BUILDING BLOCKS OF TRUST

CREATING AUTHENTIC AND EQUITABLE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS AND WATER UTILITIES

river NETWORK
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waternow alliance

This report was written by Katherine Baer, River Network, Caroline Koch, WaterNow Alliance and April Ingle, River Network. Our work to support development of trusting, authentic and constructive relationships between community organizations and water utilities is made possible with the support of Spring Point Partners.

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River Network is the foremost national nonprofit connecting and empowering local groups, agencies, tribes, and utilities working for healthy rivers and clean water across the United States. We envision a future of clean and ample water for people and nature, where local stewards are well-equipped, effective, and courageous champions for our waters.

WaterNow Alliance is a network of local water leaders advancing sustainable, affordable, equitable, and climate resilient water strategies in their communities. We are a catalyst for change and an architect for solutions identifying and overcoming barriers, providing sustainable water resources for our members, and fostering forums for collaborative action.

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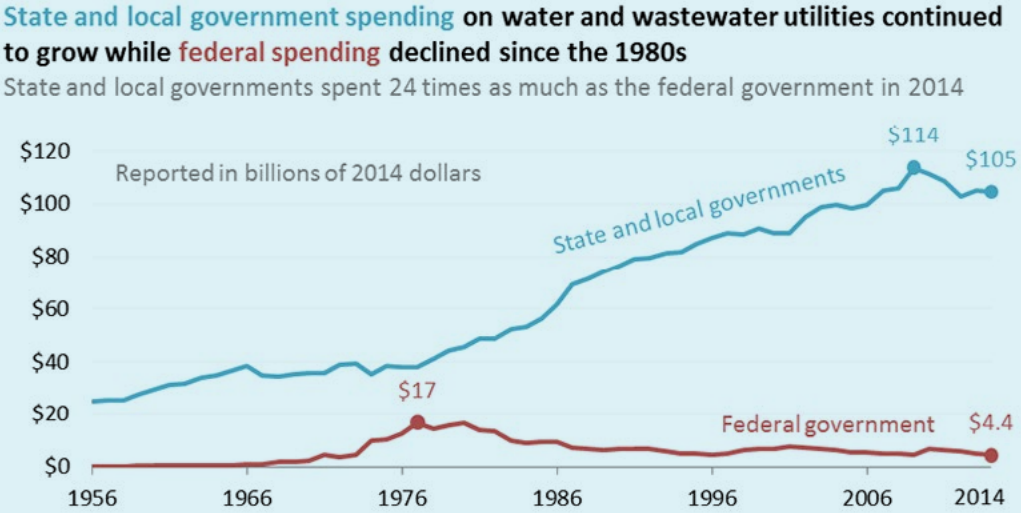
INTRODUCTION

In Pennsylvania's Schuylkill River Watershed, almost 18% of the watershed is protected, and over 14 million dollars have been invested in remediating abandoned mines, helping to safeguard Philadelphia's drinking water supply; In Tucson, access by lower-income residents to rainwater harvesting systems to provide water for shade trees is helping reduce urban temperatures and cooling costs; and in Santa Cruz, California, a community-centered process achieved a long-term plan for securing sustainable water supplies. All of these, and many more efforts, were created by local community organizations working in collaboration with their water utilities, building trust with each other in ways that pay dividends for local waterways and communities.

Strong and authentic relationships between local community groups and water systems, built on trust, are vital to achieving equitable and sustainable water systems and supporting public investment in water infrastructure.



Graphed by the Environmental Finance Center at the University of North Carolina, Chapel HIll. Source: Congressional Budget Office supplemental data for the Public Spending on Transportation and Water Infrastructure, 1956 to 2014 report [March 2015]. Displays public spending on supply systems for distributing potable water as well as wastewater and sewage treatment systems and plants. Real spending is shown after adjusting nominal spending to their 2014 dollar equivalent using infrastructure-specific price indexes.

Nationally, over 95% of water infrastructure investment vital to protecting our communities and waterways occurs at the local level,[1] emphasizing the importance of local decisions on how and where to spend money and what to spend it on. These local decisions include, for example, how to plan for future water supplies and wastewater treatment, protect drinking water sources, plan for green infrastructure and provide affordability assistance impact both rivers and people, underscoring the need for community groups and water utilities to collaborate. Trust between water utilities and community organizations is critical for successful decision making and investing that leads to safe, clean and sustainable water for all.

[1] See e.g. D. Knopman, M. Wachs, B.M. Miller, S.G. Davis and K. Pfrommer, Not Everything is Broken, The Future of U.S. Transportation and Water Infrastructure Funding and Finance, Rand Corporation (2017).

SUSTAINABLE WATER SYSTEMS & EQUITABLE WATER INFRASTRUCTURE INVESTMENT

Sustainable water systems provide safe, healthy, equitable, and affordable water services for people while preserving the integrity of water resources and the environment for future generations.

EQUITABLE WATER INFRASTRUCTURE INVESTMENTS ARE:

+ Directed by the community toward public health and clean, safe, affordable, and accessible water

+ Distributed intentionally to support low-income and communities of color most at-risk from environmental harms and historic lack of investment

+ Supportive of the quality and ecological integrity of our streams, rivers, lakes, and other waterways

+ Enhance the long-term and technical and fiscal health of water systems and utilities

Across the country some community based organizations and water utilities have achieved a high level of trust and come together, for example, to distribute water filters, conduct water quality monitoring, provide water efficient fixture retrofits, implement green infrastructure, develop needed workforces, and protect sources of drinking water. Our networks of community organizations and local water leaders wanted to understand what is needed to build lasting trust with each other to leverage our collective efforts for healthy waterways and communities.

With that directive, River Network and the WaterNow Alliance worked together to decipher and share why such partnerships are working and uncover the best practices for both community organizations and water utilities that are key to success for healthy waterways and communities. We wanted to know:

1. What's required to create such relationships?
2. Under what circumstances do they last and flourish?
3. How can we seed more of them?

To do that, we learned from successful partnerships between community organizations and water utilities around the country and have distilled and synthesized our findings so they can be applied elsewhere. In ***Building Blocks of Trust: Creating Authentic and Equitable Relationships Between Community Organizations and Water Utilities***, we aim to share what we learned from successful partnerships around the country in order to catalyze many more of these partnerships in the future. Given the decline of trust in a wide array of public institutions, we hope that these findings can be part of the effort by community organizations and water utilities to reverse that trend from the ground up.

PROCESS

River Network and WaterNow took a "bright spots" approach, looking to learn from existing water utility/community organization partnerships that have built trusting relationships under a variety of conditions to understand how they could be replicated. We started by creating a workgroup of successful community and water utility partnerships, open to utilities focusing on wastewater, stormwater and/or drinking water and community organizations with a wide range of missions. These partnerships were identified based on nationwide research and an open Request For Proposals. Our criteria included geographic diversity, diversity of water system types and size of community served, and a focus on equity and/or affordability. Based on this we selected nine partnerships to join our "Water Trust Workgroup."

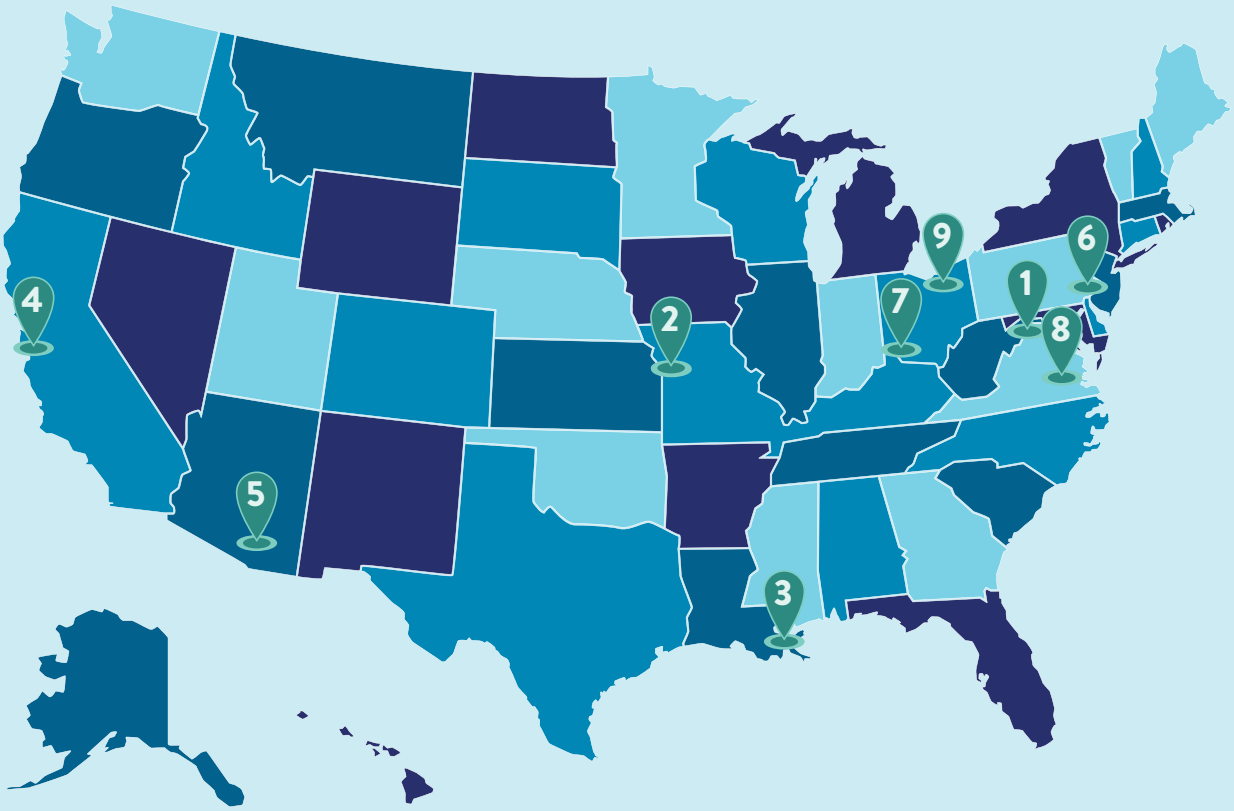
Each workgroup member participated separately in a one-hour, in-depth interview and answered questions focused on categories including:

+ Relationship background, formation, goals, maintenance, concerns and successes
+ Community characteristics
+ Methods of communication
+ Overcoming challenges
+ Lessons learned and surprises

The interviews were recorded, summarized and analyzed qualitatively to identify common threads. From there, we identified eight best practices for building trust and shared these with the workgroup to get their reactions and further input. The final best practices reflect the workgroup members' successes, challenges and experiences and we are grateful for their input.

