

Saginaw Bay Watershed: Fostering a Regional Identity and Advancing Restoration Priorities

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Executive Summary

INTRODUCTION

The Saginaw Bay Watershed Initiative Network (WIN) hired Public Sector Consultants (PSC) to help them with two evaluations. First, WIN sought to assess the extent to which there is a regional identity for the Saginaw Bay watershed and identify efforts that could be taken to continue to foster a watershed identity. Building a common identity for the watershed will better enable regional stakeholders to achieve community priorities, such as providing a high quality of life to residents, serving as a tourist destination, protecting and restoring natural resources, and supporting a prosperous economy.

Second, WIN sought to determine whether there is consensus among community leaders within the Saginaw Bay watershed for ongoing restoration priorities that could be implemented within the region to advance the statewide water strategy.

To accomplish these tasks, PSC conducted 15 telephone interviews with community leaders from the watershed that are representative of a broad spectrum of local, state, and federal agencies; nonprofits; businesses; community organizations; and other opinion leaders with responsibilities and interests in the management and/or protection of the Saginaw Bay watershed.

Fostering a Saginaw Bay Watershed Identity

The community leaders who participated in the interviews generally believed that a sense of regional identity is growing among the natural resource community. However, interviewees did not believe that a watershed-wide identity or sense of place exists among the general public—other than, perhaps, a negative sense of pollution and contamination. While significant progress has been made throughout the watershed to protect, restore, and enhance environmental quality, the interviewees believed that public perception of environmental conditions does not reflect these improvements. While the general public may not think of the watershed as a single region; natural resource–based recreation is a consistent element of all corners of the watershed, which presents opportunities to further support the development of a watershed identity.

Challenges and Opportunities

Relative consensus emerged regarding the primary challenges and opportunities to foster a regional identity. Challenges include the size and diversity of the watershed and the perception of pollution; however, all challenges represent an opportunity when cast in a different light. The size and diversity of the watershed provide a wide range of options to cater to different user groups, and opportunities exist to market the region as a globally unique system with abundant natural resources and recreation opportunities. Furthermore, the region has an opportunity to tell the stories of restoration that has occurred throughout the watershed. Finally, stakeholders saw significant opportunities for enhanced coordination and collaboration of natural resource organizations as a method to continue to foster a regional identity and achieve greater natural resource outcomes.

Advancing Saginaw Bay Watershed Restoration

Community leaders who participated in the interviews suggested that stakeholders from the Saginaw Bay watershed should develop a consensus-based water strategy for the basin that utilizes the state's as a framework. The following goals were suggested as priorities for a local plan:

- Enhancing coordination of restoration activities to achieve greater outcomes
- Managing nonpoint source pollution, including stormwater runoff, bacteria from agriculture and septic systems that leads to beach closings, and phosphorus, which contributes to algal blooms and beach muck
- Preventing the introduction of new invasive species and managing established populations
- Enhancing public and schoolwide watershed education activities
- Promoting the region as a destination for natural resource–based recreation
- Establishing a sustainable source of funding to support restoration activities
- Leveraging watershed resources as a strategic asset for community and economic development
- Enhancing recreational opportunities and public access to natural resources

To help achieve these goals, participants discussed projects and activities to advance within the region. The following were consistently identified as priorities:

- Convening regional stakeholders to develop a consensus Saginaw Bay watershed strategy that uses the state strategy as a foundation
- Advancing a sanitary code that addresses failing septic systems within the watershed
- Establishing a Saginaw Bay Watershed Endowment Fund to provide sustainable funding for restoration activities
- Acquiring and developing new public access points along the Saginaw Bay and tributaries and connecting these points through water trails
- Continuing to focus on restoration activities to remove beneficial use impairments and delist the Saginaw River and Bay as an Area of Concern (AOC)

WIN's Role in Fostering Identity and Achieving Restoration Goals

WIN was consistently identified as the leading organization that operates at a watershed-wide scale. Participants suggested that WIN can continue to play a key role in fostering a sense of identity for the watershed as a facilitator, convener, and funder. Many respondents cautioned WIN against expanding its mission to that of an implementer of restoration activities, but encouraged the organization to expand its leadership role by convening and facilitating the development of a Saginaw Bay watershed strategy.

Background and Methodology

BACKGROUND

In November 2012, Gov. Rick Snyder called on Michigan’s Office of the Great Lakes to develop a statewide water strategy using an ecosystem approach that enhances economic opportunities around water and strengthens connection to place. In 2015, that comprehensive water strategy, titled *Sustaining Michigan’s Water Heritage, A Strategy for the Next Generation*, was completed. It includes nine goals and more than 60 recommendations to achieve a 30-year vision for high-quality, accessible water resources protected by and for present and future generations.

