

OTTAWA COUNTY GROUNDWATER BOARD

- DATE: February 15, 2024
- PLACE: Ottawa County Fillmore Complex, Conference Room E
- PRESENT: Mark Baker, Roger Belknap, Adam Elenbaas, Jerry Geertman, Frank Johnson, David Kraker, Lee Machiela, Carrie Rivette, Sylvia Rhodea, Patrick Staskiewicz, Alex Svoboda, John Yellich, Dale Zahn, Henry Werksma
- ABSENT: Joe Bush, Dale Buist, John Truscott
- STAFF: Matthew Chappuies, Andrew Roszkowski, Paul Sachs, Kylie Vosburg
- PUBLIC: Nathan Adamczyk, Natalie Bekins, Steve Hecksel

CALL TO ORDER

Department of Strategic Impact Director, Paul Sachs, called the meeting to order at 9:00 a.m.

APPROVAL OF AGENDA

- GWB 24 - 01 Carrie Rivette moved to approve the February 15 Agenda. The motion passed. UNANIMOUS

INTRODUCTIONS OF BOARD MEMBERS

Since there are several new members on the Groundwater Board, each attendee briefly introduced themselves. This provided insight into the diverse areas of expertise that make up the board, allowing for a clearer understanding of the collective knowledge and skills present among its members.

ELECTION OF OFFICERS

- GWB 24 - 02 CHAIR: Patrick Staskiewicz nominated Commissioner Roger Belknap for Chair. The motion passed. UNANIMOUS
- GWB 24 - 03 VICE CHAIR: Patrick Staskiewicz nominated Adam Elenbaas for Vice Chair. The motion passed. UNANIMOUS

OLD BUSINESS

Chair Belknap expressed his gratitude for the detail of previous minutes as this helps those who are not able to attend understand the complex issues and discussions had during these meetings.

- GWB 24 - 04 Yellich moved to approve the minutes from the November 8, 2023 meeting. The motion passed. UNANIMOUS

PERTINENT PROJECT UPDATES

A. Legislative Advocacy

Paul Sachs discussed the various opportunities and challenges encountered in addressing the groundwater issue over the years. While there have been chances to implement mitigation strategies, barriers imposed by state statutes have also been identified. One such example is the Water Withdrawal Assessment Tool (WWAT), which lacks the capability to address multiple

aquifer systems like those found in Ottawa County. Influencing change with the WWAT poses challenges compared to other opportunities.

County leaders have engaged in discussions with local legislators to raise awareness about these issues. Another avenue for addressing legislative concerns is through dialogue with Michigan's Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy (EGLE) staff, although this has proven to be challenging. A meeting is scheduled for February 16 with EGLE to further discuss concerns and gain clarity on their stance regarding these opportunities and issues.

Sachs elaborated on a conversation held with Representative Luke Meerman concerning groundwater collection and reuse opportunities. Representative Meerman expressed keen interest in the topic and expressed a desire to advance related legislation. He had recently proposed legislation regarding shallow wells for non-potable use. However, this initiative encountered resistance from the Health Department, leading to the draft bill being put on hold due to negative feedback from the Well Driller's Association, which did not support the proposed legislation.

Lee Machiela expressed concerns about the potential complications arising from the well code, particularly regarding shallow wells. He emphasized that comparing a shallow well to a half-acre pond is not appropriate, as they differ significantly in their impact on the water table and overall water conservation efforts.

A discussion was then held focusing on the possibility of contamination of shallow wells over time. Participants highlighted the importance of considering the placement of shallow wells in relation to other potential contributing factors, such as septic systems, which could pose risks of contamination without the user's awareness.

Patrick Staskiewicz voiced concerns about presenting a bill without thorough discussion and consideration beforehand. He emphasized the importance of having such discussions during meetings like these to ensure that the bill is fortified with the appropriate language and direction. Staskiewicz suggested that the board could serve as a valuable resource for conducting further research and investigation, allowing for the collection of recommended language before lobbying for the statute.

Sachs elaborated that the initial form of the bill proposed allowing the installation of wells less than 25 feet deep for purposes such as irrigation and domestic water usage, such as for home gardens.

A discussion ensued regarding details regarding casing variances and concerns about isolation distances from areas such as septic systems.

It was agreed that forming a subcommittee to delve deeper into this issue would be the most effective use of time and resources. Yellich proposed the establishment of a shallow well legislation sub-committee, composed of volunteer board members including Dave Kraker, John Yellich, Patrick Staskiewicz, Lee Machiela, Alex Svoboda, Carrie Rivette, and Frank Johnson.

