

GOVERNOR'S NARRAGANSETT BAY AND WATERSHED PLANNING COMMISSION

COMMUNICATIONS AND EDUCATION PANEL

DRAFT REPORT

March 2004

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COMMUNICATIONS AND EDUCATION PANEL

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of the Communications and Education Panel is to address strategies to effectively communicate with and educate the public on issues involving Narragansett Bay and its watershed. It is critical to the commission's success to build a constituency for the protection, balanced uses and restoration of Narragansett Bay. The panel will help develop short and long-term communications strategies; craft clear, concise and consistent messages for varied audiences; suggest actions based on the input and needs of the various panels; and work with other partners in a variety of fields to widely disseminate information on the commission's work. The panel will also serve as a coordinator for all panels to integrate their work and develop consensus on major themes, share information and avoid duplication of effort.

The communications panel's work will be broken into short and long-term elements. In the short term, the focus will be on public/media relations and outreach to build public awareness about the Governor's Commission, its goals, current challenges and recommended solutions, and the need for public involvement. The long-term focus is on integrating information on bay watershed issues into informal and formal education programs, including school curriculum. This is designed to extend the reach of the commission's work among a new generation to increase its ongoing future impact.

The panel's activities to date have included:

- Creation of short and long-term communications strategy frameworks that will be used to publicly disseminate the commission's recommendations.
- Forming an education subcommittee to address long-term strategies for incorporating Bay-oriented education into informal programs and school curriculum.
- Doing an inventory of existing Bay and watershed issue-oriented curricula and programs, both formal and informal. The education subcommittee is reviewing these to look basically avoid duplicating effort, but also to see how these programs overlap and can be effectively merged for maximum impact and number of students/individuals reached.
- Compiling research on public perceptions of environmental issues and how a constituency can best be built by changing or reinforcing current perceptions.
- Doing an inventory of short-term public outreach vehicles (which can in most cases be continued over the long term) to utilize for raising public awareness about Bay issues, the challenges they present and the way the commission is finding solutions to those problems.
- Serving as liaisons to other panels, attending their meetings and centralizing the information so it can be integrated and shared among the panels.

INTRODUCTION

Like all the Commission panels, the Communications and Education Panel was presented with a purpose and short-term charge from the outset:

Purpose: Address strategies to more effectively communicate with and educate the public on Bay and watershed issues. Focus on the development of consistent messages, actions based on needs assessments, and the use of collaborative mechanisms for implementation.

Short-term Charges: Develop an analysis of the current communication landscape and capabilities with recommendations for improvement.

This guidance is at the heart of any successful communications strategy. The communications panel consists of more than a dozen professional public relations and education experts. It serves as a creative resource for shaping the Commission's message and maximizing its distribution. It is also a support service for the other panels to turn often complex problems, ideas and solutions into information that is easily understood by the average citizen, and effectively helps build a public constituency for achieving the Commission's goals.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Rhode Island and Massachusetts are lucky enough to have scores of groups who for years have worked to improve the condition of and properly manage, protect, conserve and restore the region's natural resources. This is above and beyond the state and federal agencies charged with that task. In Rhode Island, the focus has primarily been the state's most valuable economic and environmental resource, Narragansett Bay, which directly impacts the quality of life of all the region's residents. This effort has been aided and often driven by a tradition of coastal stewardship second to none. One only needs to look at the response to catastrophes such as oil spills that have threatened the ecology of Narragansett Bay and the coastline, when thousands of citizen volunteers have instantly responded to do their part to help protect these resources.

While what happens to, in and around Narragansett Bay has an impact on everyone in the region, many lose sight of the fact that the activities of everyone who lives here has, in return, an impact on the Bay. Many people have no concept of the Narragansett Bay watershed, and it is often a surprise to them to learn that 60 percent of the Bay's watershed lies in Massachusetts. The actions of every person or organization person within that watershed—a natural system which respects no arbitrary political boundaries—ultimately will effect the condition of the Bay. But that is a fact that is often overlooked.