> **"It's a long game to get to, to that point of trust. So, doing whatever you can for that transparency and building the groundwork, is critical."**
> *- Community Organization*

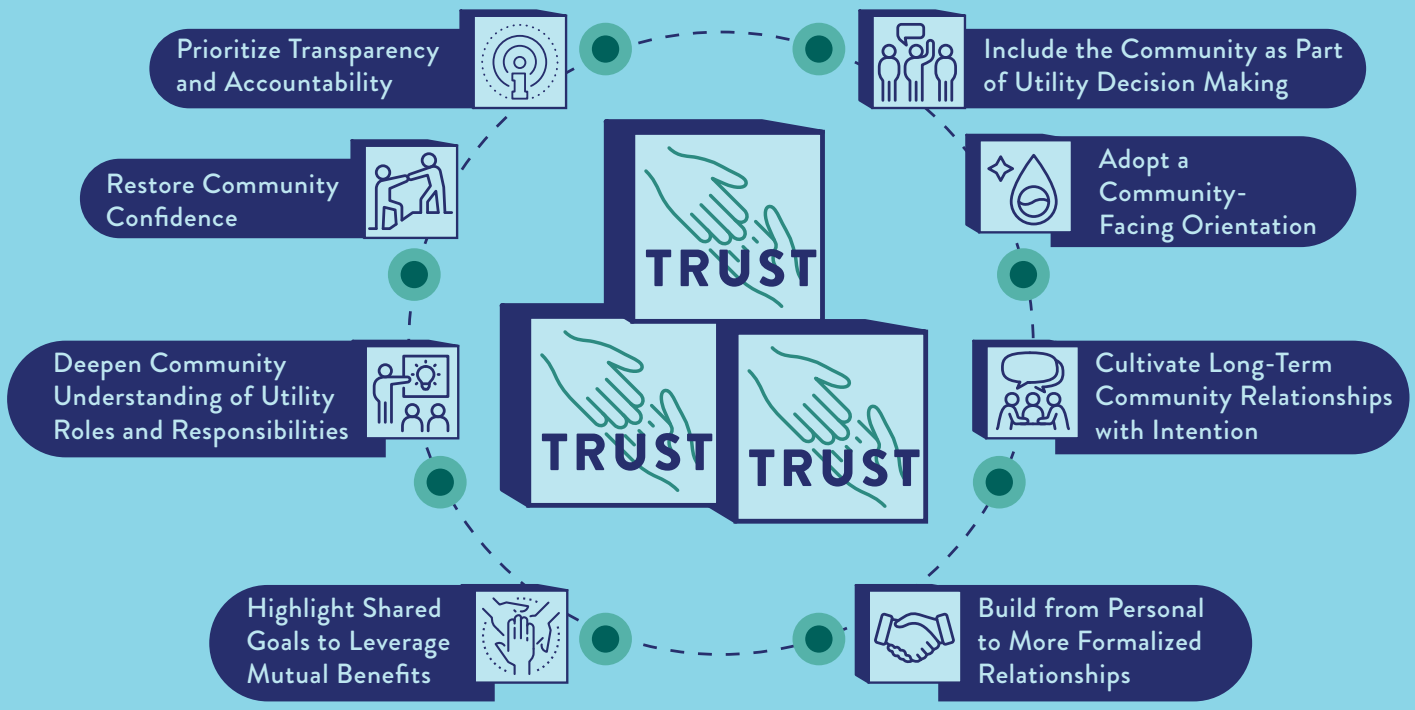
WATER TRUST WORKGROUP COMMUNITIES



Below are the Water Trust Workgroup communities who shaped this report. More about each partnership can be found throughout this report.

1. Harpers Ferry, WV – West Virginia Rivers Coalition and Harpers Ferry Water Commission
2. Kansas City, MO – Heartland Conservation Alliance and Kansas City Water
3. New Orleans, LA – Healthy Community Services and Sewerage and Water Board of New Orleans
4. Santa Cruz, CA – Santa Cruz Water Supply Advisory Committee and Santa Cruz Water Department
5. Tucson, AZ – Sonora Environmental Research Institute and Tucson Water
6. Philadelphia, PA – Schuylkill Action Network and Philadelphia Water Department
7. Northern Kentucky – Groundwork Ohio River Valley and Sanitation District Number 1 of Northern Kentucky
8. Richmond, VA – Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay and the City of Richmond Department of Public Utilities
9. Cleveland, OH – CHN Housing Partners and Northeast Ohio Regional Sewage District

FOUNDATIONS OF TRUST
EIGHT FOUNDATIONAL BEST PRACTICES AND BUILDING BLOCKS



The Foundations and Building Blocks of Trust can be thought of as a constellation of practices and used in any order. Partnerships can employ all eight in some way or may find that selected building blocks are most useful at different phases throughout the community-water utility relationship. Our research led to the understanding that both the utility and community organization must have a threshold level of functionality to be in a position to employ these building blocks. When a utility or community organization is in disarray for any reason, it is unlikely they can develop and nurture trust, which requires time and intention. Similarly, even under optimal circumstances, it is important when starting out to understand that utilities and organizations of different sizes may have differing capacities and therefore their ability to engage meaningfully in such relationships will vary.

Foundations of Trust: Eight Best Practices and Building Blocks, Examples and Case Studies

- **Prioritize Transparency and Accountability**
- **Restore Community Confidence**
- **Deepen Community Understanding of Utility Roles and Responsibilities**
- **Highlight Shared Goals to Leverage Mutual Benefits**
- **Include the Community as Part of Utility Decision Making**
- **Adopt a Community-Facing Orientation**
- **Cultivate Long-Term Community Relationships with Intention**
- **Build from Personal to More Formalized Relationships**

FOUNDATION OF TRUST:
PRIORITIZE TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

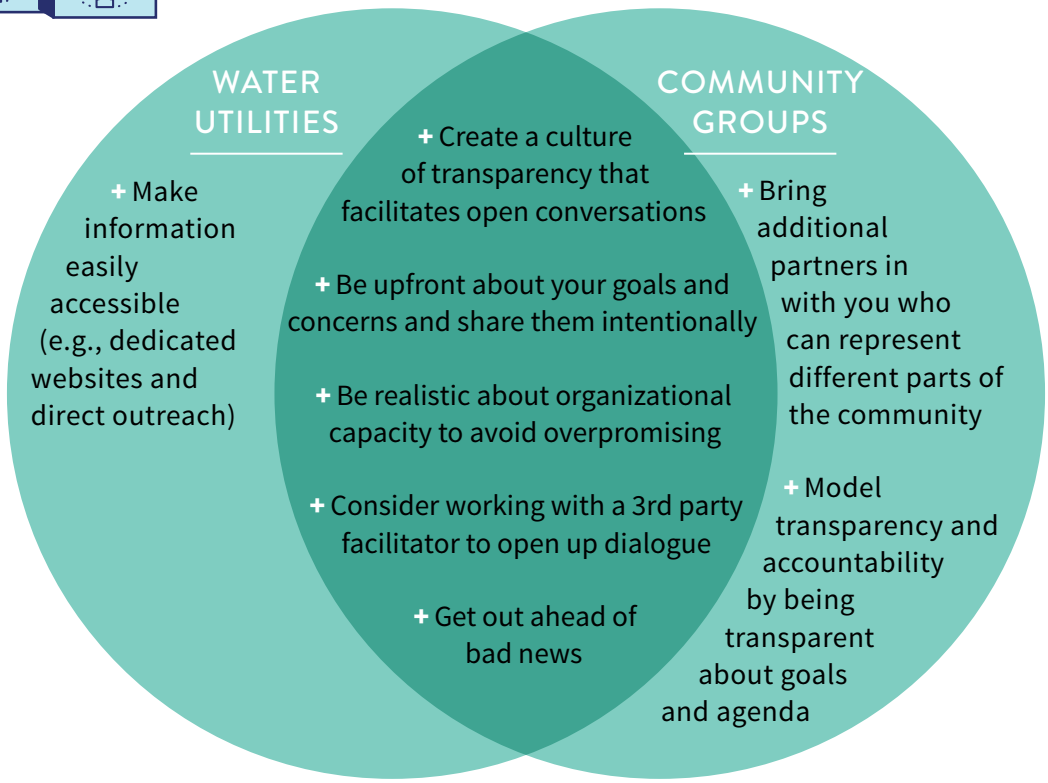
Trusting relationships depend on honesty and transparency from both sides. Many partners recognized that trust is fragile, and that when it's broken, groups are forced back to square one in their relationship-building process. This underscores the need for utilities to be transparent and for community groups to be upfront about their goals and concerns. A culture of transparency and honest feedback also requires thick skin and a willingness to hear and address issues and concerns—on both sides.

In Richmond, the Department of Public Utilities (DPU) is prioritizing transparency, and more information from the utility is now publicly available online. DPU is currently engaging in a large, open planning process, where they emphasize the importance of listening to the community. An openness to candor is needed so partners can freely communicate their problems and concerns and know the utility will understand it's not just criticism but a way to stay informed. Similarly, in New Orleans, the Water and Sewerage Board recognizes the importance of being open and honest and recommends utilities be up front, especially when the news is not good.

The same standard applies for community groups. To build trust it's important for community organizations to state their true purpose and be honest and upfront about their purposes and motivations, and avoid overpromising. For community groups, it's important to make clear that you are addressing the issues in your community, and then make sure your priorities align with the utility before starting out. Be clear about the purpose of the partnership, and be honest about what you see as the needs of the community so that the utility is aware of the organization's perspective up front. Further, don't attempt to represent parts of the community that you don't already work or have relationships with, and instead bring other community groups along with you who are doing the on-the-ground work. Heartland Conservation Alliance in Kansas City, for example, recognizes that they don't represent the entire community and intentionally work to support and bring a diversity of voices to the table.

Several communities use third party facilitators to foster this culture of transparency. In Santa Cruz, transparency was key to the utility successfully rebuilding trust with the community following their decision to not pursue a controversial desalination project, and outside facilitators convened and ran the meetings. The utility member who participated in the Water Supply Advisory Committee (WSAC) meetings was also a key shepherd of the process by providing access to needed information. The utility also provided many resources to support transparency, including providing packets of materials in advance of the meetings, following open meeting law requirements, and creating a dedicated website to support the effort. Further, the process the WSAC adopted to carry out their work was also transparent and adaptable. Such transparent decision making creates buy-in that can provide support for a range of decisions and have lasting impact. Richmond's DPU also used a consensus-based approach led by the University of Virginia's Institute for Engagement and Negotiation to set the stage for building trust with the community (**see Partnership Profile**), and in Philadelphia, the water department relies on their community partner to provide the critical facilitation to make sure that all voices know they are heard.

