

COON CREEK WATERSHED DISTRICT

Request for Board Action

MEETING DATE: January 27, 2025
AGENDA NUMBER: 13
ITEM: Results from Phase 1: Municipal Insight Survey

AGENDA: Discussion

ACTION REQUESTED

Receive update

PURPOSE & SCOPE OF ITEM

To provide a summary of initial insights from Phase 1 of the Municipal Insight Survey. CCWD Engagement Coordinator, Jessica Lindemyer, will be available to give a brief presentation.

LEGISLATIVE AND OTHER REQUIREMENTS

CCWD, and the municipalities within its jurisdiction, are federal and state MS4s (municipal separate storm sewer systems). As MS4s these entities are required to address impaired waters that do not meet water quality standards by the goal deadline of 2045 under the Coon Creek Watershed TMDL (Total Maximum Daily Load).

SITUATION

The cost associated with addressing the TMDL impaired waters by the 2045 goal deadline is approximately \$70 million over the next 10 years and \$103 million over the next 20 years. This places a significant financial burden on the local tax base and raises several concerns related to the need for increased state and federal funding, functional classification changes, and extension of the 2045 timeline. It also has the potential to create further divides between the public and the various government entities tasked with achieving the TMDL.

In order to make meaningful progress on impaired waters by 2045 CCWD and its municipal partners must work collaboratively to identify, fund, and implement cost-effective projects and practices.

The Municipal Insight Survey is intended to guide CCWD in determining the best methods for engaging with CCWD's municipal partners to facilitate a unified government approach.

APPROACH

CCWD staff have been working with consultants from MP+G Marketing Solutions to implement the Municipal Insight Survey. The effort is divided into two main phases, targeting two key audiences: municipal decision-makers & residents of the watershed.

The objective of this effort is to identify the needs, values, and priorities of the individuals who make water management decisions at the municipal level and gain a better understanding of their perceptions related to water management (quality/quantity) and the TMDL with the goal of:

- Improving CCWD's engagement and public information strategy by crafting our efforts in a way that speaks to the values and interests of the individuals who share responsibility of achieving the TMDL
- Communicating with these audiences in a language in which they understand and in terms that are of interest to them.

Phase One of the Municipal Insight Survey focused on gaining insights from municipal decision-makers. This phase consisted of two parts: 1) one-on-one interviews and 2) online surveys. Thirteen (13) one-on-one interviews were conducted by MP+G to complete a qualitative analysis and identify themes, key messages, audience commonalities/contrasts, trusted messengers, and preferred/recommended communication channels. The insights from these interviews were then used to develop a quantitative survey that was distributed to a broader group of municipal staff working in water management within the District. Twenty-five (25) municipal staff members completed this survey.

COLLABORATION

Members of CCWD's Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) assisted in obtaining decision-makers to participate in the interviews and in disseminating the survey to municipal staff.

ISSUES/CONCERNS

In addition to addressing impaired waters, municipalities are faced with the risk, uncertainty, and cost associated with random damaging weather events, aging infrastructure, demands for tangible results, and growing public skepticism.

As public skepticism increases, particularly skepticism of state and federal government, it will become increasingly hard to connect with local stakeholders both on a personal level and a community level. CCWD should be able to navigate this growing skepticism by continuing to be a trusted resource for local municipalities.

The Municipal Insight Survey is intended to guide CCWD in determining the best methods for engaging with the District's municipal partners.

CONCLUSIONS

MP+G has provided CCWD with a preliminary research report of the findings from Phase One of the Municipal Insight Survey. These findings have been summarized below.

Factors that support/justify water management funding & programs

- Concern for protecting water quality and public health
- Desire to mitigate risks to infrastructure and prevent loss
- Seeing a cost-benefit balance
- Awareness of, and willingness to meet, regulatory levels
- Ongoing engagement with city staff and CCWD
- CCWD Progress reports

Factors that discourage water management funding & programs

- Lack of confidence in federal and state entities that set contaminant levels
- Not feeling that expenditures are worthwhile
- The belief that water management is a problem for others (future councils, future generations, or other municipalities)
- The perception that water quality problems are caused by something that is not within municipal control

Meaningful differences between those who support water management investments and those who do not

- Long-term planning:
The communities that appeared to be most ready to meet the 2045 goals were those that were furthest along in the planning process. Some are not planning for it even though they are aware of the deadline.
- Ownership and shared responsibility:
Participants who viewed the problem as something to be addressed by other communities or people in the future, or who did not perceive that water quality was a problem needing attention, were less ready to invest in water management than participants who conveyed a sense of ownership or shared responsibility for the problem.
- Trust in standard-setting agencies:
A few respondents expressed the opinion that the regulatory agencies that set standards, TMDL/contaminant levels, regulations, and/or policies were doing so without good reasons. These respondents were less ready to support investment in water management.

Trusted sources of information

- These participants said when they had questions about water management they most often turned to city staff and/or CCWD staff
- Other trusted sources mentioned included:
 - Other watershed districts and WMOs (where overlapping)
 - Minnesota Department of Natural Resources
 - Outside consultants/firms
 - City leadership

- The Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources
- The Minnesota Department of Health

Perceptions about CCWD and staff

- When asked if they had thoughts to add, many of these respondents praised Coon Creek Watershed District and its staff members.

Needed resources

- Periodic city-specific progress reports that include previous impairment levels, actions being taken to address impairments, progress toward goals, and comparisons to other municipalities.
- explainer resources with minimal jargon that explains water management science in plain language
- More public outreach and education including shared materials and continued CCWD staff attendance at municipal events.

Communication Recommendations

- Top key messages, or talking points, for municipal leaders based on the above findings are:
 - Coon Creek Watershed District is a trusted resource working to protect our water assets for future generations.
 - Our work keeps water safe for drinking and recreation.
 - Together our efforts prevent damage from flooding and erosion.
 - Through responsible water management we protect roads and bridges.
 - We work to control pollution, keeping people, wildlife, and fishing safe.
- Recommended messengers for communicating with municipal decision-makers include:
 - City staff
 - CCWD presentations and work sessions
 - Site visits
 - Engineering and management consulting firms
- Recommendations for helping municipal decision-makers communicate with the public through:
 - Explainer resources city staff can use, such as handouts, infographics, and videos
 - Content for city newsletters, city websites
 - Inserts in utility bills and other mailings
 - CCWD presence at municipal events
 - CCWD question(s) on municipal resident surveys
 - Public awareness campaign

RECOMMENDATION

Receive update

ACTION/IMPLEMENTATION STEPS

Phase Two of the Municipal Insight Survey, focusing on residents of the watershed, is currently underway. The process for phase two mirrors phase one with the goal of obtaining 14 qualitative interviews followed by a larger survey of the general public. Upon conclusion of Phase Two MP+G will provide CCWD with a findings report which will be shared with the Board.