



Evaluation of the Role of Public Outreach and Stakeholder Engagement in Stormwater Funding Decisions in New England: Lessons from Communities

June 2013

Fact Sheet

Introduction

Communities with municipal separate storm sewer systems (MS4s) face significant fiscal and other challenges in implementing stormwater management programs to comply with Clean Water Act requirements. A critical element of an effective stormwater management program is adequate and sustainable funding. MS4 experiences across the country suggest that development of support among community stakeholders is an important step for communities seeking to adopt and implement stormwater funding strategies.

This evaluation describes lessons about the role and design of public outreach and stakeholder engagement strategies related to community stormwater funding decisions. The evaluation is based on the experiences of eleven small and medium-sized communities, primarily—but not exclusively—in New England. The evaluation had two complementary goals: first, to evaluate whether and how public outreach and stakeholder engagement efforts influenced the adoption of stormwater funding mechanisms; and second, to draw on the communities' experiences to identify lessons for other MS4 communities considering stormwater program funding solutions.

Evaluation Questions

1. To what extent is a stakeholder process desirable for a community to decide on, and accept, a stormwater funding mechanism? Are there other alternative approaches that lead to the same outcomes?
2. What factors drive the need for, and value of, stakeholder processes in communities?
3. What specific elements of stakeholder processes help create or derail agreement on an effective approach to stormwater funding?
4. What contextual factors make stakeholder agreement on an effective approach to stormwater funding more or less challenging and in what ways?
5. How can stakeholder processes be designed to overcome contextual challenges?
6. How are stakeholder processes and decisions about stormwater funding mechanisms influenced by the overall cost of stormwater management and the community's resources to address it?
7. Where a stormwater funding mechanism (e.g., stormwater utility) has been adopted, what were the strongest influences on adoption? What role, if any, did stakeholder agreement play?
8. Where a stormwater funding mechanism (e.g., stormwater utility) has been effectively implemented, what were the strongest influences on implementation? What role did stakeholder agreement play?
9. Can stakeholder agreement reduce litigation over stormwater funding mechanisms?
10. How much does it cost to run a stakeholder process to effectively consider stormwater funding options?
11. How can federal and state agencies help communities and stakeholders effectively consider stormwater funding options?
12. What guides, tools or other resources would be most useful to communities considering stormwater funding mechanisms?

<http://www.epa.gov/evaluate>

For more information on completed evaluations at EPA or the Evaluation Support Division, visit the above link.

Evaluation Methods

The primary information collection and analysis methodology for the project was comparative case study analysis; information to support this evaluation was obtained using the following methods:

- Open-ended discussions with people familiar with the history of stormwater funding in their communities (e.g., lead staff from stormwater management agencies, process facilitators, and participating stakeholders).
- Primary document research (e.g., city or county council meeting minutes, newspaper articles and stormwater ordinances).
- Published case studies.
- A New England Regional Stormwater Program Funding Symposium held in New Hampshire in October 2012, which was an opportunity to discuss and refine preliminary findings.

Findings

The analysis confirmed that stakeholder support played a critical role in the successful adoption and implementation of stormwater funding mechanisms. In order to build stakeholder support and successfully adopt a stormwater funding mechanism, public outreach strategies and focused stakeholder engagement were critical. The specific factors that municipal decision-makers had to take into account—such as citizen or business opposition, the policy environment (e.g., enabling legislation), anti-tax sentiments, chronic flooding, and other issues—differed from town to town. Therefore, the specific design of public outreach and stakeholder engagement strategies had to be tailored to uniquely address these factors and related stakeholder concerns. The specific approaches used by the eleven communities for engaging stakeholders differed. However, communities that effectively addressed their stakeholders' specific concerns were more likely to adopt and implement their proposed funding mechanism.

Key lessons on effectively implementing stakeholder engagement were:

- Identify and involve all key stakeholders.
- Proactively engage stakeholders that support developing a utility and those that oppose it.
- Foster deliberation and exchange of ideas among stakeholders with many points of view.
- Start by discussing what the proposed program should accomplish, and only then talk about how to fund it.
- Implement a stakeholder engagement process appropriate to the community's circumstances and budget.
- Recognize that building adequate community support takes more than achieving consensus on an advisory committee's recommendation.

Key lessons on effectively developing and implementing public outreach/involvement were:

- Make a locally-compelling case that a stormwater funding program meets a critical need.
- Demonstrate the cost-effectiveness of the funding approach.
- Be responsive and flexible through the first few billing cycles.

Recommendations

Recommendations for federal and state entities:

- Offer incentives to communities developing funding mechanisms to support their stormwater plans.
- Enhance communication to MS4 communities about state and federal stormwater requirements.
- Offer state and/or federal incentives for regional, inter-municipal watershed-based funding solutions.

Recommendations for agencies or institutions involved in stormwater management:

- Identify or develop model stormwater utility ordinances based on state enabling legislation.
- Continue to evaluate and compile evaluations of MS4 communities' stormwater program funding efforts, and analyze those that demonstrate strategic approaches to program development, funding solutions developed through stakeholder consensus, and trouble-free implementation.
- Establish an online clearinghouse to share the resources listed above.

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Report Link: <http://www.epa.gov/evaluate/pdf/water/eval-sw-funding-new-england.pdf>

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