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The Community Watershed Stewardship Program: Experiments in Engagement and Equity in Portland, OR

Thaddeus Miller^{1,2*}, Erin Goodling^a, Cameron Herrington^a, Jennifer Devlin³

Abstract

The Community Watershed Stewardship Program (CWSP) is a long-running city-university partnership between the City of Portland's Bureau of Environmental Services and Portland State University, with the goal of improving watershed health. CWSP has recently focused its efforts on addressing equity, exploring how community watershed stewardship can be generated by low-income and minority communities.

This paper provides a case study of CWSP, exploring its genesis; how it leverages community support and engagement; and, its leadership in analyzing the equity implications of its work and how it can improve. CWSP, which received the Jimmy and Rosalyn Carter Foundation Campus Community Partnership Award, serves as an excellent example of an innovative university-city partnership that is able to leverage a relatively small amount of funding by fostering bottom-up community engagement. Most importantly, CWSP demonstrates how university-community partnerships can explore innovative ways to merge environmental and social equity goals and outcomes.

¹ Nohad A. Toulan School of Urban Studies and Planning, Portland State University, 506 SW Mill Street, Suite 350, Portland, OR 97201

^{2*} Corresponding author: Portland State University, PO Box 751-USP, Portland, OR 97207; Phone: 503-725-4016; Fax: 503-725-8770; email: trm2@pdx.edu

³ Bureau of Environmental Services, City of Portland, 1120 SW 5th Avenue, Room 1000, Portland, OR 97204

Introduction

Among the most intractable issues city governments face related to urban sustainability policy and planning is the ability to foster and maintain meaningful public engagement, and to substantively address issues related to social equity and justice [1,2]. Despite its international reputation as a sustainable city, Portland, OR is far from immune to these challenges. In recent years, several sustainability policies and projects have been met with controversy, particularly around issues of equity, participation and gentrification [3,4]. These shortcomings in city sustainability policy and planning were identified as such in the *Portland Plan* [5], which identified equity as a core goal. Yet, for urban sustainability policy and planning in Portland and beyond, the question remains as to how to meaningfully translate aspirational goals related to equity into program evaluation and on-the-ground policy action. University-community partnerships can serve as fruitful spaces for experimentation in these areas, with the potential to yield powerful innovations for city-wide governance [6,7,8].

The Community Watershed Stewardship Program (CWSP), a long-running partnership between the City of Portland Bureau of Environmental Services (BES) and Portland State University (PSU), serves as an excellent example of how a relatively small program can have meaningful environmental and community impact and foster innovations in program design and implementation around public involvement and social equity. This paper begins with a description of CWSP and then focuses on two critical elements of the program: public involvement and equity. The paper then concludes with a discussion of

how university-community partnerships can provide space for experimentation on how meaningful engagement mechanisms and equity goals can be developed.

The Community Watershed Stewardship Program

The vision for CWSP was crafted in 1995 in response to federal regulatory obligations for BES to prevent stormwater pollution. BES was obligated to foster public involvement in stormwater management, which included education for school aged children, watershed stewardship grants, partnerships with watershed councils and other constituents, and provision of public information about pollution prevention and stormwater issues. CWSP was developed as a collaboration with PSU to provide funding and technical assistance for community initiated water quality improvement projects that build understanding of watershed concepts and community involvement, education and partnerships.

Each year, two graduate students from the PSU Nohad A. Toulon School of Urban Studies and Planning Masters in Urban and Regional Planning program coordinate CWSP with BES staff supervision. The program is a graduate assistant internship collaboration between PSU and BES. PSU faculty help to hire and manage the graduate research assistants, provide technical support, participate in grant review, and integrate CWSP and BES projects into their course work to further support the program.

Each year CWSP awards grants of up to \$10,000 to community groups and citizens to enhance the health of Portland's watersheds. In the process, CWSP fosters lasting partnerships between community groups, non-profit organizations, government agencies, schools and universities, and individuals. In this sense, CWSP is more than a university-

city partnership, but instead a university-city-community partnership that works with citizen and community groups to develop and implement projects with funding and planning assistance from CWSP coordinators and BES staff. CWSP funds projects that promote watershed health, including pavement removal, ecological restoration, stormwater management (e.g., bioswale and ecoroof construction), community gardens, watershed clean-up projects, and education and engagement projects.

