

## **CHAPTER 10. FOCUS GROUP MEETING SERIES**

### **SUMMARY**

Obtaining public input to ensure that the watershed project is meeting the needs of the residents was a primary purpose of conducting the focus group series. A majority of the participants agreed that the topics considered in this “state of the watershed” report must be explored to provide a solid foundation for decision making. When asked what outcomes should be achieved which would indicate that the watershed effort was a success, participants said that water quality must be maintained or improved, that road banks must be “fixed” and road ditches re-seeded, septic systems must be upgraded/maintained, sedimentation and erosion reduced, residents informed, and a baseline of data created to measure agricultural impacts over the long term. The Plan must be ratified by the watershed governments which would make it accountable.

### **INTRODUCTION**

As part of the strategic planning process, a series of four focus group meetings entitled “Setting the Course for Seneca Lake” was set up during March 1998 to:

\*tell residents about SLAP-5 and the work the group hoped to accomplish

\*inform residents about the latest lake research undertaken by John Halfman, Hobart and William Smith Colleges

\*gather public input on the following questions:

What are the values and benefits of living in this area?

What concerns do you have about the Seneca Lake Watershed?

What information needs to be gathered before we can solve these concerns?

List some possible solutions for the concerns you identified.

What must we accomplish to call this watershed project a success?

### **RESULTS**

More than fifty people attended the series and gave the program high marks (*See evaluation summaries from each session in the Appendix.*) They reviewed the handout materials which included a color brochure explaining “What is a Watershed?,” the Seneca Lake Watershed Program/Project Information Sheet, which summarizes all ongoing work in the watershed, a one page chart of tasks and an evaluation form. They heard excellent presentations by Seneca Lake Area Partners in Five Counties (SLAP-5). The participants shared their views as summarized in the newsletter.

*“Values and benefits to living in the Seneca Lake Watershed were inclusive of environment, cultural and social aspects such as beauty, recreational offerings*

*and quality of life. Environmental concerns included nonpoint source pollution and other pollutants such as hazardous wastes and agricultural runoff; lake level; nuisance aquatic weeds; littoral zone damage; erosion of shoreline; zebra mussels; and ground water contamination. Participants also expressed concerns about unregulated zoning and development; septic system failures; property values and economic issues. Education was viewed as critical to the preservation of the lake along with gathering critical data to assess the “State of the Lake.” The public felt that, to make the watershed project successful, it was necessary to reduce sedimentation and erosion; educate residents, users and regulators; create baseline data on watershed impacting circumstances; upgrade septic systems; and improve and fix roadbanks.”<sup>1</sup>*

Table 10.1 below lists specific comments by the frequency mentioned during the series.

Table 10.1 Summary Comments Made by Six Break Out Groups at the Four “Setting The Course For Seneca Lake Forums, March 5, 11, 19, And 25, 1998  
(numbers indicate the number of groups making the statement)

## **LIST VALUES AND BENEFITS WITH LIVING IN THE SENECA LAKE WATERSHED**

### **ENVIRONMENTAL**

- 6 **Beauty**
- 6 **Fishing**
- 5 **Tolerable climate** - not severe (only 2 wks/yr too hot/cold)/microclimate - can grow things/benefits of climate to growing season
- 4 **Clean Air/Water/ Lake/Good drinking water** (quality/taste)
- 4 Draws variety of **wildlife**/observing wildlife/wildlife habitat
- 3 **Hunting**
- 3 **Four seasons/** variety of seasons
- 3 **Aesthetic quality** of open space and agriculture lands/Scenic - Aesthetics, landscape variety/ Scenic location
- 3 Finger Lakes **National Forest** / state parks
- 2 **Natural surroundings**
- 2 Sense of **open space/** Open space - quiet
- 1 Opportunities for **outdoor recreation** - don’t have to travel far
- 1 Abundance of **natural resources**
- 1 Resources are **priceless**
- 1 **Undeveloped shore** (steep and too far from urban)
- 1 We are not in control - **nature** is in control
- 1 **Geneva’s lakefront park**

