Tabling Tips & Talking Points

VLAWMO Basics:

The Vadnais Lake Area Water Management Organization was created in 1983 by a joint powers agreement between six municipalities (WBL, WBT, North Oaks, VH, Gem Lake, Lino Lakes) in the northeast metro. North Oaks is the only city entirely within VLAWMO’s watershed boundary, the rest are most or partly in the watershed. Gem Lake for example is mostly in the watershed, and Lino Lakes has a small area in the watershed.

VLAWMO is what’s known as a “WMO”, opposed to a Watershed District (WD). Watershed districts have more permitting and fining authority than a WMO. A WMO functions as more of a partnership-based organization. VLAWMO creates plans and policies that promote watershed improvement, and these become adapted and integrated into City and Township water plans and policies. Depending on your viewpoint, either of these can be pros or cons. To welcome and encourage conversation with a variety of viewpoints, we phrase these neutrally at the table. For example: “VLAWMO doesn’t have permitting authority and cannot fine someone for filling in a wetland, but fosters the tools and resources for communities to keep water management at the forefront.” Or “VLAWMO relies on partnerships to achieve its goals and while this may be more complex than working independently, it allows for closer partnerships, strategy, and customization with partners.

The Minnesota Metro Surface Water Management Act of 1982 sparked the creation of watershed organizations as local units of government charged with the task of protecting and improving local surface water resources.

VLAWMO is the Ditch Authority for Lambert Creek, County Ditch 14, and operates under state statute 103B. Other watersheds likely operate by the more common statue of 103E. 103B calls for a plan to be generated for ditch management, and requires the ditch to be maintained at a “reasonable function.” This results in some gray space, which may be frustrating for some individuals, especially if they’re approaching the topic of ditches with a direct “quick fix” mentality. When this occurs, we explain that partnerships are again utilized and are key to success in this ditch maintenance statue. It also involves a complex and neglected history of how the ditch was used. In sum, it was a former agriculture ditch. The landscape changed as the area developed and urbanized from the 40s to the 80s and even 90s, but the ditch system didn’t. As these changes happened, the ditch system’s expectations grew, with new needs and pressures – increased stormwater runoff (introduction of impermeable surfaces) plus reduced storage and support space (filling and draining of wetlands). The VLAWMO website project page and project map convey the efforts that VLAWMO has undertaken overtime to renovate and retrofit the watershed’s drainage system. Residents > Ditches and Drainage is also a place with information and tells the story of the ditch. If folks have questions or complaints, please feel free to direct them to the website or to staff for follow-up as you see fit.

Key Talking Points:

* Everyone has lakefront property. Most stormdrains in VLAWMO connect to a wetland or ditch conveyance system, but also drain to lakes. In many other areas, stormdrains empty directly into lakes or rivers without treatment.
* 1 teaspoon of salt can permanently pollute 5 gallons of freshwater
* 1 lb of phosphorus can generate up to 500 lbs of algea
* The general concept we’re conveying on stormwater: “Slow it down, soak it up.” We strive to increase water storage across the landscape, so that downstream areas receive less pressure, from the ditch systems to neighbors that happen to live close to these high pressure receiving areas. By pressure, we mean everything that relates to surface water: volume, sedimentation, nutrients, and even other contaminants such as salt, trash, and automotive fluids. We relate this concept to being a good neighbor.
* The less distance stormwater travels before soaking into the ground, the less opportunity it has to pick up contaminants and carry them to a waterbody. This calls for a very expansive vision that reimagines our everyday landscape. It wasn’t developed with the watershed in mind, but we can strive to restore it and make it better by creating new norms. Raingardens, better soil and vegetation cover,
* Pet waste is unlike wildlife (fox, goose) waste. It is higher in nutrient density, and due to neighborhood walking hotspots, occurs in higher densities. Pet waste can take up to a year or longer to fully break down, and as it does it continually leaches nutrients off the surface into water. This also carries harmful pathogens and bacteria into water, posing health risks for people and pets. Pet waste should be disposed of in the trash. It can be thrown away in a toilet, if the pet owner is willing to do that disposal.
* Turf can soak water into the ground, but only until it’s saturated. Because turf is largely a thick mat, it’s also known as “green concrete” because depending on the soil, sun, and root structure, turf can shed stormwater and any loose particles or substances on the turf (i.e pet waste, soil, etc.). This is why we recommend maintaining longer standing turf (3” or more) and trying out new planting styles that work for your personal tastes and maintenance needs. There’s no one right way or solution, because each property has its unique needs and everyone has different maintenance abilities. Planting plans can be simple and practical, or intricate and complex. Both styles are needed for long-term improvement of the watershed.
* VLAWMO does not work directly with mercury levels in lakes, micro-plastics, or salt contamination in municipal drinking water. These are important issues but are beyond VLAWMO’s scope.
* VLAWMO’s watershed is a challenge for public outreach because there are no public access points to the watershed. Because of this, we have to convey that it’s important to take care of the water here because it’s the right thing to do as a good neighbor and a steward for future generations. This means slowing down, planning, and working on the community level wherever possible to pay attention to how we’re impacting water, where there’s opportunities for improvement, and ways we can bring local water closer into our routines and daily conversations. (I.e. the “water experts” can’t possibly do it all and wave a magic wand, because everyone impacts water for better or for worse. The water experts monitor, provide the resources and tools, and build improvements whenever it can, but a sense of personal responsibility is also a big help).
* Most of VLAWMO’s watershed drains to East Vadnais Lake, the reservoir for the Saint Paul Regional Water Services. Gem Lake is the exception in that it’s a “dead end” and has no outlet.
* Gem Lake was once impaired, but is an example that it’s possible to improve a shallow lake! Gem Lake was de-listed from the State impaired list in 2019.
* Shallow lakes are unlike Minnesota’s pristine northern lakes, and thus require different expectations and understandings. Aquatic vegetation is unappealing to many, but shallow lakes depend on and have developed with aquatic vegetation to be healthy. In a shallow lake ecosystem, either there’s aquatic vegetation and clean water, or no vegetation and algae. Settling with algae-rich lakes may seem easier, but this leaves Minnesota in a vulnerable place for the future, with over 50% of its lakes impaired for high nutrient levels. It is very difficult to flip shallow lakes back to a clean water state, so this is why we try to prevent them from going into algae-dominated states, and when needed, flip them back to clean water states. This can be a delicate balancing act between the immediate needs of those who live and utilize the lake, and the bigger picture of Minnesota’s interconnected water cycle. Because this is a puzzle, it requires a sense of wonder and questioning from everyone. If in a contentious conversation about how shallow lakes should be managed, we recommend using probing questions to grapple with the issue together: “What does it look like to be a good neighbor in terms of water?” “While there’s individual property rights, water is a public resource. How can we balance and protect both in a way that mirrors the water cycle?” In many cases, it’s ok to not have “the” answer, but to sit in a space of inquiry in a spirit of collaboration. This creates a far more impactful experience for people in the long-term, and is more memorable than reciting facts or telling the “right” answer.
* High nutrient levels in a lake is like a person that has too much ice cream. Too much of a good thing (nutrients) can leave you green with a stomach ache.
* Most wetlands in the watershed have been damaged or degraded between the 1940’s-1980s. While it’s very difficult and expensive to fix them directly, it’s still important to take care of them by paying attention to the ways we impact wetlands everyday close to home. What we do on the yard, street, and parking lot has a long-term impact on our wetlands, and our wetlands have a long-term impact on our soil, air, surface water storage, and especially groundwater.
* We recommend maintaining a mowing height of 3” or more. Bee lawns, alternative turf, and native plants are fabulous and we express excitement about them, but we don’t want to shame anyone or pressure anyone to change their lawn care routines or personal aesthetic. The best change comes from a positive arrangement of information with space for personal decision making, evaluation, and buy-in.

