

Winooski Basin Water Quality Commission Meeting Minutes – January 19, 2023

Winooski Basin Water Quality Council Members:

NRCDs		RPCs	
✓	Peter Danforth, Lamoille NRCD	✓	Darlene Palola, CCRPC
✓	Emily Porter-Goff, Alternate		Garret Mott, CCRPC, Alternate
✓	Remy Crettol, Winooski NRCD	✓	Alan Quackenbush, CVRPC
✓	Russ Barret, Alternate		Robert Wernecke, CVRPC, Alternate
Land Conservation Organizations		Municipalities	
✓	Erin De Vries, VT River Conservancy	✓	Annie Costandi, Essex
	Vacant, Alternate	✓	Sarah McShane, Stowe, Alternate
Watershed Protection Organizations			Nigel Hicks-Tibbles, Northfield
✓	Michele Braun, Friends of the Winooski River	✓	Alice Peal, Waitsfield, Alternate
	Shawn White, Alternate		
✓	Ira Shadis, Friends of the Mad River		
	Brian Shupe, Alternate		
✓	Kinny Perot, Alternate		

CVRPC Staff: Brian Voigt

Guests: Keith Fritschie (VT Department of Environmental Conservation), Karen Bates (VT Department of Environmental Conservation)

Meeting called to order: 1:03 PM

Updates to the agenda: None

Public comment: None

Review & Approve minutes from December 15, 2022 meeting

E. De Vries moved to approve the minutes of the December 15, 2022 meeting. P. Danforth seconded. No discussion. Motion carried unanimously.

CWSP Updates (information)

B. Voigt provided an update on CWSP progress since the December meeting. He noted that the remaining policies will be presented to the CVRPC Board at their February meeting and that two Requests for Qualifications (RFQs) (one for Project Implementors and one for Contractors) will be issued in late January 2023. Responses

to the RFQs will be reviewed in early March. The BWQC will continue to meet monthly through February 2023. After that the BWQC will meet less frequently with a primary focus on project ranking and prioritization for funding requests submitted during project solicitation rounds. The first project solicitation round will be issued shortly after the February 2023 BWQC meeting.

A. Quackenbush asked if B. Voigt is planning to present the updated policies to the CVRPC Board. B. Voigt responded that he would attend the CVRPC Board meeting to discuss the policy changes and why they are necessary. E. De Vries asked B. Voigt to remind the BWQC of the policies to be updated. B. Voigt noted that work on the CVRPC Public Participation Policy and the BWQC Bylaws has been completed. He then listed the remaining policies to be updated and approved by the CVRPC Board, including: Procurement, Records Retention, Internal Controls, Personnel and Conflict of Interest.

Developing a co-benefit scoring matrix & methodology (discussion)

B. Voigt presented the work that was done to update the proposed co-benefits scoring matrix and methodology since the December 2022 meeting based on feedback he received during that meeting. He recounted that one area the BWQC felt the original proposal came up short was accounting for terrestrial habitat in the Ecological Benefits category. He suggested the inclusion of areas delineating rare, threatened and endangered species and significant natural communities and presented a map displaying those locations within the basin. He proposed that the BWQC focus on two ecosystem services – carbon sequestration and flood resilience – and identify project types that are most likely to realize these types of co-benefits. The Community Building co-benefit has been revised to account for community involvement in project development and implementation. Lastly, the focus of the Education co-benefit was narrowed to consider only interpretive signage and educational meetings / workshops, excluding the geographic targeting option that focused on level of educational attainment.

A. Quackenbush asked if any BWQC members submitted comments to the CWSP since the December meeting. B. Voigt responded that he did not receive additional feedback beyond what A. Peal submitted. A. Peal asked for clarification about how the UVM Co-Benefits White Paper was selected for use in this program. B. Voigt responded that it wasn't selected for use per se, rather, DEC staff involved in the administration of the CWSP Program were also involved in the development of the White Paper. BWQCs are not required to use the UVM Co-Benefits White Paper when considering co-benefits. E. De Vries asked if there is an expectation for the Project Implementors to be well-versed in, for example, the array of metrics considered in the Social Vulnerability Index. B. Voigt responded that the Social Vulnerability Index is not being used for

project evaluation. Rather, the Environmental Justice co-benefit is based on Act 154 which includes a definition of “environmental justice target populations”. He also noted that one goal with the proposed approach is to simplify the review process for the CWSP and Project Implementors by delineating target areas on a map.

