

ACTION THROUGH CONNECTION:
CAPACITY-BUILDING FOR COMMUNITY GROUPS

Hudson River Watershed Alliance

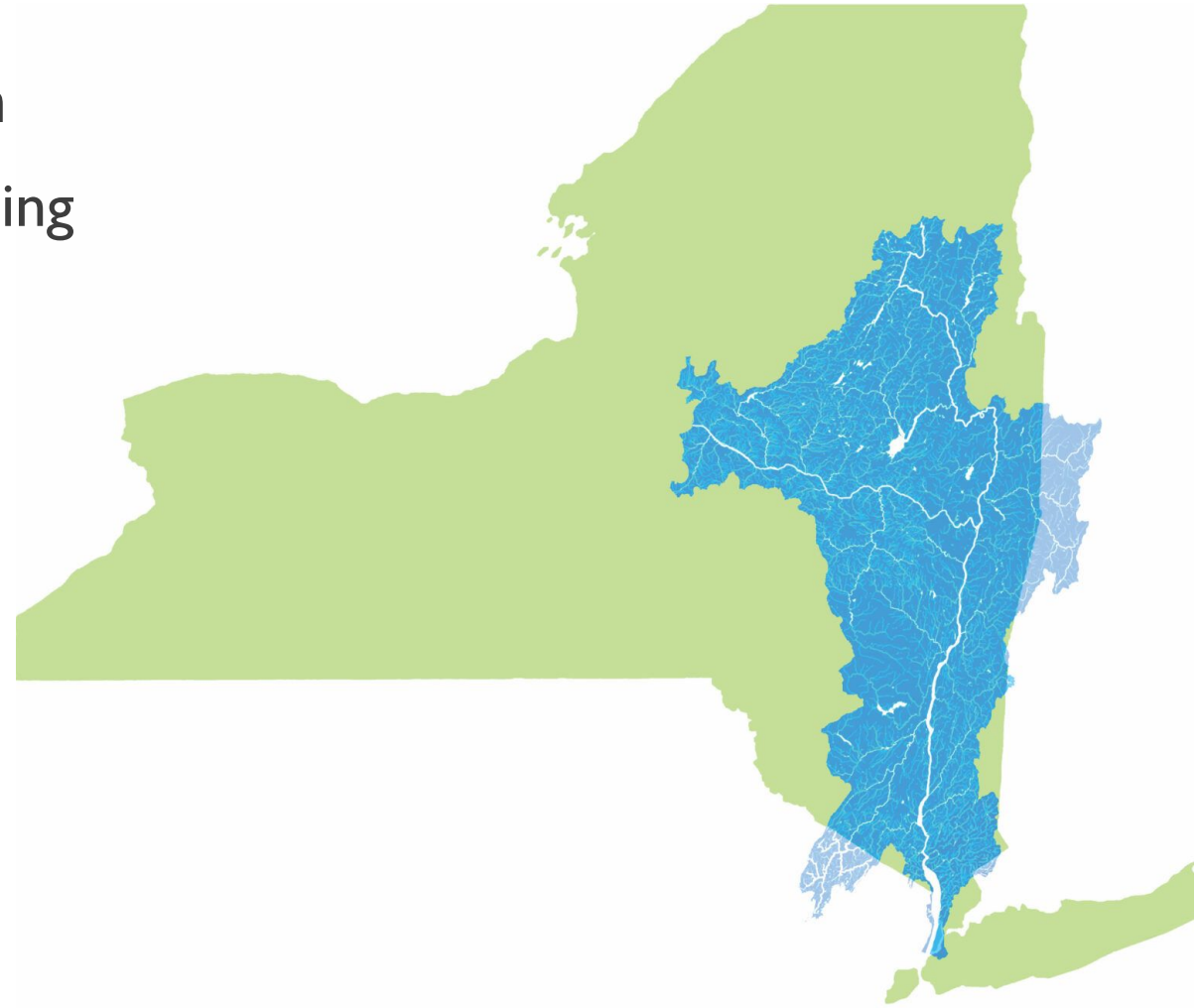
EMILY VAIL

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
HUDSON RIVER WATERSHED ALLIANCE