BUILDING BLOCKS FOR PRIORITIZING TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY



PARTNERSHIP PROFILE

RICHMOND, VIRGINIA – STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT LEADS TO GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE MASTER PLAN

+ Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay
+ City of Richmond Department of Public Utilities

Richmond is centered on the James River and has seen the waterway's usage change over time from transportation and commerce to providing drinking water and recreation opportunities for Virginians. The James River, a tributary draining over 10,000 square miles to the Chesapeake Bay, is affected by water quality issues related to legacy industrial pollution (notably Kepone and PCBs), agricultural runoff in rural areas of the watershed, as well as stormwater pollution and combined sewer overflows (CSOs) in urban areas. The **City of Richmond's Department of Public Utilities** (DPU) manages five utilities, three of which address water and influence local water resources: wastewater, stormwater, and drinking water. Historically, the three utilities were managed independently of one another, focusing on "end of pipe" compliance rather than broadening the view holistically to the entire watershed. This approach required the City to make decisions related to compliance for each utility without being able to consider the interrelated impacts, especially on local waterways.

The City decided to take a new approach following the **Environmental Protection Agency's Watershed Framework**, which integrates such types of separate programs into a coordinated approach. This allows localities to focus on reducing the impact of the highest pollution load, eliminating redundant activities, efficiently and effectively addressing impacts following rain storms, and improving water resources overall. Planning for the **RVA Clean Water Plan** began in 2013, utilizing a collaborative, consensus-focused approach championed by the **University of Virginia's Institute for Engagement and Negotiation**. The approach started with an inclusive range of community input to inform the transparent development of clean water goals and strategies and build trust in the process and in DPU's **RVAH2O** (Richmond Water) initiative. This five-year process resulted in Virginia's first state-approved integrated permit that focuses on several priority watersheds determined by the stakeholders. The **Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay** (The Alliance) has long worked with DPU, and has witnessed the slow progress of green infrastructure implementation in Richmond, often challenged by coordination between city departments. The Alliance participated in the RVAH2O stakeholder process and was able to leverage the new RVA Clean Water Plan and their long-term relationship with DPU to secure funding from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation to develop a green infrastructure master plan for implementation in the priority watersheds, an ongoing project on which the partners are currently working.

FOUNDATION OF TRUST:
RESTORE COMMUNITY CONFIDENCE

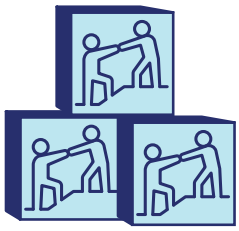
In situations where trust between the community and water utilities has eroded, building back those relationships can be challenging. At the same time, this can also present an opportunity to develop stronger relationships. We learned that communities that had successfully achieved this were able to step back and take a new approach, come to the table ready to listen, and respond to the community and deploy utility staff who were committed to and/or experienced in community-centered processes. To succeed, utility staff need to be willing to let go of the "normal, internal staff-driven process" that may limit community input. Both utilities and community groups have to be willing to find a way to participate with each other, starting by listening, and being open to a broader range of solutions.

Santa Cruz provides a good example (**see Partnership Profile**), using a well-supported citizens' advisory committee to work through thorny issues relating to water supply development. One successful component of this effort was the use of a neutral, third party facilitator who could focus on the process and make sure that everyone was heard and could establish common ground.

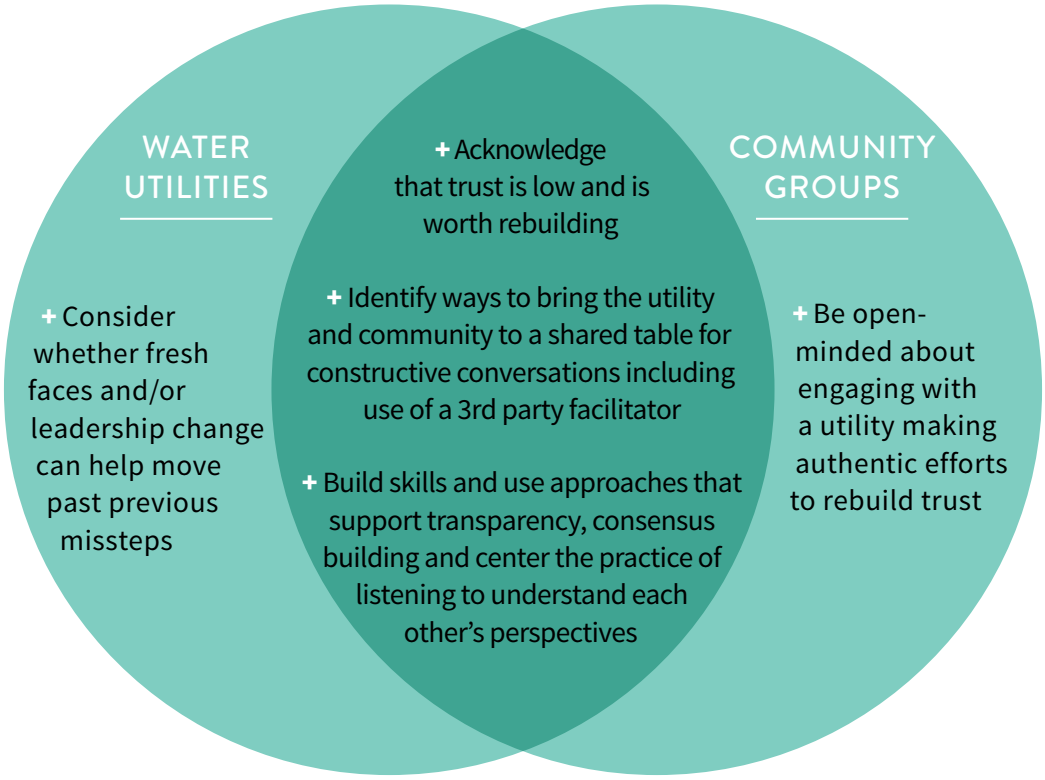
Another key to the success in Santa Cruz was the willingness of the water department to keep an open mind to new solutions to address their water supply issues, commit to transparency, and provide the technical support for the process to work. This was greatly aided by a new leader who had extensive experience with collaborative planning and demonstrated their commitment by attending all of the meetings and providing food for participants .

Echoing how a change in leadership can help restore trust, leadership changes at Tucson Water catalyzed restructuring, increased transparency, and new and intentional approaches to working with local organizations. These adjustments by the utility eventually led to a more trusting relationship with the community. Overtime, Tucson Water and Sonora Environmental Research Institute (SERI) rebuilt a level of trust paving the way for a close working relationship where SERI helps implement Tucson Water's community-focused rainwater harvesting program.

Other approaches to rebuilding trust include letting the community organizations lead. In Kansas City, for instance, the Heartland Conservation Alliance (HCA) is helping the water utility improve its relationships with the community by putting the community in the driver's seat and making space for—and centering—vulnerable and marginalized communities. Similarly, in Tucson, because Sonora Environmental Research Institute (SERI) is well-trusted in the community, their partnership with the utility supports the utility's long path to rebuilding trust. West Virginia Rivers has also found that starting with small steps, like regular coordination and communication, can help bring utilities worried about community opposition to the table, as part of a longer process to building trust.



BUILDING BLOCKS FOR RESTORING COMMUNITY CONFIDENCE



PARTNERSHIP PROFILE

SANTA CRUZ, CALIFORNIA – COMMUNITY-CENTERED PROCESS TO CREATE LONG TERM WATER SUPPLY PLAN

+ Santa Cruz Water Supply Advisory Committee
+ Santa Cruz Water Department

Santa Cruz relies almost exclusively on surface water for its water supply, has limited water storage capacity, and is therefore highly vulnerable to drought. After nearly a decade of work on a local desalination project, in 2012 a public controversy arose related to the City's pursuit of the project. Over the following two years intense community opposition to the desalination project resulted in significantly undermined public trust in the Santa Cruz Water Department. To address the controversy, in 2014 the City Council established a Water Supply Advisory Committee (WSAC) and tasked it with coming up with community-supported solutions to address future water supply needs and long-term sustainability. The WSAC was made up of 14 community members representing key interests in water supply and sustainability. Over the course of 18 months, the WSAC worked with the support of a facilitator and technical team to dive into water supply issues, models and options.

At the same time, the Santa Cruz Water Department hired a new leader with experience in and openness to developing community partnerships, who engaged with the advisory committee and the broader community, providing transparency and demonstrating openness to a community developed outcome. At the end of the process, WSAC reached a consensus agreement that had broad community support and included an adaptive process for evaluating and selecting water supply projects to sustainably improve long-term water supply reliability. The City Council unanimously accepted the WSAC's recommendations and the Water Department continues to work hard to implement both the letter and the spirit of the plan. As a result, trust between the Water Department and the community has been reestablished, the WSAC process has been used as a template to address other issues of community-wide importance, and two WSAC members have served on the Water Commission, the City's ongoing governance and oversight body for water issues.

> **"A perfect project that can't get done is not a perfect project."**
> *- Water Utility*

FOUNDATION OF TRUST:

DEEPEN COMMUNITY UNDERSTANDING OF UTILITY ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Community members and non-governmental community groups will be well-positioned to initiate, maintain, and grow relationships with their utility if they have a strong understanding of a utility's jurisdiction, responsibilities, purposes, and the political landscape in which the utility operates. A deep grasp of what the utility does allows community groups to hold the utility accountable, identify positive aspects of the utility operations and be empathetic to challenges facing utilities.[2] Community groups that are knowledgeable about the utilities in their area that intersect with the groups' mission are prepared to take a data-driven approach to discussions with the utility and issues of concern, an approach that helps start but also maintain relationships, for example.

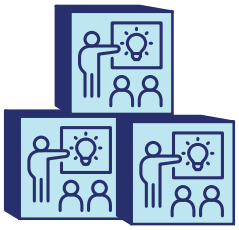
Such nuanced engagement between community groups and utilities creates enduring partnerships with lasting impact. The Heartland Conservation Alliance (HCA) spends time researching the water utility and attending their events and makes sure that the utility has a seat at the table on their relevant steering committees. West Virginia Rivers Coalition (**see Partnership Profile**) notes that water utilities are under a lot of pressure and finds that being empathetic goes a long way; they make the effort to fit into the water utilities schedule with their presentations and outreach. Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay similarly advises fellow groups to "put yourself in the utility's shoes" when approaching them.