Over the past 18 years, nearly \$1 million in CWSP grants have been matched with \$3.6 million in community support through donated services, materials, and volunteer time. Between 1996 and 2012, CWSP supported 224 community-led environmental projects. These investments have funded the planting of 325,437 native trees and plants, restored 10.4 miles of stream, and installed 309,106 square feet of ecoroofs and other stormwater infiltration features. Grants have been awarded throughout the entire city.

Since CWSP was established, BES has renewed its commitment to the stewardship program through subsequent Stormwater Management Plans, the River Plan, and the 2005 Portland Watershed Management Plan (PWMP) [9,10,11]. The River Plan listed Education and Stewardship as one of the “Ten Actions for Success.” The PWMP detailed six “Watershed Improvement Strategies” including Education, Involvement and Stewardship.

Watershed Stewardship through Community Engagement

The first step in recruiting a new cohort of grant applicants each year is for graduate research assistants at CWSP to perform extensive community outreach across the city.

This includes attending community and group meetings, tabling at community events, and specific meetings with individuals and organizations. Graduate assistants then provide significant support to groups as they prepare their applications. This includes a familiarization with the necessary local and state regulations as well as connecting applicants with needed technical expertise. After awards are determined, graduate assistants then follow up with the grantees to facilitate not only the delivery of the funds, but also to continue to help with implementation of the projects.

CWSP's core goal is to deliver watershed benefits through small grants, and the program often achieves this through community engagement and education. Though CWSP proposals must respond to core criteria around watershed health established by BES, they are generated entirely by community groups and individuals. CWSP projects have connected thousands of Portland citizens to watershed stewardship and education. Between 1996 and 2012, 43,425 volunteers have been engaged to log 328,065 volunteer hours on CWSP-funded projects. These results demonstrate CWSP's ability to leverage a relatively small amount of funding to engage Portlanders across the city.

CWSP has demonstrated innovative ways to engage diverse groups of communities in Portland through targeted outreach by graduate assistants and by funding community-led projects. The CWSP partnership serves as an example of how city policy and planning can foster flexibility and innovations in public participation and meaningful engagement [12,13]. The university-city partnership between PSU and BES forms the core of CWSP, and establishes funding priorities around watershed health, education, engagement, and, as we will discuss further below, equity. With the support of CWSP and BES staff,

community groups and individuals generate proposals that meet these goals as well as community needs.

In 2012, for example, CWSP funded Groundwork Portland's Summer Green Team. Groundwork Portland is a non-profit organization focused on community-led improvement of urban environments and the advancement of environmental and social justice. Groundwork's Green Team Program engages youth in summer green jobs training to provide employment skills and foster awareness of environmental and social justice issues. CWSP provided funding for the Summer Green Team. The Green Team involved 12 teenagers from communities of color in Portland with job training on green infrastructure as well as stipends for their work. Beyond job skills and summer employment, the program also works to empower participants to become environmental justice advocates for their communities. In addition to these community benefits, the Summer Green Team worked on projects that enhanced water quality and helped to manage stormwater through the construction of rain gardens and bioswales.

Building an Equity Agenda

Over the last few years, CWSP has undergone a series of changes toward becoming more responsive to Portland's underrepresented populations, and CWSP's partnership with PSU has been at the heart of these shifts. CWSP has institutionalized its efforts to become more responsive to underrepresented groups in three main ways: setting concrete equity goals; changing program activities such as outreach efforts, messaging and grant award selection; and, spreading the word about the program's evolution and approach to other municipal programs in Portland and elsewhere [14].

During the first decade of CWSP's existence, environmentally focused, well-connected community groups applied for and received the majority of CWSP's grant funds. Recipients mainly represented white and middle- to upper-class Portland residents, marginalizing communities of color and groups that did not frame the challenges they faced in terms of environmental quality. The funded projects were also concentrated in a few neighborhoods, mostly in well-to-do areas near Portland's streams and natural areas. CWSP was unintentionally reproducing Portland's racialized and spatialized disparities [15].

