

CANNON RIVER WATERSHED PARTNERSHIP

**INNOVATION
STORY
NO. 3**

**STORY
VICTORIA
BLANCO**

**LOCATION
NORTHFIELD,
MN**

The Cannon River Watershed Partnership (CRWP), working with the Southeast Minnesota Wastewater Initiative (SMWI), has prevented 94 million gallons of untreated sewage from entering the state's rivers and streams over the past decade. The SMWI project is a partnership between CRWP, the Southeast Minnesota Water Resources Board, and the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency.



LEADER
BETH C KALLESTAD

BUDGET
\$250,000–\$499,999

GEOGRAPHY
MINNESOTA,
NATIVE NATIONS

YEARS ACTIVE
FOUNDED IN 1990

CRWP ENGAGES COMMUNITIES IN PROTECTING AND IMPROVING THE WATER QUALITY AND NATURAL SYSTEMS OF THE CANNON RIVER WATERSHED.

BREAKTHROUGH

To remediate and prevent wastewater contamination in Southeast Minnesota, CRWP invests in a citizen engagement strategy—with funding from the SMWI—that empowers local communities to take charge of their water and find the best solution to ensure it stays clean for generations to come.

H₂O EDUCATION

Rather than forcing a top-down approach on rural towns that need to upgrade their wastewater technology, CRWP develops and educates a task force of community members and experts to lead each specific project. With a four-way partnership, CRWP ensures residents are not only informed, but also invested in solutions.

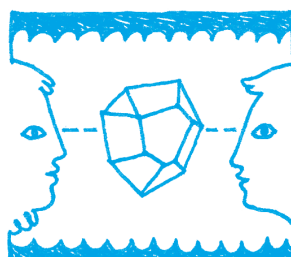
THE SYMMETRY OF PERSONALITIES

CRWP leverages a mix of personalities to create a well-oiled machine of community members who complement one another and rally residents to fight pollution. When CRWP faces resistance to its initiatives, it moves toward the opposition, seeking out challengers to join local task force groups.

