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Valued legacy at watershed council

Your Turn

Kacey Cook
Guest columnist

The following guest commentary was written by Kacey Cook, policy and advocacy specialist at Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council.

August was a month of transition at Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council. Dr. Grenetta Thomassey, the watershed policy director, retired at the end of the month, and I joined as the new policy and advocacy specialist. Thomassey has spent the last 16 years at the watershed council dedicated to protecting Northern Michigan's water resources and advocating for the communities and ecosystems that depend on them. While I wish to devote my own expertise to our organization, I also want to continue that legacy of outstanding leadership.

It is difficult to fully account for all of the ways that Thomassey has contributed to our community. During her time at the watershed council, she has advocated at the local, state, federal, and international levels. She has worked tirelessly to ensure that we recognize and act on the intricate connections between healthy waterways and thriving local economies. She has supported local governments in implementing protocols to identify and repair failing septic systems before they contaminate our waters. In the face of changing weather patterns and rising water levels, Thomassey created tools, including model ordinances and a master plan checklist, for building climate resiliency at the local level. She evaluated local ordinances and master plans in Antrim, Charlevoix, Cheboygan, and Emmet counties to determine how local governments could strengthen their protections for water resources. The evaluation tool she created, the Gaps Analysis, covers ordinances at not only the county level, but also for cities, townships, and villages in the county. She has published countless reports and resources that provide invaluable insight into some of the most pressing issues we face. Most impressively, perhaps, Thomassey has facilitated and fostered countless partnerships, committees, and collaborations, bringing together key stakeholders to work toward shared goals of water resource protection.

As Thomassey transitions out of her role, I am starting my role as the watershed council's policy and advocacy specialist. I will be working primarily on local issues and initiatives in our four-county service area with a focus on protecting Northern Michigan's lakes, streams, wetlands, and groundwater. My responsibilities will include assisting local governments in the review of their master plans with a special focus on building climate resiliency. I will be working towards the adoption of water-protection ordinances and to promote community stewardship of the waters within the Burt Lake and Mullett Lake Watersheds. Another big part of my role will be advocating for the adoption of local ordinances that ensure septic systems are properly maintained. I will be providing comments on permit applications for development projects that impact Northern Michigan's waters, and I look forward to working with landowners on solutions that allow them to meet their development goals while protecting our water resources. I also will be attending the meetings of lake associations and government bodies to learn about their work, seek opportunities for collaboration, and share information and resources.

As for my background, I grew up in Petoskey and spent my childhood enjoying the waters and woods of Northern Michigan. After my family relocated to the Upper Peninsula, I continued to spend my summers working at Camp Daggett on Walloon Lake. I received my undergraduate degree from Kalamazoo College and a law degree from Indiana University, but it had always been my hope that I would make my way back to Northern Michigan.

This first year will be a year of learning for me. I hope to continue to build upon our relationships with the local governments, nonprofits, businesses, and community members that make this area such a wonderful place to live. I also want to learn more about the issues and initiatives that are important to our Northern Michigan community and contribute to collaborative efforts to address them. It is humbling to join an organization that has accomplished so much over the years and that has so many valued relationships in the community. I am determined to carry on Thomassey's legacy of preserving our water resources for future generations and to pay forward what I enjoyed as a child — growing up in a beautiful place surrounded by abundant water resources, thriving ecosystems and healthy communities. Please feel free to reach out to me at (231) 347-1181, ext. 1181.