<sup>1</sup> Seneca Lake Area Partners News (SLAP-5) Spring, Summer 1998, a special insert in “Lake Watch,” newsletter of the Seneca Lake Pure Waters Association, Volume 23, Spring 1998

- 1 **Skiing**
- 1 Tillable land - **agriculture**

#### CULTURAL/SOCIAL

- 6 **Boating**-sailing-canoeing/free boat ramps
- 5 **Wineries**-grapes/wines-wine industry/vineyards
- 4 **Sense of community**/ close knit communities pride/history of area-lifestyles- feel at home with people throughout area/Rural character-small town
- 3 **Stress Free** / lack of hustle, love to come home/pace of life
- 3 **Job** is here
- 2 **Low density** population - good for residents and tourists
- 2 **Bathing/swimming**
- 2 **Affordable land** prices (critters)
- 2 **Easy access to culture** / proximity to urban centers, health care, arts/- “cultural bumpkins”
- 1 **Mennonites**
- 1 **Agriculture** is flourishing
- 1 Born/raised here - **home**
- 1 **Good mix** of urban and rural landscapes
- 1 **Recreation** - hiking/biking
- 1 Economic - **tourism**
- 1 **Road race** - sporting
- 1 **Transportation** system
- 1 **Government good stewards**
- 1 Work - fish sales - charter - **small business spinoffs**
- 1 **Quality of life**
- 1 As a **tourist to visit wineries**
- 1 Kids/grandkids come to **lake cottage**
- 1 **Educational** opportunities

#### WHAT CONCERNS DO YOU HAVE ABOUT THE SENECA LAKE WATERSHED?

##### ENVIRONMENTAL

- 4 **Seaweed** - catches on engines, aesthetics/weeds -started to increase about 3 years ago/weeds are a problem- increase control /milfoil
- 4 **Nonpoint source pollution** - erosion/sediment-roads and other sources
- 4 **Pollution - from all sources** (industrial discharge, salt roads, lawn chemicals, septic, fertilizer, logging, road ditches)/chemicals in water/farmland-manure spreading/Dumping - all kinds
- 3 **Road salt**

- 3 **Lake levels** - who controls for water reasons? Law suits are still in court since 1800's/water level/flood control/lake level - properties need to increase protection (flood plain) - as affect other uses
- 3 **Zebra mussels** - clogging intakes, indirect effect on seaweed growth/zebra mussels - what are real impacts (of loss of bottom of food chain)
- 2 **Groundwater contamination**
- 1 **Keuka is a watershed** of Seneca - need to be concerned about happens there
- 1 **Decreasing amount of shoreline** available for wildlife
- 1 **Damage to littoral zone**
- 1 **Sharp shells** on beaches
- 1 **Taking for granted** natural resources / drinking water
- 1 **Odors** (hog factories)
- 1 **Aesthetics of water** - musty in fall even inside water
- 1 **Water quality**

#### CULTURAL/SOCIAL

- 5 **Decreasing public access** (worried that it is or will be)/lack of public access - T. Starkey passed up chance for park (voted down)/public access for swimming/boating/public access difficulties/access to lake - no public access on west side
- 4 **Uncontrolled/unplanned development** (lack of regulation, lack of enforcement, lack of understanding of value of planning)/unplanned development -e.g., Guardian firm in Geneva spawns growth and intensity of land use-large homes on lots which are too small and too visible/uncontrolled development/increase development leads to increase in water quantity problems and need for planning
- 3 Impact on birds from **jet skis and noise** /personal watercraft - dangerous near shore, noise - but less problem than Keuka, etc./ jet skis
- 3 **Old septic systems** - upgraded?/sewage - industrial/septic systems/old septics, inc. municipal sewer systems/septic systems/outdated municipal systems
- 3 **Lack of land use planning & zoning**/enforcing/developing zoning laws
- 3 **Economic development** - too many laws stifle economic growth/economic growth vs. unspoiled water purity/water level/flood control / Integrate individual needs/economic development with lake protection - how?
- 2 Getting all communities to act together/Seneca Lake is too big to get everyone coordinated
- 2 **Lack of awareness** in watershed-especially off of lakeshore in the upland areas /individuals unaware of problems/misinformation/misperception of water quality
- 2 How to **protect tax base** if water quality goes down (look at Waneta/Lamoka whose property value has gone down with the increase of weeds)/water quality ties to tourism - property values