Hudson River Environmental Society Annual Symposium | Millbrook, NY | 10/28/26

OUTLINE

- Planning processes take data to action
  - Watershed characterization & planning
- Capacity is key each step of the way
  - What is capacity?
  - HRWA programs, resources, examples
- Elements of capacity-building
- Next steps



HUDSON RIVER WATERSHED ALLIANCE

- Unite and empower communities to protect our shared waters
  - Support watershed groups
  - Help municipalities work together
  - Communicate as a collective voice
- Based in Kingston, NY, work across the watershed

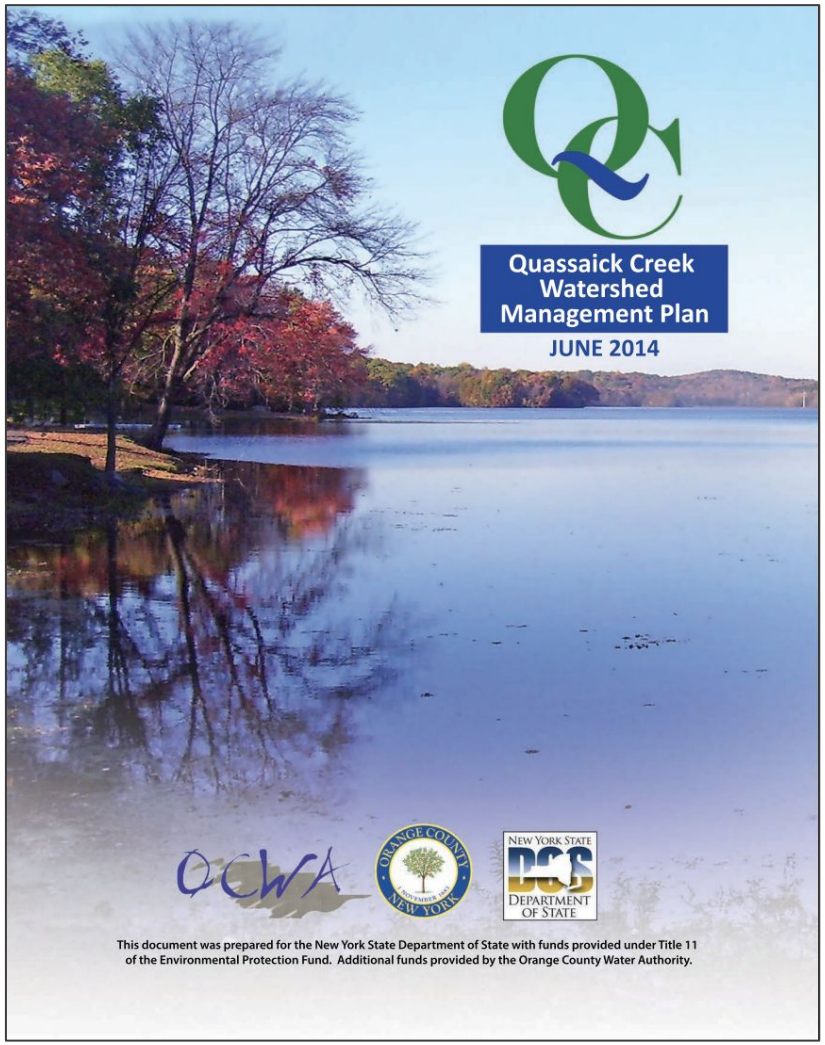


THE PLANNING PROCESS



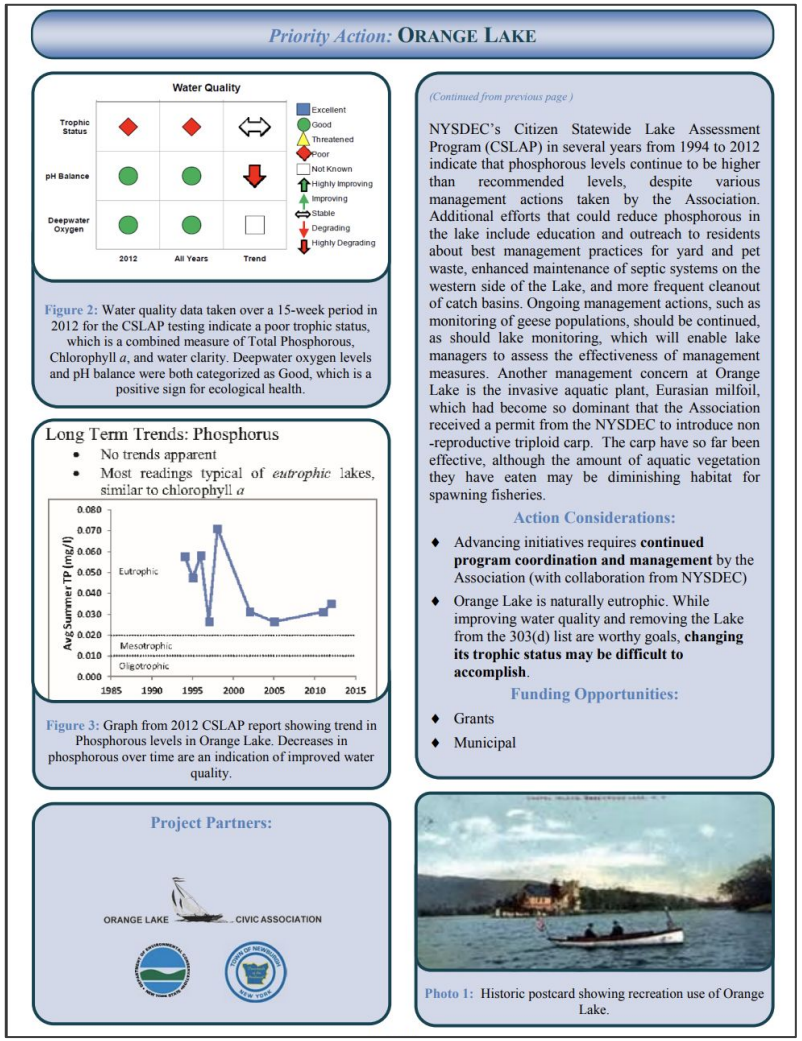
WHAT IS A WATERSHED PLAN?

- Planning for future conditions, using a watershed framework and scale
- Process and product to bring people together, build consensus, and develop strategies
- Includes 1) compilation of existing information (*watershed characterization*) and 2) specific actions to meet goals (*watershed plan*)
- Shares the watershed's story by contextualizing, interpreting data; citable resource



DATA TO ACTION THROUGH PLANNING

- Collect data/information (water quality or other)
- What does it mean? Interpretation is key
  - Scientifically? Against baselines/standards? Within the community? Compared to region?
- Describe in watershed characterization
  - Maps, charts, narrative, visualizations to illustrate meaning
- Watershed plan process: defines actions
  - Use the science to inform strategies
  - Prioritize, build consensus, buy-in
  - Implementation plan
- Priority actions get done!



Priority Action: ORANGE LAKE

Water Quality

Figure 2: Water quality data taken over a 15-week period in 2012 for the CSLAP testing indicate a poor trophic status, which is a combined measure of Total Phosphorous, Chlorophyll *a*, and water clarity. Deepwater oxygen levels and pH balance were both categorized as Good, which is a positive sign for ecological health.

Long Term Trends: Phosphorus

- No trends apparent
- Most readings typical of *eutrophic* lakes, similar to chlorophyll *a*

Figure 3: Graph from 2012 CSLAP report showing trend in Phosphorous levels in Orange Lake. Decreases in phosphorous over time are an indication of improved water quality.

