

COLLABORATIVE WATERSHED PLANNING

WORKING TOGETHER TO FIND SOLUTIONS THAT WORK!

COLLABORATIVE PROBLEM SOLVING

As we search for solutions to water quality problems, we may need to make some difficult choices. It is easy for each person to focus on a favorite solution. Then when options are discussed, each group member gets locked into defending his or her own position without trying to understand the interests behind other positions. When such a contentious atmosphere arises, people view choices as likely lead to a win-lose outcome, an impasse, or an unsatisfying compromise.

Contrast this situation with discussions that allow for an understanding of each person's underlying interests. Collaborative problem solving:

- Moves people away from contentious positions.
- Promotes mutual education.
- Allows a cooperative atmosphere to develop.
- Encourages consideration of many options.
- Permits the search for a creative solution.

PRINCIPLES OF COLLABORATIVE PROBLEM SOLVING

The following principles¹ have been identified from case studies of successful processes:

- **Purpose-Driven.** We are here because we have a reason to participate in the process.
- **Inclusive, Not Exclusive.** Our group has representatives from all parties with a significant interest in the issue.
- **Educational.** We will use the best available information and allow for collaborative inquiry.
- **Voluntary.** We all participate voluntarily.
- **Self-Designed.** We have an equal opportunity to participate in designing an explainable process that meets the circumstances and needs of our situation.
- **Flexible.** We will accommodate changing issues, data needs, political environment, and programmatic constraints like time and meeting arrangements.
- **Egalitarian.** We have equal access to relevant information and the opportunity to participate effectively throughout the process.
- **Respectful.** We accept the diverse values, interests, and knowledge of everyone involved.
- **Accountable.** We are accountable to our constituencies and to the process that we establish.
- **Time Limited.** We will honor realistic deadlines throughout the process.
- **Achievable.** We are committed to implementation and effective monitoring of our watershed plan.

¹ Ten principles of collaborative problem solving can be found in *Building Consensus for a Sustainable Future: Putting Principles into Practice* by Gerald Cormick, et al., National Roundtable on the Environment and the Economy, Ottawa, Canada, 1996. The third principle, "Educational," was added by the author.

SEEKING CONSENSUS

Consensus allows collaborative problem solving to work. Consensus prevents the decision from being driven entirely by power politics. It allows us to build trust and share information, especially in areas of conflict. Consensus does not mean that everyone will be equally happy with the decision, but rather that all will accept the decision. It is not realistic to require that all of our decisions will be made by consensus. Groups that require unanimous agreement risk being held hostage by a demanding member. Instead, we will seek consensus. We will go the extra mile to find solutions that meet the interests and concerns of everyone. If an agreement cannot be reached—if consensus cannot be achieved—each participant will be free to exercise his or her next best alternative to a negotiated outcome.

MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT CONSENSUS

You may be reluctant to engage in consensus decision-making because of the following common misconceptions:

“I will give up authority.” Senior managers, elected and appointed officials, and others keep their decision-making authority. And unless the stakeholders support the agreement, there won't be one.

“I will be pressured to betray my constituents.” You will not be asked to compromise and sacrifice what you need in order to reach agreement. Consensus agreements reflect outcomes that are better for each stakeholder than his or her next best option. Stakeholders are free to walk away if they cannot get what they need through negotiation.

“I will have to help my enemies.” You are negotiating to meet your own interests. The most effective means of meeting your own interests is often to assist the other parties get what they need as well. The goal of consensus building is to get what you need, not to injure the other side.

“I will be forced to abandon my principles.” You are free to disagree with whatever is being proposed during a discussion. This is true even if you can't express exactly why you are not happy with a decision.

For more information see <http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/WECO>

Prepared by

L. Steven Smutko

Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics

North Carolina State University, Raleigh, NC 27695

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