

LANCASTER COUNTY, PENNSYLVANIA'S COLLECTIVE RESPONSE TO A MAJOR WATER QUALITY CHALLENGE

Lancaster County, Pennsylvania is a study in contrasts. Its unique mix of urban, suburban, and rural landscapes is home to over 5,000 farms, an urban center with eclectic artists, and a bustling college town. Plain Sect farmers work their land with horse drawn equipment next to neighbors on the cutting edge of agricultural technology.

Still, more than a decade ago, this vibrant and successful community received a wake-up call.

In 2009, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) put Pennsylvania, specifically Lancaster County, on notice. Nutrient and sediment pollution had made more than half of Lancaster's 1,400 miles of streams unsafe for drinking and recreation and harmed critical insect and fish populations. To turn the tide, the EPA set expectations for Pennsylvania to reduce nitrogen and phosphorus loads by 2025. In total, Lancaster County is responsible for 21% of the state's required nitrogen reductions and 23% of phosphorus reductions.

Making that change doesn't happen overnight, and progress was slow at the start. Despite 60 municipalities with water quality imperatives and more than 40 public and private organizations actively engaged in conservation efforts, there was no single organizing entity coordinating a collective effort for sustainable change. Without consistent collaboration, efforts were patchwork and duplicative.



In 2018, the Lancaster Clean Water Partners (the Partners) was born as a public-private collaboration out of a multi-sector concern for worsening water quality throughout the county and the potential for increased regulations from the EPA. The groundwork to launch this initiative, however, began years earlier.

CONTENTS

UNDERSTANDING THE ISSUE..... 2

BROADENING AND BUILDING TRUST 3

BUILDING INFRASTRUCTURE AND CAPACITY 4

DEMONSTRATING LEADERSHIP AND VALUE..... 5

COLLABORATING FOR IMPACT..... 6

ACHIEVING MEASURABLE AND ENDURING RESULTS..... 7

FOSTERING RELATIONSHIPS 8



UNDERSTANDING THE ISSUE

Change accelerated in 2014 when a handful of leaders in Lancaster County decided they wanted to see more deliberate action taken to coordinate clean water work.



“As I learned more, the alarm bells were going off,” said Lisa Riggs, President of the Economic Development Company (EDC) of Lancaster County.

In Riggs’ role at the EDC, she works to welcome, retain, and grow businesses in the county.

“We started running into issues with clean water,” she said. “We couldn’t get stormwater management permits, which meant we couldn’t build. No one was talking about it, but it was a big deal. I started talking to others in different sectors about it. They knew it was a problem, but it had no sense of urgency and no one ‘owned’ it.”

Ultimately, a small, cross-sector group of influential leaders assembled. They represented local business, government and economic development interests, local agricultural organizations, and philanthropy, each understanding the impact of clean water on their work and the future of Lancaster County.

“Everyone who was involved in the beginning is a natural changemaker,” said Emily Smedley, Communications and Programs Coordinator for the Partners. “They don’t settle for ‘that can’t be done.’ I think that’s a key characteristic.”

The group benefited from the example of a previous local Collective Impact initiative to end homelessness launched by the United Way of Lancaster County. Collective Impact is a formal model for multi-sector collaboration curated and promoted by John Kania and Mark Kramer in a Stanford Social Innovation Review article more than 10 years ago.

“It showed us what was possible,” said Riggs. “Entities came together around the table and established a unified vision while maintaining their independence, and they made more progress as a collective. It helped us speak more confidently to the Collective Impact model.”



BROADENING AND BUILDING TRUST

Together, this initial small group of local leaders acted as connectors and ambassadors to expand the group and organize their efforts. They tapped into their networks. In Fall 2016, they convened a working group of 45 stakeholders to develop a strategic framework for improving water quality.

Building on that momentum, in Spring 2017, local leaders, funded by the Keith Campbell Foundation, hired Due East Partners to facilitate the creation of a draft Common Agenda and 18-month strategic roadmap to finalize and launch a bold action plan.

The goal: guide the growth of a multi-sector collaborative with a strong “backbone” organization that could serve as the central organizing force in collective water improvement efforts to achieve clean and clear water in Lancaster within a generation.

The Campbell Foundation’s support was catalytic.

