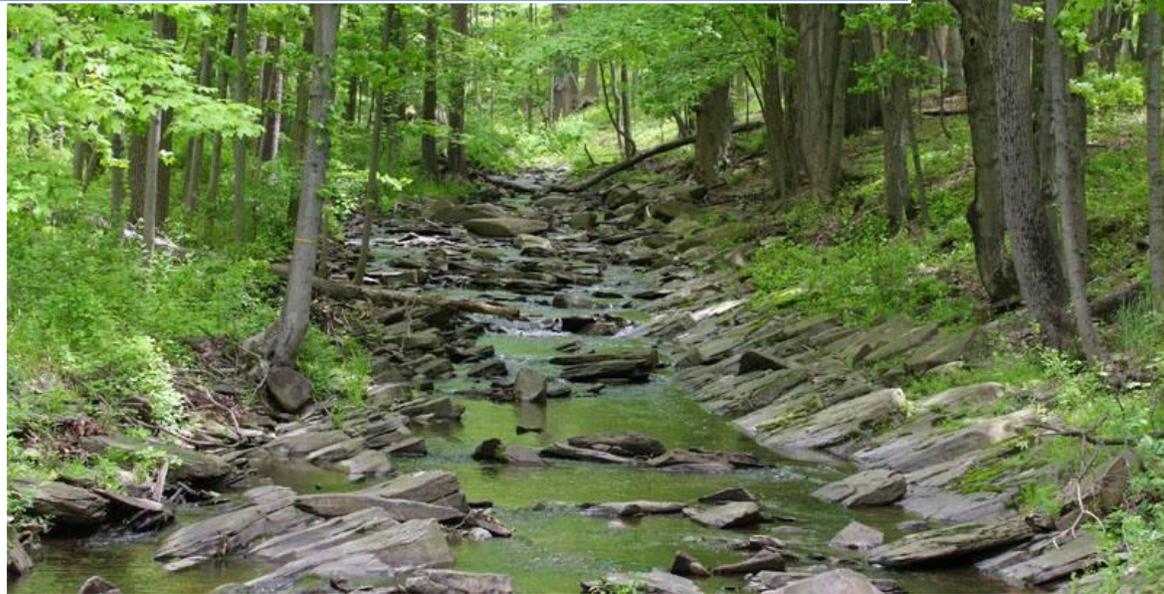


# The Watershed Institute

A Program of the Stony Brook-Millstone Watershed Association

## The Watershed Institute Strategic Plan



2015-2018

Kate Hutelmyer

Watershed Institute Coordinator

July 2015



Your water. Your environment. Your voice.

# **THE WATERSHED INSTITUTE**

*A Program of the Stony Brook-Millstone Watershed Association*

## **Strategic Plan : 2015-2018**

### **Our Current State:**

New Jersey's rivers and watersheds have come a long way over the last half a century. Many people can likely remember a time when rivers were dumping grounds for toxic materials, garbage, and an assortment of other contaminants. There was a time when sprawl and development went unchecked, even in environmentally sensitive areas. There was a time when we didn't truly understand the impact that human activity had on the environment. And, in the grand scheme, that time wasn't terribly long ago.

Fortunately, through regulation, restoration, and the tireless efforts of concerned and engaged citizens, our rivers and watersheds are in much better shape now than they were back then. However, there is still much work to be done. Legacy contaminants in rivers that were once home to heavy industry must be cleaned up. The flow of nonpoint source pollution from residential and commercial development and agriculture into our waterways must be reduced. We must prepare for the impacts of climate change, which threatens to increase the intensity and frequency of extreme weather events like floods and droughts. We must defend against poorly sited development that continues to encroach upon our open space resources here in the nation's most densely populated state. These issues are among the challenges that environmentalists and watershed organizations face here in New Jersey. At stake is the health of our natural environment and the type of world that we will pass on to our children.

### **Our Role:**

At the turn of the century, there was a renewed interest in the holistic approach of watershed management. In New Jersey and across the country, more and more people were beginning to view the environment from a watershed perspective. For the first time, public and private resources were directed to focus on watershed planning as a tool to protect waterways, manage sprawl, and preserve open space.

