

**The Lake Charlevoix watershed: What do local planning officials think?
Focus group summary**

September 21, 2012

**Dean Solomon, Senior Extension Educator
Chris Anderson, Project Assistant**

Introduction

MSU Extension conducted two focus groups sessions during late summer 2012 to gather local planners' and zoning administrators' perceptions about protecting water quality in the Lake Charlevoix Watershed.

Mailed surveys in 2011 and 2012 revealed that local officials are very committed to protecting water quality, but we want to understand more. The information from these focus groups, combined with results of the previous surveys will help enhance education and services to watershed communities.

This effort was funded by the Environmental Protection Agency through the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality and Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council.

Method

Two 90-minute focus groups were conducted, one with local elected and appointed officials in Charlevoix County (12 participants), the other with zoning administrators (6 participants)¹. A very similar set of questions was asked during each session, and the responses were audio recorded and transcribed. During our analysis, we looked for common themes in the discussions for each question.

Questions were designed to gather perceptions about:

- Successes and challenges in local governmental efforts to protect water quality.
- Successes and barriers in working with other governmental units on plans and ordinances to protect water quality.
- Impressions and possible uses for the Local Ordinance Gaps Analysis Guide published by the Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council.
- Future roles for non-governmental organizations and universities to support local officials' role in protecting water quality.

¹ The local officials were randomly selected for invitation to the session in a way that assured representation from townships, cities and county governments. All 11 zoning administrators and professional planning staff members were invited to the zoning administrator session.

Findings

After introductions, the first question was simply “What do you like best about our area?” The intent was to establish rapport and ease into the more substantive focus group questions. Responses, though, were revealing. Nearly all participants highlighted natural resources and natural resources-based recreation, especially water, in their statements. As one of the respondents said “...*the bottom line here is the lakes. If we lived in the same area and we weren’t surrounded by the lakes we are surrounded by, I’m not sure I’d want to be here.*”

Successes and challenges in local governmental efforts to protect water quality

Successes generally fell into two categories. First, countywide efforts, such as the Charlevoix County recycling program, the stormwater ordinance and phragmites control efforts were mentioned by participants in both focus groups. Second, there was an overall belief among participants that, through past education efforts, there is better awareness of water quality issues, and subsequently more effective zoning ordinances (for instance, greenbelt provisions) and county codes (for instance, the health code).

Despite those successes, participants said that the challenges are substantial.

Zoning enforcement was the theme of many comments. The appointed and elected officials group highlighted the challenge of justifying and enforcing setbacks. Zoning administrators were even more frustrated, especially in cases when wealthy property owners exploit ordinance weaknesses, or use substantial resources to challenge the zoning decisions or enforcement actions. They also highlighted the challenge of complaint-driven enforcements and difficulty gaining access to private property. Also notable was frustration with lack of enforcement action by the county prosecutor on non-zoning violations, especially related to soil erosion and sedimentation.

“Politics” was also mentioned as a challenge – the difficulty of gaining consensus on action and dealing, in some cases, with anti-zoning sentiments. Specific challenges with septic systems, geese and groundwater were also discussed.

Successes and barriers - working with other governmental units on water quality protection

Countywide efforts were most commonly mentioned as successful multi-governmental successes. The Charlevoix County recycling program and hazardous waste collection was frequently mentioned, as was county stormwater and soil erosion control efforts. Respondents tended to list organizations and agencies they worked with instead of examples of intergovernmental water quality protection efforts.

Time, resources, politics and leadership are the barriers to working together, according to participants.

For local officials, the time to create and implement water quality protection ordinance provisions is a challenge, especially given the short amount of time they meet together and yearly member turnover. Zoning administrators, just the time needed to deal with all the enforcement issues is a challenge.

The politics of small communities was discussed by both local officials and zoning administrators. As one zoning administrator said, “... every township is their own little dynasty.” Another commented “... they know who votes them in and out, and it isn’t the neighboring township people...”

Leadership for intergovernmental efforts was a common theme. Some participants gave examples of efforts that failed because there wasn’t anyone to follow the process through. Many highlighted the need for outside leadership, from non-governmental organizations and others, to facilitate the process and stick with until there are results.

Local Ordinance Gaps Analysis Guide – Impressions

The message about the Gaps Analysis Guide from both local officials and zoning administrators was clear – although the publication was a good summary and informative document, the rating system was a barrier to the publication being fully embraced. Many believed that the rating system was flawed or inconsistent, with some communities rated lower than others without justification.

Aside from the rating system, participants were positive about the guide, commenting that it was a great effort and a useful reference for both local officials and zoning administrators.

Non-governmental organizations and universities support role

Education and facilitation are the support roles both local officials and zoning administrators foresee for non-governmental organizations and universities. Education directed to landowners and local officials was identified by the participants. The organization most often identified by participants was the Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council.

Overall impressions

Overall, both local officials and zoning officials were very committed to water quality protection and proud of the progress they have made. They acknowledge that there are still significant challenges, especially with zoning enforcement and the barriers to working across political boundaries. Despite those challenges, there was general optimism about moving ahead to provide greater protection of Lake Charlevoix water quality through regulation and education.