Despite best intentions, the major problem to date facing a comprehensive communications strategy that builds public awareness and support for Narragansett Bay has been the fragmentation and tunnel vision focus of those efforts. The citizens groups, ranging from large advocacy organizations such as Save the Bay and the Conservation Law Foundation, down to grassroots local efforts such as the Blackstone Valley River Council and the Salt Pond Watchers Coalition, have done excellent public relations and informational campaigns throughout the years. This is also true of local and state municipalities and state and federal/regional regulatory agencies. These varied organizations have also, in some cases, put together very effective educational programs for everyone from elementary school children to adults and key decisionmakers. These "informal" education

efforts must be combined with formal education curricula on Bay-oriented topics introduced within our school systems to provide lasting, long-term impacts that will derive from a public that has begun learning about the importance of the Bay from their youth onwards. Integrating these programs is another challenge for the Communications and Education panel and full Commission.

But the majority of communications initiatives carried out through the past few decades have failed to raise the focus of the public up to a level that looks at the big picture, or offer a comprehensive communications strategy that addresses the entire Narragansett Bay watershed. Nor have they truly embraced the economic side of the equation, where balance in development is sought between the business uses of the bay and environmental concerns. There is still a need to show and explain the payoff on investments made in clean-up efforts, and the societal benefits that occur when controlled, considerate growth along with protection of the watershed takes place. These are the problems facing the Communications and Education Panel. How does the Governor's Commission integrate the varied messages, issues and geographic focuses that abound in the watershed, and tie them into a comprehensive effort that educates the public of its impacts on the Bay whether inland, upstream or right on the shoreline? How does the way we plan for and manage the Bay and its watershed impact the economic investments that are made and the benefits to local businesses and residents? And, how can the public learn about the ecosystem and play an active, important role in reversing the activities and trends that are currently threatening the region's primary environmental resource?

ANALYSIS

Carrying out a comprehensive communications strategy for Narragansett Bay and its watershed will not detract from any of the very good ongoing public outreach, awareness-building and education efforts referred to above. Rather, it will complement that work. Local projects will serve as models for other community, regional and state and interstate wide efforts, demonstrating successes and effective public outreach. Meanwhile, statewide communications work will help shape the work being done at local levels, and provide recognition about how all the parts form a whole with a critical mass of interrelated activities and shared objectives. The problems of having too narrow a focus at the local level with a the failure to see the bigger picture, or doing statewide outreach that fails to incorporate and recognize grassroots and what they add to the larger effort, need to be overcome through partnerships, collaboration and coordination.

To be blunt, to date, people have heard too much talk and seen too little activity on the creation of a comprehensive, coordinated strategy for Bay planning and management. This has added to the fragmentation of Bay-related projects, as local and statewide groups and government agencies—and particularly grassroots advocacy organizations—eventually give up on collaborative efforts that are backed by neither government leadership or adequate funding, or result in petty and irreconcilable “turf battles.” Instead, they turn their focus back to their specific area of concern or authority.

While this is understandable, it is also inexcusable. Every time the public has been asked to respond to a crisis threatening Narragansett Bay, they have turned out by the hundreds to volunteer. Every time the public has been asked to support bonds to fund protection, conservation and restoration efforts for the watershed, they have cast their votes in favor of making that financial commitment. If government officials and organization leaders who are now expressing their frustration at the constant wheel-spinning and “studies” that produce no action over time, there is even more frustration among the public who have displayed an overwhelming sense of stewardship for the Bay, for what could be regarded as meager return from official entities. The problem has

not been people not understanding how they can help; it is feeling that their work is not making a difference. They have a perception that the state's government and business community are not as serious about this work as they are, or that their vision is not shared by those with the power to do something about it.

It is now time for state leaders from all sectors to tangibly demonstrate leadership and a willingness to work together from the interstate and state levels down to the local communities to chart the future for the Bay and watershed. The communications strategy needs to highlight these commitments from the Governor's Commission and the two General Assembly legislative committees, and for the communications effort to show immediate actions and results. This will be both an example and model for the public and all involved agencies and organizations to follow suit. There must be activities undertaken and objectives achieved—at first the “easy apples”—that show the public that success through partnering can indeed be achieved, and that there is a payoff for their investment of time and energy. In the same way, the business sector and legislature must have it made clear to them that their financial investments are also reaping a return, as well as providing benefits for watershed residents. These are the small victories that the communications work can use to build an even stronger public constituency and stewardship over time than the already laudable one that exists.

