**Testing Civic Governance as a New Approach to Policy Making**

By Jeff Forester

Both problems and solutions to water issues are complex. Lakes and rivers are highly complex systems, and they have significant cultural and societal components. Science, funding and regulation alone cannot protect our aquatic ecosystems. No single federal or state agency can protect our water quality. Because of the significant social component to water use and impairment, social solutions are critical for success.

Unlike grasslands, forests and even wetlands, lake and river systems are almost impossible to fully restore once they are significantly degraded. In most cases, the best resource managers can hope to achieve after aquatic degradation is to mitigate negative impacts, and work towards the rehabilitation of the degraded system. The costs are enormous and the results uneven. Preventing aquatic degradation in the first place is always cheaper and more effective.

As a society, we have placed the greatest responsibility for making water policy and executing water programs in the hands of government agencies. We have built largely siloed administrative infrastructures to govern water; when our water is in the sky it is under the authority of NOAA, when it falls to the ground, it is the land owner’s responsibility until it flows into the ground, a nearby creek or lake, where the DNR has authority, or a river where the US Army Corps of Engineers takes over. In addition, local government units like counties, cities, townships, watershed districts and soil and water conservation districts play a role. At the statewide level decisions by the MN DNR, the Department of Transportation, the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, the Department of Agriculture and others make decisions and set policies that impact water.

Challenges include:

1. Numerous federal, state, and local rules,
2. Multiple jurisdictions each having specific responsibilities for protecting water,
3. A diverse set of uncoordinated NGO stakeholders,
4. Scattered funding sources, and
5. An often-unengaged citizenry.

Water flows around and through the gaps in these regulatory and institutional systems and impairments continue.

Science and funding are not the biggest obstacles to success. We have the science, expertise and knowledge needed to improve or protect water, or to at least make a good start.  We also have remarkable public investments in water protection in Minnesota, totalling about $256 million annually. Water issues are non-partisan by and large, so politics is not the greatest barrier.

One significant gap where there is potential to make progress, however, is our civics. Often our communities (government staff and residents alike) lack the civic mindset and political skills needed to work cooperatively, navigate the complex regulatory maze around water, leverage the complex resources needed to restore impaired waters and protect the good quality waters they still have. Many citizens fail to see a role for themselves in protecting water, assuming, “that’s the government’s job.” Government resource managers often complain that the public lacks urgency and commitment.

Citizens most often organize in response to specific threats like a proposed feedlot, mine, pipeline or other development that could impact clean water after these projects have been proposed. This organizing often creates controversy in local communities, is usually too late to be effective, and does not build a sustainable civic mindset in the community that can be leveraged to address future water issues.

In recent years, there has been a growing sense that we have reached a point of diminishing returns when it comes to traditional ways of governing water decisions and managing water quality. Existing education and outreach programs, incentive programs, regulatory programs, and even civic engagement activities all have their limits when it comes to achieving sustainable impact.

**A New Approach**

MLR is working with the Citizen’s League using a grant provided by the Clean Water Land and Legacy Amendment through the Initiative Foundation to pilot Civic Governance demonstration projects in Cass and Ramsey Counties. Participants include MN DNR, County Commissioners, Tribal representatives, local county resource managers, watershed districts managers, water service providers, the Minnesota Aquatic Invasive Species Research Center, and lake association leaders. In less than a year these groups have developed a New Infestation Response Plan (NIRP) to connect all of the stakeholders that have a role in taking action after a new infestation of AIS is discovered, and a testing of eDNA to help detect AIS earlier. We are working towards implementation strategies for One Watershed One Plan as well as piloting a bio-control for eurasian watermilfoil that builds partnerships between local high school students, professional resource managers, and lake associations.

As these non-controversial projects move forward, and relationships are built, civic infrastructure will develop to promote local water quality efforts. Said Jeff Forester, Executive Director of Minnesota Lakes and Rivers Advocates, “In the natural resource world, there is often a lot of talk about individual rights. But we felt that there was a lack of emphasis on the other side of citizenship - the responsibility to work with others both inside and outside of government for the common good. Clean and healthy water ecosystems are a good that benefits every citizen in Minnesota, and we see a real role for citizens to engage in this work and achieve better outcomes.”

For a Case Study on MLR’s Civic Governance Project, go to: <http://www.mnlakesandrivers.org/2019/01/27/civic-governance-to-protect-water>

MN Lakes & Rivers Advocates ~ PO Box 22262 ~ St. Paul, MN 55122

[www.mnlakesandrivers.org](http://www.mnlakesandrivers.org) ~ 952-854-1317 ~ judy@mnlakesandrivers.org