SHARES OWNERSHIP



CREATES A SHARED VISION



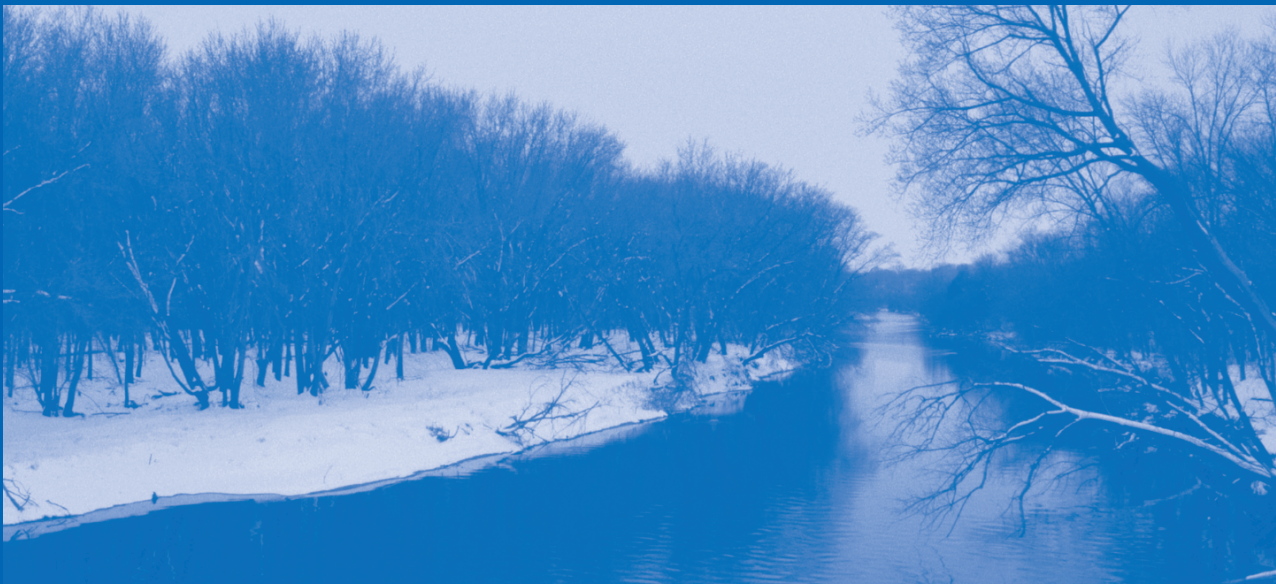
EMPHASIZES LEARNING



**CLEAN WATER FOR
SOUTHEAST MINNESOTA**

Birch trees and pine trees stand tall where the Cannon

River flows at Lake Tetonka. As the waterway follows its 112-mile trajectory through southeastern Minnesota toward the Mississippi River, its waters change from placid to wild. Anglers know where to catch northern pike and bluegills; whitewater enthusiasts tumble over the rapids; and farmers irrigate their crops with the water. Yet every year, hundreds of gallons of untreated sewage leach into the water that communities in the watershed rely on, devastating the ecosystem. Sewage surfaces in residents' backyards, and pathogens in the drinking water make people sick.



The traditional top-down approach to solving wastewater problems hasn't worked in smaller communities. State agencies have the authority to fine communities for mismanaged wastewater, but those agencies may not understand that many of these communities lack the resources to sustain newly implemented wastewater systems.

Images:

Left: Cannon River, Right: Sheila Craig (left) and Aaron Wills, CRWP Wastewater Facilitators



“THEY NEED A SYSTEM THEY CAN MANAGE AND THAT THEY’RE ON BOARD WITH TAKING CARE OF. THEY NEED TO FEEL INVESTED IN THE SOLUTION.”

—AARON WILLS, CRWP

H₂O EDUCATION

Treating water and protecting the health of communities

is top priority for CRWP. Founded in 1990, CRWP currently serves 21 low-income counties in southeastern Minnesota.

Communities that come up with their own water treatment plans are motivated to maintain the infrastructure and protocols they implement, ensuring clean water for decades. To engage communities from the very start, the organization invites trained community wastewater facilitators from the University of Minnesota Extension School to spend months listening to community members' concerns and building relationships. As the facilitators gain community trust, they invite members to public forums to openly discuss wastewater problems and propose solutions. Through these forums, facilitators help communities form a task force—a team of community members who often have no wastewater management knowledge. Together, they find solutions that best meet the individual needs of their community. CRWP finds that community engagement builds trust in the wastewater solutions, solidifies relationships between neighbors and creates a culture of investment in clean water.

CRWP welcomes everyone to the task force, aiming for a minimum of five members and encouraging diversity in gender, age, class and race. It doesn't matter that community members know little about ecosystems and wastewater treatment; through its collaboration, CRWP provides ample education. Its number one priority is making sure task force members feel included. "They need a system they can manage and that they're on board with taking care of. They need to feel invested in the solution," says Aaron.

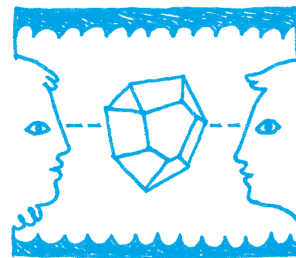
Sometimes residents don't realize the lasting impact of untreated water, so Aaron and Sheila Craig, a fellow

**SHARES OWNERSHIP**

Effectively working with a small community requires a unique strategy of citizen engagement that puts residents in the driver's seat. CRWP forms a task force for each specific community sewer project. Each team is made up of a local county septic system or environmental department professional who serves as a resource for the group, providing information on county rules and permits on file for existing septic systems; local elected government; and most importantly, a group of five to eight property owners from the community. These three partners, along with a SMWI staff person, make up the heart of CRWP's grassroots efforts. Throughout the project, the task force keeps the community informed of progress and addresses residents' questions and concerns.

community wastewater facilitator, organize programs to teach them. “We talk about what a good septic system looks like,” Sheila explains, adding that most residents immediately recognize the benefits of investing in a wastewater treatment system. From the educational programs, Aaron and Sheila identify residents who are interested in working toward a solution and invite them to join a local task force. As outsiders to these communities, Sheila and Aaron aim to facilitate, not dictate solutions.

