



Summary and Next Steps Report

September 29, 2021

Setting the Context: The Water Table initiative was formed in response to the challenge that conservation nonprofits, certain government agencies, and water users who may share common objectives to protect and improve water quality in the Delaware River Basin often do not have robust communication pathways and sometimes work in silos or in limited teams on water related initiatives. Knowing that additional communication and collaboration can benefit the water quality and water resource challenges facing the Delaware River Basin, this initiative was designed to follow the concept of Collective Impact to bring people and organizations across sectors together in a structured way to bring about meaningful change.

Water Project Team, Steering Committee, and Stakeholders: The Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission (DVRPC) is the backbone entity coordinating the project, in close partnership with core team members the Partnership for the Delaware Estuary (PDE), the Water Resources Association of the Delaware Basin (WRADRB), and the Philadelphia Water Department (PWD). The core team, along with the twelve Steering Committee members, represent the diversity of sectors in the field of water resources in the Delaware River Basin, and were instrumental in guiding the process. The 65 Stakeholders representing over 50 organizations who participated in the interviews and/or attended one or both interactive Stakeholder meetings, further expanded the reach of the overall cross-sector effort by creating opportunities for even greater diversity of perspectives.

Project Objectives:

- Increase understanding, respect and trust among sectors
- Forge connections and relationships
- Identify alignments for collaborative work

Understanding, respect and trust among stakeholders are key elements needed for a successful multi-stakeholder collaboration. The project team members conducted over 50 in-depth interviews with various conservation nonprofits, government agencies, and water user stakeholders, to seek to understand perceptions of each sector, identify commonalities, and gauge motivation for collaboration. A series of maps showing service areas for land trusts, watershed associations, and municipalities with an Environmental Commission (NJ) or Environmental Advisory Council (PA) were created to show geographic overlaps to facilitate

expanded collaboration. Two Stakeholder meetings were conducted (virtually) to share those [findings](#), gather input on priority actions, and foster cross-sector relationships.

Desired Outcomes:

- Better understanding of each sector's perspectives
- Expanded network of colleagues for future collaboration
- List of shared priorities and action plan for next steps

A [survey](#) conducted after the first Stakeholder convening demonstrated that the majority agreed that the meeting's purposes to 1) increase understanding of perspectives; 2) identify commonalities and alignments among sectors and organizations; 3) expand networks of water resource colleagues; and 4) develop a list of potential cross-sectoral shared initiatives, were all important to improving water quality in the Delaware River Basin. Survey results also indicated agreement that the first Stakeholder gathering was helpful in both understanding perspectives and starting to identify alignments, and that the [seven themes](#) (appreciation, funding, collaboration, knowledge, DEIJ, regulations, and miscellaneous) identified from the interview process were a reasonable organizing structure. A large majority (90%) of respondents agreed or were neutral that the meeting expanded their network, with 10% disagreeing, commenting that the virtual nature of the meeting precluded more meaningful connections.

Identified Priorities: Discussions from the interviews and Steering Committee and Stakeholder meetings identified ten primary focus areas where the Water Table could provide future leadership and coordination:

1. Designing a **shared regional identity/story** around the Delaware River Watershed and unifying our messaging for greater impact.
2. Mitigating impacts of **climate change**, including sea level rise, flooding, drought, extreme heat and encroaching saltline.
3. Building more **restoration** projects such as riparian buffers, agricultural BMPs, living shorelines and **preserving** more headwaters, stewarding more land and establishing more healthy tree canopy.
4. Facilitating **better stormwater management** through local fees and/or multi municipal/subwatershed approaches.
5. Addressing **emerging contaminants**, such as microplastics, PFAS and unregulated contaminants.
6. Ensuring **safe drinking water for all**, through source water protection, lead pipe replacements and upgrading aging infrastructure.