In 2000, five of New Jersey's largest watershed associations (Stony Brook-Millstone Watershed Association, Great Swamp Watershed Association, Passaic River Coalition, South Branch Watershed Association, and Upper Raritan Watershed Association) came together to develop a program that would support the growing group of water-focused nonprofits throughout the State. The original goal of the Watershed Institute was to help those watershed groups become strong and effective advocates for the protection of New Jersey's water resources.

Much has changed in the last fifteen years. However, the mission of the Watershed Institute is largely the same. We still strive to protect the watersheds of this State by supporting and empowering the watershed organizations with whom we work. We do this in a variety of ways: through a small grants program, technical assistance and online resources, workshops and events, and more. Through our efforts we solve problems, build community, and help to provide a more unified voice for the watershed management movement.

Every day, we are broadening and strengthening our relationships with the dozens of active watershed groups throughout New Jersey, from Sussex to Cape May and everywhere in between. It is our goal to support them in their courageous work to protect their local environments, and we are fully committed to being responsive to their needs today, tomorrow, and always.

Now more than ever, with fifteen years under our belt, we are uniquely poised to rise to this challenge. The Stony Brook-Millstone Watershed Association, our parent organization, has more than sixty-five years of experience in working at the watershed level to protect the environment and benefit local communities. The Association's track record of success in conservation, advocacy, science, and education within our 265 sq. mile watershed has laid the foundation for the Watershed Institute to serve as a resource provider for New Jersey's environmental nonprofit community. Furthermore, the new Watershed Center for Environmental Advocacy, Science, and Education will provide us with endless opportunities to expand our programs and offerings, and will serve as a new forum to educate and engage environmental groups, municipal officials, and other key decision makers.

### **This Plan:**

This plan reflects our desire to expand the quantity and quality of the services we provide to our constituent organizations in order to better promote watershed health in New Jersey. Through this strategic planning process, we have committed ourselves to understanding the needs of New Jersey watershed organizations and identifying ways to improve our capacity to meet those needs. Our method included extensive interviewing of stakeholders and local experts with regard to our current programs. It also included a national review of two dozen organizations with similar missions, along with an analysis of organizations within New Jersey that may have overlapping goals or services.

The process of strategic planning has led us to refine our mission statement and to craft new goals, priorities, and targeted actions. The framework outlined in this document and the recommendations presented herein will guide our efforts over the course of the next several years. Included in this plan are the following elements –

- *Our Vision*
- *Mission, Goals, Priorities, and Targeted Actions*
- *Our Philosophy*
- *Recommendations for Projects and Programs*
- *Final Thoughts*

### **Our Vision:**

We envision a New Jersey in which -

- Water is clean, plentiful, and sustainably managed for human and ecological health.
- Citizens are informed about and actively engaged in the stewardship of their watersheds.
- Watershed organizations are well-respected and well-integrated into the communities they serve, and the communities are stronger and healthier because of the organizations' presence.

## **Mission:**

The Watershed Institute promotes the health and resiliency of New Jersey's watersheds by strengthening, connecting, and mobilizing watershed organizations.

The Institute's goals are -

- To strengthen the organizational and mission-critical program capacity of New Jersey's watershed organizations to protect and restore the State's watersheds
- To connect New Jersey's watershed organizations and allies in a way that promotes community and meaningful collaboration
- To mobilize New Jersey's watershed organizations to address distinct priority issues affecting clean and plentiful water and healthy habitats

In support of those goals, our priorities as a program are -

- To restore New Jersey's waterways to meet state and federal clean water quality standards
- To promote the resiliency of New Jersey's watersheds to stormwater impacts, flooding, and drought
- To protect and restore healthy habitats and functioning ecosystems

Based on those priorities, we have identified the following targeted actions that will guide the ways in which we promote watershed health in the coming years. Those priorities are:

