



CLINTON RIVER
WATERSHED COUNCIL

ORGANIZATIONAL HISTORY

BEGINNINGS

In 1968, a major rainstorm flooded the Red Run, inundating the Mount Clemens area just downstream. This event revealed that the flood control projects of the early 1950s – namely the Clinton River spillway and Red Run Urban Drain – could no longer accommodate the increased runoff generated by this rapidly developing region. As a result, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers began planning further flood control projects. The classic division of interests between upstream and downstream communities became clear: the upstream communities wanted the drainage system enlarged in order to move water away quickly, while the downstream communities were fed up with the severe flooding that resulted from channelizing the system.

This conflict sparked interest in forming a Clinton River Watershed Council under the provisions of the Michigan Local Rivers Management Act (Act 253, PA 1964). This act was adopted because of the perceived need for lead agencies that could focus on all of the water resource management issues affecting river basins as units. A watershed council would provide a communicating and coordinating function among the many stakeholders that were responsible for a piece of the river management puzzle, but lacked a holistic view.

The Clinton River Watershed Council was established in December 1971. The council served as an association of local governments with appointed, voting delegates in proportion to each community's population in the watershed. With passage of the federal Clean Water Act in 1972, local governments with wastewater treatment plants on the Clinton River joined the council. They hoped to present a united front to the state and federal governments, which were pressing for abandonment of local plants discharging to inland streams and redirecting sewage to Detroit for collection and treatment. This strategy was developed to make use of the large flows of the Detroit River for dilution, in the days when it was commonly believed that “the solution to pollution is dilution.”

The watershed council's Executive Director was selected as chairman of the Army Corps advisory committee for flood control planning, thus positioning the council well to influence the outcome of the planning. By 1979, the Corps concluded that the costs of additional flood control work would exceed the damage reduction benefits. Hence, no additional federal projects would be funded. The watershed council then successfully petitioned Congress to fund a watershed-wide study of existing and potential flooding and analysis of several alternative approaches to flood control. This work convinced the council that stormwater management and source control of runoff was the most effective approach. Since the Clinton River had suffered over 50% of the historic flood damages in Michigan, it was an appropriate watershed in which to launch new efforts towards stormwater management.

WATER QUALITY MONITORING

The first major project of the watershed council from 1974 to 1979 was river monitoring. An independent and more complete set of water quality data was critically needed. Monthly grab samples were collected from 17 stations in the watershed and analyzed for 17 parameters with the assistance of four treatment plant laboratories. The program ended as the nation's focus shifted from conventional parameters to a concern for toxic substances. Today, the council's Stream Leaders student river monitoring program (established in 1992) and Adopt-a-Stream program (established in 1998) focus on macroinvertebrate sampling in addition to chemical analysis because these organisms are long-term indicators of water quality, not just snapshots at one point in time. A 1997 habitat inventory encompassed physical, chemical, and biological characteristics of the river.

WATERSHED MANAGEMENT

Throughout the 1970s, as the federal flood control program was being developed and Michigan was struggling towards enactment of the state's Wetlands Protection Act, a great deal of the council's work focused on the role of local government in floodplain management and wetlands protection, as well as promoting the adoption of local floodplain and wetlands ordinances. With council assistance, Oakland Township became the first Michigan community to adopt a local wetland ordinance and a stormwater management plan.

Stormwater management addresses both the quantity of water (flood control) as well as the quality of water (pollution control) and preservation of aquatic habitat. When Lake Erie suffered oxygen depletion and fish kills, and truckloads of dead ducks were dumped at the Michigan Capitol, public policy shifted from "the solution to pollution is dilution" to "dilution is not a substitute for treatment." The Clinton River cities of Warren, Pontiac, and Mt. Clemens retained their local wastewater treatment plants and committed to making improvements to comply with new federal stormwater discharge permits, which limited the levels of pollutants in their discharges. The council was very active in representing local communities as federal and state policies, laws, and programs were being established for today's pollution control framework.