7. Increasing and improving **access to the rivers' and tribs' edges** , especially for underserved populations.
8. **Coordinating existing and/or new sources of funding to increase impact on water quality**, such as a regional Capital Improvement Program (CIP) for water infrastructure, new funding mechanisms like a trading market, and/or a circuit rider who improves access to funding. More specifically, the Water Table could 1) participate in the creation of a regional CIP for Water Infrastructure to advance the region's priorities in anticipation of an Infrastructure Bill and/or ongoing earmarks, 2) explore new funding mechanisms for water quality that link upstream and downstream issues, akin to a carbon trading market or the Christina Watershed Water Fund, 3) expand low resourced communities' access to existing state and federal funding programs like State Revolving Funds (SRFs), such as through a circuit rider technical expert dedicated to writing and managing grants.
9. Generating and maintaining a widely accessible **clearinghouse of water quality related activities** and/or developing a **comprehensive database of scientific studies for the Delaware River**. The clearinghouse of activities might include the drivers for those activities (TMDLs, MS4s, CCMP, consent decrees, etc), the leading organization for contact information, funding sources, goals, and updates on progress to date. The scientific database could gather, connect and make available scientific studies and data to increase understanding of issues associated with water quality, water quantity, sea level rise, climate change, ecosystem services and endangered species to better inform the overall management of the river, and enhance collaboration.
10. Supporting **workforce development for the next generation of water professionals from diverse backgrounds**, for example, by training and employing the underemployed through a **Civilian Climate Corp**. More specifically, a Civilian Climate Corp, (WPF CCC Initiative for the Delaware River) could engage marginalized, underemployed and unemployed communities to address climate and conservation needs. Water Table Stakeholder roles could include 1) identifying relevant projects, 2) identifying and creating pathways for in demand career pathways, 3) providing training and certification, and 4) creating jobs and economic growth in struggling communities.

A live poll was conducted in Stakeholder Meeting #2 revealing these, in priority order, as the top four:

1. **Coordinating existing and/or new sources of funding to increase impact on water quality**, such as a regional CIP for water infrastructure, new funding mechanisms like a trading market, and/or a circuit rider who improves access to funding.
2. Designing a **shared regional identity/story** around the Delaware Watershed and unifying our messaging for bigger impact.

3. Mitigating impacts of **climate change**, including sea level rise, flooding, drought, extreme heat, and encroaching saltline.
4. Supporting **workforce development for the next generation of water professionals from diverse backgrounds**, for example, by training and employing the underemployed through a **Civilian Climate Corp**

Responses to Questions on Prioritized Actions: during the second Stakeholder meeting, participants worked in breakout Zoom rooms for facilitated discussions, answering these questions, with the full notes found [here](#), and summarized below:

1. **Does the priority action need further definition ?** *In all cases, the answer was “yes.” It was agreed that additional discussion is needed to refine the identified priorities so that funding and future collaborative efforts among stakeholders can be properly focused to achieve near term and long term benefits for the Delaware River Basin and there was a uniform commitment to engage in those discussions.*
2. **What is the desired outcome?** *Funding: coordinate grants for holistic impact on the watershed to avoid duplication; identify ways to assist with grant required matches. Identity: build a better understanding of the multiple uses of the Delaware River, develop strategies to harmonize competing interests, create more opportunities to connect people to the river and instill appreciation and caring for this important water resource. Climate Change: build on the clearer understanding of potential impacts of climate change to the region to coalesce around an action plan and find interested funders to support. Workforce: WT stakeholders need to inform universities on the needs of the industry to support curriculum, and WT stakeholders should become a bridge for students into the industry. Also make space for the second career and adjacent career workforce by broadening the definition of water-related work to include areas like construction.*
3. **Why is the Water Table cross-sector collaboration needed to advance this?** *The premise of the WT project was to engage all stakeholders with an interest in water management in the Delaware River Basin based on the recognition that no one entity can do it alone. The WT project has ground-truthed that premise by the efforts to date and verified that each committed stakeholder has a unique role to play and that the formidable challenges require an interdisciplinary and collaborative approach.*
4. **What are others already doing?** *Many efforts are already underway, but there is no central repository of information. Participants suggested the development of a clearinghouse of activities to further inform efforts, identify gaps, avoid*

duplication and unnecessary competition, and to find alignment and synergies among project implementers and funders.