Project Partners:

ORANGE LAKE CIVIC ASSOCIATION

(Continued from previous page)

NYSDEC's Citizen Statewide Lake Assessment Program (CSLAP) in several years from 1994 to 2012 indicate that phosphorous levels continue to be higher than recommended levels, despite various management actions taken by the Association. Additional efforts that could reduce phosphorous in the lake include education and outreach to residents about best management practices for yard and pet waste, enhanced maintenance of septic systems on the western side of the Lake, and more frequent cleanout of catch basins. Ongoing management actions, such as monitoring of geese populations, should be continued, as should lake monitoring, which will enable lake managers to assess the effectiveness of management measures. Another management concern at Orange Lake is the invasive aquatic plant, Eurasian milfoil, which had become so dominant that the Association received a permit from the NYSDEC to introduce non-reproductive triploid carp. The carp have so far been effective, although the amount of aquatic vegetation they have eaten may be diminishing habitat for spawning fisheries.

Action Considerations:

- Advancing initiatives requires **continued program coordination and management** by the Association (with collaboration from NYSDEC)
- Orange Lake is naturally eutrophic. While improving water quality and removing the Lake from the 303(d) list are worthy goals, **changing its trophic status may be difficult to accomplish**.

Funding Opportunities:

- Grants
- Municipal

Photo 1: Historic postcard showing recreation use of Orange Lake.

PLANNING PROCESS DECISION-MAKING

- Motivations
  - Reactionary? Anticipatory? Exploratory?
- Geographic extent
- Content focus (based on understanding of watershed conditions or issues)
  - e.g., water quality, flooding, aquatic habitat, environmental justice, climate change
- Who should be involved in planning or action?
- Helps you determine
  - Timeline/budget/funding
  - Expertise & experience needed, roles



Punch Brook-Roeliff Jansen Kill Watershed Characterization Advisory Committee

WHAT IS A WATERSHED GROUP?

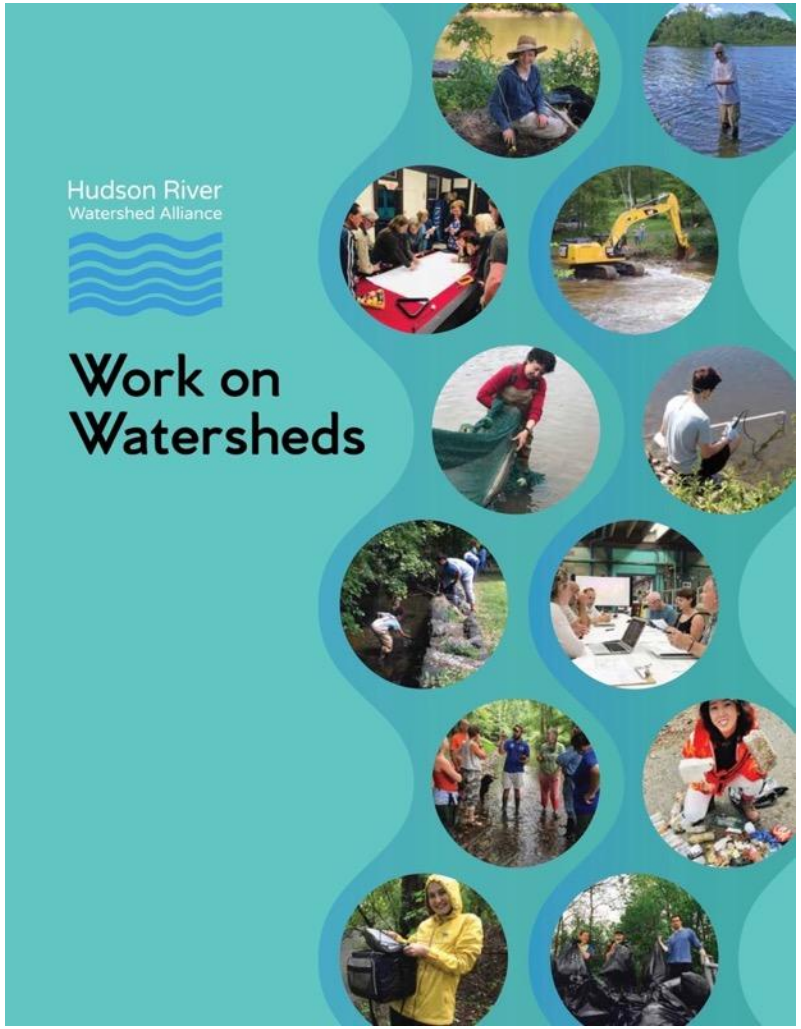
- Collective of people working together locally to protect a specific watershed
- Variety of forms: unincorporated community groups, 501(c)(3)s, intermunicipal councils, fiscal sponsor, led by agencies or non-profits
  - All- or mostly- volunteer groups (some have part-time paid coordination)
- Watershed work is complex, collaboration is key



