

How to Engage with Municipal Leaders

Delaware River Basin Policy and Practice Workgroup

Preface

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Preface: This document, and the documents for stream temperature, depth, and conductance elsewhere, were developed by the Delaware River Basin Policy and Practice Workgroup. The intent of the workgroup has been to provide foundational science references for environmental advocates who are collecting stream data and who wish to communicate results to local government officials. The target readership for this document is the stream monitoring community in the Delaware River Basin, however we hope others may benefit as well. The workgroup strongly believes that environmental advocates must have a clear understanding of the science and the issues under discussion. Therefore, this and the other documents are written with sufficient detail and rigor to enable advocates to engage in confident and informed dialogue.

Comments are most welcome at bit.ly/engageforfreshwater.

If you are passionate about environmental issues, you can play a significant role in effecting change at the local level. One important way to have influence is by attending local municipal meetings and presenting compelling information to influence officials towards greater environmental consciousness and towards more informed, science-based decision-making that is protective of natural resources. This document aims to provide you with practical steps and strategies to effectively engage with municipal officials and promote environmental initiatives within your community.

1. Importance of Engaging with Municipalities

A state like Pennsylvania, which emphasizes a bottom-up approach to governing, can be categorized as having a decentralized or devolved governance structure. In this model, power and decision-making authority are distributed among multiple levels of government, with a greater emphasis on local and regional entities.

By adopting a bottom-up approach, Pennsylvania recognizes the importance of local decision-making and allows for citizen participation and involvement in shaping policies that impact their communities. This approach aims to empower local governments and foster collaboration between the state and local entities to achieve more effective governance and better address local needs and concerns.

Listed below are ways in which local municipalities can plan for their future development and have a significant impact on the natural environment:

- A. Zoning demarcation is an important function of local municipalities. It is important to review a copy of your municipal Zoning Map as well as your local Ordinances. This will tell you what type of development is allowed where. Investigate questions such as: What percent of impervious surfaces are allowed in certain districts? What are the permitted uses in these zoning districts? Download a free version of “eCode Search” from the AppStore. You may find your municipality’s ordinances here as over 2700 local governments use General Code with the online hosting and maintenance of their municipal codes on the eCode360 platform. But the municipality would have to pay a subscription fee for this service.
- B. Municipalities are responsible for dealing with human sewage within their municipal boundaries. They may own or subcontract wastewater treatment plants. They also vote on Sewage Planning Modules, and/or Act 537 plans.
- C. The municipal boards have the potential to protect critical forested buffer zones around streams, creek, ponds/lakes, and wetlands from encroachment. Municipalities should have ordinances defining Riparian Buffer Areas along with what is allowed within those zones. Furthermore, Exceptional Value and High-Quality streams require a greater level of protection, which should also be indicated in the ordinance. Visit your local municipality and request a copy of their ordinances and search for wetlands and riparian buffers sections in the ordinance. If they do not address riparian buffers, go to

https://conservationtools.org/library_items/topic/146-Riparian-Buffer-Protection-Ordinances for example ordinances as well as additional legal analysis.

- D. Municipal boards have the primary authority to protect sensitive floodplain habitat through identifying flood zones on their maps as well as having ordinances restricting activities within those defined areas.
- E. Municipalities primarily control what percentage of land in a proposed development can be built on and/or left as “Open Area.” This information is typically found in the Zoning section of the ordinance under a section labeled “Coverage” or some similar language, which typically states something such as “At least 40% of the lot shall be maintained as open area”.
- F. Each municipality controls and decides whether an applicant may be granted exceptions to the Municipalities ordinances: These exceptions to the rules are either called “Variances” (exceptions to the zoning ordinance), or “Waivers” (exceptions to the SALDO (subdivision and land development ordinance)).
- G. Each Municipality can set conditions on specific projects on a case-by-case basis during “conditional use” hearings, or “Special exception” hearings.

