

1. Administrative Information

Institution: ECHO, Leahy Center for Lake Champlain

Project Title: Voices for the Lake

Award Amount: \$25,000

Project Date: 10/1/16 - 9/30/18

Project Director: Barry Lampke

Project Summary

ECHO, Leahy Center for Lake Champlain, the lead applicant, and All Souls Interfaith Gathering's Center for Earth Ministry, developed and launched an online engagement platform to provide shared services to an emerging network of organizations committed to creating a new culture of clean water.

The project was intended to provide:

- Network participants with a robust system for communications, project planning, management and evaluation.
- State leaders with the critical public engagement puzzle piece to increase effectiveness of their regulatory efforts, including tactical basin planning efforts to meet water quality standards;
- Local and regional organizations with shared learning opportunities to better understand their water quality challenges and participate in their basin's planning and project implementation.
- The public with stories and a dashboard of environmental, economic, cultural and regulatory indicators measuring our progress in improving water quality and creating a culture of clean water.

Background

In June, 2015 the Lake Champlain Basin Program released its [State of the Lake Report](#) that indicates little or no progress in addressing the lake major water quality challenges. Concentrations of phosphorus have not decreased significantly in any areas of Lake Champlain, and long-term trends since 1990 indicate concentrations in several segments continue to increase. Combined sewer overflows have discharged hundreds of thousands of gallons raw sewage to the lake during heavy spring and summer rains. Burlington's beaches already have been closed this summer due to toxic blue-green algae.

The state of the lake also creates economic hardships. In areas such as St. Albans Bay and Missisquoi Bay, algal blooms from high phosphorus concentrations are causing financial distress for the region's economy, including tourism businesses and homeowners facing lower property values.

Understanding that the stakes are high, key legislators, organizations and decision makers collaborated to craft and fund Act 64¹, a landmark law to improve water quality in our streams, rivers and lakes - the Vermont Clean Water Act. Signed by the governor in June, it provides state agencies with important regulatory and enforcement authority, allocates resources to educate Vermont farmers and businesses about strategies to reduce phosphorus runoff, and creates a Clean Water Fund to support water quality improvement projects. This all comes at a time when the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency EPA recently established Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL)² for how much phosphorus can be in certain areas of Lake Champlain while still meeting

¹ [Vermont Act 64](#), Enacted June 16, 2015

² [Phosphorus TMDLs for Vermont Segments of Lake Champlain](#). Publication. N.p.: n.p., n.d. Print.

requirements of the federal Clean Water Act. At the same time, the state released its plan to implement the TMDL.

Project Need

As state agencies gear up to fulfill their permitting, enforcement and training responsibilities, state leaders and other stakeholders are eager to collaborate on the larger picture - engaging all Vermonters in clean water awareness and action. The law's enactment presents a unique opportunity for this partnership to establish a new network to create a culture of clean water.

We must collaborate in new ways to create a culture of clean water. To create a culture of clean water, we must move away from the traditional, fragmented approaches that have not produced results. These efforts are characterized by:

- Organizations working separately and often competing against each other for funding;
- Organizations structuring evaluation to show only their progress.

This project will engage multiple stakeholders, collaborating to solve the complex challenge of improving water quality, and will be characterized by:

- Participants honoring spiritual and scientific motivations for environmental stewardship;
- Funders and participants recognizing that water quality problems and solutions come from organizations interacting within a system;
- Participants coordinating actions and learning together;
- Participants working toward shared goals using shared metrics.

EPA TMDL and Act 64 identify scientific and regulatory and limited financial levers. This project builds on that work, and identifies and develops strategies to move the system's cultural and economic levers. It engages a diversity of stakeholders in all walks of life. The complex adaptive system of water quality management demands new relationships and agile solutions.

Our scope was built on stakeholders' success in mapping the system, identifying levers of change and initiating collaborative projects. In Year 1, we worked with systems mapping consultant Scott Spann of Innate Strategies to engage more than 70 stakeholder organizations to create a system map for preserving water quality in the Lake Champlain Basin. They collaborated in teams to:

- Create and validate the systems map;
- Identify levers to improve the how the system functions;
- Establish a common agenda;
- Cultivate and deepen working relationships; and
- Form teams to implement specific projects identified at a project summit.

3. Project Results

The project developed and launched an online engagement platform to serve as a key part of our work to engage and motivate people who care deeply about creating a culture of clean water. We employed a combination of face-to-face and online strategies to facilitate productive conversations around water quality and advance our work.

This engagement strategy would:

- Ensure collaborators have the opportunity to commit to a common agenda, discuss workflow, address common concerns and build trust;
- Foster an environment of continuous and productive collaboration.
- Build upon the VFL storytelling approach to share Vermonters' clean water culture experiences;
- Connect with other stakeholders and the public, and solicit input on project results and next steps.

The online engagement platform was designed to offer the following features:

- Communications Toolbox that provides network participants with consistent language, talking points, social media posts and news stories about network goals, project progress and activities;
- Members-only forums for Work Team and Steering Committee participants; and
- Platform to share current and future Voices for the Lake videos curated from the ECHO kiosk and other sources.
- Dashboard of population-level clean water culture indicators and actions people can take to improve water quality;
- Webinars and other shared learning opportunities for water quality improvement initiatives;
- Social media initiatives to engage people in network and member organization activities.

When the project was conceived, the Vermont Clean Water Network was an emerging multi-sector network organized around a Collective Impact common agenda. The Network's governing body, the Common Circle, understood the need for a communications framework that supported the network's activities, and determined that an online platform would be essential to continuous communication and project management. This occurred during a time in which two paradigms of Internet communications were beginning to compete for users' attention:

- Destinations - websites and portals with content that are driven by search engines and referrals; and
- Conversations - social media channels with conversations and content driven by social connections.

Designed to be an online central hub (destination) through which network participants would communicate, the platform would incorporate a variety of functions, including a communications toolbox, a platform to share video stories, member forums and tools, a community indicators dashboard, and webinars. It was also intended to be a resource for Vermonters who wanted to learn more about the issues and take action.

Among our lessons learned:

- Participants preferred to share communications tools among themselves, and not create a common toolbox. Organizations preferred to create communications that fit their brand.
- Participants were not willing to join another set of forums that required them to create user names and passwords. Instead, they still prefer e-mail and a Network ListServ to communicate online, and face-to-face meetings.
- We initially expected participants would create and share videos, but they lacked the time and resources to do so. Participants will share their stories in video interviews if they are not responsible for producing the product.

- A number of organizations and agencies already have dashboards addressing water quality in different geographic areas, and this project did not have the capacity to tackle a data-intensive effort to establish a shared measurement initiative.
- Participants clearly articulated that one of the main value propositions of the Network was learning together in the same room. At the same time, they determined that the public and key stakeholders would greatly benefit from a centralized What You Can Do section on our website.
- Originally the website was administered separately from our social media channels, and we quickly learned they must be linked and support each other.

Ultimately, due to the highly decentralized and emerging structure of the Network and the rapidly changing online world, participants chose to use a variety of in-person and online tools to communicate, learn together and manage initiatives.

To apply our lessons learned, we continue to make the following changes to better serve participants' needs:

- We now provide participants with communications success stories and opportunities to learn from each other.
- We now engage participants through existing online channels and meetings;
- We now oversee production of video interviews, and have approximately 20 online.
- We now create in-person learning opportunities for participants rather than online webinars, and have public resources for action online. We will continue to update and refine our website's What You Can Do section;
- We now integrate our social media outreach directly with the website.