This can only be done together with the Governor's Commission joining with the work and direction that is being planned by the separate state Senate and House committees. Communications and public outreach can spread the word, but it is time show that all parties are willing to not just talk the talk, but walk the walk. If that doesn't take place, the best communications and education work in the world won't make a difference.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Communications Panel's work will be broken into short and long-term elements. In the short term, the focus will be on public/media relations and outreach to build public awareness about the Governor's Commission, its goals, current challenges and recommended solutions, and the need for public involvement. The long-term goals will be to build upon existing educational materials and programs and create curricula that in the future will be formalized in the state's schools.

Within the communications strategy framework and timeline the Communications Panel has created (see Attachment I at the end of this report), there are many outlets and vehicles for making the public aware of the Commission's work and to build a constituency for it. The key to this is for the Commission to decide upon a clear message of their shared vision, objectives and activities that resonates with all sectors, from business to government to society as a whole, seeking to benefit everyone who lives and works in the Bay Watershed.

The Communications and Education Panel recommends the following to help needed to achieve the Commission's short and long-term goals:

- External communications: Create short and long-term communications strategy frameworks that will be used to publicly disseminate the commission's message(s) and key recommendations to build a legislative and public constituency. Do an inventory of short-term public outreach vehicles to utilize for raising public awareness about Bay issues, the challenges they present and the way the commission is finding solutions to those problems. Stress cross-societal impacts of Commissions' work—factors that affect the Bay do not just impact the environment, but involve the economy and every facet of day-to-day quality of life.

- Internal communications: Create an internal information/knowledge management system that streamlines and consolidates information for sharing among panels and the Commission to avoid confusion, unnecessary overlap and to stay focused on priorities. This will also be used to help Commission leadership work with state legislators on a direct and ongoing basis. (Communications Panel members are currently serving as liaisons to other panels, attending their meetings and centralizing the information so it can be integrated and shared among the panels.)
- Craft the Commission's core message(s). This is essential. The message must be clear, concise and consistent. It must be positive, understandable to the public and have meaning to people on a day-to-day scale. The Commission's work must answer the question, "So what?" Why should someone care? How does it directly affect them, their families or their work in their everyday life?
- Tailor the core message to meet the needs and interests of different audiences. For example, the business sector will want to know the economic impacts—what's the cost, what is the return on the investment? For community groups, what is the impact on their town or city, children and the less privileged, and are proposals equitable? For government officials, how does it affect my constituents (read: voters)?
- Develop a core group from Commission members, representing government, environmental groups, social agencies and the business sector. This is a critical factor in creating a successful communications campaign. The core group (Commission members of which can be involved on a volunteer, rotating, as needed/most effective basis) will be used to background media and decisionmakers so the project is defined not by others, but by the Commission itself, and critical questions can be answered at the outset. Program staff should seek out meetings with community, business, government and environmental leaders and groups to have the core group members sit down with them and explain the goals of the initiative and solicit their support.
- Employ a variety of public outreach vehicles based upon the specific needs and what will be most effective. The Communications Panel members have identified—and have for years utilized, and will again—a wide variety of informational outlets from press conferences to local newsletter inserts to videotapes to Internet Web sites and e-mail list serves. The Communications Panel will inventory these for best use at the proper times, and seek out new ways to get across the message about the Commission's work.
- The Communications and Education Panel's long-term focus on the education side includes integrating information on bay watershed issues into informal and formal education programs, including school curriculum. This is designed to extend the reach of the commission's work among a new generation to increase its ongoing future impact. The communications unit has an education subcommittee to address long-term strategies for incorporating Bay-oriented education into informal programs and school curriculum. This committee includes individuals within the Department of Education as well as from environmental groups who have conducted their own successful "informal" education programs. They will also inventory existing successful programs and curricula and build upon those, while exploring ways to effectively incorporate bay/marine/watershed curriculum into schools. This will include recommending achievable initiatives that the public and teachers will see as valuable and advance the understanding of the Bay and its environs. Because of past experience with similar initiatives, a phased approach is being considered, so we can build on successes, rather than suggest a large "all or nothing plan" that will potentially be a political lightning rod that ends up with no positive results at all.