Fall Kill Watershed Coalition

WATERSHED NEEDS ASSESSMENT

- 2019-2021: Watershed Needs Assessment *(Hudson River Estuary Program grant)*
- Talked to 56 people (32 1:1 interviews and 26 regional partners in focus groups)
- Goal: better understand strengths and needs of watershed groups
  - → Watershed Needs Assessment Report
  - → Watershed Needs Assessment Appendix
  - → Work on Watersheds – success stories



WATERSHED GROUPS NEED CAPACITY

- Sept 2024: journal article in *Environmental Management*
- "The Importance of Capacity-Building in Watershed Groups: Lessons from the Hudson River Watershed, USA" by Michael Finewood, Pace University, et al.

"At the watershed scale, environmental organizations and groups are ***critical for effective watershed governance***…

[O]ur research suggests ***capacity (such as internal structure, strategic planning, and leadership) is most important for successful and sustainable groups***.

Therefore, we argue that ***support for capacity is more likely to help sustain groups and their long-term beneficial impact***."

WATERSHED GROUPS NEED CAPACITY

- What is "**capacity**"?
  - **Ability to get work done**
- Specific needs/challenges we heard:
  - One person does all the work
  - Leadership transitions
  - Need more people / members
  - Engage more communities
  - More specific, clear mission to manage opportunities and watershed challenges



September 2025 Watershed Roundtable

CAPACITY-BUILDING PROGRAMS & RESOURCES

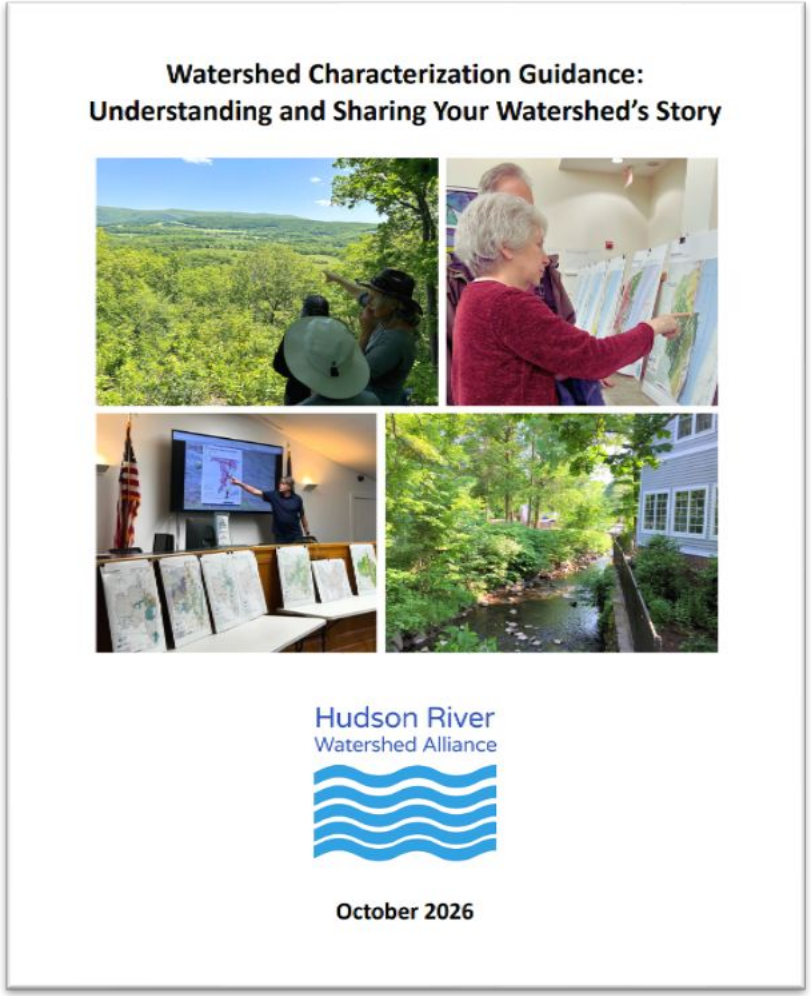
- To meet needs, HRWA developed:
  - **Watershed characterization and planning guidance**
  - **Organizational development self-guided learning modules**, monthly cohort meetings to work through modules
  - Direct technical assistance with facilitators to create a **strategic workplan**, implement an org development priority