2. Research and Preparation

- A. Understand the Municipal Organization: Familiarize yourself with the structure and functions of your local government, including the roles and responsibilities of different members and departments involved in decision-making. Municipalities often are composed of elected officials and appointed officials. The elected officials usually serve on something like a Board of Supervisors. They are the people authorized to make decisions on the part of the municipality, such as spending money, approving budgets, authorizing ordinance, and map changes. The appointed officials usually make recommendations to the elected officials. Their recommendations may or may not be followed by the elected officials. Recognize the role of municipal engineers as they often provide technical guidance to the decision makers and can be very influential. Also familiarize yourself with the municipality's demographics, policies, and ongoing projects.
- B. Local Government Websites: Visit the official website of your local government. Look for information on council meetings, environmental committees, and relevant policies or initiatives. Start with their Comprehensive Plan. The Comprehensive Plan is a statement of objectives of the municipality concerning its future development including the location, character, and timing of future development. The Comprehensive Plan may also detail requirements for the protection of natural resources including wetlands and aquifer recharge zones, woodlands, steep slopes, prime agricultural land, flood plains, and unique natural areas. As an example, refer to: https://www.berntownship.org/newsite/wp-content/uploads/Bern_Twp_Comprehensive_Plan_2013.pdf. The structure and content of these plans will vary from municipality to municipality.

- C. **Attend Relevant Meetings:** Research the schedule and agendas of upcoming municipal meetings. These may include council meetings, planning board sessions, or environmental committee meetings. If you are planning on speaking, the typical protocol is to call the municipal secretary or township manager to ask to be put on the agenda. Give the secretary a brief description of what you will be presenting. Keep in mind some municipalities may have a time limit on presentations by the public. Our municipality limits the unscheduled public talking time to 3 minutes unless you have a prior agreement to a longer time limit. If you are scheduling ahead of the meeting, do this at least one week before the meeting. The municipality secretary's phone number is often found on the internet if you search for the municipality's website. Also, municipalities may allow you to speak without prior contact if you let them know at the beginning of their meeting, which is considered a 'citizen's forum' in some townships. However it is always best to contact them ahead of time, so they know you are coming. Some municipalities have live broadcasts of their meetings, others have video recordings, and others provide written minutes only. This is another, less time-consuming, method of getting familiar with topics as well as board members' opinions.
- D. **Gather Information and learn the science of the environmental issues of concern:** Collect facts, data, and relevant studies to support your arguments. Stay updated on local environmental concerns and initiatives to strengthen your case. Network with reputable organizations/individuals and explore websites of reputable environmental organizations such as Stroud Water Research Center, PennFuture, the Sierra Club, World Wildlife Fund (WWF), or local environmental groups and watershed associations. These organizations often provide resources, research, and guides on the science of environmental issues and on the process of engaging with government officials and advocating for better watershed and environmental management. Utilize the "One Page" educational documents prepared by the Delaware River Basin Policy and Practice Workgroup.
- E. **Evaluate your Information:** Remember to critically review the sources of the information that you use, considering factors such as author credentials, publication date, and reputation of the organization or publication. Be careful about making grand statements about causation and be sure to cross check facts.
- F. Meeting minutes can tell you a tremendous amount about the municipality and can "catch you up" on years of decisions in a short amount of time. Planning commission, and Board meetings keep minutes; work sessions do not have meeting minutes but do have agendas.
- G. Townships publish a list of meetings in January of each year, this will show the regularly scheduled work sessions, planning commission, zoning hearing board, and Board meetings.

3. Building Relationships

- A. **Introduce Yourself:** Attend meetings regularly and introduce yourself to municipal officials and staff members. Establishing personal connections can help you build credibility and gain their attention. A suggestion would be to stay after the meeting is over and introduce

yourself to one or more of the board members. Compliment them on how well their meeting was run and let them know why you are interested in attending their meetings. Being a resident of the community is a good enough reason. If you make a good impression they may ask you if you want to be appointed to one of their many committees! I would guess that they all are looking for volunteers to share their workload with.