- 2 Which **type of economic development** do you want - **industry or tourism or agriculture?** (see NYC watershed regulations - farmers can't afford to farm with the strict laws)/lack of economic opportunity - status of agricultural problems
- 2 **Loss of agricultural land** /over development: open land is changing to houses
- 2 **Excess traffic**, noisy, lack of enforcement
- 2 **Ability to pay** for solutions /Expense of cleaning water for drinking
- 1 **Vulnerability to economic "prediction"** (taking advantage of low land/property values)
- 1 **Need user friendly DEC regulations.** DEC must be more cooperative with landowners - rebuilding cribbing and moving fishing shed (as examples) were very difficult because of regulations/Not enough public education about purposes of DEC laws./ DEC laws even too complicated for them!
- 1 Political **decisions are based on politics** -- not necessarily water quality needs
- 1 **Increased bulk heading** (walls along the shoreline instead of natural edge)/appropriate placement of retaining walls
- 1 General human impacts - **cumulative effect?**
- 1 Public sentiment that **planning is evil - property rights are sacred**
- 1 Current lake **accesses over used**
- 1 **Agricultural run off**
- 1 Potential **impact of industry**
- 1 **Seneca Army Depot**
- 1 Well water/ground **water contamination**, need for testing
- 1 **Swimming - misrepresented**

## WHAT INFORMATION SHOULD BE GATHERED BEFORE WE CAN SOLVE YOUR CONCERNS?

### ENVIRONMENTAL

- 5 **Establish a base of information.** Is the Lake polluted? What are the sources? natural/man made? Gather historical information on status/health of lake/monitoring of existing conditions/need scientific data - without it can't addresses problems/baseline data on water quality
- 4 **Compile information from regulators** and other agencies that deal (or should) with these problems/coordinate water quality data that has been gathered/get information to stop ""finger pointing" by farmers, septics & businesses
- 3 Sources of pollution (industrial discharge, salt roads, lawn chemicals, septic, fertilizer, logging, road ditches, floor drains) / **need to quantify pollution sources** such as erosion, chemicals, salt/collect data on non-point source pollution

- 2 **Trends** - zebra mussels, aquatic weeds/update information on zebra mussels trends
- 1 How many houses send **sewage directly to the lake**?
- 1 **Value of littoral zone** - what percent needs to be protected/maintained?
- 1 What is **water quality of tributaries**? - especially Keuka Lake - what are sources?
- 1 **Phosphorous budget** - add up all sources - does it equal levels found in the lake?
- 1 **Define family farms and agricultural “factories”** when quantifying ag. pollutants

## CULTURAL/SOCIAL

- 3 What is the overview of the **state of the local economy**? Will this plan encourage economic development or stifle it?/ What is tourism generating in dollars and how to relate it to lake?/compare taxes across the watershed: lakeshore vs. upland properties
- 3 **Find out what others have done and what has succeeded/failed** / where are good models for Best Management Practices (BMP’s) from other areas? Publicize them as part of this project/information/success from other watersheds models
- 2 **How enforceable are laws**? Are they being enforced? Which laws do we need? Local land use regulations and controls
- 2 **Where will the money come from** for cleaning up?
- 2 What are the **projections for growth**?/what are the population changes over time?/how many second homes have been built? How does it compare with year round homes?/new homes are being built at what rate?/how many seasonal homes have converted to permanent residences?/what are the positions of elected officials on growth? Have these discussions before elections.
- 2 Need to figure out how to get all the **“players” to work together** / how do you get cooperation at the “neighborhood” level/need a crisis to rally around!/settled here to “get away” from meetings/obligations - so how do get people to join the effort?
- 2 Explore what the **consequences would be if we don’t succeed**. Try to quantify
- 1 What **land uses are grandfathered**? Should they be?
- 1 Set up mechanism to **continue data gathering**
- 1 **Landfill regulations**/ clean up plans - status?
- 1 **Stormwater run off** - how much pavement is a concern?
- 1 Enough data, **but need more John Halfmans** to make it interesting
- 1 **Stop duplication**
- 1 Find ways of **informing the general public**