Wallkill River Watershed Alliance visioning session

WATERSHED CHARACTERIZATION GUIDANCE

- Just published! ***Watershed Characterization Guidance: Understanding & Sharing Your Watershed's Story***
- Watershed planning frameworks, project scoping, prompts for decision-making, how to compile and organize information, lessons learned from pilots, templates, many more resources
- Self-assessment worksheets to identify next steps
- More info on our website



SELF-GUIDED RESOURCES AVAILABLE

- Organizational development + growth checklists, modules
  - Short videos, worksheets, templates
- Useful for getting on the same page for groups, orgs, projects, partnerships, etc. of all sizes
  - Helps make the implicit explicit
  - Simple, but not easy
- Posted on HRWA website



Episode 1: Org Health Checklist & Mission Statements

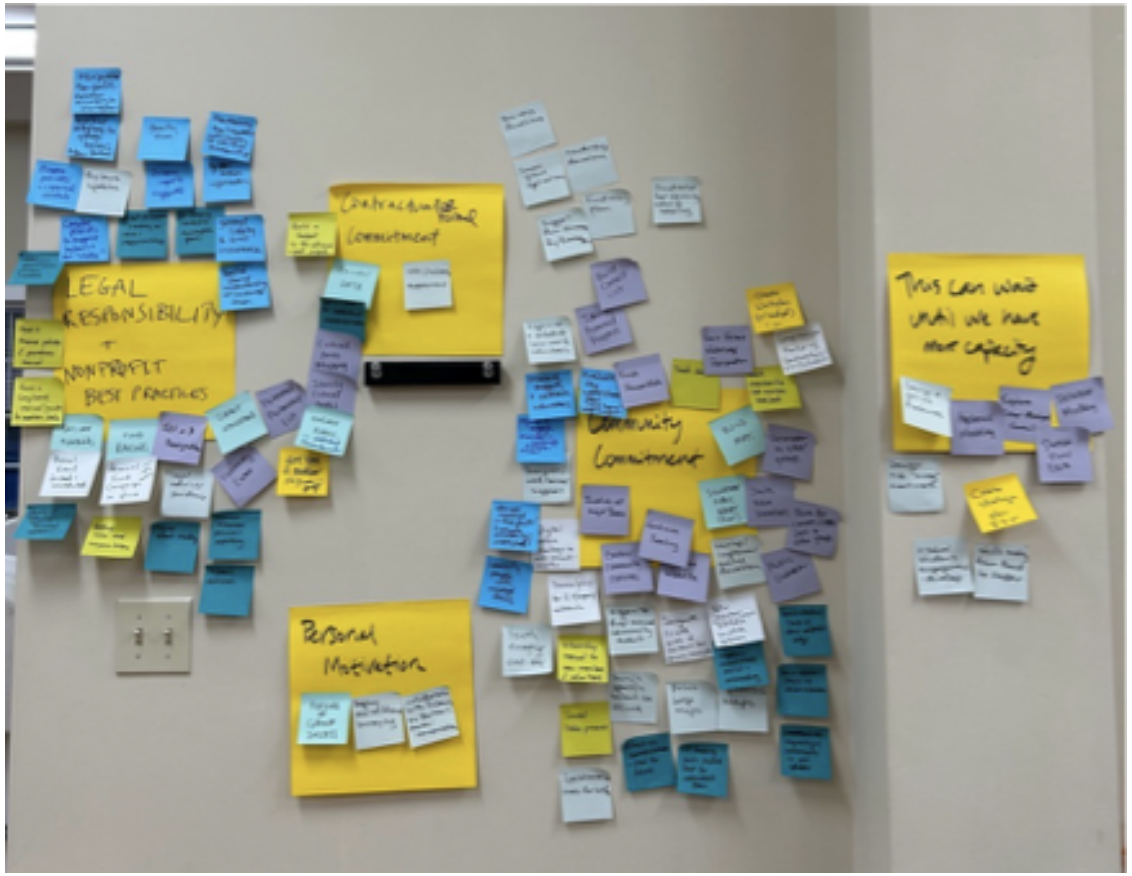
The first episode in this series reviews the checklist topics, and dives into building and assessing a mission statement.

