
CHAPTER 8. ISSUES AND CONCERNS

PUBLIC MEETINGS

Initial Public Meetings

An original round of in-person public meetings was scheduled for 2020. However, the Coronavirus pandemic occurred, so the initial public meeting for the plan was held virtually on Zoom in December 2020.

Meeting Summary

- **Project Area Characteristics**

Communication - Two main issues came up about the availability of reliable communication, such as cell phone and internet services.

Utilities - Water services in the form of both public drinking water and sewage were discussed. These two services can be extremely controversial, and the need for them varies among different communities in the watershed. Some participants even felt that the sewage enforcement officers are behind the times and not doing their jobs properly and that new, available technologies are not being utilized.

Transportation - In some areas there is a need for increased public transportation while in other areas the transportation is adequate. Additional transportation is needed for recreational users in the forms of shuttles, especially in Ohio pyle Borough. That way users can park elsewhere in dedicated areas and shuttle to trailheads. Bikers often request shuttles or public transportation opportunities. This is also a need for private boat owners who do not rent equipment from the outfitters.

Emergency Services - Our emergency service providers are doing a great job with their limited resources. The biggest needs for emergency services are more funding and more volunteers. Funding for paramedics and emergency management services have been decimated over the years. Keeping paramedics in the rural mountain area of the watershed is challenging. There are not enough services, and most of the departments are made up of volunteers who are stressed to the max. Training is expensive, which limits some individuals' ability to volunteer.

With the numerous recreational resources around the Youghiogheny River, there is a need for additional swift water rescue personnel who are properly trained and fitted with essential equipment. While training is occurring, more needs to be done. Training sessions on how to access the river at remote locations is also something that should be discussed, bearing in mind that these remote places are difficult to access.

Education - The quality of education can always be improved. Schools in Fayette County need to do a better job of preparing children for the future. There is also some concern about the quality of education for students in the Turkeyfoot School District. One of the biggest concerns for educators is the lack of parents' support and investment. Some parents need to value the education their children are getting.

Traditional school curricula focus on all the foundational subjects, but they appear to skip over teaching environmental topics. There need to be ways to increase this area in schools. Schools could expose students to environmental topics by inviting watershed groups and other agencies to provide teachers with resources or give guest presentations. Schools could potentially offer environmental internships for interested students for credits in certain subjects.

Local state parks conduct educational programs. Deep Creek Lake offers a variety of educational field trips for students to learn more about the environment and career positions in that field. Watershed organizations need to get more involved in working with schools as well. Regional environmental groups must be more involved in primary education.

- **Land Resources**

Mining- This section refers to legacy coal mines with poorly reclaimed mine sites that spew abandoned mine drainage, as well as active mine sites, and quarries. These impacts to the land resources have altered the landscape. There are specific concerns with the Rustic Ridge Coal Mine in Donegal Township, Clay Strip mine in Ohiopyle, and Jonathan Run that were mentioned at the meeting.

Increased sedimentation – Sediment, erosion and nutrification are of concern, especially in the Casselman Watershed. The lack of buffers in headwaters, agriculture run off, mowing of riparian buffers and increased impermeable surfaces all affect water quality.

Agriculture - Animals in streams, increased specific conductance and nutrient loading are all concerns. Forestry practices of clearcutting and generally improper logging and timbering practices are an issue as well.

Invasive species - Invasive species have caused great loss to our state tree, the hemlock.

Climate Change and the increase of stream temperatures threatens sensitive species like Brook Trout and Eastern Hellbender Salamanders.

- Energy – Energy development throughout the watershed brings concerns, especially concerning gas development and fracking. Solar energy has potential and the solar array project at Mountain Watershed Association office is a strong example of using solar in the region. Wind energy will likely come to our region, but placement of windmills can cause ecological damage. Windmills need to be placed selectively and carefully. There are existing wind turbines in the watershed. Hydropower is an option, but a new dam on the river would be troubling. Perhaps existing dams could be adapted to harness more energy. The fish kill at the hydro plant at Confluence can be fairly high because there is excess nitrogen in the water passing through turbines at low water levels when the temperatures are high.

Illegal Dumpsites - Almost every rural road can be a site for illegal dumping and general roadside litter. There are many illegal dumpsites throughout the watershed. PA Cleanways Illegal Dump Surveys provides maps and information for some of the older dumpsites. Local source water plans may also have dumpsites identified if we can gain access to those studies.

- **Water Resources**

Any type of contamination to the stream can be harmful and should be mitigated. The participants identified a variety of contamination sources that concerned them.

- Sewage including sewage overflow/municipal sewage, lack of public sewage, and lack of enforcement, Sewage Enforcement Operators, and improperly managed treatment systems and septic tanks.
- Mine Drainage – Legacy pollution, lack of funding to treat, abandoned sites with known discharges and active mining such as the Rustic Ridge and Shaw mines.
- Sedimentation – loading eutrophication. This is a major issue often overlooked, especially impacting the Casselman and Ohio State Park area. Riparian corridor preservation and restoration including the use of streambank fencing in rural areas is important.
- Plastics - Levels of certain petrochemicals can be harmful to aquatic life if leaked into river systems or the ocean. They also have negative impacts on ecosystems when chemical waste ends up in soil and landfill.