B. Landscape Partnership Opportunities

Kylie Vosburg shared updates on efforts to expand community outreach and support for native plantings. She noted that an enthusiastic resident reached out to staff regarding converting his

property to native plants and removing turf grass. However, he encountered resistance from his HOA and neighbors. To address this, he intends to create educational signage to promote the benefits of native landscapes. Additionally, the resident partnered with a landscaping contractor to establish a non-profit named Restoration Earth. The nonprofit proposed a partnership with staff to assist residents in establishing a 10ft by 10ft section of their yard for native landscaping, aiming to facilitate the initial steps in this process.

Pat Staskiewicz inquired about work in subdivisions and work in the right-of-way. If someone allocated the time and resources into this type of work, then the Road Commission performs any type of work they are equipped to restore the area in that manner. He proposed working with staff to establish a standard for landscaping in right-of-way areas, emphasizing the use of native plants and adherence to established requirements. This standard would apply to existing native plant installations as well as future remediation projects following general right-of-way work. Suggestions to work with multiple county departments to achieve an agreement that works with these efforts was supported and deemed achievable.

Vosburg also shared that a parent from the Jenison School District initiated a conversation regarding the potential conversion of some turf grass areas to native landscaping on school grounds. Although this initiative is currently in the idea phase, there is optimism that such projects will serve as educational opportunities for others, fostering a desire to pursue similar conservation efforts in the future.

John Yellich emphasized the significance of residents understanding soil types and the native plants suitable for their specific soil conditions when embarking on native planting projects. He stressed the need for comprehensive documentation to be prepared and easily accessible for reference by residents. Vosburg suggested that this information could be incorporated into the educational signage being developed for the Fillmore Complex, providing an opportunity to educate the community about soil types and plant suitability as part of the broader educational effort.

Chair Belknap proposed that the newly established organization, Restoration Earth, be invited to present at a future board meeting to showcase their progress and initiatives.

C. 2024 Staff Objectives

Matt Chappuies highlighted the considerable amount of work already undertaken and ongoing this year that contributes to addressing the complex issue at hand. Key initiatives include the installation of new monitoring wells in various locations in Allendale Township in collaboration with Allendale Public Schools, as well as locations at the Polkton Township office, and the County Fillmore Complex. Additionally, there are other prospective projects in the pipeline. The target goal for this year is to install 14 or more additional wells to further advance these efforts.

Staff is currently developing a comprehensive standard operating procedure and checklist for well drilling, which considers various factors including environmental considerations, future land use of the sites, and accessibility. This initiative aims to streamline the process from site selection to gaining access authority and all subsequent elements of the drilling procedures. By incorporating best practices learned through the drilling of more wells, this procedure will facilitate smoother operations and enhance efficiency.

During the discussion, the presence of the Marshall Aquifer at the Fillmore complex and the reasoning behind choosing this particular site was mentioned. It was decided that drilling should proceed here, even if solely to confirm the Marshall Aquifer’s absence. Regardless of whether the aquifer is present or not, these endeavors will offer valuable insights into the area's geological characteristics. Additionally, the plan to install a glacial drift aquifer monitoring station remains feasible and will enhance our data collection efforts.

Chappuies continued to give an update on the marketing and educational outreach efforts of the Groundwater Sustainability project. Significant strides have been made with the video production undertaken by Gorilla Inc. The 3-and-a-half-minute educational video, which aims to raise awareness about the initiative, is nearing completion. It effectively communicates key information about the issue and encourages residents to get involved by visiting the project's website for further details on how they can contribute to conservation efforts. The video's development has involved extensive collaboration with board members and members of the scientific community to ensure its accuracy and accessibility to a wide audience. Subsequently, the board was presented with the video for viewing. The next steps include adding the branding and other related graphics, but the video will be wrapped up shortly and be ready for distribution.

During the discussion, concerns were raised about certain language used in the video and whether slight alterations could be made. Additionally, questions were raised about the response of residents who may not be directly impacted by the groundwater issue and what incentives they have to participate in conservation efforts.

Chappuies explained that many of these concerns and questions will be addressed on the website that the video directs viewers to. The website will feature documentation and supplementary shorter videos aimed at answering the next level of questions that arise. The primary objective of the video is to serve as a gateway to these resources, and it successfully achieves this goal.

The video will be prominently featured on the groundwater website, complementing the broader marketing campaign orchestrated by King Media. This comprehensive campaign encompasses Gas Station TV, social media advertisements, and strategically placed billboards, all of which will direct residents to the website. In addition to raising awareness about the groundwater issue, these channels provide valuable information on why and how residents should actively engage in conservation efforts.

As part of the marketing campaign, a new universally recognizable branding and logo were developed. The tagline "Be Water Wise" was chosen, accompanied by corresponding logos. These logos feature an outline of Ottawa County with a water drop placed within it. The tagline "Be Water Wise" carries a dual meaning: encouraging residents to be wise and conserve water, but to also educate themselves about water-related issues. Staff anticipates that this message will strongly resonate with residents and become a recognizable and impactful campaign.