– Mission Statement Worksheet
– Values Worksheet
– Vision Statement Worksheet
– PDF of episode slides



STRATEGIC WORKPLANS

- Process: w/ facilitator, align on mission, consider commitments, build consensus on next steps
- Set of priority actions for the watershed group to take over the next 2 years
  - We have lots of information / challenges, but what do we do first?



Fishkill Creek Watershed Alliance visioning session

CASE STUDY: QUASSAICK CREEK WATERSHED ALLIANCE

- Quassaick Creek watershed, Newburgh, NY
- 2009: Quassaick Creek Watershed Alliance
- 2014: Watershed Management Plan
  - 54 management recommendations
  - 10 priority projects
- 2025 strategic workplan with HRWA:
  - Set priorities, leadership transition, spread workload, improved communications, clearer roles on partnership projects



Quassaick Creek Watershed Alliance

ACTION THROUGH CONNECTION

- **What does successful work together look like for you?**
- **What does "increased capacity" look like, for your group or the group(s) you support?** (How do you know capacity has been increased?)
  - Goals: Increased confidence, ease, consensus, cohesion, shared sense of direction
  - Outcomes: more projects, more people and partnerships, strategic actions, access to funding, sharing successes



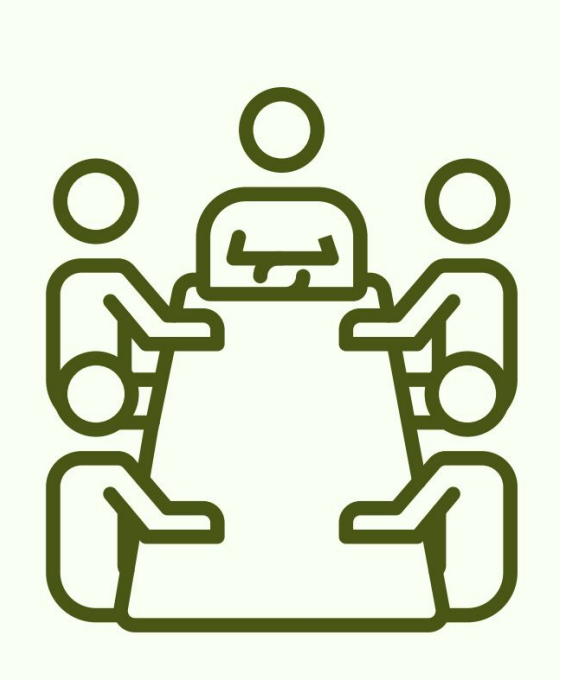
Fishkill Creek Watershed Alliance

ELEMENTS OF CAPACITY-BUILDING

Can be considered for internal work, planning processes, implementation projects, partnerships/collaborations, etc.