ATTACHMENT I

OUTLINE OF COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY BASIC STEPS

IDENTIFY PROJECT COMMUNICATIONS STAFF AND SPOKESPERSON

- **Who is responsible?**
- **Always available**
- **Information resource for media**

IDENTIFY RESOURCES - FINANCIAL & HUMAN

- **What's the budget?**
- **Who will do the work?**

DEVELOP A MESSAGE

- **The 3 C's - Clear, Concise, Consistent**
- **The 3 "Barks" – Three sentences to get your message across**

DEVELOP A CORE GROUP

- **Community leaders**
- **Business sector leaders**
- **Government representatives**
- **Environmental community**
- **Media representative (if possible)**
- **Funder(s) representative (if appropriate)**

RESEARCH AND IDENTIFY OPPOSING ARGUMENTS

- **Why are you right and they wrong?**
- **Preemptive strike; shows consideration of opposing argument and alternative solution**

IDENTIFY TARGET AUDIENCES AND TAILOR MESSAGE

- **Public/Media**
- **Business sector**
- **Community/social services/educational sector**
- **Government (National/State/Local)**

IDENTIFY EXTERNAL SUPPORT PEOPLE

- **Community leaders and neighbors**
- **High visibility and credibility**
- **Knows issues cold and is articulate**
- **Contrarian (whenever possible)**

CREATE AN ACTION TIMELINE

- **What are you going to do? Why?**
- **Short-term actions/Long-term strategy**

IDENTIFY PUBLIC INFO VEHICLES/OUTLETS

- **One-page summary**
- **Flyer**
- **Brochure**
- **Posters**
- **Video**
- **WWW**
- **Other (Billboards, T-shirts, etc.)**

IDENTIFY KEY LOCAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR PUBLIC INFORMATION DISSEMINATION

- **Use local knowledge (e.g., church fairs, community events)**
- **Neighbors and friends (Rely on people who live/work in an area)**

SET UP A DATABASE OF PEOPLE AND ORGS. FOR INFORMATION DISSEMINATION

- **Create foundation for communication flow**
- **Includes everyone involved, supporters and key fence sitters or opposition**

BACKGROUND LOCAL MEDIA

- **What are you doing in this community/region?**
- **Answer questions and rebut arguments in advance**
- **Seek input and support from media executives (often community leaders)**

COMING OUT PARTY - IDENTIFY ANNOUNCEMENT DATE/KICKOFF EVENT

- Time to go public
- Press conference (?)
- Date, place, “hook”
- Press release
- Pre-brief participants and invitees - rehearsal

ANNOUNCE NEXT STEPS

- What are you going to do? Show you are getting things done and this is first step
- What do you want public to do? Tell them, and they will respond

OPINION/EDITORIAL PIECE FOR LOCAL PAPER

- Your message in your own words. Define yourself before others do
- If not signed by project leader(s), then by respected and prominent local member of core group to build credibility and identify with public

DISSEMINATE MEDIA COVERAGE

- Look at what we're doing! Outside validation of work
- Distribute via database
- Distribute to funders to show return on investment and them backing a success
- Show public recognition to government officials/decisionmakers, who seek same

Communications and Education Panel: Activities Timeline

Framework for Year One Activities (* = Critical work period for ongoing effort)

	Feb	March	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan
Media Element												
Identify project communications staff and spokesperson												
Identify resources - financial & human												
Develop (3) core message(s)												
Create public outreach/legislative advocacy materials*												
Develop core groups to assist in public outreach												
Research and identify opposing arguments*												
Identify target audiences and tailor message to their needs												
Identify external support people												
Create an action timeline												
Identify public info vehicles/outlets*												
Identify key local opportunities for public information dissemination*												
Set up a database of people and orgs; update on regular basis*												
Background local/statewide media												
Background decisionmakers												
Identify announcement date/kickoff event												
Announce next steps												
Opinion/editorial piece for local paper												
Craft/lead campaign for legislation												

* - Ongoing, critical work period highlighted only