R. Crettol asked about the scoring approach for the Ecological Benefits criteria and whether the individual criteria will be weighted. B. Voigt responded that the proposed scoring approach will evaluate the location of the project against the portions of the watershed that have been designated as priority areas. If a project falls within a priority area, co-benefits points are awarded. If not, no points are awarded for that particular co-benefit. R. Crettol also noted his concern that the approach places too much of a geographic focus on co-benefits which may limit project funding for sites outside the priority areas. B. Voigt noted that the points awarded for co-benefits are minimal compared to the overall project scoring and that good projects, regardless of their geographic location, are expected to rise to the top of the rankings. He also noted that this is a first attempt, and that the scoring approach could be revised in subsequent project solicitation rounds to, for example, focus on other priorities or specify an amount of project funding for specific types of projects, regardless of location or co-benefit production.

I. Shadis asked about how to deal with data and information that is not included on the map. He offered a hypothetical scenario where a project proposal indicates the presence of an endangered species (as confirmed by a biologist after a field survey), but the state data (used to create the map) does not include that location. B. Voigt responded that if, following the first project solicitation round, no project outside the Ecological Benefits priority areas are funded that perhaps the weight assigned to the Ecological Benefits is too high. He also reminded BWQC members that they don’t just represent their organization, they represent all organizations of that type. If members find, in speaking with their network of contacts, that organizations with cost-effective Phosphorous reduction projects are not being awarded CWSP funds, the BWQC and CWSP should work to understand why and adjust the evaluation matrix accordingly. He noted that the overall goal here is to meet the Phosphorous reduction target, and that if other good things happen (i.e. co-benefits), that’s a net positive. However, accounting for the “other good things” should not preclude the funding of cost-effective Phosphorous reduction projects with limited co-benefits. I. Shadis suggested a more formalized approach for soliciting feedback from Project Implementors beyond relying on word-of-mouth. B. Voigt responded that issuing a survey / request for feedback after the first round of awards might prove useful. Survey results can be shared with the BWQC to consider whether changes in the project evaluation approach should be modified in subsequent project solicitation rounds.

B. Voigt asked for additional feedback on the proposed co-benefit evaluation matrix. Hearing none he asked if the BWQC was comfortable enough with the proposed approach to move on to the first project solicitation round or if they require additional time to consider the approach. P. Danforth responded that he feels this is a good starting point and that depending on the results of the initial project scoring that the BWQC can work together to resolve any outstanding issues (e.g. information not included in a statewide dataset that is known to the project proponent) when ranking the projects. B. Voigt responded by recounting a conversation at a previous BWQC meeting that cautioned against awarding funds to organizations that have other money (i.e. outside the CWIP funding stream) to identify or enhance co-benefits (e.g. community engagement, one-off biological inventories) to increase their project score when compared against other, well-qualified projects (and project proponents) with limited financial backing. He concluded his remarks by noting that project scoring and project ranking might not totally align, based on the nuances of individual projects which will be discussed during the project ranking process.

A. Quackenbush asked how the BWQC should finalize this approach and whether that requires some type of formal agreement. B. Voigt responded that the BWQC could make a motion to accept the evaluation approach as outlined or that members could simply agree that consensus has been reached. I. Shadis requested additional time to review the approach. P. Danforth asked if this meant the motion to accept the proposed methodology would be made at the next meeting. B. Voigt will assemble the co-benefits evaluation materials into a single document for members to review. He requested that members communicate with him directly prior to the next meeting to offer any additional feedback and that he will post that feedback to the CVRPC website. I. Shadis and A. Peal supported this approach to finalizing the methodology.

Project Solicitation

B. Voigt briefly recapped the Winooski River Basin Year 1 Funding and Phosphorous reduction targets. He noted that the funding level may change in subsequent years due to inflation and that the CWSP is still awaiting DEC guidance on this topic.

B. Voigt proposed that Project Identification and Development projects be considered separately from Design, Engineering and Construction projects. That could be accomplished in a single solicitation with a section(s) that pertains only to Project Identification and Development or by issuing separate project solicitation rounds (e.g. one for Project Identification and Development and another for Design, Engineering and Construction projects). He then proposed two questions to the BWQC: 1) How many project rounds should be issued per year? and 2) Should all project solicitations be the same? The CWSP could issue a general project solicitation that offers funding for all project types, phases and sectors. Alternatively, the CWSP could issue multiple,

targeted (thematic) project solicitations throughout the year prioritizing, for example, specific project phases, project types, sectors, geographic regions or co-benefits. He noted that this decision does not need to be either – or, rather that the CWSP could pursue a generalized approach initially, identify any gaps or areas of concern, and follow-up the initial solicitation with more targeted approaches.