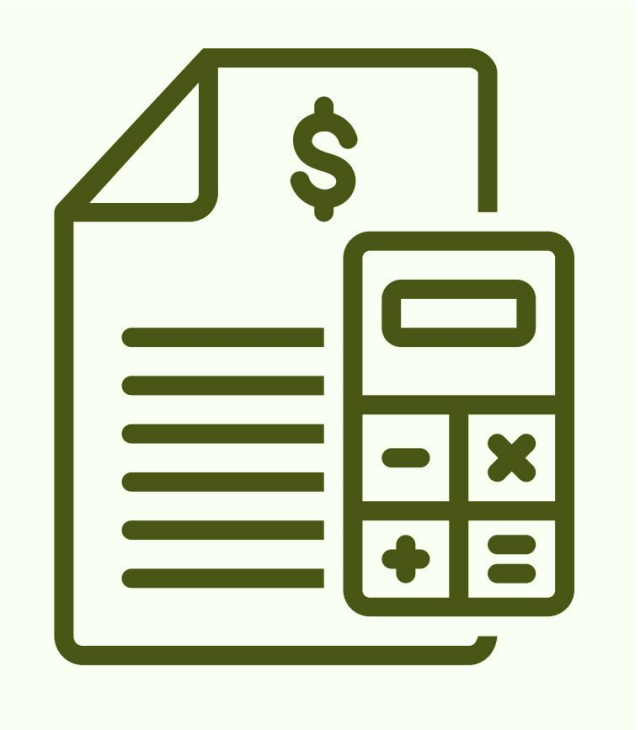
- Defining specific mission(s)
  - What is our shared purpose?
- Leadership
  - Who sets the course?
- Membership / leadership team
  - Who is at the table, or should be?





ELEMENTS OF CAPACITY-BUILDING

- Governance structures and roles
  - Who makes decisions? Who advises? Who is informed?
  - How can the workload be shared?
  - Who is responsible for what?
- Funding/budgets
  - Do we have the resources we need?
  - How are funds processed?
- Workplans
  - How do we prioritize work?
  - Do we have the people, resources, time, expertise?



ELEMENTS OF CAPACITY-BUILDING

- Relationship-building
  - How to engage partners and/or the broader community?
  - Do we have access to people with the information, expertise, experience, and/or insights we need?
- Communications
  - Is information from past work, studies, institutional knowledge, etc. accessible? Where is it stored?
  - How are project updates or successes shared? (to engage more members, connect with partners, update the community, build trust/legitimacy)



TAKEAWAYS

- Planning products and processes help bring data to action
  - Understand what data mean, build consensus, and set priorities
  - Active decision-making, clear goals → better outcomes
- Capacity is the ability to get work done
  - Within groups, specific projects, through collaborations with partners
- Good systems create more ease, confidence, opens capacity



Saw Mill River Coalition

NEXT STEPS

- Get specific about the barriers to action, in planning or implementation
- Check out Hudson River Watershed Alliance programs / resources
  - Watershed Characterization Guidance
  - Self-guided capacity-building modules
  - Strategic workplans for 4 more watershed groups in 2027
- Join our email list to stay in touch!



THANK YOU!

Emily Vail
Executive Director
Hudson River Watershed Alliance

emily@hudsonwatershed.org
hudsonwatershed.org
@HudsonRiverWatershedAlliance

Hudson River Watershed Alliance

Uniting & empowering communities to protect our shared waters

NEW YORK STATE | Department of Environmental Conservation | Hudson River Estuary Program

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