- Water Quality Science and Education: promote data-to-action efforts of organizations monitoring water quality, increase the accessibility of water quality information, and improve communication to the public on why good water quality is important to environmental and community wellbeing
- Stormwater Policy: promote collaborative efforts with state, county, and municipal officials (where practical) to advocate for improved stormwater rules and ordinances beyond the current minimal and often ineffective requirements
- Green Infrastructure: promote the education of landowners and municipal decision-makers on the role of impervious cover in flooding, using green infrastructure as a solution, and green infrastructure best practices (including the importance of long-term maintenance)
- Climate Change Resiliency: promote the incorporation of resiliency and adaptation into all aspects of future projects, planning, and policy efforts, and increase the accessibility of information and appropriate tools regarding climate change impacts

## **Our Philosophy:**

We believe that healthy watersheds are essential to public health and safety, a robust economy, and a resilient environment. Working from a watershed perspective uniquely addresses New Jersey's most pressing environmental challenges by managing water resources along the boundaries established by nature, rather than along arbitrary political boundaries.

We believe that any watershed organization can grow and thrive as a champion for the environment if they have the right tools and support. For us, no group is too large or too small to be deserving of assistance. We consider every group we work with to be a partner organization, and we are proud to support the important and inspiring work they do.

## **Recommendations for Projects and Programs:**

Events and Workshops – Each year, the Watershed Institute hosts a variety of workshops, seminars, and training sessions, the majority of which are provided free of charge to the New Jersey environmental nonprofit community. These events cover a variety of technical and organizational topics and serve as a forum where groups can come together, learn from one another, and share best practices.

- *Goal:* The Watershed Institute strives to provide organizations with valuable tools and information, and to encourage collaboration and idea sharing among constituent groups.
- *Recommendations:*
  - We will continue to develop and expand our partnerships in order to broaden the network of presenters and resource providers that support our workshop series.
  - We will host at least one major conference or workshop per year, either at the new Watershed Center for Environmental Advocacy, Science, and Education or at another suitable venue.
  - We will increase our efforts to solicit and analyze participant feedback in order to increase the quality and diversity of our offerings and to ensure that we are responsive to the needs of our constituent groups.
  - We will provide relevant supplemental resources (technical documents, case studies, etc.) to participants after each workshop, either through a list attached to the agenda or through a follow up email, and we will provide all resources covered in each workshop on the Institute's website.

Watershed Institute Grants Program – The Watershed Institute is proud to manage an annual small grants program, underwritten by the generous support of the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation. Over the past twelve years, we have provided hundreds of thousands of dollars in grants to strengthen watershed organizations and help them achieve their missions. Under the newly defined focus of this grants program, funded projects must all work towards one or more of the Institute's targeted actions.

- *Goal:* The Watershed Institute grants program supports the work of watershed and conservation organizations to protect their local environment and inspire a shared vision for the protection of New Jersey's watersheds.
- *Recommendations:*
  - We will increase efforts to evaluate the grant program and collect feedback from applicants and grantees on an annual basis, and use that information to continually improve the program.
  - We will dedicate more time and effort to building community among each cohort of grantees through networking socials and other events.
  - We will clarify and expand upon the language in our grant application and agreement materials to ensure that all expectations are well-defined and all parties are protected.
  - We will assess organizational capacity as a component of the applicant's eligibility during the grant review process to ensure that funded projects have the greatest chance of succeeding.
  - We will increase efforts to promote both the grant program and the funded projects of our grantees through traditional and social media outlets.
  - We will utilize the new grants program logo in all relevant materials.
  - We will promote the importance of the target actions that are the focus of this grant program through presentations, press releases, etc.

Technical Assistance and Resources – The Watershed Institute Coordinator is available to provide one-on-one assistance to watershed organizations regardless of whether the organization is in the planning stages or is already well established. This entails responding via email, phone, or in-person consultation to requests for help with a variety of topics in the fields of capacity building, organizational maintenance, and environmental programming. In addition, through our newly redesigned website we offer a variety of static resources that groups can access at any time.

