



Watershed groups unite to form Blue Water Baltimore

Merger will allow new entity to take on more challenging citywide pollution issues

By Rona Kobell

Baltimore City has one of the highest homicide rates in the country, widespread poverty, a record number of abandoned homes and a shrinking tax base. With so many stresses, it's no wonder the city's environmental woes have long gotten short shrift.

For decades, sewage spills have dumped millions of gallons of sewage into the Jones Falls, Herring Run and the Gwynns Falls. So much trash floods the Patapsco River's branches that the streams can look like landfills after a rain. Even the Inner Harbor

is not immune: Near-annual fish kills each summer distress tourists flocking to the National Aquarium, and have an even more profound affect on local residents who can't leave. Yet, most of these events barely merit a mention in the local papers, and evoke a here-we-go-again shrug from residents. While small watershed groups advocated for their local streams and watersheds, no one spoke for Baltimore with one voice.

Unlike Washington, DC, or Norfolk, VA, where organizations such as the Anacostia Watershed Society and the Elizabeth River Project are established champions for major local rivers, the voice for Baltimore's waterways has been diluted among five smaller organizations.

That's about to change. The city's watershed groups are merging into one—an alliance that activists hope will shine a long-overdue light on the city's pollution problems as well as provide some money to solve them.

The groups include the Herring Run Watershed Association, the Gwynns Falls Watershed Association, the Jones Falls Watershed Association, the Baltimore Harbor Watershed Association and the Baltimore Harbor Waterkeeper, which is part of the national Waterkeeper Alliance. Come February, all of those names will disappear, and the combined group will go by a new name: Blue Water Baltimore.

"The number one purpose of the merger is to be more effective," said Baltimore Harborkeeper Eliza Smith Steinmeier. "As a series of water groups, we were focused on subwatersheds. Baltimore is just not that big. Subwatersheds were wonderful in terms of connecting with communities, but not so with the whole city."

The group has a robust agenda for its inaugural year. It will continue working on the greening projects most of the watershed groups were already doing, including planting trees. But it also has a plan to remove much of the impervious surface in the city's alleyways and replace it with permeable material to absorb toxins before they flow into the watershed.

It also plans to lobby in Annapolis for a dedicated stormwater authority to pay for the necessary upgrades to an antiquated system that is responsible for contaminating miles of streams. And it will push for stronger requirements to label fertilizer and invasive plants, enabling consumers to make better decisions.

With a budget of \$1.4 million, a staff of 11 and an executive director with 30 years' of experience managing nonprofits, the group seems raring to go. None of them could muster such resources on their own—a couple seemed unlikely to even survive. And some complained they weren't taken seriously; when a Gwynns Falls board member asked a Baltimore County official how his group could help with stormwater problems, the official suggested his group stencil "Chesapeake Bay Watershed" on the storm drains.

"We knew that the challenges of the watershed required us to go deeper, to do more," said Halle Van der Gaag, the former head of the Jones Falls Watershed Association, who is now the combined organization's director of advocacy. "We're now really well positioned to operate on all levels."

Van der Gaag said the merger was more like blending a family. It shows. At their new headquarters on Belair Road, the conference room is a hodgepodge of five different types of file cabinets, several different types of furniture and lots of boxes yet to be unpacked. The heat at the new place still isn't working properly, one of the bathrooms needs repairs and work spaces appear to be in flux.

And while everyone appears to get along, putting together five families was a lot tougher than becoming the Brady Bunch. The exercise took close to three years, involved 65 board members, and flummoxed even the lawyers who took on the job pro bono. Along the way, some volunteers quit, upset that the merged group was no longer going to be focused on a particular stream or park. And some board members that wanted to be part of the new group didn't make the cut. The combined organization has a manageable board of 17 people.

Then there were the more difficult questions of tone, structure, size, debt and culture. The Waterkeepers are an aggressive group, known for their boats-in-the-water activism and frequent lawsuits against polluters. Were the folks who were more comfortable planting trees willing to risk alienating neighbors and potential donors with such an active stance?

And, with a substantial amount of funding coming from Baltimore County, would they jeopardize their very existence if they filed a lawsuit against, say, a county sewage treatment plant?

Eventually, the group and its board became comfortable with the activism role, and Steinmeier, an attorney herself, had a clause written into the group's charter that the new organization abide by the Waterkeeper's quality standards.

Eventually, Steinmeier said, "they realized having a hammer in their toolbox gave them a very powerful tool. They didn't want to shut the Waterkeeper out and be a happy-go-lucky, kumbaya organization."

The group also had to decide on what kind of leader they wanted. Van der Gaag, Steinmeier, and former Herring Run executive director Mary Roby all decided they did not want to be in charge of a combined organization. That opened up a national search for a leader, and a question—did the group want someone steeped in watershed issues, or someone who knew how to run a business?