The onus to develop this deep understanding is not on community groups alone. To foster relationships and ensure they are built on trust, utilities are well-advised to pull back the veil of what can be seen as a faceless institution, or a "black box," and meaningfully engage with the community on what the utility does and the benefits it provides. Taking this educational, or storytelling, approach humanizes the utility and encourages empathy and trust between the utility and community groups. In New Orleans, for example, a tour of New Orleans pump stations provided Healthy Community Services with a new level of understanding that deepened their appreciation for the utility, and also gave them insights into when the utility is being fully transparent, helping to build trust.

With this building block, community groups and utilities will also be primed to find joint solutions putting community groups and utilities on the path to another key building block for trust based relationships—recognizing shared goals to leverage mutual benefit.

> **"As a utility, it's important to put yourself in the room."**
> *- Water Utility*

[2] To develop a strong understanding of what utilities do, see the Utilities section of River Network's ***Equitable Infrastructure Toolkit***.



BUILDING BLOCKS FOR DEEPENING COMMUNITY UNDERSTANDING OF UTILITY ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

WATER UTILITIES

+ Water utilities provide opportunities to learn more about utility operations (e.g. provide tours of utility facilities and hold utility open houses)
+ Create a citizens' academy to educate community members on how the utility works

BOTH

+ Include community members on utility boards and water utility staff on nonprofit boards and advisory committees

COMMUNITY GROUPS

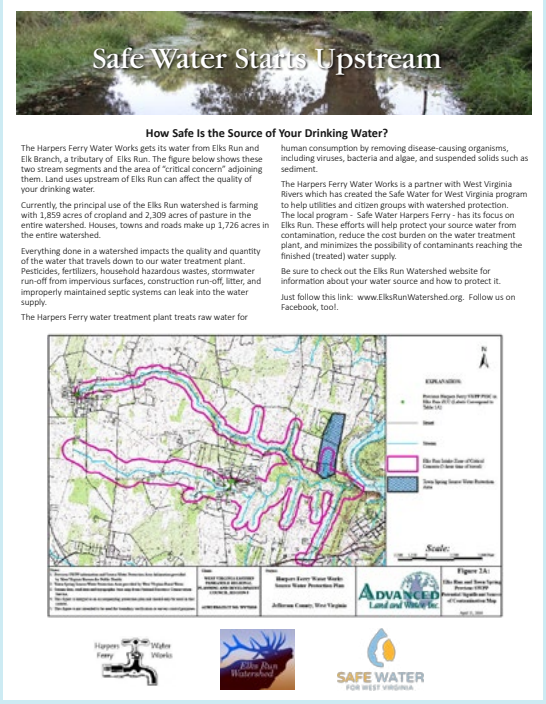
+ Community groups take time to learn about the water utility and its operations
+ Be empathetic to challenges facing utilities
+ Conduct outreach to utilities in ways that recognize they are juggling lots of competing interests

PARTNERSHIP PROFILE

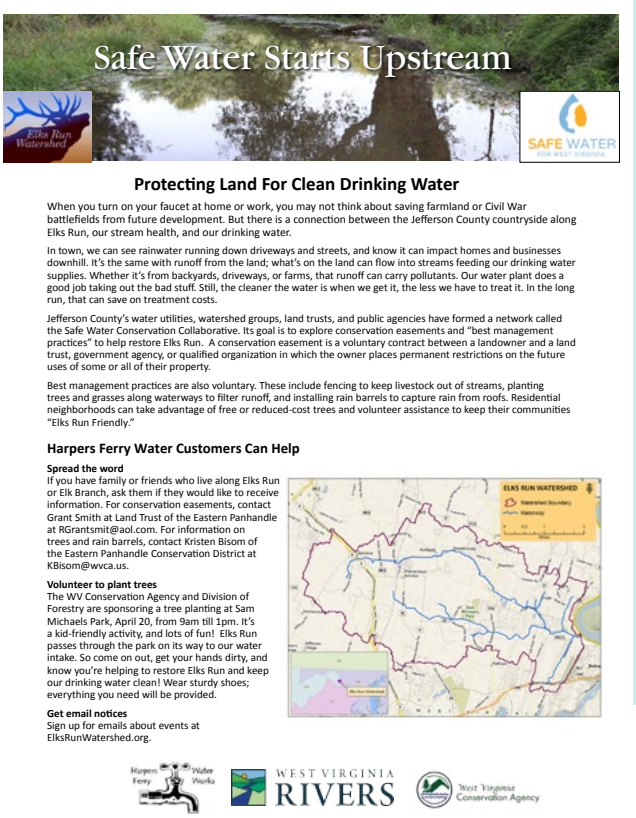
HARPERS FERRY, WEST VIRGINIA – STEPPING TOGETHER TOWARD SOURCE WATER PROTECTION

+ West Virginia Rivers Coalition
+ Harpers Ferry Water Commission

Following the 2014 Elk River chemical leak that contaminated the drinking water for 300,000 West Virginia residents, **West Virginia Rivers Coalition** (WV Rivers) worked with state policy-makers to **pass a law** requiring utilities to develop source water protection plans and to substantially involve the public in this process. WV Rivers then continued to build connections across the state between community organizations and their water providers. In Harpers Ferry, WV Rivers works with the Harpers Ferry Water Commission and the Harpers Ferry



Water Works utility to implement their source water protection plan for Elks Run, a surface water stream that provides drinking water for local homes, businesses, and the Harpers Ferry National Historical Park. The Commission, the water utility, and WV Rivers work together to raise awareness about source water issues by implementing public outreach, education and mapping projects in the local area, growing the network of people who understand the connection between source water and the tap. As a result of this work together, the Commission recognized the value of increasing stakeholder voices from throughout the watershed to provide input for source water protection. In 2021, the Commission recommended to the Town Council that they add two seats on the Commission to represent a broader portion of the watershed.



Safe Water Starts Upstream

Protecting Land For Clean Drinking Water

When you turn on your faucet at home or work, you may not think about saving farmland or Civil War battlefields from future development. But there is a connection between the Jefferson County countryside along Elks Run, our stream health, and our drinking water.

In town, we can see rainwater running down driveways and streets, and know it can impact homes and businesses downhill. It's the same with runoff from the land; what's on the land can flow into streams feeding our drinking water supplies. Whether it's from backyards, driveways, or farms, that runoff can carry pollutants. Our water plant does a good job taking out the bad stuff. Still, the cleaner the water is when we get it, the less we have to treat it. In the long run, that can save on treatment costs.

Jefferson County's water utilities, watershed groups, land trusts, and public agencies have formed a network called the Safe Water Conservation Collaborative. Its goal is to explore conservation easements and "best management practices" to help restore Elks Run. A conservation easement is a voluntary contract between a landowner and a land trust, government agency, or qualified organization in which the owner places permanent restrictions on the future uses of some or all of their property.

Best management practices are also voluntary. These include fencing to keep livestock out of streams, planting trees and grasses along waterways to filter runoff, and installing rain barrels to capture rain from roofs. Residential neighborhoods can take advantage of free or reduced-cost trees and volunteer assistance to keep their communities "Elks Run Friendly."

Harpers Ferry Water Customers Can Help

Spread the word
If you have family or friends who live along Elks Run or Elk Branch, ask them if they would like to receive information. For conservation easements, contact Grant Smith at Land Trust of the Eastern Panhandle at RGrantsmit@aol.com. For information on trees and rain barrels, contact Kristen Bisom of the Eastern Panhandle Conservation District at KBisom@wvca.us.

Volunteer to plant trees
The WV Conservation Agency and Division of Forestry are sponsoring a tree planting at Sam Michaels Park, April 20, from 9am till 1pm. It's a kid-friendly activity, and lots of fun! Elks Run passes through the park on its way to our water intake. So come on out, get your hands dirty, and know you're helping to restore Elks Run and keep our drinking water clean! Wear sturdy shoes; everything you need will be provided.

Get email notices
Sign up for emails about events at ElksRunWatershed.org.

> **"The utility is the community and needs to meet folks where they are."**
> *- Water Utility*

FOUNDATION OF TRUST: HIGHLIGHT SHARED GOALS TO LEVERAGE MUTUAL BENEFITS

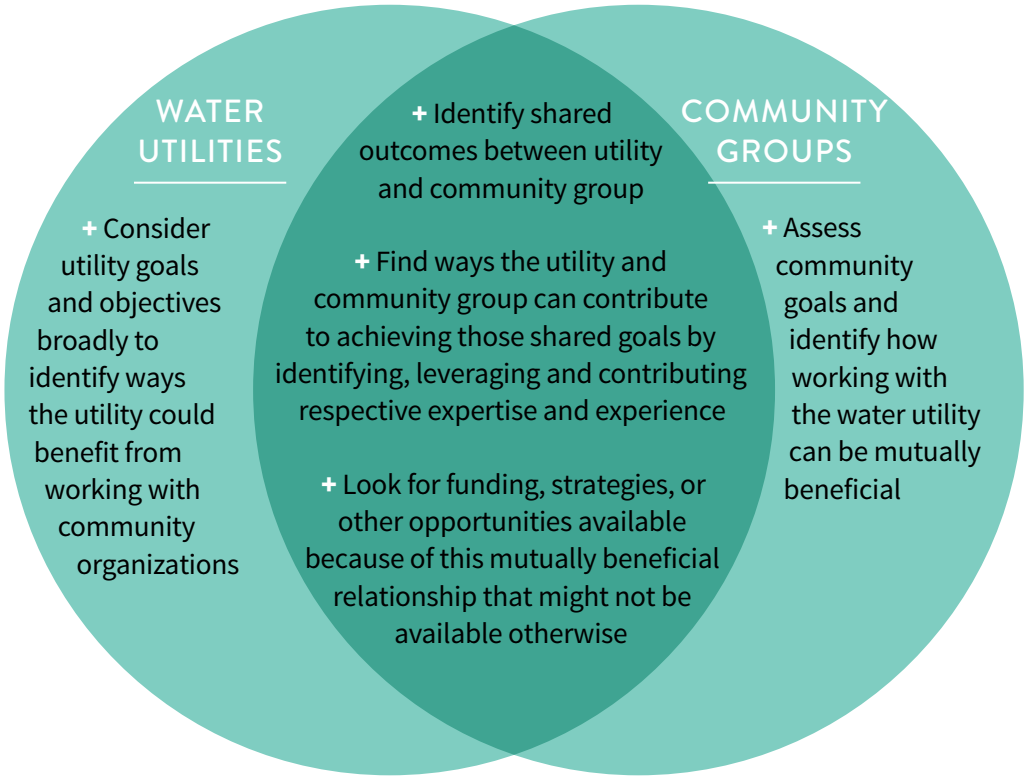
Strong partnerships are formed when utilities and community groups recognize and demonstrate that together they can create and amplify mutual benefit and value to reach common goals, and in some cases achieve things that they couldn't alone. This "ingredient" is needed across all aspects of community-utility relationships. Recognizing and demonstrating shared benefit and value is a key component for starting and maintaining trusting relationships. It's also important for creating open lines of communication between the utility and community partners as well as the community at-large once a relationship is established. When utilities and community groups recognize and identify the value each can provide for the other, and how this can leverage greater overall benefits, these groups can build deeper, enduring relationships that grow and evolve with the changing needs of the partners and community. Working towards common goals from this foundation provides utilities and communities pathways to overcome challenges, and facilitates balanced, equitable community-centered partnerships.