Since 2002, task force groups have worked closely with SMWI, a collaboration with the Southeast Minnesota Water Resources Board, Minnesota Pollution Control Agency and Minnesota Public Facility Authority. Through these alliances, local community members benefit from a wide range of perspectives and expertise as they map out water pollution solutions tailored to their specific area. The partnership between SMWI and CRWP eliminated approximately 256,050 gallons of untreated sewage per day for the last 10 years. Left alone, that untreated sewage would leach into the rivers and streams of Southeast Minnesota. Different communities encounter various obstacles due to geography, topography and income, so each task force must tailor its treatment plan to those factors. Some communities live by a bluff, others by the river and some by a stream. If wastewater treatment solutions don’t augment ecosystems like these, they will eventually harm the environment or stop working altogether. As a result, each plan takes three to five years to implement. Sheila and Aaron use their expertise to make sure the infrastructure in each proposed plan remains intact; they also educate the various task force groups on proper maintenance. CRWP envisions wastewater solutions as the answer to ensuring the health of the rivers and lakes in Southeast Minnesota far into the future, and sees clean water as an opportunity for communities to band together. Through their work, task force members develop friendships and gain prestige in their communities as the protectors of the water and their towns’ livelihoods.



CREATES A SHARED VISION

Small lots, difficult geography or a lack of political wherewithal and funding have prevented communities from upgrading their wastewater treatment technology in the past. To overcome these obstacles, CRWP employs a unique blend of community members and professionals. CRWP facilitators bring together multiple levels of government officials, septic professionals, funders, agency regulators and residents to organize around each project. Then, facilitators help communities identify their specific wastewater treatment problem, search for solutions and guide the local task force in applying for and receiving state grants and loan funds to cover the cost of new systems.

Image: Cannon River



THE SYMMETRY OF PERSONALITIES

Top-down approaches from untrusted outsiders have left communities suspicious of water treatment plans. Because of this attitude, Sheila and Aaron often encounter resistance to their initiatives.

Vocal community members can turn the tide with a single protest or a few negative remarks at a meeting, even after Sheila and Aaron have dedicated weeks to education and task force formation. CRWP understands that community members come to wastewater problems with a mix of hope and fear. Ardent resisters are deeply invested in the place they call home, so Sheila and Aaron work twice as hard to involve them in the work: “We try to look for difficult people to form our task force. We often handpick someone who is opposed to the project. If [your opponents] aren’t at the original table, they’ll oppose you and spread rumors, so it’s important to involve them and get them to understand the project on the grassroots level.”

In one community, a task force member spoke out against the wastewater management technology the rest of the group wanted. Instead of outvoting him, the task force engaged him in conversation and found a compromise. “Sometimes it’s about slowing down the process,” explains Aaron. Low-income communities in Southeast Minnesota constantly face dilemmas about which problems are most pressing and require their town’s limited funds. “Sometimes counties resist us because they see CRWP pulling them away from things they really have to get done,” Sheila says. When Sheila and Aaron face a particularly challenging time finding enough members for a task force, they’ve learned to look for one outgoing person who is comfortable knocking door-to-door and giving out their phone number to people who want to know more or are interested in participating. Finding one respected ally in the community often convinces resisters to trust CRWP. Sheila and Aaron are adept at identifying people with different skills



EMPHASIZES LEARNING

CRWP leverages education as a vehicle to empower residents to pick the best wastewater treatment technology for their communities. In early meetings with community and task force members, CRWP teaches the rules and regulations behind wastewater treatment systems, and explains the different types of technologies used. CRWP brings in a variety of professionals to walk communities through why their wastewater treatment systems don’t meet code and how they are polluting the environment. By the end of a community project, residents speak the language of wastewater treatment and know the pros and cons of different technologies. Each community recognizes its own priorities, limitations and land options for implementing a wastewater treatment system.

and personality traits to create a well-oiled machine of community members who complement one another. For example, Aaron looks to counterbalance charismatic members with someone who is detail-oriented, pays attention to numbers and can manage timelines.

By connecting wastewater educators to invested and engaged community members, CRWP eliminates ineffective top-down answers. In its place, the organization builds relationships among neighbors and connects people to the natural world, channeling those bonds into lasting solutions that rural towns can commit to over the long term. The process to educate a community, form a task force and guide members toward a community-generated plan can be arduous and frustrating; however, by investing in grassroots problem-solving, CRWP bolsters long-lasting devotion to water health from communities in southeastern Minnesota.

Image: Beth Kallestad, former CRWP Executive Director

“IT’S IMPORTANT TO INVOLVE [YOUR OPPONENTS] AND GET THEM TO UNDERSTAND THE PROJECT ON THE GRASSROOTS LEVEL.”

—SHEILA AND AARON, CRWP





