

CHAPTER 2. WATER QUALITY PLANNING FOR SENECA LAKE

SUMMARY

Business and government have been planning for and managing Seneca Lake's waters for commerce, flood control, and water supply since the early 1800's. Water quality planning expanded its scope into environmental protection by the 1950's and, more recently, recognized the inter-relationships between the water resource and the entire upland watershed. This watershed-wide approach necessarily involves all land owners and water users in the Seneca Lake basin and requires a cooperative, rather than regulatory, framework to maintain high water quality. The broad-based Seneca Lake Area Partners in Five Counties (SLAP-5) was formed to accomplish this work. This chapter describes the evolution of planning for Seneca Lake from its early days through the creation of SLAP-5.

HISTORY

The earliest attempt to manage Seneca Lake occurred in 1817 with the construction of the Erie Canal, which needed a regulated flow of water to ensure available water for commerce. Flooding in the late 1800's led to the creation of the NYS Water Storage Committee in 1902 whose purpose was to regulate river flow and to develop hydroelectric power sources. In 1959, state water resources planning legislation was passed which set the stage for the creation in 1965 of the Water Resources Commission which was established to:

“Provide the basis for wise management of our water resources through scientific planning and equitable regulatory activities.

Establish comprehensive plans for multi-purpose development of the water and related land resources of each river basin and region of the state through regional and state-federal partnership efforts.

Work as a partner with federal agencies in formulating comprehensive plans that adequately reflect New York's interests in interstate river basins.

Fashion programs to implement regional plans for development of water resources as soon as they are established.”¹

Under its auspices, the Regional Water Resources Planning and Development Boards were created to conduct overview studies and project implementation feasibility. Yates, Ontario, and Wayne Counties organized in November 1965 and published the 1973 Interboard Plan for the Finger Lakes-Oswego River Basin. This plan called for the control of point sources of pollution, stream reclassification, acquisition of public access points, and the coordinated operation of the Finger Lakes-Oswego River system, and the protection/purchase of wetlands

¹ NYS Water Resources Commission, The Coordinated Program, page 8.

and other objectives. Most of these recommendations were implemented, leading to the dramatic reduction of flagrant discharges of sewage, industrial discharges and agricultural chemicals to the Lake.

Meanwhile, the Federal Water Pollution Control Act Amendments of 1972 (PL92-500) were passed, calling for annual water quality reports, basinwide water quality planning and other far reaching water quality improvement measures. The New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC) responded by conducting statewide assessments and by composing the Section 303 (b) Water Quality Management Plan for the Western Oswego River Basin in January 1977. Section 208 planning funds were also allocated to conduct intensive water quality monitoring / modeling and water use forecasting, project nonpoint pollution contributions as well as to determine maximum waste load allocations. All of this work helped NYSDEC and other state regulatory agencies to set limits for State Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (SPDES) permits, continue the control of point source pollution, and make recommendations for the control of nonpoint pollution. Unfortunately, sufficient implementation funding was not made available at that time, and many 208 reports around the state were Aput on the shelf.

In 1977, amendments to the Federal Clean Water Act were passed which called for meeting fishable and swimmable@ water quality standards across the state. Priority Waterbody Lists (PWLs) were established on a county by county basis to identify stressed streams@ which would be the target for implementation funding. In 1980 USEPA established guidance for AProtecting and Restoring Publicly Owned Freshwater Lakes.@ As part of this Statewide Clean Lakes program, NYSDEC pledged to develop watershed management plans for the Finger Lakes. By this time, there was widespread recognition that combating nonpoint sources needed the cooperation of all levels of government with emphasis on local agencies. In the early 1990's, NYSDEC published the Watershed Planning Handbook for the Control of Nonpoint Source Pollution which has directed the approach to the Seneca Lake Watershed Planning project.

RECENT HISTORY

June 1995 Seneca Lake Watershed Study

The Seneca Lake Pure Waters Association received a \$4,000 grant from the Rural New York Program to create a “long term plan to maximize the environmental quality of Seneca Lake and the watershed.” The objectives of the plan were to:

- develop a permanent fund for activities
- develop a comprehensive database for strategy development
- develop a strategy that aids development of the local economy (agriculture and tourism) by linking it to the enhancement of water quality in the region.²

This study produced the report, “Seneca Lake Watershed Study: Developing an

² Application to develop a Seneca Lake Watershed Management Plane, SLPWA, spring 1995.

Understanding of an Important Natural Resource,” which formed the strong backbone of most subsequent watershed planning work.

July 3, 1996 SLAP-5 is created

With successful completion of the Watershed Study which provided an outline of the elements of a complete watershed management plan, the Seneca Lake Pure Waters Association called a small meeting of key county and regional people to “unveil” the report and move ahead. This pivotal brainstorming session in July resulted in mayors, supervisors, state legislators, county agency staff and others pledging to work together as the Seneca Lake Area Partners in Five Counties (SLAP-5) to prepare and implement a plan (See the Appendix for minutes of 7/31/96 “Kick Off” meeting).

September 1996 NYSDEC talks watershed planning

NYSDEC Lakes Division staff from the Albany office attended this early SLAP-5 meeting to outline the watershed planning process and offer encouragement to the new group. DEC explained their directive from the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to develop management plans for each of the Finger Lakes to meet the EPA “Clean Lakes Guidance.” They expressed their eagerness to work with a local watershed group to accomplish this task for Seneca Lake. The regional planning boards began preparing a proposal to use Section 604(b) Clean Water Act funds to assist with the planning, data gathering and education efforts.

