



## **A Collaborative Urban/Suburban Watershed Partnership: Successes, Challenges and Lessons Learned**

The Tookany/Tacony Frankford Watershed Partnership (TTF) acts as the crucial link connecting residents, businesses and government as neighbors and stewards of this impaired, but critically important watershed in the Philadelphia metro region. Through educational programming, community outreach, networking services, and project coordination, TTF facilitates, supports, and initiates efforts to restore the health of the watershed, and to mobilize its communities as watershed stewards.

In 2000, the Philadelphia Water Department (PWD) launched the Tookany/Tacony-Frankford Watershed Partnership (TTF), a groundbreaking effort to connect diverse stakeholders as neighbors and stewards of the watershed. The partnership was integral in developing the Tookany/Tacony-Frankford Integrated Watershed Management Plan, a blueprint for restoring this urban stream into a community asset while addressing the mandated requirements of the Federal Clean Water Act and the Federal Stormwater Permit Program.

In 2005, under PWD's leadership, the Partnership formally incorporated as an independent nonprofit, composed of environmental organizations, community groups, government entities, and other watershed stakeholders. In 2007, TTF hired a full-time Executive Director. By the end of 2009, TTF had a staff of three full-time, dedicated workers and an established track record of providing quality watershed education and outreach. This document explores the lessons we learned during 2008 and 2009, our formative years as a fully staffed nonprofit organization.

### **Lessons Learned**

Through our first several years in operation, TTF has developed successful programming initiatives. This success is due to a variety of factors, described in detail below.

*Identifying and Coordinating Stakeholders:* At its core and throughout its growth, TTF has relied upon watershed stakeholders to participate in funding, planning and providing resources of all kinds. Our success in implementing our goals has been largely due to our initiative in building strong partnerships and our facilitation of a well-rounded Board of Directors. As we identify new municipal, business and residential stakeholders, we have reached out to their leaders, and even invited and named new Board members to connect us to these stakeholders. In order to affect watershed-wide change, we must continually foster municipal cooperation, and we have been able to do this by engaging our Board as working partners who represent key stakeholders across the watershed. Each of our quarterly Board meetings includes a lively presentation from one of our municipal partners so that our partners can learn about each different area of the watershed and help

strategize solutions to shared problems. Our Board meetings have become valuable forums for our municipal partners to share their successes and challenges, and for all our partners to work cooperatively to improve the watershed as a whole. In addition to our committed Board of Directors, TTF has developed strong partnerships with other local environmental and community organizations such as schools, community groups, businesses, community development corporations, park advocacy groups and environmental educators. Please see our website to learn about 59 of our current partners: <http://tffwatershed.org/about-us/partners>. By forging and maintaining sustainable partnerships, we have strengthened and expanded our activities to a degree that would otherwise be impossible.

*Planning, Evaluating and Analyzing:* TTF developed a Strategic Plan in 2008 and a Three-Year Fundraising Plan in 2009. With this road map in hand, we were able to commit to a realistic and achievable timeline, and accomplish our goals. We have been committed to formally evaluating all of our work. We have innovated reliable methods of evaluating and measuring our performance for many of our organizational objectives. We have been able to improve our measures over time; and, we learn from the data to improve upon our shortcomings and sustain our successes. For example, at most every event we distribute evaluation forms to participants and volunteers in order to collect feedback on our performance. In addition, we track pounds of trash collected, e-waste drive participation, website hits, rain barrels distributed, people served, trees planted and many other informative measures. Such data allows us to powerfully communicate watershed needs and the results of our work to potential funders. Along with our many stakeholders who offer informal feedback on our performance, data-driven decisions have been key to our continued success and growth.

*The Power of Participatory Education:* We have found that hands-on learning, and a physical experience of watershed concepts have been powerful tools for making progress towards watershed improvement through education. Through our educational outreach, we are making change on a daily basis. TTF constantly provides educational support in our watershed and online. Our storm drain marking projects, watershed lessons, plantings and clean-ups engage people of all ages throughout the watershed in caring for their local streams. In a watershed with so many problems and so much potential, it is not difficult to find opportunities to advance our mission. Schools, community groups, businesses and municipalities are beginning to recognize the value of watershed education and stormwater management, and are looking to TTF for guidance and support. These changes radiate out, from teacher to student, from child to parent, from citizen to elected official and beyond.

*The Power of Communication:* TTF facilitates communication with and between watershed residents and stakeholders, both in person and online. We are a presence at most local environmental events. We use a powerful online contact management system in order to effectively send targeted mass emails. We have developed a website with a blog ([www.tffwatershed.org/news](http://www.tffwatershed.org/news)) that we update constantly with TTF news and events, and we are working to develop a strong online presence through Facebook, Twitter, and other social media technologies. As a small organization trying to cover a large geographic area, we have found that an online presence is nearly as essential as face-to-

face contact. Our Associate Director was hired in February 2009 in part for her expertise in mass media communications. Combined with the Executive Director's background in face-to-face community building and leadership, this technology know-how has helped TTF to widen its scope and deepen its reach.