## LIST SOME POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS FOR THE CONCERNS YOU IDENTIFIED

### ENVIRONMENTAL

- 3 **Set aside lake frontage** for permanent national habitat, for wildlife, etc./ maintain open space/acquire public access/control management shoreline building/development
- 1 **Confront “government machine”** -- vote and lobby
- 1 **Find problem** first before can solve
- 1 **Same cheerleaders -- get others**

### CULTURAL/SOCIAL

- 6 **Education** - get more people to care, school kids/youth as well as adults/hold workshops for highway superintendents around watershed/need education about positive impact of planning (Lodi)/need support from schools - local and Cornell, etc./communication !!! lots of miscommunication when addressing issues/develop school curriculum because kids take the information home (adults won't go to meetings)/for Lodi, Hector & beyond, attend town meetings, get to know the leaders, become a “neighbor”/increase distribution of LakeWatch - to officials, etc/develop or use one web site for all Seneca Lake info/citizen requests/complaints/etc./present projects and the findings to as many groups as possible/sense of stewardship/public awareness through newspapers and schools/education/education/more education on zoning
- 5 **Prepare a watershed plan.**
- 4 **Make people fix septics.** If they can't afford this, then subsidize/assist them. (However, septic tanks are a tough problem - there are impossible sites such as a site which is 90 acres of steep clay (T. Dix). There still isn't a suitable location on this property.) Improve septic/sewer plan design especially Ontario Co. (starting to work on this)/ Legislation - any & all environmental protection laws from local zoning to state level - (however, there were concerns with enforcement. How to ensure?)/Town sewage treatment/sewage sludge ban - land spreading / increase staff to enforce / study existing septic system conditions/subsidize septic upgrades/uniform enforcement of septic laws - county health dept. / If money is no object - sewer to clean water but leads to density/septic inspection/survey, and low interest loans to upgrade/replace failing systems.
- 4 **Promote intermunicipal action** on multiple fronts: planning, regulation, municipal operations/communication between towns/encourage organized cooperative effort - gov/private business/citizens
- 4 **More money/ funding**
- 3 **Build detention areas** to keep sediment from reaching lake - deals with nutrients/sediment/ weed growth/detention ponds/build farm ponds (used to cost share, but no funds now)

- 3 **Best management practices for agriculture** and other uses and industries/non-point pollution prevention plan/BMP's
- 3 **More planning generally** planning for development / encourage planned development
- 2 **"Court" the media** to get public behind these efforts
- 2 **More consistent zoning laws enforcement** /consistent watershed inspection
- 2 Increase the number of **hazardous collection days** - sites / Provide methods for responsible chemical disposal
- 2 Stress **personal voluntary choice** after public education - avoids fines/laws/"sticks" / Reinforce good behavior - success breeds success - generates more support
- 2 Lake owners - **big tax bill** but little representation in local government / Lake property tax is too high. Look at school tax income/property value
- 1 **Marketing materials** - (on popular destinations like) swimming and public access
- 1 Corps of Engineers implementation - **404 permits**
- 1 **Stormwater regulations**
- 1 More **pump out facilities** (lake use is on the rise by boaters)
- 1 **Work with Keuka Lake Group (KWIC)**
- 1 **Boating control** near shore - reduce speed
- 1 **Land use regulations** - fill in gaps
- 1 **Inspire people:** Show local people a vision of prosperous but rural area - however, do we share this vision? / See the potential of the watershed!!! Don't play down the assets. (local people too familiar with the area and do not see it as special as it is -- visit out west to see how they have capitalized) / Build consciousness that we must maintain the rural beauty/
- 1 Learn about and publicize **real costs of development**