M. Braun identified the amount of work for the review committee as a primary concern. She noted that the Lake Champlain Basin Committee used to set a common deadline for all of their grant applications, but found this approach too cumbersome for the review committee to handle the workload all at once. This also means that all of the contracting would occur at the same time as well. Lastly, M. Braun noted that while it is challenging to have multiple applications due at the same time, it is also challenging to have a different application due every couple of weeks. B. Voigt asked if the Project Implementors on the BWQC preferred a rolling deadline versus specific due dates. I. Shadis asked how long the grantee would have to spend the award. B. Voigt replied that he believes they would have until the end of the Formula Grant (31 December 2024). I. Shadis noted that if an applicant has two field seasons, that provides the applicant with increased flexibility for proposing projects. R. Crettol stated that he would prefer a rolling deadline. E. De Vries concurred. She also suggested that the first solicitation be more general in nature to “see what’s out there” and use the results of the first round to determine the priority criteria of subsequent rounds. B. Voigt responded that moving forward the BWQC is likely to meet quarterly and that one approach for accepting proposals might be to have a rolling deadline with submission dates approximately one month prior to each BWQC meeting. The CWSP will score the projects and share them with the BWQC for their consideration and projects will be ranked at their next meeting. B. Voigt continued by suggesting that under this scenario that only part of the funds be made available for the initial project solicitation round, holding some funds in reserve for subsequent rounds. A. Quackenbush, P. Danforth and I. Shadis concurred. B. Voigt then asked for input on how much of the overall budget should be released for the initial project solicitation round. A. Quackenbush responded that maybe that should depend on the quality / viability of the submitted project proposals.

R. Crettol asked whether there should be a simple pre-proposal to help the CWSP and BWQC understand what projects might be forwarded for consideration. B. Voigt noted that the CWSP wants to be respectful of the time and effort necessary to solicit CWSP funds and does not want the requirements to be overly burdensome. E. De Vries appreciated R. Crettol’s suggestion but was concerned about the timing of the process and the impact on potential Project Implementors. B. Voigt responded that there could be a section of the RFQ that asks about potential projects, operating under the logic that if a Project Implementor submits their qualifications for consideration, they

are likely to have one or more projects for which they intend to seek CWSP funding. He also offered a clarification of the process, noting that the CWSP will be evaluating the qualifications of Project Implementors and that the BWQC does not play a role in this part of the process.

Returning to an earlier question posed by B. Voigt, the BWQC discussed how much of the CWSP funding to release for the initial project solicitation round. It was noted that \$825,000 is not that much money when it comes to implementing water quality projects, and that the amount committed to projects following the initial project solicitation should be based on the quality of the projects submitted. Not committing all the available funds for projects proposed in the initial project solicitation round would offer flexibility in subsequent rounds to address emerging concerns or missed opportunities.

B. Voigt asked for BWQC input on what questions would be most informative for gathering information regarding potential projects. He referred to an earlier suggestion that the survey include a request for a brief project description and the level of funding likely to be requested. I. Shadis suggested making the survey a single question focusing on the amount of funding required for the project(s) the Implementor would like to advance. B. Voigt responded that while a single question survey seems attractive from a workload perspective, it might actually require additional background research by the Project Implementor to understand the finer points of CWSP funding eligibility. He also noted that by requesting a project description as part of the survey instrument that projects not deemed to be a good fit for CWSP funding could be forwarded to other funding programs for consideration. P. Danforth described how the Vermont Association of Conservation Districts solicits this type of information annually – each district lists the type of project and the amount of money it would cost. B. Voigt responded that once the CWSP has a roster of pre-qualified implementors that this approach would work, noting it is likely to be more successful and less time-consuming for use in year two and beyond. I. Shadis also noted that it would be useful to include project location in the list of survey questions.

Agenda Items for Next Meeting (February 16, 2023)

A. Quackenbush noted that the approval of the scoring matrix should be at the top of the agenda. B. Voigt recommended time in the agenda to hear from Project Implementors about the projects they might propose. He asked if there was additional information from the DEC that the BWQC felt would be useful for carrying out their responsibilities, for example tools, calculators or basin planning. A. Quackenbush likes the idea of including an agenda item that offers an update from DEC. E. De Vries concurred. P. Danforth suggested inviting a Project Implementor to discuss a water quality project they are (or have been) involved in. Additionally, he proposed

allocating time to discuss upcoming trainings so that BWQC members are aware of these opportunities. K. Bates noted the variety of resources available beyond the DEC materials, including those prepared by the Lake Champlain Basin Program. E. De Vries mentioned an upcoming webinar organized by DEC to discuss key changes in the Clean Water Initiative Funding Policy and K. Fritschie recommended an upcoming DEC training on how to use the new project submission form for entering projects into the Watershed Projects Database. B. Voigt will distribute information about these trainings.

Adjourn

A. Peal moved to adjourn the meeting at 2:33 PM. R. Crettol seconded. Motion carried unanimously.