The council received a series of grants through the 1980s and 1990s for stormwater management projects that produced such documents as the *Stormwater Management Guidebook for Michigan Communities* (1987), and *Controlling Stormwater Runoff From New Developments: A Guidebook for Michigan Communities* (1995). The council also received one of the state's first nonpoint source pollution planning and implementation grants for a small, urbanizing watershed housing a high quality trout stream – Gallagher Creek, a tributary of Paint Creek, in Oakland Township. A management plan for Gallagher Creek was completed in 1991. The council also worked with the cities of Center Line, Hazel Park, Madison Heights, and Warren to develop a watershed management plan for Bear Creek, a tributary to the Red Run Drain. The plan was completed in 1999 and was officially approved by the Department of Environmental Quality in 2000. A third nonpoint source pollution planning grant was received in 2000 to develop a watershed management plan for Stony Creek, located in the north-central area of the watershed.

Issues that emerged in the 1990s have provided additional opportunities to engage local communities in water resources management. The 1994 Lake St. Clair beach closings (due to high bacteria levels) and spotlight on the Twelve Towns combined sewer overflows in southeastern Oakland County, created interest among communities that previously did not feel a connection to the Clinton River. Headwater communities that considered themselves upstream from the problems are also becoming more aware of their responsibilities and the benefits inherent in protecting their local water resources. Because Lake St. Clair is the source

of much of the region's drinking water, more attention is being paid to the Clinton River / Lake St. Clair connection and the new state drinking water protection program.

THE REMEDIAL ACTION PLAN

In 1985, the International Joint Commission (IJC), which oversees progress made under the US-Canada Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement, identified 42 "Areas of Concern" (AOCs) in the Great Lakes region, including the mouth of the Clinton River. AOCs are generally "toxic hot spots" with sediments contaminated by PCBs, heavy metals, oils, and grease. The IJC called on the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (now the Department of Environmental Quality) to develop Remedial Action Plans (RAPs) for the AOCs, with assistance from local public advisory councils. The watershed council has been involved in Clinton River RAP planning since 1986. The initial Clinton River RAP was published in 1987, and updates were produced in 1995 and 1998.

RECREATION

Because the objectives of the nation's Clean Water Act are "fishable, swimmable" waters, the watershed council has also had a long-term focus on promoting recreation opportunities on the river. A 1973 booklet provided a site evaluation methodology for use by local governments in selecting good sites for riverfront parks. The council has provided information and support for local park and trail grant applications, and produced a poster illustrating the recreation opportunities along the streams in the watershed. The Council has also assisted cleanup committees that have sponsored annual cleanups for removal of litter and log jams from the river, and published the *Guide to Organizing a River Cleanup* for Earth Day in 1990. In 2001, the council reinvigorated river clean-up activities with the establishment of Clinton Clean-Up, an annual watershed-wide clean-up event.

GROUNDWATER PROTECTION

"A river is the memory of the land through which it has flowed." Stormwater management connects land and water, and includes nonpoint source pollution controls and wetlands and floodplain protection. Surface water and groundwater are also connected, and anything that is spilled on the land has the potential to contaminate groundwater. With a four-year grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation's Groundwater Education (GEM) program, the council focused on local government roles in groundwater protection. Groundwater protection provisions for local ordinances were written, outreach tools for local governments to use with community homeowners and businesses were developed, and Michigan's first Municipal Wellhead Protection Plan was written with the Village of Oxford in 1992.

STORMWATER REGULATIONS

The vast majority of communities in the Clinton River watershed are subject to Phase II of the National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System, new federal stormwater regulations that went into effect in March 2003. These regulations require communities to obtain permits for their stormwater discharges and to undertake actions to reduce stormwater discharge quantity and improve the quality of discharges entering public waterways. These activities include the implementation of ordinances and standards to control stormwater, construction site erosion and sedimentation control, good housekeeping practices such as street sweeping and catch basin clean-out, and public education to raise awareness about watershed protection and stormwater pollution prevention.