*Model Neighborhoods – Tangible, Concentrated Change:* We developed our Model Neighborhood program in order to create visible change in a concentrated area (as opposed to the important, but less obvious changes occurring watershed-wide). This project is a neighborhood beautification program that focuses on stormwater management and clean water issues. By collecting residents' suggestions for neighborhood improvement and combining them with projects to manage stormwater, TTF is able to raise awareness of watershed issues, help beautify neighborhoods, and lay the foundation for ongoing local watershed education and stewardship. These efforts will serve as a beacon for changes that other watershed stakeholders can implement and other watershed organizations can imitate. For more information on our Model Neighborhood Program, please see [www.tffwatershed.org/model-neighborhoods](http://www.tffwatershed.org/model-neighborhoods)

### **Identifying Challenges to Enable Change**

Part of our success has been a constant attention to the challenges we face in our watershed neighborhoods and more globally. By seeking out and clearly identifying challenges, we may face them boldly and enlist help in our efforts to affect positive environmental change.

*Fundraising During an Economic Downturn:* In this economic climate, long term economic planning is key. Green projects are garnering interest for their long-view of sustainability, which is much needed in the immediate economic situation. TTF appeals to funders by way of this long-view approach to sustainable environmental improvement that will benefit the local economy as it contributes to improving upon greater water and economic issues globally. With our Three-Year Fundraising Plan completed and in use, we have an opportunity to put our good planning to work, to continue to work creatively on building sustainability for our watershed and our organization. TTF has also responded to the economic crisis by diversifying its revenue streams, drawing funds from corporations, government agencies, fees-for-services, merchandise sales, and individual contributions as well as philanthropic support.

*Expanding Staff and Infrastructure to Serve a Vast Watershed:* The small size of our organization in relationship to the watershed area poses a formidable challenge, but we feel that we have made strong inroads and have built a sound foundation for achieving our goals. One way we have been able to address this challenge is through the use of the Internet. With regular online mailings and a social media presence, we are able to reach a greater percentage of our watershed. However, our staff is still miniscule compared to the needs we address and the population we serve. We have found many more grants available for projects, which require more staff, than for general operating costs, which would help us expand. So, we have found it necessary to organize our plan for growth around specific projects. For example, we have secured a full time AmeriCorps VISTA employee dedicated to the Philadelphia model neighborhood project. While our virtual

reach is substantial through our Internet innovations, new staff is essential to sustain our on-the-ground efforts and fulfill our vision for the watershed.

*Urban/Suburban Differences:* It is imperative for all urban/suburban watershed partnerships to understand, appreciate and address the different problems – and different strengths – in their watershed communities. We face many challenges in balancing the concerns of all of our watershed residents, which vary greatly. For example, in our Philadelphia section of the watershed, we have observed a major disconnect between residents and their natural environment due to urbanization. Through our education and outreach, we have worked to shift social norms, making “watershed” a household term, and fostering understanding of the connections between storm drains on the street and a creek two miles away. In urban areas, issues with litter, illegal dumping and crime persist. Our efforts offer new hope for more beautiful neighborhoods that residents will have more incentive to make safe and healthy. In struggling areas, tangible efforts for positive change in the face of great challenges, like our watershed issues, offer a source of much needed pride for participants. In Philadelphia, we facilitate our Model Neighborhood based on a strong relationship with a neighborhood Block Captain group, which helps enlist residents to address watershed and neighborhood issues together as community issues.

In the suburbs, we encounter a different set of problems: manicured lawns abutting the edge of the creek; liberal use of pesticides and fertilizers by the creek; and a preference for landscaping with non-native plants. As in the Philadelphia section, we address suburban problems by playing to community strengths. In Cheltenham, where the residential grid is less dense and there is no block captain system, we used local schools as the starting point for our Model Neighborhood. Teachers and students collaborate on high profile, hands-on projects and bring their learning about watershed improvement home to their yards and households.

As an urban/suburban watershed partnership, we must take care to listen to the concerns of all community residents and do our best to address them while capitalizing upon the strengths of particular neighborhoods. We have seized upon the strengths of high functioning schools in the suburbs and block captain systems in urban areas to enlist residents in our mission to improve watershed health. We look forward to learning and using more community strengths to grow in the future as we take on more challenges. There is no “one-size fits all” solution.

## **Conclusion**

Each watershed is unique, and we all face different challenges. But many of TTF’s lessons learned will be applicable to other urban/suburban watershed partnerships. Although some challenges are daunting, identifying challenges helps funders recognize and support our needs, and leads us to funders who want to support our good work in facing particular challenges related to their philanthropic and business interests. In this way, identifying challenges—such as fundraising during an economic downturn, expanding staff and infrastructure to serve a vast watershed, and urban/suburban differences—can and will enable change as TTF grows into a partnership to match the

scale of its watershed. From our experience over the past two years, we have learned the importance of the lessons detailed above involving: identifying and coordinating stakeholders; planning, evaluating and analyzing our efforts with data and stakeholder input; the power of participatory education; the power of communication; and creating model neighborhoods to showcase tangible, concentrated change. With continued support from the William Penn Foundation and our other benefactors, we will build upon these lessons to achieve not just Model Neighborhoods, but a Model Watershed and a Model Watershed Partnership as we realize our vision of healthy waterways and communities in and about the Tookany/Tacony-Frankford Creek.