WIN is a community-based, voluntary initiative that connects people, resources, organizations, and programs. Through its grants and other support, WIN works to improve the quality of life in the region by developing projects, supporting related organizations, and developing a watershed identity. Through its collective impact in its program areas, WIN seeks to develop a sense of place for the Saginaw basin as a watershed community.

WIN hired PSC to help it assess its role in developing a watershed identity and identify priority projects that will support the state’s water strategy by advancing restoration efforts in the Saginaw Bay watershed.

As part of the assessment, PSC conducted telephone interviews with leaders from the watershed to discuss their insight on WIN’s role in the watershed and priorities for restoration efforts in the Saginaw basin.

METHODOLOGY

The WIN-PSC team identified community leaders that represent a broad spectrum of local, state, and federal agencies; nonprofits; businesses; community organizations; and other opinion leaders with responsibilities and interests in the management and/or protection of the Saginaw Bay watershed. Prior to the conversations, participants received an interview guide that included the following questions:

- How would you describe the current state of environmental restoration efforts in the Saginaw Bay watershed?
- When you think of the Saginaw Bay and its watershed, what are the top five things that come to mind?
- How familiar are you with the Saginaw Bay Watershed Initiative Network? How would you describe their role in the watershed?
- What ideas do you have that would contribute to fostering a regional identity for Saginaw Bay and the Saginaw Bay watershed? And how could WIN support that?
- What are the greatest challenges and opportunities for creating a regional identity for the Saginaw Bay and its watershed? This can include ecological, economic, or community factors.
- How familiar are you with the state’s new water strategy? Of its recommendations, which do you think are the most important? If you are less familiar with the water strategy, what do you think local groups should prioritize in the watershed?
- If you could pick three projects that partners within the watershed should focus on to begin to implement the water strategy locally, or advance restoration of the Saginaw Bay, what would they be and why?
- Is there anything that we haven’t discussed that would be helpful for WIN to consider?

PSC then conducted one-hour phone interviews with 15 opinion leaders within the community. Interviews were completed with senior officials at state, regional, and local governmental agencies; executive directors at natural resource–focused nonprofits and philanthropic organizations; and leaders of the business community. To enable a more candid discussion, the interviews were treated as confidential, such that

responses were not attributed to an individual. After all of the interviews were complete, PSC analyzed the results to identify common perspectives and dissenting points of view. The WIN-PSC team is grateful to the individuals who participated in the interviews for lending their time and talents to this work.

Current State of Environmental Restoration

To begin the interviews, participants were asked to describe the current state of environmental restoration efforts in the Saginaw Bay watershed.

Interviewees shared the opinion that environmental conditions have improved dramatically over the last few decades as a result of restoration efforts. Specific improvements that were identified include dam removals, Natural Resource Damage Assessment cleanups, improvements to the walleye and perch fishery and flavor of fish, wetland and other wildlife habitat preservation, and the removal of beneficial use impairments designated by the AOC program. While conditions have improved, those interviewed were quick to note that challenges remain, primarily regarding legacy contamination issues, public access, and nutrient management. Despite the overall view of improvement, most respondents felt that the public perceives environmental conditions in Saginaw Bay to be far worse than they are. Most of the interviewees felt that there was a need to communicate progress more broadly inside and outside of the watershed.

Almost all of the interviewees discussed the diversity of the watershed as both a strength and a challenge of developing a watershed identity and advancing restoration priorities. The basin encompasses nearly 8,700 square miles, an area about the size of New Jersey. The watershed is home to a diversity of land uses including agricultural, forest, and wetlands as well as a variety of community types, including heavily urbanized cities, suburban communities, small towns, and rural communities. The watershed is also diverse in the sense that these communities represent a wide range of economic conditions and demographics. This size and diversity creates a challenge, as one respondent stated: “Our issues are so colossally different than the (sub)watersheds in other regions (of the basin), it’s hard to find common ground.” Many interviewees believe that the region lacks a leadership organization that works to coordinate stakeholders to develop and implement shared restoration priorities.

The Role of the Saginaw Bay Watershed Initiative Network

To help assess stakeholder understanding and perception of WIN, interviewees were asked to describe their familiarity with the organization and describe WIN's role in the watershed. Interview participants included representatives from a range of organizations located throughout the watershed that have interacted with WIN in various capacities. Many of the interviewees serve on WIN's task groups and/or resource committee; others have received funding through WIN or provide funding to its grant programs.