- B. **Understand Public Officials:** They have lots of work to do, and not a lot of time in which to do it. Relationships are important because public officials rely on others for information and advice – staff people, colleagues, family members and personal friends. To be effective, you not only want to identify and influence these advisors, but you also want to become one of them. Start by becoming a source of reliable, timely information. For example, if it is an MS4 municipality, mention that you and/or your organization can help with meeting some of their MS4 requirements regarding educating their citizens about MS4. However, you must familiarize yourself with the MS4 program before you start making promises. Don't "poison the well" by making promises that you can't fulfill.
- C. **Engage in Dialogue:** Take opportunities to engage in conversations with officials outside of meetings, expressing your concerns and demonstrating your commitment to environmental issues. You may be able to do this if the municipality is proactive and has a website where they post public activities. Some have events, like a community "Night Out," where you can approach the public officials in a non-formal setting and get to know them. Other opportunities might be if you volunteer for litter pick-up, youth programs or other needs in the community, where you can meet these folks while performing common activities.
- D. **Collaborate with Like-Minded Individuals:** Join local environmental organizations or initiatives to collaborate with others who share your passion. Read the local newspapers and the municipal newsletter where there may be stories about other environmental activities in your area. Check local bulletin boards at shopping centers in your area for advertisements for fundraisers for environmentally leaning organizations. Together, you can increase your impact and present a unified front. A good opportunity is to author an article for the township newsletter or blog, and joint articles are another way to do this. You can propose the article in advance and ask what the word limits are.
- E. **Make a Good Impression:** While public participation efforts can be extremely valuable, superficial, or poorly designed efforts may simply waste valuable meeting time and at worst can increase public cynicism of your concerns. An example of a poorly designed effort is a presentation on a subject you recently learned about but did not check the accuracy of the information you are basing your presentation on. Another example of a potential pitfall would be not being properly prepared. Proper preparation requires that you present your talk to someone, like a family member, prior to going to the meeting and time yourself to see how long your talk takes. Keep in mind that while speaking at the meeting, members of the board may start questioning you, and if you only have a specific allotted time, be prepared with quick responses to anticipated questions. There's also the concept of having a certain amount of "social currency," this builds up over time, but can be depleted by a single poor performance, passionate outburst, etc.

- F. Don't forget to thank officials when they do something "good". For example, write a positive letter to the editor about them.

4. Effective Communication

- A. Understand the Agenda: Review the meeting agenda in advance to identify specific items relevant to environmental concerns. Tailor your message accordingly. Agendas may be posted to the municipality's website or Facebook page. There may be a printed agenda provided at the meeting.
- B. Prepare a Clear and Concise Message: Craft a well-structured presentation that highlights the importance of environmental consciousness, offers potential solutions, and demonstrates the benefits to the community. Some municipalities incorporate an item on their agenda titled "Public," where they will specifically ask if there is someone in the audience that wishes to speak.
- C. Utilize Visual Aids: Supplement your presentation with visual aids such as charts, graphs, or images to enhance understanding and engagement.
- D. Share Personal Stories: Connect emotionally with the officials by sharing personal anecdotes or stories that illustrate the local impact of environmental issues and potential benefits of environmentally conscious decisions.

5. Develop a Strategy

- A. Know the issue: Who supports and opposes you? What are your opposition's arguments, and how can you neutralize them? Usually the best way to do this is to attend public meetings prior to your presentation, especially meetings where you may have found the agenda ahead of time and you see there are items that are of concern to you. Many municipalities have strong ordinances in regard to environmentally sensitive land. However, developers may ask for a variance to avoid having to meet these requirements. If the requirement is stated in the Zoning Ordinance, the developer will need to appear before a zoning hearing board (ZHB) to present their case. This would be an important meeting to attend and be prepared to speak if you have a good case to present. Be aware that there also are DEP requirements that need to be satisfied, and the DEP often relies on local citizens to make them aware of potential violations. By attending and speaking at the meeting, the developer will be aware that local people are watching them.
- B. Know your targets: Have the officials you are targeting voted or made a statement on the issue? Do they have relevant interests or values? Who do they go to for information and advice on the issue? The best way to ascertain this is to attend meetings. There is the possibility of doing this remotely in some communities. Also, there typically is a record of the meeting in the form of meeting minutes. The details of these minutes may vary from municipality to municipality, but some may actually record the results of a vote to take action and who voted for or against the action.