- **Biological Resources**

Invasive species have a major impact on the biological resources in the watershed. These species impact animals, plants, habitats for species of concerns, and overall ecological communities. There are many special natural habitats and species of concern residing in our watershed, and their habitats are impacted by invasive species.

- **Cultural Resources**

Hiking and walking were popular recreational activities among meeting participants. The various hiking trails in the watershed, especially those at Ohiopyle State Park, were highlighted. A priority to close gaps on the Indian Creek Valley Trail, specifically the Steyer Bridge project is needed. Connecting local trails to the Great Allegheny Passage would also be beneficial.

Cyclists desire more mountain bike trails, practice loops, or pump tracks where riders can enhance their skills before riding the trails. Bike-share programs are popular in cities and could potentially be beneficial here. Riders would rent a bike at one location and then drop it off elsewhere. The use of the Laurel Highlands Trail for cycling was also mentioned.

The Youghiogheny River provides a variety of recreational opportunities. Paddling is a key activity with white-water rafting, kayaking or boating in some of the larger lakes like Deep Creek and Youghiogheny River Lake. The area is also a fantastic fishery that provides a variety of different habitats and types of fishing from lake fishing for warm-water species to cold-water, native trout streams.

The vast amount of wildlife throughout the region provides ample recreational opportunities from hunting and trapping to bird or wildlife watching and nature photography. State parks in Pennsylvania and Maryland are excellent locations for these activities. Swallow Falls State Park is particularly beautiful with several waterfalls throughout the headwaters of the Youghiogheny.

Winter sports such as downhill and cross-country skiing are also popular. There are a variety of resources with the several ski resorts in the watershed.

Night sky viewing is becoming a popular recreational activity. This viewing is best in areas with no artificial lights. Establishing a dark sky park or dedicated area is desired within the watershed.

Second Round Informational Gathering Meetings

The Steering Committee discussed the outcomes of the initial virtual public meetings. The committee felt the community input was lacking. A second round of informational public meetings were held in June 2022. These meetings were held in person in Ohiopyle and Rockwood, Pennsylvania, and in Deep Creek, Maryland. Few people attended the meetings in Pennsylvania, but many people attended in Maryland. Community members in Maryland were appreciative of the opportunity to share their insights about the watershed. Most of the discussion concerned a trail in the Wild and Scenic portion of the Upper Youghiogheny River as undesirable.

Draft Public Meeting

A summary of the comments received during the draft public meetings held in August 2023 will be included in the Final Plan.

Confluence Public Meeting

- Public Water-clean without sulfur and sediment in water in Confluence
- White's Creek- AMD seep
- Excessive assessment of Dunbar Creek
- WISP- withdrawals water from Deep Creek (seasonal time of extraction can have an impact)
- Maryland Healthy Beaches
- How does the dam impact the amount of sediment in the Youghiogheny River?
- Monitoring fracking and drilling (add section to plan to talk more about how to monitor and where to monitor)
- Pedestrian Bridge (small) old Auto Bridge- from trail to town- across Casselman Bridge needs restored
- New Zealand Mud Snails potentially sited at Cranberry Glade Lake

Deep Creek Public Meeting

- Lower Whites Creek mine drainage discharge three miles upstream of the mouth of Casselman. Old Thomas Mine. Also new sewage flowing into Whites Creek. Casselman River raw sewage intake.
- Casselman River gets so muddy when it rains.

Ohiopyle Public Meeting

- Fracking
- Westmoreland Water Authority- impacts Dunbar Creek when pipes crack
- Laurel Run (Potato Ridge)- Wild Trout Streams
- Tire piles at Ohiopyle State Park

SURVEYS

Public Survey

To reach the widest audience of people who live in or visit the Youghiogheny Watershed, we set up an online survey that was open for a little over two years.

Survey Results

Following the closing date of this public survey, there were 104 responses in total. Of those responders, 33% lived within the Youghiogheny Watershed, 62% did not, and 5% were unsure. Regarding the question of whether responders visit the watershed/use it for recreation, 95% responded yes, 4% responded no, and 1% were unsure.

For section two of the public survey, the importance of watershed qualities in the future were ranked using a point system. Points were assigned by taking the number of votes each number on the scale (0-5) received and multiplying them by the scaling number, e.g., if community activities received five votes of scale five importance, three votes of scale four importance, and six votes of scale three importance, no votes of scale two importance, one vote of scale one importance, and with any votes for scale zero importance being worth no points, then the score for community activities would be:

$$\text{Community Activities Score} = (5 \times 5) + (3 \times 4) + (6 \times 3) + (0 \times 2) + (1 \times 1) = 46$$

By applying this formula to each watershed quality given as an option in the survey, a ranking of importance could be created. Results are displayed in Table 8-1 below. From the results of this section, it is clear that new businesses and new jobs are not a high priority. On the other hand, ***maintaining the current trend of restoration of the watershed's natural character is most important***. The importance of water quality improvements is not far behind, which is no surprise considering the interrelated characteristics.