- *Goal:* The Watershed Institute works to strengthen the organizational and mission-critical capacity of our constituent organizations through personalized technical assistance and a full array of web and print-based resources specific to the needs of watershed groups.
- *Recommendations:*
  - We will take full advantage of our new, more user-friendly website in order update our web resource offerings to reflect the most current information and most pressing needs.
  - We will strive to continually develop new web-based resources for our constituent groups that fall into one or more of our new “CASE for Clean Water” categories: capacity building, advocacy, science, and education.
  - We will update the Capacity Building mini-series and the Watershed Protection How-To series and integrate them more thoroughly into our online resource tool kits for organizations.
  - We will begin to realize the Institute’s founding goal of moving towards “think-tank” work by developing issue papers, case studies, and other analyses of key issues related to watershed management.
  - We will refine the language on the Institute’s website that describes the capabilities of our technical assistance program so that we can better market and execute that service for constituent groups.
  - We will continue to build up our partnership network to increase the knowledge and skill sets that the Coordinator can call upon to assist constituent groups, as well as finding more ways to utilize the skills and expertise of the staff at the Stony Brook-Millstone Watershed Association.

Community Building – A major component of the Watershed Institute’s mission is to develop and foster a sense of community among the State’s watershed organizations. We believe that doing so invites communication and collaboration, and also allows for the watershed community to speak with a unified voice for the benefit of the environment in New Jersey.

- *Goal:* The Watershed Institute strives to foster a sense of community and to encourage meaningful collaboration among the watershed organizations within that community here in New Jersey.
- *Recommendations:*
  - We will revive the New Jersey Council of Watersheds where members of the watershed community can advocate with a unified voice on issues of joint interest.
  - We will encourage and occasionally initiate collective action on important watershed and water quality issues at the state level.
  - We will increase efforts to connect like-minded groups (through workshops, referrals, and other means) to one another so that they might share best practices and see one another as resources upon which they can call.
  - We will renew our focus on developing strategic partnerships throughout the State, especially with groups that provide complementary services and have similar missions.

Outreach and Communication – The success of the Watershed Institute in carrying out our mission is heavily dependent on our ability to reach constituent groups with our messaging and programs. Therefore, a strong outreach and communications program is critical to sustaining our work and moving us forward.

- *Goal:* The Watershed Institute’s outreach and communication efforts will serve as the program’s public face, allowing us to market our initiatives and resources and to interact and engage with constituent groups.
- *Recommendations:*
  - We will continually update and add content to our newly designed website, which will be our primary resource for constituent groups.
  - We will seek to better incorporate our program into the website, newsletter, social media, etc. of the Stony Brook-Millstone Watershed Association to inform our membership base about the services we provide.
  - We will investigate new methods and software for managing our listserv in order to make it more responsive to our needs for member management and read-rate analysis.
  - We will pursue new ways (social media, press releases, external websites, etc.) to promote our programs and services, as well as the accomplishments of our partners and constituent groups.
  - We will continually seek out innovative ways to engage with both constituent groups and the public, including through social media initiatives like the “May Watershed Awareness Month” Facebook project and the “I am #4OpenSpace” campaign.

Other Recommendations –

- *Goal:* In addition to improving our existing programs and initiatives, we also seek to expand the work that we do in order to find new and innovative ways to support New Jersey’s watershed organizations.
- *Recommendations:*
  - With help from the Stony Brook-Millstone Watershed Association’s new Development Director, we will seek out new sources of funding as opportunities arise in order to support the development of new initiatives.
  - We will investigate establishing a Watershed Institute Advisory Committee, made up of representatives from several watershed associations and other relevant groups from across the State, in order to support the Coordinator and lend increased credibility to the program.
  - We will identify potential new programs and projects through an analysis of what is currently offered by similar organizations across the country, what the evolving needs of our constituent groups are, and what funding is available to support new initiatives.

**Final Thoughts**

Our 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary provides a golden opportunity for us to think strategically about our path forward as we work to grow and expand our programs, initiatives, and partnerships. We are fully committed to realizing the Watershed Institute’s newly-defined goals and serving New Jersey’s watershed community. We will strive to be responsive, flexible, and innovative as we work through the challenges of protecting the State’s water resources today and in the years to come.