5. **What else needs doing - What are the gaps in addressing this issue?** *Efforts are decentralized and fragmented. Reliable, coordinated mechanisms are needed to pull information, activities and people together.*
6. **What resources (organizational participation, funding, time) are needed?** *Opportunities for funding are needed through stormwater fees, the federal infrastructure bill and other sources as future resources are deployed to implement the priority actions identified through the WT project. For workforce issues, a white paper and/or summit is needed to elicit understanding, involvement and action.*
7. **Are there good models to replicate for this?** *Yes, the Schuylkill Action Network (SAN), Camden Collaborative Initiative, many DRBC committees, Jersey Water Works, the Wissahickon TMDL Alternative, and Power Corps in Camden and Philly are all consistently mentioned. One suggestion is to replicate the SAN into a Delaware Action Network (DAN).*
8. **What geographic area should this cover?** *While there is a preference to focus on the entire Delaware River Watershed, tensions between urban and rural, and the upper and lower basin were acknowledged. There will be a need for tiered or multi-faceted messaging and approaches to meet the objective of a watershed wide effort.*
9. **What could you/your organization offer?** *Data, funding, advocacy, perspective, connections to communities/employers, and programs were offered.*
10. **What are potential challenges?** *Time, money, focus, diverse perspectives and not having all the right people at the table. It was acknowledged that these challenges could be addressed through the continued work of the WT.*
11. **What are the next steps to advance this priority?** *Unite voices for bigger impact, leverage the federal infrastructure bill, conduct gap analysis to drill down on needs, develop a coordinated plan of action based on the identified priorities and further define the role for the WT as a whole vs individual stakeholders.*
12. **Are there “low hanging fruit” steps that could be taken to show quick progress?** *Create working groups/subcommittees to continue focused conversations and develop a plan of action to refine and implement shared commitments.*

Assessment of Stakeholders’ Interest: Throughout the effort, participants showed high enthusiasm and passion for the Water Table multi-stakeholder collaborative effort. This was repeatedly demonstrated, first by participants' willingness to engage in lengthy, open, honest and insightful conversations during the interview stage, second by high attendance and compelling engagement at both virtual Stakeholder meetings, and third by positive responses to the survey.

Lively discussion centered around the top four priorities (as recorded), but project scope constraints and the virtual meeting environment precluded coalescence around concrete next steps for any of the priorities, other than continuing through subcommittees or workgroups. Fortunately, the stakeholder survey revealed that participants wanted more time to get to know one another and that they had strong interest in continuing to stay involved with the Water Table process. In fact, when asked, none of the respondents asked to be removed from future correspondence.

Survey respondents also requested narrowing the goal and a desire for future efforts to result in something “tangible,” while simultaneously noting that such an outcome would take considerably more time and effort.

Next Steps: This Water Table effort was always envisioned as Phase I of multiple phases, with this first phase focused on increasing cross-sectoral understanding, gaging motivation for participating in a multi-stakeholder collaborative effort to improve water quality in the Delaware River Basin, and identifying potential activities of such an effort. Broadly speaking, the three sectors (conservation nonprofits, governments, and water users) have both positive and negative perceptions of each other, but are keenly interested in getting to know one another better and finding ways to collaborate to achieve collective impact. Through multiple conversations and meetings, the Water Table process narrowed numerous water quality concerns down to four top priorities around the topics of funding, a regional identity, climate change, and workforce development. There is interest and commitment toward these priorities, and establishing precise next steps will require continued funding of a multi-stakeholder collaborative process with a backbone entity and defined structure.

The Core Water Table team is committed to staying the course with additional financial support, and rotating the backbone entity responsibility from DVRPC to PDE. PDE has a long history in bringing together water resource professionals from different sectors and is well positioned to take on this role.