- C. Know the politics: Who are the key players, and what are their relationships to the elected officials? Identify potential allies or opponents who have influence with these officials. See item 2 above for recommendations on how to do this.
- D. What questions to ask: Compile a comprehensive list of questions that can be posed to municipal officials, staff, and stakeholders to gather relevant information. Typically you may be attending the meeting because you have a specific concern, such as flooding in your community or elevated levels of chloride in the water. You may want to start your questions with, after doing some homework, what is in the stormwater ordinance currently that should have prevented the flooding or high chloride concentration. Has the road crew been educated or certified about optimum ways to spread salt? Is the salt spreading equipment antiquated? In anticipation of a storm what is the municipality's protocol on checking that storm drains are clear of debris or on timing regarding the start of salt spreading.
- E. What questions to be prepared to answer: Outline key questions that you should anticipate and prepare appropriate responses. Research alternatives to offer.
- F. Bring a support group to the meeting. Gather like-minded people to join you at the meeting and have a "storyteller," a constituent who has been directly affected by the issue at hand.
- G. Do a self-assessment: What are your strengths and weaknesses? Do you need to build your public speaking skills, or recruit and activate allies to be effective?

6. Engage in Constructive Dialogue

- A. Be Respectful and Professional: Maintain a respectful tone throughout your interactions with officials, even if there are differing opinions. Professionalism enhances your credibility and increases the chances of being taken seriously. As the old adage states, "You can disagree without being disagreeable."
- B. Address Concerns and Ask Questions: Anticipate objections or questions from officials and be prepared to address them with logical arguments and evidence. Engage in a respectful dialogue to foster understanding and collaboration.
- C. Propose Solutions: Offer feasible solutions to the environmental challenges faced by the community. Emphasize the potential positive outcomes, such as economic benefits, improved quality of life, and long-term sustainability.
- D. Emphasizing a working-together ethic to influence decisions: Promote a collaborative mindset and demonstrate the intention to work alongside the municipality to achieve shared goals.
- E. Don'ts: Never lie. Be scrupulous with facts. Your credibility is gone as soon as you say something an official knows is not true. Never make a threat. You should hold officials accountable for their actions, but it will not help your cause to threaten that they will never win re- election, for example. Do not make it personal or take it personally. Always be professional. It is okay to be enthusiastic but draw the line at hysteria and shouting.

7. Follow Up

- A. **Express Gratitude:** After presenting your information, express gratitude to the officials for their time and consideration. Building positive relationships is crucial for long-term engagement.
- B. **Provide Additional Information:** Share relevant articles, reports, or studies to support your arguments and further educate officials on the environmental issues you discussed.
- C. **Stay Engaged:** Continually attend meetings, participate in public hearings, and monitor the progress of environmental initiatives. Offer ongoing support and collaborate with officials as they work towards implementing environmentally conscious policies. You may want to develop a support group, they could be members from your watershed association, to foster a “team” approach to taking on this challenge. For example, if you can’t attend a meeting, they can stand in for you. Or if you are presenting you should have someone in the audience to support your stance as well as to provide feedback after the meeting is over.
- D. **Most Municipal Leaders want to be re-elected:** Ultimately, it comes down to votes. Local voters have power, especially those who are part of large, influential organizations and know how to work the media. However, public officials want every constituent to think that his or her interests are being represented and will often try to avoid taking stands on controversial issues on which voters disagree.

