

Rural and Tribal Partnerships: How They Benefit Participants and the Environment

Community Context

In the mid 1980's the City of Garrison, located in north central Minnesota, was having problems with septic system failure at numerous locations throughout the city. Effluent from failing onsite septic systems was surfacing, contaminating groundwater and making its way to Mille Lacs Lake, a major fishery in the state. The city's proximity to the Twin Cities, Minneapolis - St. Paul, Garrison was facing increased population growth. The city was proactive and began take steps to resolve their wastewater issues by contacting consultants and federal and state agencies that could assist them to address the problem. However, with high groundwater, bogs, lakes, and poor soil conditions, the city's initial efforts were halted due to location limitations for discharging the treated wastewater effluent.

Later in the 1980's the city embarked on a second major effort to address their onsite septic system failure issues. City staff contacted state and federal agencies including the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA), Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (MNDNR), Minnesota Public Facilities Authority (MNPFA), USDA Rural Development (USDA RD) and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineer (COE) and the national nonprofit organization the Rural Community Assistance Program's (RCAP) Midwestern Partner, the Midwest Assistance Program (MAP).

In addition, the city contacted local legislators and U.S. Congressman Oberstar to garner support for the project. The city set up meetings to discuss the magnitude of the problem and to assist in focusing their efforts on finally addressing the community's wastewater problem. The city contracted with an engineering firm to study the problem and prepare reports required for federal funding assistance. A grant-writing firm was also retained to identify funding sources and submit applications to achieve an affordable

solution to the wastewater problem. Upon final review, however, city leaders realized that this effort would not be affordable for the residents.

During this time the city was also in contact with the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe, Natural Resources Department, who was conducting environmental studies of Mille Lacs Lake. Tribal representatives and city officials began meeting in the late 1980's to discuss their mutual wastewater problems, and in early 1992 they began discussing the creation of a Sanitary District (District) that would serve the needs of the tribe, the City of Garrison, Garrison and Kathio Townships.

Further discussions involved a partnership through which the Mille Lacs Band would provide and manage the area's wastewater treatment facility and the District would pay for the development of the wastewater collection infrastructure. The group also discussed potential financing for the project, from both state and federal agencies. MAP assisted in coordinating staff of the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe and the City of Garrison to work together to protect the groundwater and Mille Lacs Lake.

In the mid-1990's Garrison, Kathio, and the tribe partnered with Crow Wing and Mille Lacs counties to form the District. With MAP's assistance, these government entities formed a partnership to conduct public hearings to establish support for the District and address failing onsite septic systems within the District. As a result, a petition to establish the District was drawn up, signed, and submitted to MPCA for review and approval. In August 1999, the Garrison, Kathio West Mille Lac Lake Sanitary District (GKWMLL) was formally approved.

With the assistance of MAP and other agencies, the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe continued exploring wastewater treatment

alternatives and the elimination of effluent discharges into Mille Lacs Lake. The Band contracted for engineering services to develop a treatment facility and the District contracted for engineering services to prepare an Updated Facility Plan for the collection system and to prepare an Environmental Assessment Worksheet.

The Organization/Agency

In early 2001, the Band and the District agreed to create Mille Lacs Wastewater Inc. to build and manage the wastewater treatment facility. Representatives from both the Band and the District met to negotiate a contract to treat the District's wastewater effluent. Permitting for the facility was held up by an appeal, but the Band conducted a public hearing and the appeal was denied and the NPDES permits were issued and a Sewer Extension permit was also approved.

MAP assisted the District to secure funding sources for the project by submitting the project priority reports to the state, coordinating activities between the District and MNDNR, conducting public hearings, and submitting applications to state and federal agencies, including the State Revolving Loan Fund and Community Development Block Grants.

The District received approval from the COE, for #569 funds (Northeast Minnesota Environmental Initiative Program) and #219 funding in 2002 and notice of Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) in 2003. The USDA RD agency and MNPFA awarded funds for the project. The District sent out bids for Phase I of the project in 2004 and would like Phase II to be bid in early 2005 so that construction can start in the spring. The project is projected to be completed in 2006-2007.

The District is continuing to seek out additional funding for the project. The final estimates of cost are: Mille Lacs Band for treatment facility \$16 million and for the District collection \$17.1 million. The project

was made possible due to the dedication and focus of the Mille Lacs Band and District staff and their goals to:

- to protect groundwater from contamination
- prevent pollution from reaching Mille Lacs Lake
- provide environmentally effective wastewater treatment services, and
- provide affordable services to residents and businesses.

The joint efforts and focused commitment of the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe, GKWMLL Sanitary District, City of Garrison, Garrison Township, Kathio Township, Crow Wing County and Mille Lacs County working together is resulting in the development of a sound wastewater treatment and collection system that benefits not only the participants, but also protects the environment of the region.

Community Impact

The GKWMLL District has allowed for the following positive Community Impacts:

- Expansion of existing businesses and the creation of new jobs in the rural area.
- Development of new housing and businesses served by district sewer services.
- Consensus of a long term development plan that has been adopted by participating entities.
- Protection of Mille Lacs Lake from nutrient loading.
- Protection of area groundwater (most residents use shallow wells as a drinking water source).
- Expansion of local tax bases by making unbuildable lots now buildable with sewer service.

Lessons Learned

Lessons learned in development of the GKWMLL Sanitary District:

- Patience is a learned virtue over time.
- Always allow extra time for local, regional and state issues.
- Keep the public informed through meetings, hearings and media releases.
- Realize the first identified solution may not end up being the approved solution.
- Representation from all groups must be involved in the process.
- Strong and open leadership with focus is essential.

Rural Housing and
Economic Development Gateway
U.S. Dept of Housing & Urban Development
451 7th Street, S.W., Room 7137
Washington, DC 20410
1-877-RURAL-26 (1-877-787-2526)
www.hud.gov/ruralgateway/