

# Case Study

## Community Initiative Protects Water Supply

### UPPER NEUSE RIVER BASIN NORTH CAROLINA

It began when the mayor of Raleigh became concerned about the drinking water supply for his city. It's grown into a partnership effort that encompasses a 770-square-

mile area in the Piedmont

region of North Carolina. The Upper Neuse River Basin contains nine public drinking water supply reservoirs that together serve over 500,000 people. If the individuals and organizations that are helping to guide the effort succeed in reaching their goals, the Upper Neuse Clean Water Initiative (UNCWI) will help to safeguard vital drinking water supplies while spearheading sweeping land protection measures.

**Mayor Charles Meeker**  
Raleigh, North Carolina



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Unquestionably, these actions will provide important environmental benefits, but—according to Raleigh mayor Charles Meeker—they will also result in significant economic advantages. ***It is more cost-effective to preserve water quality by preventing polluted run-off and sedimentation than to pay for expensive treatment costs," he explains. "Land conservation will allow us to protect our drinking water supply and opportunities for recreation at less taxpayer expense than cleaning up polluted water."***

Lisa Greasman agrees with that assessment. As a Project Director at The Conservation Trust for North Carolina,

she's helped provide oversight and support for the Clean Water Initiative through the auspices of her group, which functions as an umbrella organization and service provider for 23 land trusts throughout the state of North Carolina. "When Mayor Meeker stepped up to assume leadership on this issue," says Greasman, "he showed great foresight in bringing attention to a matter that will certainly be the focus of increasing concern in the years to come." She cites a recent report that projects a 50% increase in population by 2025. Experts estimate that an additional 50,000 acres of land will be developed—a figure that, if true, means the loss of 76% of the remaining undeveloped land in the river basin. "All this growth and development pressure, in combination with rising property values, points to the fact that we're right on target with our land protection efforts: The Upper Neuse Clean Water Initiative is an idea whose time has come."

Conceptualized in early 2005, the Initiative began in earnest when the City of Raleigh invested \$10,000 to finance organizational efforts and the preparation of grant requests to various funders. On the strength of the group's initial planning, the Raleigh City Council voted to appropriate \$1 million—spread out over the course of two fiscal years—to be used to advance the work of the Initiative. This funding was designed to support all three phases of the Initiative's work: 1) creation of a land conservation plan; 2) outreach to landowners, local government officials, and the general public; and 3) voluntary land protection through the donation or purchase of land or conservation easements.

The first phase is complete, according to Greasman. "Thanks to a lot of hard work on the part of our partners, we've just published a comprehensive conservation plan for the Upper Neuse River Basin. Representatives from a variety of local, state, and federal agencies—as well as conservation groups—formed our technical advisory team. These individuals brought a wealth of experience and expertise to the table. With their assistance, we developed a computer-based model that is serving to help prioritize just where in the basin to begin working first, and also to identify which pieces of land are most in need of protection."

The Upper Neuse Clean Water Initiative is working with the Trust for Public Land and the Triangle J Council of Governments to convene groups of stakeholders in an effort to engage and involve them in the planning process. This outreach effort is designed to facilitate a dialogue between key players—local officials, landowners,

etc.—and build trust relationships that will ideally carry forward into the land acquisition/donation phase.

Greasman maintains that the group has a much better chance of success due to the fact that they are forming land protection strategies around the issue of preserving clean drinking water. This has the potential to accomplish multiple benefits, she says. "When you are able to tie your work to an issue that really resonates with the public, you can leverage a whole slate of socially and environmentally significant accomplishments. By using land protection as a way to protect their drinking water, communities are investing in the long-term health and quality of life of their citizens. Voluntarily funded land protection strategies can permanently protect critical natural areas, guide growth away from sensitive water resources, protect farmland and natural habitats, preserve historic landscapes, and provide new parks and recreational opportunities. Because clean drinking water is the centerpiece of this plan, the Initiative stands a much better chance of being supported—both financially and administratively—by landowners, community groups, and local, state, and federal government agencies."

As the effort moves toward outreach and implementation, Greasman is quick to point out that participation is entirely voluntary. At no point will regulations or condemnation of property become a component of the Initiative's work. She is confident in the validity of the process being used and in the importance of the issue being addressed. ***"Research shows that protecting land is much more affordable than building the water treatment facilities which will be needed if the land is not protected."*** These communities have made the decision to be proactive when it comes to ensuring the long-term safety and health of their drinking water supplies. They are saving money by offsetting future needs, they are demonstrating environmental stewardship, and they are improving the quality of life for the citizens of the region. It just makes sense on so many different levels."