For the third section of the public survey, the top five outdoor activities that visitors and residents participate in were addressed. These include hiking, canoeing/kayaking, biking, walking/running and visiting scenic vistas. Coinciding with the results of section two of the survey, these are all low environmental impact activities that are best enjoyed in clean, undeveloped, natural environments. A complete list of outdoor activities, and the number of survey respondents that participated in them can be viewed in Appendix M.

Respondents were asked what they think are the three biggest assets and the three biggest threats are to the watershed. This question brought some commonality between the respondents. Respondents thought that the water quality, the outdoor recreation opportunities and the scenic beauty were all assets to the watershed. The three biggest threats that respondents pointed out are overdevelopment, pollution and mining/fracking.

Some of the respondents mentioned deforestation, water quality, and recreational limitations were minor threats to the watershed.

In the last section of the survey, respondents were asked about recommendations to improve conditions in the watershed and if there were any specific projects they would like to see conducted.

The answers fell into four major categories: public education/outreach, conservation, and recreation. Whether it be through schools or local educational events, greater efforts to inform the public about the natural environment and threats to its health will help to instill a more eco-conscious mindset into the inhabitants of the Youghiogheny Watershed. General conservation of our natural resources was desired, with some specifically mentioning purchasing land for conservation, putting an end to coal extraction, or more job opportunities in the field of conservation. Completion of the Indian Creek Valley Trail and a connection to the Great Allegheny Passage are both in demand.

TABLE 8-1 PRIORITY RANKINGS FOR THE FUTURE OF THE WATERSHED

Quality	Score	Rank
Attractive Natural Setting	511	1
Water Quality Improvements	508	2
Recreational Opportunities	500	3
Preserving Historical Sites	446	4
Educational Opportunities	421	5
Community Activities	402	6
New Business/Jobs	368	7

Municipal Surveys

Municipalities in the watershed were given the opportunity to discuss current and future needs within the Youghiogheny Watershed. A total of ten municipalities found value in participating, identifying assets, constraints, and future needs for their communities.

The municipalities were asked about future planning, zoning and subdivision ordinances. About 50% of the respondents said that zoning and subdivision ordinances were not utilized, 40% said they did, and 10% said they were not sure.

Next, they were asked what the top four recreational opportunities in the municipality were. The municipalities agreed that fishing, hunting, hiking/biking and outdoor sports were the most popular recreational opportunities.

The next two questions addressed each municipality's critical infrastructure needs and challenges. Half of the municipalities agreed that road/bridge work is an important need.

When addressing tourism, 5 out of the 9 municipalities that responded agreed that tourism brings money into the local businesses. Some feel their businesses survive on tourist dollars. Some of the municipalities stated that tourism brings appreciation of the scenic beauty and helps to create jobs. On the other hand, there are some negatives to tourism. Some municipalities stated that the traffic and the amount of litter were the downsides.

Looking ahead five to ten years, 66.7% agreed that there is a need to upgrade dirt and gravel roadways and expand/improve broadband services. Some of the municipalities do not foresee a need to upgrade or expand public water supply, upgrading or expanding public sewage systems or improvement of cellular services.

When asked what projects they would like to see included in the plan, the municipalities expressed a well-thought-out vision and listed the following types of projects:

- Improvement of roads and bridges
- Increase outdoor recreation access and accessibility
- Increase roadside cleanups
- Public sewage

KEY STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS

These key stakeholder interviews were made up of individuals who are watershed professionals. All of the people interviewed either resided in or were very familiar with the lands making up the Youghiogheny Watershed. These professionals are all involved in environmental protection and remediation projects.

They agreed that water quality in streams has improved. When asked about what is affecting the land resources in the watershed, the respondents mentioned that floodplains affect future development, as do uncontrolled erosion and strip mining. As for effects in water resources, respondents mentioned sewage, point-source discharge, wastewater, farms and uneducated visitors. Threats to biological resources were knotweed, acid rain from mine discharges, nutrients, farms and large mine drainage seeps. Respondents wanted MWA to focus its restoration efforts on riverbank stabilization, on-lot septic systems, water quality and preservation of land. All respondents agreed that there was not a big influence from invasive species. The respondents pointed out knotweed and rock snot. The last question asked if there were any projects, they thought should be included in the River Conservation Plan. The responses are listed below:

- River stabilization on the west bank of the Youghiogheny River
- A dam in South Connellsville
- Enhancing tourism opportunities
- Implementing plans for on-lot septic systems
- Work to ensure people pump out their septic systems
- Arrowhead dredging project
- Preserve 20,000 acres of prime agricultural land
- County wide zoning: work on 5-to-20-year preservation