exactly what they have accomplished. It also helps them realize that milestones are being achieved, and enables the group to focus on established goals. This is particularly important with long-range projects and plans.



Often with long-range projects it becomes difficult to stay involved simply because immediate results are not seen. Celebrations of success keep people enthused, involved, and committed. NOTE: A good way to energize the local work group is to build an avenue for a quick victory or two (tied into the overall vision and goals) at the beginning of the project.

Alternatives, Alliances, Actions, Evaluation and Modification

(Re) creating the vision, mission, and goals, will give your work group or district new vitality as you implement the remainder of your strategic plan. If you have done your homework in these initial steps, the next steps (not reviewed here) in the strategic plan may be easier for the local work group to agree upon.

Create an Environment of Trust

There will be times when it seems as though the local work group cannot possibly hold together; perhaps apathy or conflict has set in. Group dynamics that build trust among the members and that offer socially satisfying experiences are sometimes the only thing

that serve to “carry” individuals and the group through discouraging times. Different types of team building exercises can help enhance trust. In addition, build activities that will allow members to see the humanity in each other in each work group meeting (i.e., ice breakers, etc.).

Involve the Community

Typically, a portion of the local work group’s goals involves engaging and acquiring opinions from the overall community. This can generate or re-generate interest and discussion. This interest is based on the fact that most people have strong opinions about their communities’ environmental quality and most people also want to know how their opinions line up with their neighbors’. There are many techniques for involving the community. You might want to find out which goals they most strongly support or how they would like to receive feedback from the work group. How to effectively use these techniques is described in other Social Sciences Institute *People, Partnerships and Community* fact sheets. They include public meetings (PPC 010), focus group meetings (PPC 01), rapid resource appraisals (PPC 024), and/or surveys (PPC 014). NACD has a district support module developed on methods for gathering stakeholder input at www.nacdn.net.org/FB/mod3.htm.

Make Personal Contacts

A basic notion to remember is that spreading out responsibilities and involving different people and groups will ratchet up the interest in the locally led planning process.



One proven way to involve people is to ask them to participate personally; i.e., telephone them, visit them at home or work, eat a meal with them, go fishing with them, stop them on the street.

An Earth Team survey conducted in 2001 found that over 75 percent of the respondents stated they volunteered because someone personally asked them to volunteer. The more people you involve in the planning process, the more successful the process will likely be. Finally, along these lines, it is important to gather information from members of the community in order to identify their priorities and their potential contributions toward implementing the plan.

Provide Regular Feedback

As the strategic plan is implemented, reports and feedback from leaders of different subgroups should be a regular part of local work group meetings. This gives the committee leader and his/her group opportunities to showcase what they have accomplished and also provides the local work group an opportunity to respond positively to their achievements. The elements in the strategic plan should be viewed as a way to decentralize the tasks and to engage the local work group as well as the public in the completion of the goals. The public should regularly receive updates through their preferred mediums (e.g., local newspaper, newsletter, e-mail, Web site, direct mailing, presentations, etc.). You would already know their preferred mediums because you have previously asked them (see above, “Involve the Community”). Involvement and feedback will re-ignite interest.



Additional Points to Consider

As you work to renew your local work group, there may be specific reasons why the work group lost momentum or interest. Answering the questions that follow may help you identify and address some of those reasons.

· **Do you really *know* your community?**

We tend to think we “know” our communities if we know our neighbors and are somewhat involved in community issues. However, people are usually very surprised when they look at data, particularly the population census, agricultural census, and economic census. Reviewing this data can help to determine if there is inclusive representation from the community in your work group, particularly in the public participation phase. This information can help you formulate a profile of the county. For instructions for developing community profiles, see [PPC044_SocialProfileFinal.pdf](#) (PPC 044).

· **Have you identified and involved the local power brokers?**

If you find the work group is continually hitting roadblocks as you move forward, it is possible there are things going on behind the scenes that you have not addressed.

Who are the power leaders in your community? More often than not the true power brokers are not



the elected officials and oftentimes are not highly visible. You may need to step back, identify, and contact these individuals in order to get their buy-in and support.

· **Does your work group deal with the “elephant” in the room or is it ignored?**

If you ignore the controversial points and issues, the work group will not only be less effective but may cease to work entirely. Work group members *and particularly the leaders* need to deal with conflict in a constructive manner. Conflict is uncomfortable for most people, but if handled correctly and dealt with directly, it can have a positive impact on the work group, bring them closer together, and energize them toward achieving their goals. For assistance in this area, see [PPCs/PPC012_DFCConflictManagement.pdf](#), PPC 012 for managing conflict, and PPC 013 for dealing with difficult people.

Summary

- ✓ Recreate your strategic plan
- ✓ Ensure the work group’s and members’ underlying values are similar
- ✓ Have clear, attainable goals
- ✓ Create an environment of trust
- ✓ Involve the community
- ✓ Personally ask people to participate
- ✓ Provide regular feedback to the work group and the community
- ✓ Positively reward contributors through mini-celebrations
- ✓ Gain involvement and support from community leaders
- ✓ Develop a community profile
- ✓ Deal directly with conflict

Questions

If you have questions about this publication either call or e-mail.

Where can you find more information?

Developing Your Skills to INVOLVE COMMUNITIES in Implementing Locally Led Conservation. Developed by Michigan State University Extension and Michigan State University in collaboration with the Social Sciences Institute, NRCS. 1999.

NACD's Farm Bill Implementation Toolkit at www.nacdnet.org/FB/index.htm has many good ideas, sample agendas, Powerpoint presentations, and so on that can assist your work group.

NRCS - Social Sciences Institute Web Site. Several *People, Partnerships, and Community* fact sheets are cited in this publication.

Renewing Local Watersheds: Community Leader's Guide to Building Watershed Communities. Lois Wright Morton, Ph.D.; Steve Padgitt, Ph.D.; Jan Flora, Ph.D. Iowa State University. : www.soc.iastate.edu/extension/watersheds_manual/index.htm.

Rural Enterprise Zones: Lessons Learned from Pilot Projects in Local Communities. Presentation by Cornelia Butler Flora, North Central Regional Center for Rural Development, Iowa State University, www.ncrcrd.iastate.edu.

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