> **"The partnership helps center the community in the green infrastructure work while also advancing the utility priorities; the partnership allows the conversation to take place in the community."**
> *- Community Organization*

Multiple workgroup members' experiences underscore the importance of this foundational building block in developing trust. Many initiated their partnerships because, at least in part, each recognized that to meet their local water management needs, and broad community values, they needed support from each other. For Tucson and Cleveland the mutual benefit and value stems from the community groups' unique relationships with the community that supports and advances the utilities' goals to provide assistance to low-income residents. Partnerships in Harpers Ferry and Philadelphia that help utilities and communities protect the quality of drinking water sources got started due to the mutually recognized benefit and value that each brought to the table. For example, in Harpers Ferry when the utility and its community partners worked together to host required public meetings to educate the public on their source water plan, West Virginia Rivers Coalition's role was not only to help plan and prepare for the meetings but to also be the eyes and ears on the ground in the community. Similarly, in Kansas City, the Heartland Conservation Alliance benefits Kansas City Water by communicating with the community and building support for utility projects the utility is advocating for with city decision makers. Groundwork Ohio River Valley helps surface the utility's good projects making the community aware of the benefits the utility provides. In Tucson, Sonora Environmental Research Institute (SERI) assists Tucson Water to overcome language barriers with non-English speaking customers and helps the community understand that the utility (and local government) is accessible to them. Based on their partnership, Tucson Water has come to realize that the connection with the community SERI provides is invaluable. In New Orleans, as the Sewer Board finds great value in the water-related programs community groups are providing, they are working to find ways to fund community groups ongoing work.

With this foundation, these relationships have continued to evolve over time, building increased trust and credibility. In Cleveland, CHN's long standing relationship with the utility put CHN in a good position to implement the utility's new Water Champion's program, which is aimed at further improving the utility's engagement with the community and expanding the reach of its customer assistance programs (**see CHN and NEORSD Partnership Profile**). For Richmond's Department of Public Utilities, their ongoing partnership with the Alliance for Chesapeake Bay allowed the utility to expand their relationship and access grant funding they would not otherwise have been able to secure, which supports the common goal of increasing green infrastructure solutions. Tucson Water's relationship with SERI—a well trusted organization—has helped rebuild the utility's reputation and regain lost trust. In Kansas City, Heartland Conservation Alliance Supports the utility's evolving relationship with the community by being a thought partner for the utility and helping to center vulnerable, marginalized populations in decision making.

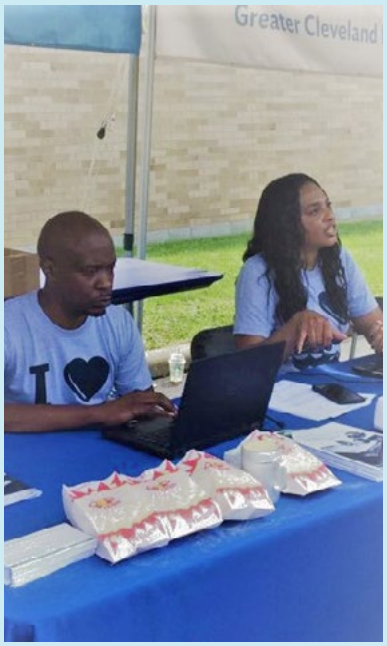
BUILDING BLOCKS FOR HIGHLIGHTING SHARED GOALS TO LEVERAGE MUTUAL BENEFITS



PARTNERSHIP PROFILE

CLEVELAND, OHIO – INCREASING ACCESS TO WATER AFFORDABILITY ASSISTANCE

+ CHN Housing Partners
+ Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District



Cleveland, like many Great Lakes cities, has seen its population decline while poverty levels rise. The city's current population is less than half of what it was in 1950, and many remaining residents face extraordinary financial challenges. Cleveland has one of the highest poverty rates among U.S. cities, stemming in large part from the decline of manufacturing. According to the U.S. Census, approximately 30 percent of Cleveland residents live in poverty, three times the national average. **CHN Housing Partners** and the **Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District** work together to help utility customers pay their sewer bills. The Sewer

District contracts with CHN Housing Partners to manage applications for several cost-savings programs designed to reduce financial burden and risks of disconnection, particularly for customers affected by limited income or other life events. In partnering with a local organization known for helping residents, the Sewer District has a trusted community liaison connected with eligible customers—and there is room to grow. The Sewer District has focused efforts increasing eligible customers' participation in its cost-savings programs since 2016, and that work will continue beyond 2021. CHN Housing Partners targets clients already eligible for their other utility assistance, weatherization, and energy-efficiency programs which have the same eligibility requirements as the Sewer District's cost-savings programs. Their newest partnership, the "Water Champions" program, will strengthen awareness of water issues in the community and support further enrollment in these programs.

PARTNERSHIP PROFILE

NORTHERN KENTUCKY, OHIO RIVER VALLEY – PARTNERING ON GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT FOR CLEAN WATER

+ Groundwork Ohio River Valley
+ Sanitation District 1 of Northern Kentucky

Sanitation District 1 of Northern Kentucky is faced with Combined Sewer Overflows, polluted stormwater runoff and flooding. The utility is addressing this through a variety of approaches, including the installation of green infrastructure, like green roofs, rain gardens and trees. **Groundwork Ohio River Valley** (Groundwork ORV) and **Sanitation District 1 of Northern Kentucky** (SD1) are partnering on a new two-year, community-driven green infrastructure project that is funded by L'Oreal USA. The project is in its initial phases, and they are piloting the project in a city park in Dayton, KY. Through the project they plan to combine financial incentives; outreach and education; stakeholder engagement; assessments of water issues, development, land use, zoning, and housing issues; and direct installations of green stormwater infrastructure to support the implementation of green infrastructure in the Ohio River Valley of Northern Kentucky.

Groundwork ORV is providing labor for the project through their **Green Corps** and **Green Team** programs while also providing training and building a green infrastructure workforce for the region. SD1 is providing monitoring and technical expertise.

FOUNDATION OF TRUST:
INCLUDE THE COMMUNITY AS PART OF UTILITY DECISION MAKING

Another key way to strengthen community-utility partnerships is to integrate the community into utility decision making. This can be part of a specific project or process that is underway, or as part of utility governance more generally, for example via an advisory board or special council. Community governance can be useful to help vet ideas, build credibility, create transparency, avoid one-sided decisions, and increase accountability for the utility. For community governance[3] to work, the roles and responsibilities must be clearly defined, including how community input will be applied, consistent with utility governance. Several workgroup partnerships feature different models to approach this integration.

In Philadelphia, the Schuylkill Action Network (**see Partnership Profile**), facilitated by the Partnership for the Delaware Estuary, creates a broad partnership of groups and governance to protect the watershed that has lasted over 15 years and is still expanding. Governance for SAN is very well established with a strategic work plan, work groups, and standard operating procedures. Philadelphia Water Department (PWD) serves on the steering committee, participates in workgroups, and provides financial support to the partnership's operations. Based on the governance structure, PWD follows the prioritization of watershed restoration projects recommended by the steering committee and workgroups. The openness and structure of SAN and PWD's partnership allows priorities to evolve where the needs of all partners are addressed, reflected in the creation of new workgroups, most recently one focusing on the overlap between recreation and source water protection.

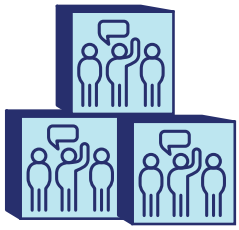
Santa Cruz had a very in-depth structure to involve the community in decision making that can serve as a model for community engagement and good governance. The Santa Cruz partnership is centered on a formal decision making and governance structure that gives the community a voice via the Water Supply Advisory Committee (WSAC) designed to recommend new approaches to securing water supply, and completing their work with final recommendations delivered in 2015. With a fairly strict charter and a professional mediator, the WSAC set their own "rules of engagement" to be a consensus-based body required to find common ground.

Although the WSAC membership did not fully reflect the diversity of the community, WSAC meetings were open to the public, and the utility did a lot of outreach to the broader community to provide opportunities for input into the utility's decision making, in addition to their support of WSAC members. Ultimately, the WSAC recommended a process for developing new water supplies that was adopted by the City Council and implemented by the water utility. The utility maintains the trust and credibility built through the WSAC by earnestly implementing the recommendations the committee made and by following the agreed upon procedures.