They decided on the latter. After an interim period where former Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay Director Fran Flanigan led the group, the organization chose Bob Gray, who worked for the National Easter Seals in Chicago and the Foundation Fighting Blindness before becoming a management consultant.

Asked about his priorities for the next year, Gray doesn't hesitate: "I want to make sure we're financially stable."

Other issues were more contentious. Herring Run, which was thought to be the most financially stable

of the

five, had debt related to the construction of a watershed center on Belair Road as well as a mortgage on the building.

The two smallest groups, Gwynns Falls and the Harbor Watershed Association, had to think long and hard about agreeing to take on that debt. Both organizations lived hand to mouth, on about \$70,000 a year with a part-time staffer. They had no money, but neither did they have debt.

Then there was the question of location. For now, the group is based at the Herring Run building, in part because they own it. But the building was supposed to be an education center, and space for the growing organization is tight. Plus, it's not centrally located.

But the parties and their advisers concluded these are all minor issues when compared to the benefits of having one voice to speak about Baltimore's environmental problems, which have long been ignored or only addressed piecemeal.

The Chesapeake Bay Foundation, the largest environmental group in the region, has taken on stormwater in the past and has joined with the Harborkeeper in a lawsuit against the current and previous owner of the Sparrows Point steel plant, Severstal N/A, and ArcelorMittal. But with a whole Bay and a variety of issues including farm pollution, development pressure and the health of crabs, urban issues aren't always at the forefront.

The foundation's Maryland executive director, Kim Coble, said the foundation welcomes the merger and looks forward to working with the combined group, just as it has worked in Southern Maryland with the various Mattawoman Creek groups.

"To have an organization that is focused on an urban metropolitan watershed is great, because there are so many urban issues," she said. "If you're a business owner in downtown Baltimore you may not know whether to give to Gwynns Falls, Jones Falls or the Harborkeeper. This way, you can give a larger check to one group, and that will be helpful."

It was, in part, funding that persuaded the groups to merge. In late 2004, when Cathy Brill joined the Rauch Foundation, a family foundation that supports work to improve the environment in Maryland, she noticed a fair amount of overlap in the small watershed groups. She questioned whether they would be more effective working together. Rauch had funded all of the groups independently, except for Gwynns Falls, who had never asked for money. When she raised the issue with the grantees, Brill said, "It fell flat." But the other foundations that gave the groups grants were more receptive, and the conversation continued.

Rauch gave the groups a small grant to work together on stormwater issues. At the time, Baltimore was in the midst of its "cleaner, greener" campaign. Then-Mayor Sheila Dixon had made cleaning up the city a priority, and Brill said that the watersheds needed a stronger voice in articulating what needed to be done.

"Whenever people talked about urban issues in the watershed, they always talked about the Anacostia," Brill said. "There was no one to speak for Baltimore."

Jones Falls already had a strong advocate in Van der Gaag, and Roby at Herring Run had built up that organization with smart hires and prodigious fund-raising. Then Steinmeier came along and started the Baltimore Harbor Waterkeeper. With the three women working together, and support from Brill, they began to realize they could move policy.

But it took the economy collapsing in the fall of 2008 to really begin the merger process, Brill said. Rauch and the Goldseker Foundation funded the groups to handle the due diligence of merging five sets of books and researching and legal issues that might become stumbling blocks.

In September, the groups moved in together, and formally launched the new group Jan. 27.

The process was at times painful, but those involved say it was worth it.

"We can build up our capacity, lower the cost of doing things, and get more things done," said Darin Crew, who was with Herring Run for eight years before the merger and will be working primarily on greening programs with the new group. "We can mentor each other. We can take it to the next level."

Bill Stack, who worked in the city's water management division for three decades, said the new group will be able to be much more focused, and win victories for impaired waterways all over the region.

"I know all the individuals," said Stack, now the deputy director of the Center for Watershed Protection. "The collective intelligence is just going to be so much more than each group on its own."

Already, the group is being rewarded for putting aside differences and working together for the benefit of the city waterways. The Keith Campbell Foundation for the Environment just gave the new group \$30,000 to help support Van der Gaag's position.

"My hat is off to the staff and their boards for putting the value of the resource first, because often there's a lot of pride in their own small space, and they really worked hard to get past that," said Verna Harrison, the foundation's executive director. "We don't normally give to small watershed organizations, but we did here, to reward that activity."

With endorsements like that, it's a safe bet that no one will be looking to the group for their stenciling expertise. Instead, they will be known as the ones who are fighting for the city's streams-especially when Baltimore appears to have given up on itself.

"Nobody cares about urban rivers anymore. They just assume that they're dead. People are told not to go near them, and they have no experience otherwise," Steinmeier said. "We're fighting to get our rivers back, so people look at it as a resource for us, not just a dumping ground."

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