8. Conclusion

By attending municipal meetings and effectively presenting information, you can influence municipal officials to prioritize environmental consciousness. Engage in research, build relationships, communicate effectively, develop a strategy, engage in constructive dialogue, and follow up diligently. Remember, your passion, knowledge, and commitment can contribute to positive change in your community's environmental policies and practices.

9. Appendix 1 - Step by Step Approach in Working with Municipalities

- A. Educate yourself about the issue you want to champion. Understand how the municipal officials can help you to achieve your goal. For example, if your concern is the health of a local stream, does the municipality have ordinances regarding riparian buffers to aid in reducing the impact of stormwater run-off? Most municipalities have websites which include links to their ordinances.
- B. Educate yourself about the municipality. The municipality's web site should list the various committees in the municipality along with members listed and dates and times that they meet. If there is an Environmental Action Committee, that may be a good place to start making contacts.
- C. Attend meetings for the purpose of understanding the dynamics. Who runs the meeting? What gets their attention? Do they rely on their Engineers and Lawyers, who may be contracted from an outside agency, for guidance and direction? You may want to establish a relationship with them. Attend at least two meetings before you make a presentation. Simply be a face in the crowd.
- D. Begin to formalize a strategy and write up your presentation and practice presenting with your friends or family or in front of a mirror. You want to make sure that you say and ask everything you intend to, but it is also crucial that you listen and respond to what the officials have to say. Brainstorm what to expect, and role play different scenarios.
- E. Prior to the third meeting, contact the municipal secretary and ask that you be added to the agenda. Contact the secretary a month ahead of the date you plan to speak. At the meeting, simply introduce yourself and your organization. Practice your presentation ahead of time and keep it to less than 5 minutes. Simply highlight what your group has done to date in "helping other organizations". This is not the time to tell them how bad their local environment is or how they need to adopt better ordinances. Be sure to mention MS4 within the 5-minute presentation if it is a MS4 municipality.
- F. If it's a MS4 municipality, (find out here [WMS Permitted Facilities MS4 - Report Viewer \(pa.gov\)](https://www.pade.state.pa.us/wms/Permitted_Facilities_MS4_Report_Viewers)) attend the 4th meeting with a list of specific items your group can help the municipality with in meeting their MS4 requirements. Your presentation in itself may provide the municipality with MS4 "Public Involvement and Participation" credit. MS4 requirements can be found here [StormwaterPA - MS4 Program](https://www.pade.state.pa.us/wms/StormwaterPA_MS4_Program). Be prepared to follow through on any volunteer help that you offer. If the municipality is not in MS4, talk about the possibility of having an Environmental Advisory Committee (EAC) with your organization spearheading this activity if the municipality does not already have an EAC.
- G. By the fifth meeting, hopefully you are no longer just another face in the crowd or one of those people they tend to ignore. By now you should have their contact info and can send them the "One Page" educational document prepared by the Delaware River Basin Policy and Practice Workgroup before the meeting. You can then present the subject matter at the meeting. Try to be positive and if you are highlighting problems, be

prepared with practical solutions that you may be able to assist with, such as available Grants and helping them write the Grant and/or providing volunteer hours to meet the in-kind matching requirements. It is a good idea to bring along other members of your watershed association for moral support. They can also provide feedback after the meeting and help individuals build confidence in public speaking. Again, be prepared to follow through on any volunteer help that you offer.