“If the Keith Campbell Foundation hadn’t come along and said, ‘What can we do to help?’, I don’t know what we would have done,” said John Cox, former President of Turkey Hill Dairy and founding Partners volunteer. “Having a visionary partner, as well as some seed money, helped us to move forward.”



Due East Partners guided a 15-member volunteer leadership team through a months-long process to refine its vision, confirm the measurable results it intended to achieve, elevate core strategies, and begin to identify the required capacity and resources needed to sustain and support a robust, countywide effort, including an organizational backbone to coordinate all of the partners and activities.

“This was the time that really set the foundation for trusted relationships and open communication,” said Riggs. “We expanded the steering committee and included some skeptics so we didn’t just have an echo chamber. We did a lot of listening to determine how to position this new backbone organization in a way that didn’t compete with other players in the space.”



BUILDING INFRASTRUCTURE AND CAPACITY

Due East facilitated virtual learning tours of organizational backbone models adopted by similar collaboratives in the environmental sector, helped the group develop a job description for the backbone's first hire, and facilitated a conversation about which existing entity should house the new initiative.

"Setting up the backbone the right way is essential to the success of any collective impact initiative," said Lauren Maddox, Co-Founder at Due East Partners. "Early investments in capacity and infrastructure help to ensure the long-term viability of the effort."

In early 2018, the group hired Allyson Gibson as Director of Strategic Partnerships and Programs, and the Partners was launched.

"With a clear vision for 'clean and clear water,' and a mission that focused on building capacity of partner organizations, things really took off once Allyson was on board," said Bess Langbein, Co-Founder at Due East Partners.



Situated at the local Lancaster County Conservation District, Gibson began implementing the strategic roadmap. As the sole staffer for the first two years, she needed to form a collaborative structure for implementation that engaged many diverse groups and individuals.

Gibson began by strengthening the Executive Committee and Steering Committee and formalizing the partnership structure. At the broadest level, partner organizations form the organization. Any local organization that aligns to the values and agrees on its activities can join as a partner organization. Partner organizations agree to share countywide success stories, and participate on an action team. This structure allows for diverse representation.

"Collective impact needs CEO-level leadership, as well as grassroots-level input gathering and action," said Smedley.

The organization launched its first four action teams—agriculture, watersheds, data management, and education and outreach—**just in time for a critical opportunity to move the work forward.**



DEMONSTRATING LEADERSHIP AND VALUE

In June 2018, the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) invited Lancaster County to develop a countywide action plan (CAP) to address the state's Watershed Implementation Plan goals.

"We went into it very cautiously," said Gibson. "We told all of the State Secretaries, 'We need to sit at the table with you and ask our questions first. If you're expecting different results from us, what are you going to do differently?' We wanted to take the leadership role to help us meet our local goals and that has to reflect all the voices we represent. But it wasn't a simple decision."



The Partners leveraged the CAP opportunity to request a stronger working relationship with the DEP, including regular meetings, more funding, and policy changes. Ultimately, the Partners agreed to write the plan.

"It was a watershed moment," said Cox. "Allyson integrated a lot of groups into the process and came up with our first ever 'blueprint.' It helped to illustrate to all of our partners what the Partners can do that they can't do individually. It underscored the reason for us to exist."

The writing team gathered bi-weekly for five months, organizing the plan around a set of action teams. The Partners presented the plan in January 2019 and submitted it to EPA as part of the state plan in August of that year.



COLLABORATING FOR IMPACT

The completed Lancaster CAP outlines Lancaster’s path for reducing 11.7 million lbs. of nitrogen and 524,000 lbs. of phosphorus by the 2025 deadline. Multiple, interwoven strategies fuel progress, all led by the Partners/action teams.

Stream delisting: The Partners has a goal to restore 350 miles of impaired streams in Lancaster County by 2030. The delisting strategy, created by the Chesapeake Conservancy, focuses on select areas to get multiple landowners with connected sections of stream to install conservation practices at the same time. The overarching goal of the strategy is to take streams off the impaired list and restore water quality and habitats.

Watershed Leadership Academy: This 12-month training program supports the personal leadership development of individuals involved in the clean water effort. Content and field investigations include watershed science, land use, stormwater, and agriculture.