## **WHAT IDEAS DO YOU HAVE TO HELP MAKE THE SENECA LAKE WATERSHED PROJECT SUCCESSFUL?**

- 1 Undertake **Earth day projects** - pair classes with SLAP-5 people
- 1 **Communicate:** People need to know what's happening / Network / create a 1-800-4SLAP5 phone line
- 1 Have **festival** to celebrate/recognize resources - farming/vineyards – farmer's market

## WHAT MUST WE ACCOMPLISH TO CALL THIS WATERSHED PROJECT A SUCCESS?

### ENVIRONMENTAL

- 3 Maintenance/improvement of **water quality** / Keeping lake clean and healthy / Maintain fish and wildlife
- 2 **Fix road banks** - have measurable results / All road ditches seeded
- 2 Subsidize the dry toilet industry / **subsidize upgrading/maintenance septic systems**, sewer infrastructure and districts, as necessary (be careful - could promote development)
- 1 **Reduce sedimentation and erosion**
- 1 **Educate** residents and users and regulators
- 1 Must have a **baseline** to be able to measure agricultural impacts overlong term

### CULTURAL/SOCIAL

- 3 **Make the Plan accountable** - follow through on the plan, otherwise it was a futile effort / Growth of political support/ **MUST tie in local concerns** with the plan or there will be no **political support**
- 2 **Thorough testing of sewage** treatment plants/ Testing of all lakeshore septic systems for chemicals/e-coli
- 2 Agree on a vision for the lake/watershed, prepare a **watershed plan, and have it ratified by watershed governments** / Meet EPA requirements for watershed plan
- 2 **Show some examples of government cooperation** / Intermunicipal cooperation
- 2 Youth - adult - **public awareness/responsibility**
- 2 **Maintain economic growth** /Keep track of tourism increase/decrease
- 1 **Fair and frequent property assessments** to see if water quality has an impact (time may be too short for this)
- 1 Every town in the watershed puts good planning in place
- 1 Structure developed that creates responsible action
- 1 Uniform adoption - enforcement of local laws
- 1 More BMP's in watershed
- 1 **Strength in lake association** - did we inspire participation? Did membership increase?

In a “debriefing” session with the SLAP-5 Education Committee after the series, it was agreed that additional methods for reaching the public must be employed so that more people could attend the forums to have a real hand in “setting the course for Seneca Lake.” Some ideas include:

Making sure that announcement appears in all related newsletters

Undertaking a bulk mailing to a targeted percent of the population

Gathering information at regularly scheduled local meeting in addition to the forums

Holding the next series when there was substantial information to talk about

## **CONCLUSION**

Incorporating the information gleaned from the series into the planning process was seen as crucial. The most important comments to address are the ones that described the definition of a successful watershed process. Are these “products” the same as those which SLAP-5, NYSDEC and other supporting groups hope are results of the program? An overall summary of comments from all four meetings follows.

### **ENVIRONMENTAL RESULTS**

Maintain and improve water quality

Fix road banks and reseed road ditches

Subsidize upgrading/maintaining septic systems

Reduce sedimentation and erosion

Educate residents

Create a baseline of data to measure agricultural impacts over the long term

### **CULTURAL/SOCIAL RESULTS**

Have the Plan ratified by the watershed governments

Make the Plan accountable

Follow through on the Plan

Make sure the Plan addresses local concerns or there will be no political support

Show some examples of government cooperation

Increase public awareness and responsibility to keeping Seneca Lake clean

Maintain economic growth

Fair and frequent property assessment

Every town puts good planning in place

Uniform adoption – enforcement of local laws

More Best Management Practices put in place on the land

Strength in the lake association: Did we inspire participation? Did membership increase?