From 2000-2002, the council was actively involved in the formation of seven subwatershed planning groups that were organized to plan for and implement the new stormwater regulations.

These groups include representatives from dozens of municipalities, county agencies, school districts, and other stakeholders, who meet on a regular basis to collaborate on watershed planning (a requirement of the Phase II permit) and share resources and information on watershed management issues. In 2003, the council developed a program to provide its member communities with public education services to help meet the Phase II requirements and is in the process of implementing this program.

ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

From 1972 to 1993, the council depended on membership dues from local governments for funding. Initially, these revenues covered the council's operating costs and allotments for special projects. Over the years, the annual operating budget increased from \$20,000 to \$60,000, and any special projects had to be funded by grants. By 1993, municipalities were tightening their budgets, and any substantial increase in local government revenues appeared unlikely. The council's budget up to that time supported a full-time Executive Director and part-time secretary, with any additional staff coming and going with the grants. Consultants were often contracted instead of hiring short-term staff.

In 1993, the decision was made to explore the establishment of the council as a 501(c)3 nonprofit corporation in order to tap additional revenue sources such as business and individual memberships. Even when voting delegates were only from municipalities, businesses and citizens had a history of involvement in the council. A Transition Advisory Committee worked with an organizational consultant to draft the proposal for the new watershed council. At the last annual meeting of the old council in October 1993, the membership voted to terminate the Act 253 council on December 31st and transfer all remaining assets to the new nonprofit organization on January 1st, 1994.

The Board of Directors of the new council agreed it was appropriate to expand the staff and activities of the council to better meet the demands for river management and opportunities for involvement of the many stakeholders. Unfortunately, expansion and expenditures outpaced revenues for several years, creating cash flow problems. Fundraising to support operating costs and maintaining a reserve fund remains a challenge. Early plans to establish an endowment fund, which would level out the ups and downs of grants and retain staff over the long term, have not been followed through. Discontinuity in leadership also plagued the council in its early years as a nonprofit: the long-term Executive Director (1974-1993) retired; her successor resigned in 1995, and two subsequent directors served for two and three years respectively.

Despite these ups and downs, the council saw its focus expand dramatically in the closing years of the 20th Century. Grants were awarded from the state and federal governments to pursue urban stormwater controls, wetlands assessment, habitat restoration, investigation and correction of illicit connections, onsite wastewater management, and continued participation in the RAP process. In the 1990s, the council held quarterly watershed management forums for presenting and exchanging information among watershed communities. The watershed council also established River Day in 1998 as an opportunity to engage individuals, civic groups, businesses, and local governments in collaborative efforts to protect, restore, and celebrate the Clinton River and its watershed. Twice a year, the council coordinates the Stream Leaders student river monitoring program and holds an annual Congress for the students to share their results and attend workshops. The council publishes a quarterly newsletter and extensive website, hosts a 600-member e-mail listserve, and manages the Clinton River Resource Center,

an extensive library of reference materials on the river and a variety of watershed management topics.

LOOKING AHEAD

As the council enters the new millennium, opportunities and challenges abound. Throughout 2001, council staff engaged in discussions with many stakeholder groups – including other nonprofit organizations, local government officials, and county and state agencies – to talk about the council's role in the watershed. These entities unanimously expressed the urgent, unmet need for increasing the individual citizen's awareness about their role in decreasing water pollution, improving water quality and habitat, and encouraging watershed stewardship. From these discussions, the council has begun to shift its focus from planning and technical assistance to public education and outreach. Expansion of the council's activities in these areas, including coordination of the monitoring programs and River Day, educational presentations, one-on-one assistance, publication of the newsletter, and development of the council's website, will continue, and new opportunities will be explored to collaborate with other groups engaging in related activities. Now, more than ever, it is clear that the solution to pollution is individual behavior. Only through the development of aware, educated citizens, with the passion and motivation to protect our water resources, will we achieve our vision for the Clinton River.

*Originally prepared by Peggy Johnson, CRWC Director Emerita
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