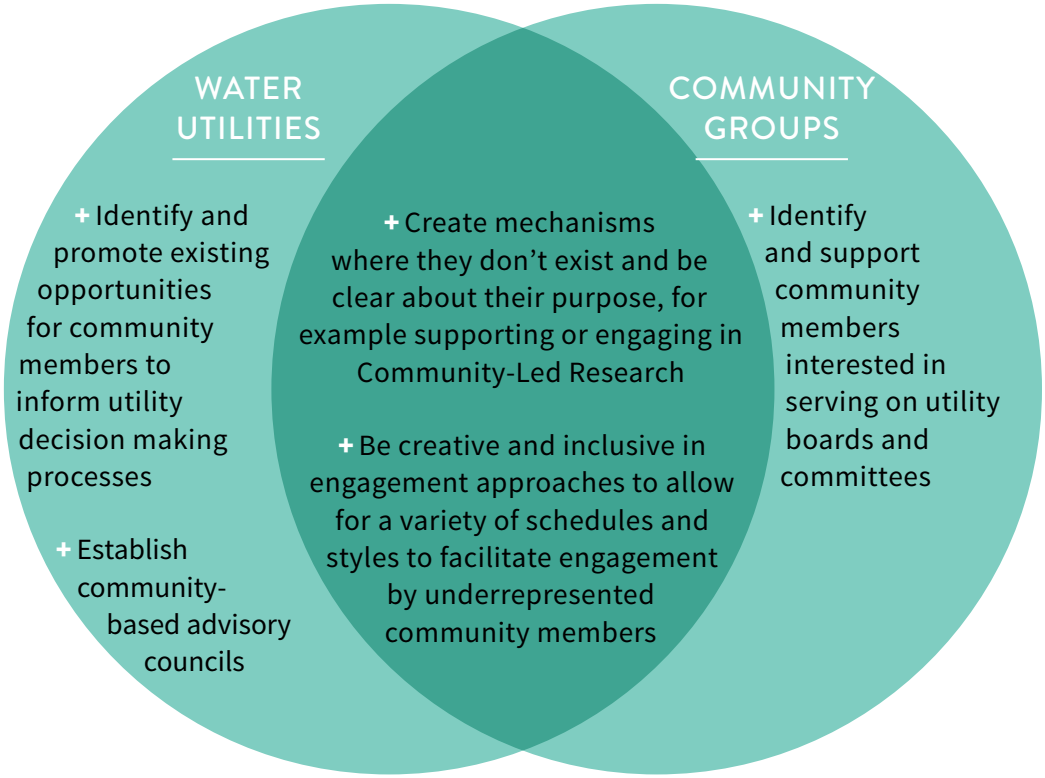
Like Santa Cruz and Philadelphia, Tucson and New Orleans built trust through community involved decision making. Tucson Water has a 17 member **Citizens' Water Advisory Committee**, appointed by the Mayor and City Council, who make recommendations and advise the City on rate structure, capital

[3] We use the term community governance loosely and generally to mean decision making that engages and is informed by the community.

improvement plan and other related topics. This Committee also provides a forum to express concern about the rainwater harvesting program. SERI suggests that it's a two-way street, and community groups could also benefit from having the utility on their advisory board. Finally, New Orleans Sewerage and Water Board recently created a **Customer Advisory Committee** to formalize engagement and better understand community needs, and several "Neighborhood Champions" serve on the Committee (**see New Orleans partnership profile**).



BUILDING BLOCKS FOR INCLUDING THE COMMUNITY AS PART OF UTILITY DECISION MAKING



RESOURCE PROFILE COMMUNITY-LED RESEARCH

Deep community engagement is vital to understand how water issues directly impact residents. Likewise, direct partnership with community members is crucial to formulating more effective and equitable solutions. Community-Led Research is an important strategy in developing this type of engagement and partnership, and surfacing issues of which a water utility may not be aware. For example, in Texas, Port Arthur Community Action Network (PACAN) is working in partnership with Port Arthur's Public Works Stormwater Drainage division to alter stormwater pathways in certain neighborhoods and reduce flooding. PACAN used a community survey to identify individuals to receive home air monitors and offered participants compensation for their time spent responding to the survey. The air monitors are measuring the impact of mold and other air quality concerns exacerbated by residential flooding. With over 300 survey responses collected, PACAN is developing

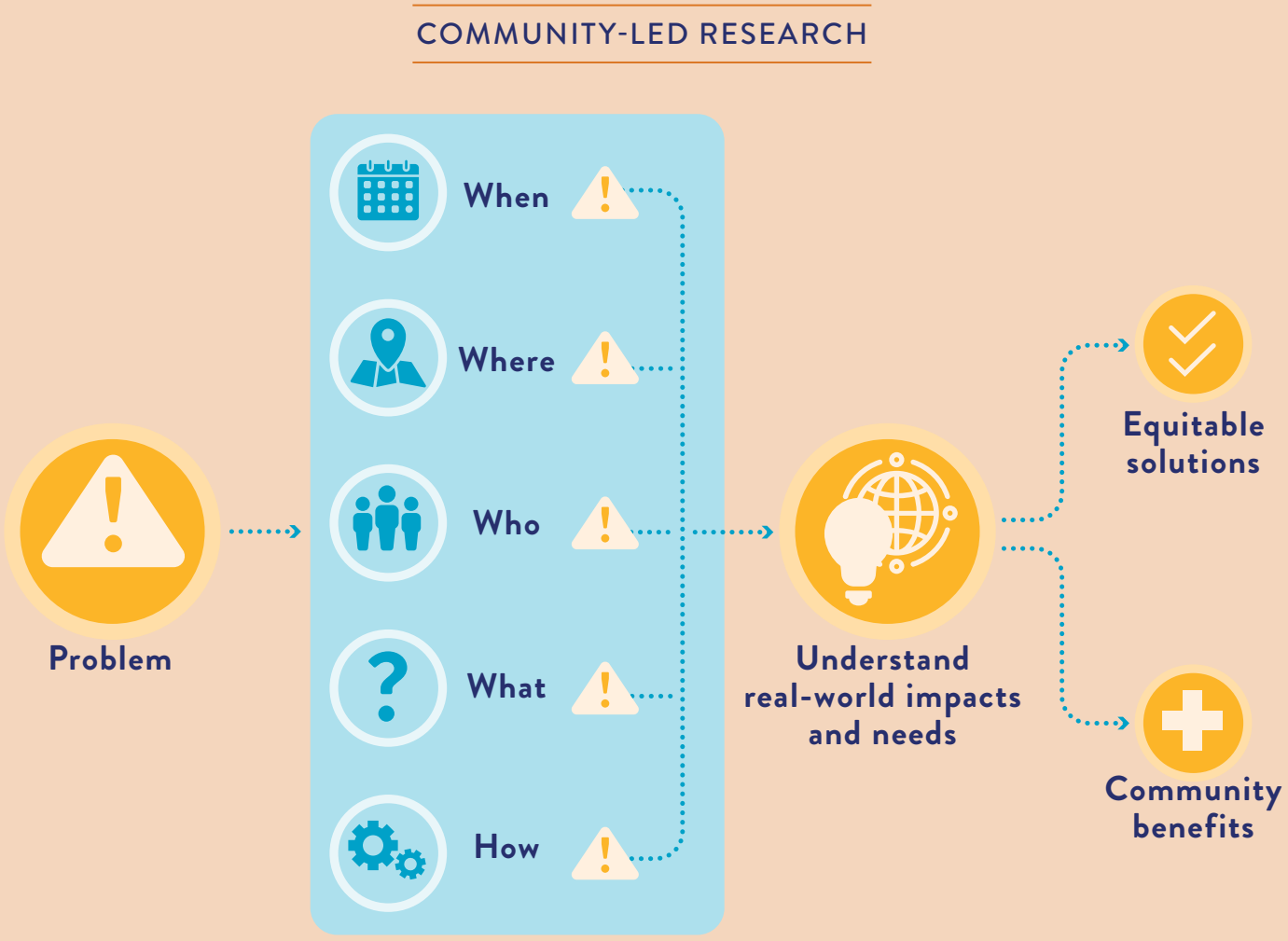
a representative case for investments in new stormwater and flood infrastructure in neighborhoods most affected by flooding. PACAN used a third-party to perform their data analysis, and are sharing the results back out to community members through presentations and community meetings and informing the Public Works department for future infrastructure investments.

River Network's **Community-Led Research Toolkit** provides step-by-step guidance and lessons learned on how to effectively support or engage in Community-Led Research.

It will help you answer questions like:

+ What is Community-Led Research and Knowledge?
+ Why should you do Community-Led Research?
+ What are the benefits of Community-Led Research and Knowledge?
+ How do I conduct Community-Led Research?

The toolkit also has real-world Community-Led Research case studies, a *Community-Led Research Project Planning and Facilitation Guide*, and extensive lists of references and resources.



PARTNERSHIP PROFILE

PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA – SCHUYLKILL ACTION NETWORK'S SHARED GOVERNANCE TO PROTECT DRINKING WATER

+ Schuylkill Action Network
+ Philadelphia Water Department

For over 15 years, the **Philadelphia Water Department** (PWD) has worked with a wide range of partners through the **Schuylkill Action Network** (SAN), with the mission to protect water resources in the Schuylkill watershed, a source of Philadelphia's drinking water. This effort grew from a source water assessment identifying pollution sources, and the reality that almost all of this land was outside the City's jurisdiction. Through much of this time, the Partnership for the Delaware Estuary (PDE) has been the facilitator and convenor of the Schuylkill Action Network and partners closely with PWD in this role. PDE is supported by a contract with PWD, and the relationship is characterized as open, honest, and collaborative. SAN's specific on the ground results include projects to reduce acid mine drainage, stormwater runoff and agricultural pollution, as well as land protection as SAN has been able to leverage additional funding from government and private sources. PDE and PWD have worked together to create common ground to communicate about water management challenges and engage a broader audience in source water protection.

FOUNDATION OF TRUST: ADOPT A COMMUNITY-FACING ORIENTATION

Another trait that facilitates trust between community organizations and water utilities is the ability of the water utility, or local government, to initiate and take new approaches to their role in the community, reflected in institutional structures and water management methods. This includes conceptualizing their role broadly as an **anchor institution** in the community, establishing flexible staff roles and corresponding internal structure, making the deliberate decision to center community partnerships as part of utility work, and being open to new approaches to both community engagement and substantive water planning and management decisions.

Water utilities typically have a specific charter or purpose to provide water, wastewater, and/or stormwater services to their community. This is already a huge responsibility, and yet some utilities go further in defining their role more expansively in the community. This broader conception of how utilities relate to and provide value in the community naturally orients a utility toward developing partnerships with local organizations. In Tucson, for example, Tucson Water recognizes the need to invest additional

time and money to reach communities that have been marginalized to ensure they're engaged in utility programs and that program dollars are equitably distributed. To this end, Tucson Water works with Sonora Environmental Research Institute on installing rainwater harvesting systems at lower-income resident's homes to conserve water and plant and sustain trees that can provide shade, cool homes and reduce energy use.

Also rooted in the concept of a utility establishing a broader role in the community, Northeast Ohio Regional Sewage District (NEORSD) and CHN Housing Partners have a shared goal of making sure everyone has sewer service and a reasonable payment plan given a range of circumstances and conditions. The utility proactively reaches out to customers via post cards and follow up letters to let them know how they can get assistance with paying their bills. Looking forward, the utility also hopes to provide more programs for renters and middle income residents who also need bill assistance and to look at the bigger picture of what impacts people's ability to pay, such as divorce, medical bills, and timing of their paychecks. When COVID-19 hit, the utility saw an increase in non-payments due to increased medical bills and job loss. CHN was able to provide additional financial assistance for COVID-related hardships. When COVID-19 became a challenge, the teams jointly met to troubleshoot what would happen with all offices shut down and developed a COVID-19 response plan. The water champions program will expand the utility's reach based on actual community needs and concerns with the goal to create new programs based on these identified needs and to have truly responsive programs built on a partnership with the community.

