

Investing in water and people

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Guest columnist

The following guest commentary was written by Jennifer DeMoss, communications director for Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council.

At the watershed council, our watershed monitoring and restoration efforts are only part of the picture. We're also invested in people. We need to know how members of our Northern Michigan community use and understand water resources at their homes and businesses. In order to protect our waters, we need to know more about you.

To gauge people's understanding of watershed issues and track behaviors, watershed policy director Grenetta Thomassey undertook a series of surveys over the past decade. The surveys were targeted towards watershed residents, shoreline property owners and government officials. They focused on attitudes, awareness of issues facing Northern Michigan's waters and limits on adopting or changing behaviors that would benefit watershed health. The results of these surveys, some of which Thomassey recently finished analyzing, indicate good news about the watershed council's valuable work.

One set of surveys from 2014 focused on clean water and the economy. Studies show that tourism and property values depend on clean water. Visitors come to Northern Michigan because of clean, abundant water, which puts more pressure on our waters and forces us to work harder to maintain healthy resources. Our economy relies on it.

In the 2014 survey, we asked beachgoers in our four-county service area (Antrim, Emmet, Charlevoix, and Cheboygan counties) about water quality and beach recreation. Shoreline development and stormwater runoff have the potential to pollute lakes and contribute to harmful algal blooms. Of those surveyed, 80% said that if water quality declined from bacteria, algae, or other pollution, it would affect their decision to visit that beach.

At the same time, we posed questions to business owners in the four counties. Of those surveyed, 61% agreed that their business relies significantly on tourism. Ninety-four percent said they believe that poor water quality would affect property values and tourism. Half of those surveyed believe their actions have an impact on water quality, and 52% said they already use best management practices to handle stormwater or are willing to do so.

Water quality does impact our economy, and it matters to a majority of business owners and recre-

ationists surveyed in our service area. The Watershed Council can use the survey to identify gaps in understanding and help business owners protect water resources and their livelihoods.

Thomassey administered another survey for local officials and shoreline and watershed property owners in the Elk River Chain of Lakes (ERCOL) area. The survey focused on people's perceptions of water quality in the context of economic growth. Fortunately, people want to preserve their waters: 83% of ERCOL residents and 82% of officials agree that it's important to protect water quality even if it slows economic development. Over 80% of residents agree that they have a responsibility to protect water and are willing to change how they maintain their properties to protect it. Now, we have baseline data to test if people's responses change after our education programs.

Our final project is the Lake Charlevoix Watershed survey between 2010 and 2020, which demonstrates how people's understanding and practices can change after an educational intervention. In 2011, most government officials in the watershed weren't familiar with coordinating water quality zoning provisions with neighboring communities, even though working across counties and townships is more effective for protecting water. The watershed council joined forces with other organizations to educate government officials, and by 2019 there was an 11% increase in officials who report they understand the value of coordinating water quality provisions. Our education programs have helped communities learn how to protect shared water bodies.

In addition, education programs from Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council and partner organizations resulted in a 7% increase in knowledge of the role rain gardens play in preventing stormwater runoff. Knowledge of how greenbelts, or buffers of native plants, are important for preventing stormwater pollution also increased 9%. Our favorite result? A 2020 follow up survey showed that 71% of watershed residents regularly pumped their septic tanks, a 14% increase from 2011.

We were proud to see Lake Charlevoix residents and property owners report they were willing to make changes to their lawn and garden practices to protect the water. Some people simply felt like they needed more technical information on best management practices to do so.

As you can see, we're not just a water monitoring organization. Our staff are committed to understanding and serving our community. If you want to learn more about our work, you can visit www.watershedcouncil.org. If you have any questions about projects, contact us at info@watershedcouncil.org or (231) 347-1181.