

RappFLOW Strategic Plan -- Brief history and update

May 2006 Beverly Hunter

In the fall of 2004, RappFLOW volunteers and partners articulated the five-year goal of facilitating the County leaders and citizens through a process to develop and implement local plans and incentives and volunteer efforts to support watershed protection. The long-term goal of this initiative is the incorporation of watershed management plans in the 2009 revision of the County's Comprehensive Plan, in addition to increases in riparian vegetative buffers through individual landowner decisionmaking. In addition, RappFLOW is working to address the goals of the Chesapeake 2000 Agreement, and the Rappahannock Tributary Strategy as they apply to our watersheds and streams.

The following is a brief history of this planning process and recent refinements and updates to the Plan.

In summer 2002, interested citizens and representatives from local and regional stakeholder groups founded *RappFLOW*. Our mission is to help preserve, protect, conserve and restore water resources and Rappahannock County's watersheds. Phase I (2002 – 2004) was funded in part by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and over \$31,000 in matching support from local organizations and volunteers. Phase I established a foundation for future watershed protection efforts through broad stakeholder involvement, community education and outreach, an atmosphere of inclusiveness and openness, strong ties with experts in government, business, and nonprofit organizations, and identification of high priority watershed protection issues. RappFLOW planned, promoted, conducted, and reported on five public education events on air and water quality in the Shenandoah National Park; riparian buffers; erosion/sedimentation/stream protection; sustainable forestry; and the effect of agriculture on water quality and mitigation strategies. Attendance increased at each public event, from 75 to 300 participants. Partners include citizen volunteers, state and federal agencies, local government, and local and regional conservation organizations. The County government serves as fiscal agent for RappFLOW grants. See <http://www.RappFLOW.org> for more information.

RappFLOW attracts community leaders and a wide range of stakeholders. Participants include excavators, construction contractors, fishermen, farmers, educators, artisans, woodworkers, sawyers, forest landowners, foresters, homeowners and other land-owners. Members of the board of supervisors and planning commission and the county administrator served as lead participants and speakers. Each event successfully raised awareness through publicity and features stories in the local paper, exchanges in the press and a County list serve. Through direct participation and briefings by RappFLOW coordinators, the Board of Supervisors, Planning Commission, and citizens are now better prepared to use watershed protection tools at the individual landowner and county level.

Strategic Planning Workshop in fall 2004

Phase I culminated in a strategic planning workshop of 25 participants representing key stakeholder groups. They expressed overwhelming affirmation that RappFLOW should

facilitate the citizenry and leaders through a scientifically-sound process to determine the steps for protecting its watersheds.

Needs Identified

Strategic planning workshop participants (fall 2004) identified the following issues as central to future watershed management and water quality protection:

- Lack of detailed data on water quality and related land cover/land use in a usable form to support landowner/local leader decision-making on watershed assessment and water-related priorities.
- Increasing fragmentation of land holdings, land cover and land use due to development, gentrification, and shifts in agricultural economics and practices.
- Need for additional landowner awareness and education regarding best management practices and associated cost sharing programs such as CREP.
- Need for deeper awareness/understanding among citizens and civic leaders of watershed and water quality concepts, facts, and issues. "People see our streams as clean and plentiful."
- Need for stronger and more detailed implementation of the policies and principles of the Rappahannock County Comprehensive Plan and enforcement of existing ordinances.

RappFLOW organizers worked in the fall and winter of 2004 to prioritize and decide how to meet these needs. Each volunteer's interests and passions are reflected in the objectives and tasks we undertake. We chose the Rapid Watershed Assessment methodology for identifying and analyzing key information because we desire to establish a scientifically defensible knowledge base for this work. We use this analysis to support individual and community participation in decision-making in a multi-year watershed planning effort.

The Phase II (March 2005 – July 2006) project supports RappFLOW's strategic plan by

- 1) creating a systematic database and analytic framework;
- 2) establishing the methodology for county and regional watershed planning;
- 3) implementing immediate on-the-ground projects that protect water quality and serve as demonstration projects; and
- 4) building community support for future efforts and adoption of watershed managements plans.