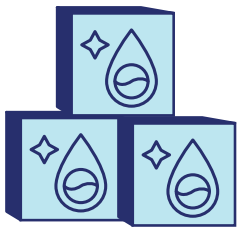
Internal utility structure should also align to work with the community to support trust building. Because these relationships are often built from personal connections, it is important that utility staff have the flexibility and internal support to spend time in the community, listening and developing relationships. In New Orleans, for example, flexibility in staff roles allowed for staff to spend time with community members to cultivate credibility. This is especially important where staff are not part of the community otherwise, and where white staff are reaching out to a community of color. A utility that recognizes the amount of time investment that relationship building takes will also be better-positioned to develop trusting relationships. In Santa Cruz, during the most intense period of the Water Supply Advisory Committee's work, which was initiated by the City Council, the Water Department Director was spending 60%–80% of her time as part of that process. Achieving this type of staff support sometimes requires restructuring job descriptions to allow flexibility and cross-cutting roles. Support for including this time and specific objectives can originate from the utility and/or the local government.

Changing the paradigm around community engagement to "step away from the checklist" and center the community as part of utility work is also key. This can be challenging as it requires utility leadership and staff to sometimes get out of their comfort zone, but can start with straightforward steps like meeting people where they are, both physically and figuratively. In Richmond, this included "throwing out the rules" and reaching out to people in non-traditional places like a rock climbing gym. In other places, creating materials that are accessible and non-technical is prioritized. In Santa Cruz, technical materials were presented and explained so that all members of the advisory committee could understand and then came up with common terminology. Ultimately, this should be embedded in the water utility's institutional culture to live on past any specific partnerships. A holistic approach to community engagement has also long been a core principle of environmental justice and centering the community as part of these partnerships moves in this direction.[4]

[4] Principle 7 of the Principles of Environmental Justice established at the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit states: "Environmental Justice demands the right to participate as equal partners at every level of decision-making, including needs assessment, planning, implementation, enforcement and evaluation." (1991)

Utilities also need to be receptive to new ideas and to working with community groups to learn together to improve programming. In Cleveland, the water department, NEORSD and CHN Housing Partners work closely together, and the utilities are open to ideas about improvements and collectively review program metrics to inform program changes. Providing institutional support for community partners is another way that utilities can alter their approach. Tucson, for instance, created a conservation fund from a fee on water bills that is used, in part, to contract with community partners to implement the water efficiency/rainwater harvesting rebate programs.

Finally, selecting the right utility staff to lead partnership efforts is important, whether someone on staff or someone from outside. Sometimes a fresh face can signal renewed efforts to build trust. One new utility staff member explained that she didn't feel that she had to follow the old rules for engagement. In another community, a new utility leader with experience in community engagement was able to help restore trusting relationships where they had ebbed.



BUILDING BLOCKS FOR ADOPTING A COMMUNITY-FACING ORIENTATION

> **"Throw out all the rules and do what works."**
> *- Water Utility*

PARTNERSHIP PROFILE

NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA – CONNECTING FOR COMMUNITY-DRIVEN GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE

+ Healthy Community Services
+ Sewerage and Water Board of New Orleans

Healthy Community Services (HCS) and the **Sewerage and Water Board of New Orleans** (SWBNO) partner on sustainability initiatives in the 7th Ward of New Orleans. HCS and SWBNO partner on efforts to give residents and business owners a better understanding of urban storm water management techniques, how the drainage system of New Orleans works, how to improve the water quality of Lake Pontchartrain as well as how green infrastructure reduces subsidence by increasing water table levels. In New Orleans, there is a network of 200—and growing—Neighborhood Champions—along with eight businesses and two churches across five neighborhoods, led by groups including HCS and Water Wise Gulf South. HCS leads approximately 25 neighborhood residents in the 7th Ward. Through green infrastructure educational workshops, demonstrations and tours, residents of the 7th Ward are harvesting and retaining stormwater and recharging the water table.

The Sewerage and Water Board of New Orleans is working to be more integrated with the community so that the "utility is the community." The utility's goal for building relationships with community groups is to support the green stormwater infrastructure industry as it grows and ensure the benefits and resources are going to the people that are doing the work. Utility staff work to build credibility and trustworthiness by attending community events and cultivating personal relationships with community leaders; getting out of the utility comfort-zone in this way allows the utility to fully understand community needs and match project design with those needs for truly community-driven development.

FOUNDATION OF TRUST:
CULTIVATE LONG-TERM COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS WITH INTENTION

Most trusting relationships between water utilities and community groups are based, on some level, on personal relationships and connecting with people in an effective and authentic way. This often stems from utility staff who are making intentional efforts to get out into the community and/or community groups proactively reaching out to water utilities, identifying the right contact within an organization to lead the relationship and then strengthening these relationships through open and ongoing communications.

From the utility perspective, personal connections often grew from efforts to be out in and part of the community, either as part of the job or as a community member themselves. From these efforts, relationships often develop over time, providing strong footing for specific partnership efforts. In Kansas

City, the relationships are based on one-on-one connections that have been intentionally cultivated; both Heartland Conservation Alliance (**see Partnership Profile**) and Groundwork Ohio River Valley invite their water utility partners to all of their events and meetings, and have built this into their outreach systems. Healthy Community Services emphasizes that it's important for community groups to undo the assumption that utility staff are not interested in community events. In New Orleans, utility staff first connected with community members at their events, and similarly in Cincinnati, utility staff view community engagement as part of their personal work because "they are part of the community."

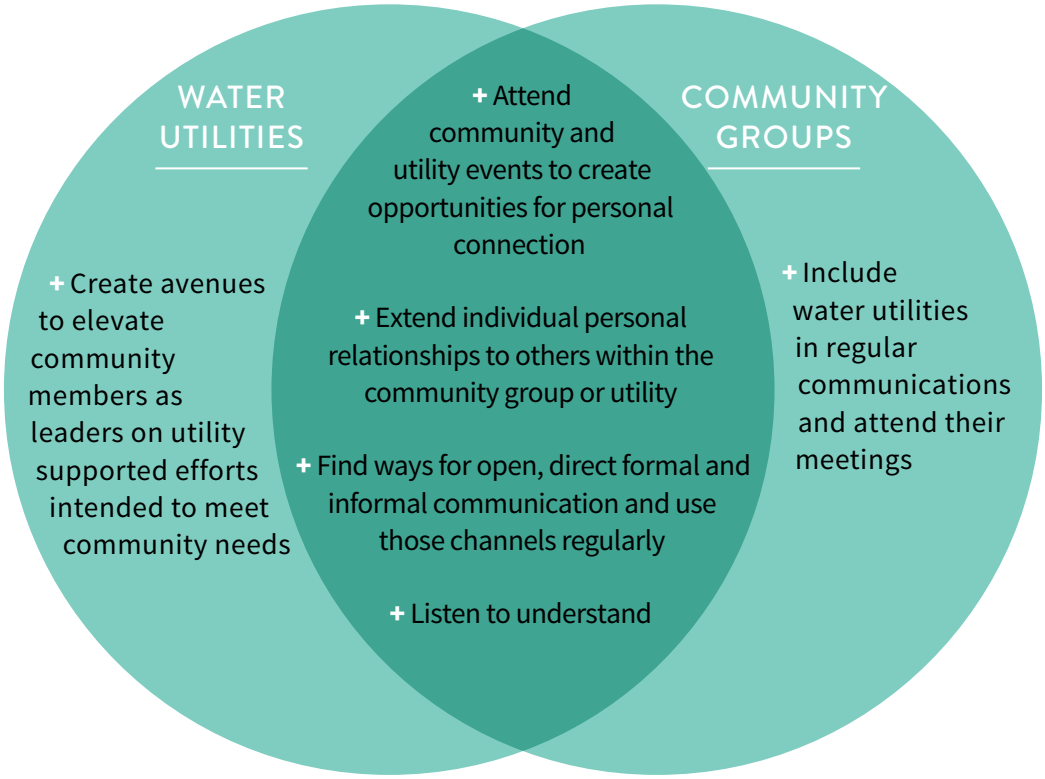
If a utility is just starting this work, community groups recommend seeking organizations that are embedded in and trusted by the community. Getting out of the office and into the community to listen to the community is critical, especially when attempting to work in communities of color. Such efforts can help ensure that utilities partner with community members that are truly representative of all communities the utility serves. Recognizing that groups are looking for partnership, not direction, is similarly critical. In other words, to build trust-based partnerships utilities will need to avoid "box checking" style community engagement and strive to build relationships. True partnership involves getting outside of utility comfort zones and into the community to fully understand what the community needs are in order to match services and projects with those needs. Being proactive in this outreach can help community groups and utilities move past the perception that they are the "opposition." Finally, identifying the right person within the community group and utility to hold or lead the relationship was also identified as important by several groups. Not everyone likes this type of work, and you need to have the right people who are good at interfacing with each other.

Once a personal relationship has been established, it needs to be reinforced by expanding to live in more than one person from each organization as it takes "more than one person to keep it going." Creating continuity is also key—in New Orleans, when there is turnover at the utility the outgoing staffer always connects the new staff with community partners to ensure ongoing connection. This is also aided by building working relationships across different levels within both organizations. For example, management and staff from both organizations should be in communication with each other to span multiple people so the partnership can continue regardless of which individuals are personally involved.

Additionally, trust follows when communication between partners is direct and open. In many communities, partnerships are characterized by frequent communication, both formal, through regular meetings, as well as informally. Partners in Cleveland have each other's cell numbers and can call at any time. In Richmond, the communication is straightforward and doesn't have to be guarded, creating a sense of collegiality. CHN Housing Partners advises that communications needs to include day-to-day but also longer term, bigger picture planning so that groups can be aligned looking into the future.