By the mid-2000s, however, CWSP's staff increasingly took note of the program's tendency to exclude already-underrepresented communities. At that point, CWSP adopted a place-based approach to begin to address equity concerns. The program's student employees conducted GIS analysis to determine which neighborhoods were underrepresented in past grant cycles, and then held annual grant application workshops at libraries and community centers in targeted areas of the city. While this effort resulted in progress toward the goal of improving the geographic distribution of the funding, most projects continued to be carried out by well-connected, environmentally-savvy groups. Few grants were awarded to groups led by people of color, immigrants and other historically-underrepresented populations.

In 2008, CWSP received the Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter Partnership Award for Campus-Community Collaboration, in recognition of its thriving university-community partnership and success in fostering community involvement in watershed stewardship.

The funds from that award were used to further develop the grants program by initiating increased technical assistance and outreach to underrepresented communities.

In 2010, after one of his staff members served on CWSP's grant selection committee, City Commissioner Dan Saltzman (at the time, Commissioner for the Bureau of Environmental Services) directed CWSP to adopt a more explicit racial equity approach. Commissioner Saltzman saw that CWSP could not only enhance watershed health through its grant making, but that the program could simultaneously have social equity impacts—for example, by funding organizations that provided green employment training to youth. From this point forward, CWSP began to explicitly include equity as a criterion for grant selection. For example, a question was added to the grant application about the role of underrepresented communities in the project. The selection committee now gives consideration to projects in which underrepresented communities take a leading role, projects that respond to community-identified priorities, and those that build capacity for environmental stewardship within these communities [14].

A project that illustrates the CWSP funding approach is “Our Happy Block.” In 2011, CWSP funded a group of neighbors in southeast Portland—the “Our Happy Block Coalition”—that was primarily concerned about public safety. The project focused on the parking lot of a neighborhood church, which was being used for illegal activities. The project reclaimed the area as a public space, removing 4,300 square feet of asphalt and replacing it with trees and native plant rain gardens. This has resulted in substantial benefits to the watershed including 370,000 gallons/year of stormwater infiltrating via the rain gardens. In addition, the project connected community members and dramatically reduced calls to the police from the immediate area.

Figure 1: Our Happy Block project (Source: Community Watershed Stewardship Program, Bureau of Environmental Services, City of Portland, <https://www.portlandoregon.gov/bes/article/449773>)

CWSP's partnership with PSU has been integral in helping this "equity turn" come about [14]. In 2012, CWSP hired Cameron Herrington (co-author of this paper), a PSU graduate student with experience in social justice issues, to analyze past approaches in outreach and project selection, and to suggest changes moving forward. CWSP staff first analyzed equity performance from past years so that it could gauge whether or not the program was improving its equity performance over time. Staff evaluated grant applications from several previous years, scoring them based on the degree of underrepresented groups' participation and leadership in the proposed project. This metric served as a baseline for the program's equity performance. CWSP then adopted an explicit goal of improving upon this baseline number. In this way, CWSP staff took an abstract equity goal and made it concrete and measurable.

Having set a measurable goal, it was time to test strategies for increasing the number of applications for projects led by underrepresented groups. CWSP staff realized that it would take a regular, concentrated approach to actually meet these objectives. No task was too small to be analyzed through the lens of equity outcomes. For CWSP, the daily nuts and bolts of running its program included outreach and promotion, the application process, and selection of and support for grantees. Infusing such tasks with an equity approach required diligence and an eye for detail.

First, staff overhauled the application process. "Equity and Leadership of Underrepresented Communities" was elevated to a core selection criterion, equal in importance for the selection committee to CWSP's other two criteria of "Watershed

Benefits” and “Community Involvement and Partnerships” [16]. With this one change, applicants that did not represent underrepresented communities, or that did not develop meaningful partnerships with those communities, became unlikely to be funded. Additionally, the application itself was made much more simple and straightforward to make it more accessible for first-time applicants.