Elevator Speech Planning:

Practice the following points with a family member or friend. It may feel funny at first, but talking them out is one of the best ways to fine-tune your own elevator speech while being accurate to the VLAWMO basics.

* Joint Powers Association: VLAWMO is a JPA with 6 member communities. A city councilmember from each community sits on VLAWMO’s Board of Directors.
* Two-board structure: The Board meets every other month, TEC once/month. BOD is a big picture direction and policy entity and the TEC has a more day to day operations focus.
* Water Management Organization: VLAWMO serves as a WMO and not a Watershed District (WD). The difference between these is largely permitting capacity – WD’s facilitate permits while WMO’s create recommendations for member communities to adopt and enforce.
* Mission: To protect and enhance the water resources in the watershed.
* What we do: Plan with member communities, facilitate Wetland Conservation Act (WCA), coordinate a cost-share program, provide education and outreach.
* Watershed topics we work on: Water quality, local flooding, stormwater, wetlands, aquatic invasive species, helping build and live around wetlands and waterbodies, serving as a ditch authority for County Ditch 14, and working closely with membership communities to share funding work towards shared goals.
* Key takeaways to express: How to be involved, where to find more information, how to reach staff.
  + Subscribe to the E-newsletter, visit the website, project page, follow us on social media
  + Build a project, learn about water-friendly yardcare, landscaping, and neighborhood practices (adopt-a-drain, adopt-a-raingarden).
  + Projects and municipal partnerships: Dawn
  + Building/boundaries, Wetland Conservation Act, water monitoring: Brian
  + Information, hand-outs, resources, volunteering: Nick
  + Maps, cost-share, water quality: Lauren

Education Tools:

Select and plan for the tools that work best for you. The table can be a hub of activity with several displays, or can be remarkably simple. For new tablers, we recommend using 2-3 education tools including brochures and hardcopy information. Select the resources based on the number of volunteers present.

* Brochures and hardcopy prints:
  + Cost-share pamphlet, watershed-at-a-glance, water monitoring summary, lake fact sheets (has its own magazine-style kiosk), Jr. Watershed Explorer booklet, Good Neighbor guide Booklet, native plant/BlueThumb pamphlet, “go native” native plant booklet, “Practical Plantings” sheet, “Wet Soil Specialists” sheet, “about us” postcard, cost-share/neighborhood spotlight photo album.
  + Top priorities: Cost-share pamphlet, Good Neighbor Guide, Jr Watershed Explorer booklet, watershed-at-a-glance
* Physical displays:
  + Stormwater Plinko
  + Pollutant Bottles
  + Smart Salting
  + Magnetic fishing pond
  + Watershed maps
  + Enter-to-win drawing (prize on display)
  + Book giveaways (when available)
  + Chromebook Tablet
  + Adopt-a-Drain sign/brochure
* Other:
  + Drippy costume
  + We “heart” H2O sail flag
  + Spin-the-Wheel (connects to prize/candy/treats or trivia questions to win)
  + Toilet leak tests
  + WAV shirt and badge