Farm visits: Lancaster Farmland Trust (LFT), TeamAg, and Red Barn – farmland preservation organization and agriculture consultants, respectively – conducted farm visits in priority areas. The farm visits assessed the agricultural plan and BMP status of the farms and aimed to identify potential landowners for implementation.

Lancaster Water Week: The Lancaster Conservancy created Water Week as an awareness and action campaign to connect the entire community to clean water. Many partners are involved in Water Week activities, and thousands of citizens have been educated about clean water and the work happening throughout the county.

Community Engagement: Through Interfaith Partners for the Chesapeake (IPC), 23 congregations in Lancaster County are active in creation care and conservation. IPC has many options for congregations to engage in creation care, such as being active in the the One Water Partnership, attending a Faithful Green Leaders Training, signing their congregation pledge, and completing a conservation practice. Each of the 23 congregations have engaging in one or more of those activities.

Clean Water Fund: The Partners launched the Clean Water Fund at the Lancaster County Community Foundation in 2019. To date, the fund has granted \$346,027 to 16 local projects aimed at improving water quality and increasing engagement efforts.



ACHIEVING MEASURABLE AND ENDURING RESULTS

The community has put in over 5,000 volunteer hours to replant trees and buffers. Partners have conducted outreach to 300 farmers. Best management practices such as manure storage, precision grazing management, barnyard runoff, and riparian restoration have been implemented.

In total, the 70 practices implemented by partners will result in estimated load reductions of 21,312.92 lbs. of nitrogen, 2,079.02 lbs. of phosphorus, and 3,853,562.84 lbs. of total suspended solids annually.

Still, moving the needle on water quality countywide is not an easy task.

“We have to make a case for clean water,” said Gibson. “It might mean more media hits. It might mean more homeowners are putting in a rain garden. Success comes in many forms.”

Before the Partners, there were no shared metrics for the clean water effort.

“How we’re going to measure success for Lancaster’s waters is very different from how we’re going to measure the success of a backbone organization,” said Gibson. “So, it’s two different sets of metrics, and we still struggle with that because of the data sources. The data is in so many different places.”



As a result, the Partners focus on a more “upstream” outcome: **making sure that local organizations have greater capacity** to achieve the shared vision of clean and clear water by 2040.

“Yes, it’s about hiring engineers and pouring concrete as well as planting LOTS of trees, but we also need people in place to write the grants and manage the finances,” Gibson said. “We want to see that other organizations are adding clean water to their business strategy and that a new state or federal agency is recognizing Lancaster County as a model where they didn’t before. As the backbone organization, we’re the connectors and the amplifiers, not the doer with shovels in the ground.”

The Partners has brought in significant funding to support local capacity, including a \$7.4 million grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Natural Resources Conservation Service to implement best management practices on agricultural lands, resulting in restored and healthy streams. The proposal funds 55 different local projects.

In another compelling example of success, the Pennsylvania DEP has taken Lancaster’s CAP and replicated its templates and tools for every other jurisdiction.



FOSTERING RELATIONSHIPS

Smedley and Gibson attribute their success, in part, to their constant focus on relationships with Steering Committee members and partners. Every new staff member meets individually with every member of the Steering Committee as their first task, but it doesn't end there.

"Relationships come first," said Smedley. **"More than outcomes and metrics.** We do a lot of one-on-ones. We get coffee. We go see a recently installed project together. We meet them where they are."

Cox agrees that specific skills, talents, and temperaments are essential to success in leading Collective Impact.



"It really requires having people who are skilled in facilitation, negotiation, and building trust where there's inherently distrust," he said. "It's a very difficult thing to pull off."

Today, the Partners is made up of a 15-person Steering Committee and five-person Executive Committee; four Action Teams; 50 partner organizations; a Director of Strategic Partnerships and Programs; a Senior Advisor; a Communications and Programs Coordinator; a Project and Grants Coordinator; a Technical Coordinator; and a Director of Collaborative Funding.

"Every year, the Partners raises the bar on what the organization can accomplish because the group knows there is no option but to achieve the results they laid out in 2017," said Langbein. "We have been fortunate to work with them on their annual planning and see the measurable impact as well as the commitment, expertise and dogged determination of their volunteer leaders and staff."

[Click here](#) to learn more about Lancaster Clean Water Partners.

[Click here](#) to learn more about Due East Partners.