In the area of outreach, CWSP’s new equity focus led staff to examine the program’s messaging and promotion strategy. Student staff members realized that although their messaging might resonate with white, middle-class Portlanders that subscribed to a mainstream environmental ethos, it was less accessible to groups that did not identify as environmental advocates – even if the group’s activities clearly had watershed health benefits (e.g., a community garden that engaged youth and elders). Therefore, CWSP changed fliers from a headline that read, “Funding for your next watershed project,” to ones that said, “Funding for YOUR community project.” Armed with more effective outreach materials and messages, staff proactively sought out organizations representing people of color, immigrants and other communities that had not often applied for the grant, and helped them identify projects that met their existing priorities while also producing watershed health benefits. The City of Portland’s Office of Equity and Human Rights was called upon to help facilitate relationships with groups with which CWSP did not already have connections. These changes went a long way toward making CWSP grants more accessible for a wider variety of groups.

Changes to the application process, messaging and outreach were very successful in increasing the number of applications that met CWSP’s new equity targets. The final step was ensuring that the selection committee would take the equity criterion seriously as it

discussed applications and decided upon awards. In 2012, the first year the equity criterion was integrated into the evaluation of proposals, 32% of the proposals involved underrepresented communities, but 67% of the awards went to those groups, indicating that the selection committee was taking this mandate to heart.

Conclusion

Equity and engagement often serve as aspirational values or even concrete policy goals for city governments, particularly around sustainability [17]. In Portland, for instance, public engagement is institutionalized in a variety of formal and informal ways, including the City of Portland Office of Neighborhood Involvement's efforts to promote equitable civic engagement throughout the city, as well as a strong culture of public participation through neighborhood associations and other avenues. Equity was explicitly identified as a core value and strategic goal in the *Portland Plan*, while the City of Portland Office Equity and Human Rights' core mission is to promote equity and reduce disparities in city government. Despite these initiatives, there remains significant room in Portland and elsewhere for improvements in fostering broad-based community engagement and meaningful institutionalization of equity goals and policies.

CWSP's efforts provide another critical lesson for environmental policy and planning. As Goodling and Herrington [14] argue, there is nothing inherently equitable in sustainability focused initiatives. Nor, for that matter, is there anything inherent in university-city partnerships that promote equity goals [7,18]. A network of community-based organizations in Wisconsin developed a guide, "Community Standards for Service Learning," that implicitly guides the PSU-BES partnership [19]. Sharing mentorship of

students between the university and partner agency, having students engage in the partnership for multiple years to develop long-lasting partnerships, and providing outreach in underrepresented communities (including “piggy-backing” on existing events), for example, help ensure that student involvement actually serves underrepresented communities.

Through a specific focus on equity, along with specific measures and mechanisms to develop and implement meaningful equity goals, CWSP has engaged a diverse array of Portlanders in a manner that is far beyond “tokenism” [20]. Although the scale of CWSP’s efforts does not quite allow for a full collaborative planning model [21], the program takes cues from the much more comprehensive *Portland Plan*’s equity lens, in turn facilitating opportunities for communities to gain power and more fully participate in the shaping of the city on a day-to-day basis. As discussed above, this was accomplished at CWSP by translating aspirations for more equitable outcomes to concrete outreach and evaluation strategies.

Despite recent political and economic pressures faced by BES, including citywide budget cuts and debates over the use of stormwater fees, CWSP has set equity goals and evaluated performance against those goals. Since 1996, CWSP has focused on the ability of community engagement and stewardship to provide watershed health benefits. CWSP has set concrete equity goals, ensured all practices are aligned toward enhancing equity outcomes through annual evaluations of equity performance, and provided assistance to other municipal programs that seek to be more equity-focused. Through these activities, CWSP has shown how university-city partnerships have the potential to develop processes and criteria for how urban sustainability goals around engagement,

environment and social equity can be set, pursued, and evaluated. The success of such experimentation should encourage city leaders and bureaus to institutionalize and scale-up these important efforts [8,22,23].

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Figure 1

Figure 1: Our Happy Block project (Source: Community Watershed Stewardship Program, Bureau of Environmental Services, City of Portland, <https://www.portlandoregon.gov/bes/article/449773>)