December 1996 Work Task Matrix created and grants applications filed.

SLAP-5 reviewed the draft matrix of tasks, estimated costs and responsible parties to begin making applications for funding for portions of the entire project. Over the next few months, many of the applications were approved, building a structure of technical and educational elements which needed careful oversight to ensure that the plan came together effectively.

June 4, 1997 watershed planning scopes of work are hammered out

With funding from NYSDEC, regional planning board staff met with SLAP-5 to finalize the scope of work. Section 319 Nonpoint funding was also imminent and the scopes of work for the full time Technical Coordinator were also in the formative stages. The meeting established the roles between the players: the state would provide the “big overview,” how the project fit into the statewide watershed planning efforts; the regional boards would accomplish technical tasks that “need to be done once,” such as digitizing the land use and soils information, to save duplication at the county level; the five counties, through their water quality coordinating committees, would be responsible for keeping local groups and government involved; and the Seneca Lake Pure Waters Association (SLPWA) would be the key contact point. SLPWA had built a strong base of citizen trust and support which is so critical to the success of the entire project.

THE PLANNING PROCESS

August 1997 Strategic Planning Outlined

Dave Zorn reviewed the principles of strategic planning and encouraged SLAP-5 to take the time to involve all the stakeholders before too much data gathering happened without a widely accepted purpose to the project in place. SLAP-5 felt that strategic planning was important; but that it could occur as the technical work was undertaken. The group felt, overall, that Seneca Lake residents needed to see “concrete” products such as miles of roadbank erosion and water quality sampling to keep up their interest as the more conceptual work of strategic planning unfolded.

September 30 – October 2, 1997 FL-LOWPA Conference as stage for public input

The Education Committee, with assistance from the regional boards staff, sent a special mailing to the full mailing list of people interested in Seneca Lake encouraging attendance at the Finger Lakes – Lake Ontario Watershed Protection Alliance (FL-LOWPA) fall conference and included a “Stakeholder’s Survey” to gather further information (See the Appendix for letters and survey). Although only about a half dozen stakeholder’s forms were returned, numerous people viewed the display at the conference.

November 1997 Oversight Committee formalized as key planning group

An Oversight Committee numbering more than seventy people, representing as many stakeholders as possible with representation from each county, was suggested. The idea was to make sure that all groups were intentionally involved in the direction of the program. The SLAP-5 Oversight Committee was created, made up of at least one representative per county who would be expected to represent all five counties in important decision making. The remaining list would be notified when public input was needed. Next, the mission statement and tasks for the Oversight Committee were accepted. These decisions streamlined the Oversight Committee into an effective, workable group, but meant that active strategic planning would have to take a different approach.

GOALS FOR THE SLAP-5 OVERSIGHT COMMITTEE

Chemung, Ontario, Schuyler, Seneca and Yates Counties

To develop a watershed management plan for Seneca Lake that will protect and improve water quality and is supported by the citizens and communities in the watershed.

To provide representation of all important sectors in the Seneca Lake Watershed and to keep in contact with people in their areas of expertise to make sure that the watershed program reflects and responds to the people that they represent.

To work by consensus to complete a Seneca Lake AState of the Lake@ report by July 1, 1999 which includes current and historical data on water quality and land use, among other information, and suggests strategies for achieving the above mission.

To help the Technical Coordinator, Education Coordinator, and regional planning board water quality staff accomplish their work plans to achieve the above mission by suggesting priorities in the face of unforeseen developments.

To provide direct technical input into the State of the Lake report, or advise staff on the right sources for that information.

To identify and encourage all groups in the basin, including those with opposing views, to review the data and to work through a facilitated process to finalize the Mission Statement and to define strategies that can be supported by all.

To understand and support the watershed management program as developed above.

To help implement the strategies through their own programs and by working with others.

To attend bi-monthly meetings of the SLAP-5 Oversight Group proposed for each fourth Wednesday starting in January 1998. The meeting location will alternate between the north and south ends of the lake.

December 1997 public forums planned

A series of public forums at convenient locations around the lake to gather public input was planned. The Education prepared the agenda and made the meeting arrangements. The SLPWA winter "Lake Watch" newsletter introduced the idea to the general public.

March 1998 "Setting the Course for Seneca Lake" series held

More than fifty people gathered in Lodi, Watkins Glen, Geneva and Dresden to hear about the watershed planning process, learn about the latest research results and share their ideas on values and benefits from living in the area, issues of concern, information needs, suggested solutions and milestones of success. A complete discussion on the focus groups can be found in Chapter 12. The input was shared in the spring "Lake Watch."

A SLAP-5 Oversight Committee strategic planning session is held in April 1999.

Well aware that the creation of the State of the Lake report is but a beginning step in the watershed planning process, SLAP-5 reviewed the status of the watershed effort and forecast fact-finding, cooperation/participation, education, organization, and implementation needs.

SLAP-5 Oversight Committee continues to meet

The SLAP-5 counties recognize that developing and sustaining the Seneca Lake watershed management program is a long term commitment. The Oversight Committee continues to meet, on behalf of the five participating counties, to accomplish its important work.

CONCLUSION

Throughout the years, water quality planning has been used in the Seneca Lake watershed for a variety of purposes. "Top-down" imposition of regulations is being supplanted by

“bottom up” associations of private citizens, business/industry and government working together to achieve water quality goals. The recent creation of SLAP-5 and its Oversight Committee is the latest structure for enabling watershed residents and government at all levels to manage Seneca Lake and its surrounding landscape.