- H. By the sixth meeting, you may be asking for a demonstration of support. Politicians are expert at sounding like they are giving you what you want. Always ask for their support, even if they sound like they will not support you, but especially if they sound like they do. If they are supportive, ask them to propose an ordinance, form a committee, and make a statement of support to be reflected in the meeting minutes by the recording secretary, commit their vote – anything to make their support public and confirm their commitment.
- I. Get an answer. Make sure you ask a direct question. Wait for an answer, even if it means sitting in silence. If they do not answer, rephrase the question. You may not want to push for an immediate answer if they are not ready to commit one way or the other, but you should find out why.
- J. Follow up by continuing to attend meetings. If you have a commitment of support, have it documented in the minutes of the meeting. Send a letter to remind the municipal officials of what they agreed to and continue to stay in touch. Commitments can always be broken, and if an official has reservations, you do not want to learn about it after the vote has taken place or after the ordinance adoption has been vetoed.
- K. If the official was noncommittal, or if you think he or she can be swayed to support you, continue to apply pressure using your members, allies, and the media. Review your strategy.
- L. If possible, go to the meetings with your supporters. When presenting, your supporters should take a listening role, pay attention to how your arguments are being received by the municipality, listen carefully to what the officials have to say and ask clarifying questions if needed. At least one person should take notes, so you have a good record of your meeting. It may be helpful if another person can offer supporting statements to validate and enforce your points.
- M. Encourage others to get involved and speak up. Once you are comfortable participating in municipal meetings, help others to feel they can have a voice too. Work with others so they feel comfortable and knowledgeable about local government and encourage them to take an active role.

10. Appendix 2 - References

Brodhead Watershed Association- January 2023 - STREAMLINES: News and events from BWA - Who Controls the Future of Clean Water?

<https://brodheadwatershed.org/wp-content/uploads/BWAs-Streamlines-Jan.-2023.html>

Comprehensive Plan Example - Bern Township, Berks County, Pennsylvania

https://www.berntownship.org/newsite/wp-content/uploads/Bern_Twp_Comprehensive_Plan_2013.pdf

The eCode Search™ app - designed to provide simple and convenient mobile access to General Code's eCode360 Library of over 2,400 municipal codes.

<https://www.generalcode.com/library/>

Eliminating Municipal Policy Barriers to Green Stormwater Infrastructure Implementation

https://psu.mediaspace.kaltura.com/media/Water+Cooler+TalkA+Eliminating+Barriers+to+GSI+Implementation/1_f9ghh1k6

Explainer: Cities, boroughs, and townships, oh my! Pa. municipalities clarified

<https://whyy.org/articles/explainer-cities-boroughs-and-townships-oh-my-pa-municipalities-clarified/>

Home » Library » Land Use Ordinances & Development Standards » Riparian Buffer Protection Ordinances available here:

https://conservationtools.org/library_items/topic/146-Riparian-Buffer-Protection-Ordinances

PennDOT Connects - Developer Negotiations Drop-in Webinar. Recording available here:

<https://register.gotowebinar.com/recording/viewRecording/3141102842842390617/1458389357618114478/tricarico1@epix.net?registrantKey=3308460607800144992&type=ATTENDEEEMAILRECORDINGLINK>

PennFuture - Living with Logistics: A Model Logistics Use Zoning Ordinance for Pennsylvania Municipalities

https://www.pennfuture.org/Files/Publications/PennFuture_Ordinance_Manual_7.pdf

Penn State Extension - Getting Involved in Your Pennsylvania Local Government

<https://extension.psu.edu/getting-involved-in-your-pennsylvania-local-government>

Pennsylvania Municipal Planning Code - Electronic copy available here:

<https://dced.pa.gov/download/pennsylvania-municipalities-planning-code-act-247-of-1968/>

Savvy Citizen - Keep your Citizens Informed and Engaged - Powerful communication for local governments

<https://savvycitizenapp.com/>

Stormwater Ordinance Example - Bern Township, Berks County, Pennsylvania

https://www.berntownship.org/newsite/wp-content/uploads/Stormwater_Management_Ordinance_340-adopted-2023.pdf

Tackling Barriers to Green Infrastructure: An Audit of Municipal Codes and Ordinances

<https://publications.aqua.wisc.edu/product/tackling-barriers-to-green-infrastructure-an-audit-of-municipal-codes-and-ordinances/>

WeConservePA - EAC Recommendation to Ordinance Adoption: Productively Attaining Official Action by Local Government

<https://vimeo.com/871905690?share=copy>

WeConservePA - How to Engage with Municipal Leaders

<https://vimeo.com/758003747?share=copy>