Another piece of developing partnerships is centering the community as part of the work and meeting people where they are. This is a two-way street and can be initiated by both the utility and the community. This includes asking the community for guidance on both outreach and programming, and recognizing when community members may be better placed to lead outreach efforts. For example, Sonora Environmental Research Institute's Prometora's Program hired women in the community to support the rainwater harvesting program and helped build trust and increase the participation of lower income residents to become more inclusive. Similarly, Cleveland's Water Champions program will expand the utility's reach based on actual community needs and concerns. Several community organizations dedicate time to meeting the utility where they are, attending and speaking at their meetings and engaging them on community steering committees. These groups treat water utilities like any other partner, and include them in all of their regular outreach.

BUILDING BLOCKS FOR CULTIVATING LONG-TERM COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS WITH INTENTION



PARTNERSHIP PROFILE

KANSAS CITY, MISSOURI – RIVER RESTORATION THROUGH MULTIJURISDICTIONAL COLLABORATION

+ Heartland Conservation Alliance
+ Kansas City Water

The Blue River flows 41 miles from Kansas into Missouri and passes five counties and 21 cities in the Kansas City metro area before flowing into the Missouri River. The river and its major tributaries fail to meet Clean Water Act standards due to pollution caused by combined sewer overflows, flooding and upstream agricultural pollution. Over the past two decades, and responding to the need for a multijurisdictional approach to watershed protection, a number of local groups and utilities have worked on multiple plans for restoring the health of the Blue River. **Heartland Conservation Alliance** (HCA) is working collaboratively with their members to spearhead and coordinate the Blue River Action Plan to prioritize actions from those regional plans. One of the key strategies of HCA has been to establish the Blue River as one of the nation's **Urban Waters Federal Partnership** locations and serves as the Urban Waters Ambassador. From the beginning, **Kansas City Water** has participated in HCA's steering committee for the Blue River and they partner together on activities including river clean-ups, restoration and outreach. Now, the two are working together on an innovative, multipurpose approach to improving the health of the Blue River Watershed including land protection and restoration, outreach and education and flood control as part of floodplain buyouts. The partners feel that the pipeline for ideas is always open, and Kansas City Water explains that their "first call" with a new idea will be to HCA. As an example of this work, HCA and Kansas City Water are working together on a conceptual design for a local property along Indian Creek, a tributary of the Blue River. HCA hopes to manage the site for public use, flood control and habitat restoration.

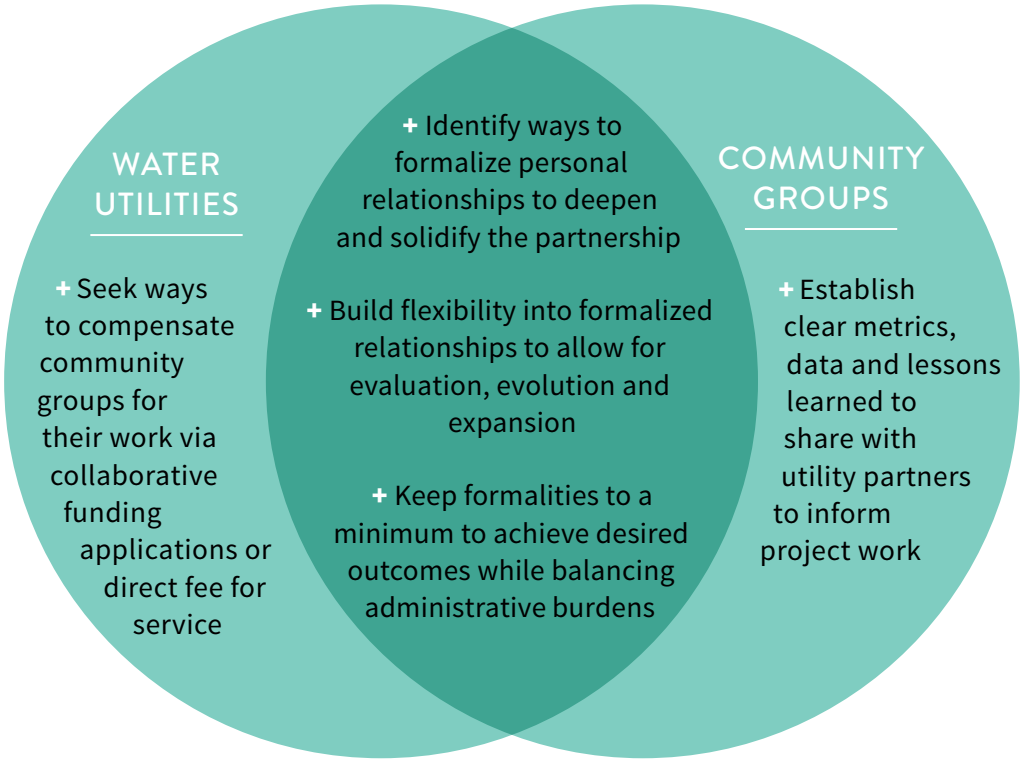
FOUNDATION OF TRUST:
BUILD FROM PERSONAL TO MORE FORMALIZED RELATIONSHIPS

Enduring, trust-based partnerships find their foundations in personal relationships that often evolve to more formalized engagements. Because of this evolution, community groups and utilities have a spectrum of partnership available to them, evolving from communication to coordination to collaboration. Formalities like grant agreements, memorandums of understanding (MOUs) or contracts support clear roles, responsibilities, expectations, and timelines and provide a means of consistent communication based on common goals and language and provide opportunities for data-driven program evaluation.

Importantly, community organizations should be compensated for their time as a way to recognize the value they bring and to address equity in a community. If a utility is unable to pay a community group directly for their involvement in a project or program, they may be able to help with grant applications or finding other third-party funding. Shifting from informal to formal engagement can also institutionalize community-centered decision making, which, in turn, can help build or repair a utility's relationship with the community. This was the case in both Cleveland and Tucson (see Partnership Profiles **above** and **below**).

Further, partnerships that have moved from the personal to formal and have an established governance structure need to retain the flexibility to respond to lessons learned from program implementation based on program evaluation as well as changing needs and priorities. It is also important to balance formal engagements with ongoing personal relationship building to create space for partnership growth across multiple projects and issues. For instance, governance for the 15 year old Schuylkill Action Network is well established with a strategic workplan, work groups, and standard operating procedures, still allowing for new topics and partners.

BUILDING BLOCKS FOR BUILDING FROM PERSONAL TO MORE FORMALIZED RELATIONSHIPS



PARTNERSHIP PROFILE

TUCSON, ARIZONA – GROWING RELATIONSHIP LEADS TO EQUITABLE OUTCOMES

+ Sonora Environmental Research Institute
+ Tucson Water

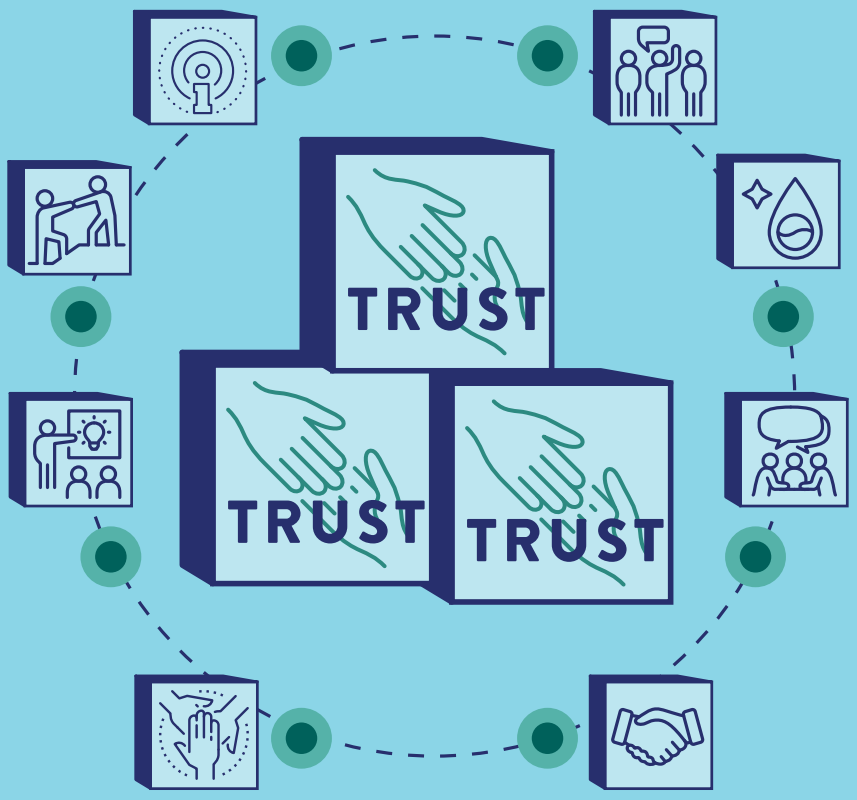
Tucson Water and the **Sonora Environmental Research Institute (SERI)** partner together to help families with limited incomes conserve water, install green stormwater infrastructure, and plant and sustain trees that provide shade, cool homes, improve air quality, and reduce energy usage. Tucson Water's Residential **Rainwater Harvesting Rebate program** provides rebates up to $2000 to single-family residential and small commercial Tucson Water customers for both passive and active rainwater harvesting systems. The program helps address both **water conservation and stormwater management goals**.

For homeowners who may not be able to afford the up-front costs of implementing rainwater harvesting systems, Tucson Water partnered with SERI to offer a **Low-Income Rainwater Harvesting Grant & Loan Program** and provide grants of up to $400 and loans of up to $2,000 to **make rainwater harvesting more affordable and accessible** to residents with lower incomes.

SERI staff have built relationships with community members and have a track record of working with residents on improving energy efficiency in their homes and planting trees. Expanding the support SERI provides to residents to include rainwater harvesting made sense and supported Tucson's Mayor's Million Tree Initiative by providing a non-metered source of water that would provide rainwater to newly planted trees. Given SERI's qualifications and relationships with the community, Tucson Water contracts with SERI to carry out their Rainwater Harvesting Grant/Loan Program.

CONCLUSION

Trust between water utilities and community organizations on how local decisions are informed, made, and implemented is critical for success and can be considered a key element for safe, clean and sustainable water for all. We are inspired by the strong and authentic relationships, centered on equity and transparency, that informed these Foundations of Trust. By applying this constellation of practices, we hope to see many more trusting partnerships between community organizations and water utilities develop and thrive, helping to secure a more equitable water future.



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

River Network – **Equitable Water Infrastructure Toolkit**

WaterNow Alliance – **Tap Into Resilience**

American Water Works Association – **A Water Utility Manager's Guide to Community Stewardship**

U.S. Water Alliance – **Water Equity Task Force Insights for the Water Sector**

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency - **Water Utilities as Anchor Institutions**