GWB 24 - 05

Carrie Rivette proposed a motion to formally accept and adopt the logo and branding that had been presented. The motion passed.

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After the vote, Chappuies went on to say that the development of data management and collection processes for water wells is underway. A central database will house all the collected data, which will eventually be made publicly available once the system is designed and published. However, this task is complex and multifaceted, requiring significant effort.

Additionally, he explained that the initiative aims to conduct modeling of geology and groundwater. Staff, along with John Yellich and his team, plan to work together on the groundwater mapping to further this objective and gain a deeper understanding of groundwater dynamics and geological formations. Staff plans to attend a geospatial conference that focuses on groundwater mapping this spring.

Chappuies then gave an update that the Allendale Public Oakwood Intermediate 5th graders presented groundwater public service announcement (PSA) videos, with over 200 students participating. These PSAs play a crucial role in raising awareness about groundwater issues, fostering understanding among children, and extending that awareness to their parents, thereby contributing to broader conservation efforts. To support these efforts, it was suggested that documentation be created to provide quick and efficient explanations of the issues. These materials can be easily distributed at events like the PSA presentations and other outreach and public events staff plans to attend in the near future, further amplifying awareness and understanding within the community.

D. Regional Conservation Partnership Program

Alex Svoboda from the Ottawa Conservation District (OCD) introduced the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) and welcomed the new Executive Director, Natalie Bekins. Director Bekins provided an overview of the OCD, established in 1939 as the first of its kind in the area. The district serves as a valuable resource for landowners, conservation professionals, private companies, and individuals seeking assistance in conservation efforts. It operates as a non-regulatory, apolitical entity dedicated to supporting those in need of guidance and support in conservation endeavors.

Svoboda then gave more details on the RCPP. The RCPP initiative spans across the watershed areas within Ottawa County as well as adjacent regions. While initially focused on addressing groundwater issues, it has expanded to encompass various natural resource concerns such as groundwater quantity and quality, aquatic and wildlife habitat preservation, and the conservation of manageable farmland. In partnership with the Department of Strategic Impact and Economic Development, the project offers a diverse array of 90 eligible practices to tackle conservation challenges. Tailored recommendations and funding support are provided for implementing practices like cover crops to enhance soil health and moisture management. Collaborative efforts with dairy farmers on rotational grazing systems and pollinator habitat have resulted in significant reductions in nutrient runoff into surface waters, with successful outcomes achieved through only 20% implementation.

Svoboda further explained that the program is funded by the US Department of Agriculture with a budget of 1.8 million dollars, and that the project has enrolled over 8000 acres for conservation. An additional \$145,000 is allocated for irrigation efficiency testing on farms. The partnership actively seeks collaborations for future programs, with potential involvement from cooperative extension services being considered. The RCPP initiative competitively funds projects addressing irrigation issues while prioritizing the implementation of irrigation efficiency improvements to mitigate surface water concerns such as nutrient loading in watersheds. It also promotes agricultural practices aligning with state standards for sustainable resource management.

Another initiative that was discussed by the OCD is the Rain Drop Rescue program, which focuses on converting green spaces into native plantings at local schools. Two schools, Robinson Elementary and Holland Language Academy, have participated in this program. Native plants were introduced, and students actively participated in the planting process, engaging them directly in environmental conservation efforts.

The annual report and supplemental slides containing comprehensive details about all of the OCD initiatives will be sent to board members. Additionally, information about the upcoming native plant sale will accompany these materials. Rain barrels will soon be available year-round to meet the ongoing community demand for them.

Although this presentation provided only a brief overview of some of the projects and initiatives of the OCD, it underscores the vital role played by the partnership between Ottawa County, the groundwater board, and the OCD, ensuring the success of these endeavors.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Nathan Adamczyk from Robinson Township highlighted how the soil composition beneath golf course turf grass contributes to its lushness, even with withdrawals from wells, whether from the Marshall or glacial aquifers. Most golf courses utilize water from the glacial aquifer for the minimal watering required by the turf grass, especially on sandy soil content. Most grasses are drought tolerant and wishes that the Board would be mindful of that fact.

Adamczyk further suggested exploring alternative options to mitigate groundwater usage, such as implementing filtration efforts and gaining a thorough understanding of water test results. By comprehending the results and identifying any issues with water quality testing, residents can take proactive measures to address concerns. He encouraged residents to seek their own solutions for issues related to their water, empowering them to take charge of their water quality and conservation efforts.

OTHER BUSINESS

Chair Belknap reminded the Board that the next meeting is scheduled to take place on **Monday, April 18, 2024, at 9:00 a.m.**

ADJOURNMENT

GWB 24 – 06 Chair Belknap moved to adjourn the meeting. The motion passed.

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