Our goals for Phase II (March 2005 – July 2006) are to:

- Preserve, protect and restore the water quality in the Upper Thornton River subwatershed.
- Create, test, and evaluate an approach to community-based watershed assessment and planning for Rappahannock County that is applicable elsewhere in the Upper Rappahannock watershed.
- Use the project findings to develop a management plan on one subwatershed of the Upper Thornton watershed;
- Support local decision making regarding watershed protection for riparian lands.
- Help citizens prepare for

- 1) future TMDL implementation processes in areas surrounding the five category 5 impaired stream segments identified by the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality;
- 2) meeting goals in the Rappahannock Tributary Strategy; and
- 3) meeting the goals of the Chesapeake Bay 2000 agreement.

Phase II is supported by grants from the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, plus contributions from 15 partner organizations plus volunteer hours.

2006 Update to strategic plan

Based on experience and progress during 2005, RappFLOW in early 2006 articulated the following objectives for the next phase of work:

Goals for Phase III are to protect our watersheds and water quality by:

- preserving and restoring riparian vegetative buffers,
- controlling erosion and sedimentation, and
- mitigating the ongoing conversion and fragmentation of farms and forests.

This requires a combination of the following:

- public education and participation;
- individual landowner actions;
- cost sharing programs for agricultural and forestal BMPs;
- local government policies, incentives, and ordinances; and watershed management plans in the 2009 revision of the County's Comprehensive Plan.

Working towards meeting the goals of the Chesapeake 2000 Agreement, Rappahannock River Basin Tributary Strategy, and County Comprehensive Plan. The Rappahannock County allocations for the Tributary Strategy "Input Deck" provide us with useful provisional goals for 2010 for forestry, agricultural, and urban/suburban BMP's with respect to riparian forested buffers and hence reductions in erosion, sedimentation, nutrients, biological impairments and other contamination. The Trib Strategy for our County calls for an increase by the year 2010 from 972 to 1,704 acres of forested buffer area in agricultural BMPs, and establishment of 908 acres of forested buffers in suburban BMPs.

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Objectives in proposed Phase III (Sept. 2006 – December 2007) are to:

- Weave together the scientific, environmental, social, educational, economic, engineering, and political aspects of watershed management in ways that work for our people, topography, land uses, land cover, economy and political processes.
- Accomplish this within a focus on increasing the percentage of riparian buffer area that is preserved or restored to forest cover on both agricultural and "suburban" land uses. We seek to increase the forested buffer acres using agricultural BMPs by at least ten percent -- from 972 to 1069 -- and institute a pilot program for forested buffers on suburban land, implementing 40 acres of stream and pond buffer area.
- Refine and apply our subwatershed vulnerability assessment model to the entire county area, thereby helping to prioritize watershed management efforts.

- Create a new land cover classification based on 2006 satellite imagery to serve as baseline for evaluating future progress in increasing forested riparian buffers.
- Identify the cost-effective incentives and educational strategies that result in landowners implementing vegetative buffers along streams and ponds on their land.
- Help landowners analyze and understand the health and vulnerabilities in their local small watershed areas; present information to landowners/ stakeholders in ways useful for decision-making; and help landowners to decide upon and implement best management practices for improving our watersheds with special focus on forested buffers for streams and ponds;
- Help Rappahannock County's governing bodies understand, articulate, and enforce public policies and tools best suited to addressing our watershed's vulnerabilities, with special focus on implementing policies of the Comprehensive plan that address protection of riparian corridors.
- Evaluate the environmental, economic, and political effectiveness of our approach, using quantitative indicators of riparian vegetative buffer preservation and restoration, and detailed records of the educational, technical assistance, and financial incentives offered to and used by landowners.

This project will greatly enhance our community's ability to develop an effective county-wide watershed management plan over the next four years. We intend for our model to be useful to similar localities.