Most of the people (12 out of 15) interviewed identified themselves as being extremely familiar with WIN; the remaining three respondents considered themselves somewhat familiar with the organization. The perception of WIN among these individuals was unequivocally positive. WIN was described as a highly developed, well-functioning organization with a deep level of respect within the watershed. The grant review process was described as challenging but fair and results in selection of high quality projects. The majority of respondents noted that WIN provides "first money in" on many projects, and once vetted through WIN's review process, approved projects gain legitimacy in the community. In other words, when WIN provides funding support to a project, other organizations and individuals trust that the project is sound. This reputation has helped enable many of WIN's grantees to leverage WIN's investments by securing funding from other sources to get projects off the ground.

WIN was consistently described as forum that convenes a wide network of partners throughout the watershed from a diversity of backgrounds to advance the sustainability of the Saginaw Bay watershed. This includes the technical committees used to help develop funding priorities and evaluate grant proposals. Furthermore, WIN's funding model was described as a unique, efficient, and effective way to pool and allocate resources from multiple funders in a way that complements rather than competes with other funding programs. Interviewees also discussed the benefits of the flexibility of WIN's funding, which has enabled it to take greater risks than other funders and take a long view of restoration activities. For example, the dam removal on the Cass River in Frankenmuth was repeatedly cited as a project for which WIN provided seed money over 15 years before the dam was removed and the rock ramp was installed.

Over the course of the interviews, many respondents discussed the challenges of coordinating natural resource activities at the basinwide scale, due to the size and diversity of the watershed. Most respondents suggested that there is not an entity that truly fills the role of coordinating restoration and management activities and suggested that greater leadership is needed at the watershed scale. Interviewees that discussed leadership indicated that WIN is the only organization that truly operates at a watershed scale, and because of its convening power, it is the de facto leader for environmental activities at the basinwide scale. However, some questioned whether serving as an organization that coordinates environmental management activities is an appropriate role for WIN or whether it is something that could be further supported by WIN through its funding programs. As one interviewee suggested, "There is a leadership gap in that no group serves as the environmental restoration or management coordinator for the bay. Absent that, WIN is the go-to group and assumes this role, but it is not their mission."

Fostering a Saginaw Bay Watershed Identity

Through its programs, WIN seeks to foster a unique identity for the Saginaw Bay watershed. To help identify whether this identity exists currently, participants were asked a series of questions about how they would describe the watershed's identity and how the development of a regionwide identity could be further supported.

THE IDENTITY OF THE SAGINAW BAY WATERSHED

To determine whether there is a common identity for the Saginaw basin, respondents were asked to identify the top five things that came to their minds when they think of the Saginaw Bay and its watershed. Responses fell into three cohorts: (1) consensus elements that were identified by ten or more people; (2) common elements that were identified by five to nine participants; and (3) less common elements identified by fewer than five people.

Consensus Elements

Two elements emerged from the interviews as primary components of the Saginaw Bay watershed's identity.

- **Natural resource–based recreation (12 out of 15 people).** In one form or another, almost all of the respondents discussed one or more type of natural resource–based recreation as being central to the region's identity. Specifically, these elements include fishery resources (nine out of 15 people), a growing focus on water recreation (seven out of 15 people), hunting/birding (six out of 15 people), and boating (five out of 15 people).
- **Legacy pollution and the AOC designation (ten out of 15 people).** Interviewees believed that environmental conditions have vastly improved over the last few decades, but the public perception of the region is still one of pollution and contamination. While five interviewees did not identify these concerns as a top five element of a regional identity, all participants discussed these issues over the course of the telephone interviews.

Common Elements

The next series of responses were identified by between one-third and two-thirds of interviewees, which suggest that each element is a strong component of the watershed's identity. These elements include:

- **Diversity, uniqueness, and size of the watershed (eight out of 15 people).** Interviewees suggested that the basin is nationally, if not globally, unique for its coastal wetland system, hunting/birding opportunities, and fishery resources. Interviewees also identified the size and diversity of the watershed as both a strength and a challenge in fostering a unified identity.
- **A region in transition and untapped potential (six out of 15 people).** Interviewees highlighted environmental restoration as well as economic redevelopment that is occurring along waterfronts throughout the watershed. Despite the positive changes in environmental quality, interviewees also discussed the economic challenges that remain in the watershed as the economy transitions from an industrial to a service-based economy. Many noted that the region has untapped potential in terms of its natural resource assets that can be leveraged to build a sense of place for the watershed, support a high quality of life for residents as well as tourism.
- **Agriculture (six out of 15 people).** The region has a rich history in agriculture and continues to be a major agricultural center.

- **Manufacturing/industry (five out of 15 people).** The region has a strong history of manufacturing and commerce. While there has been a decline in this sector, the region’s strong manufacturing base still partly defines the watershed’s identity.
- **Phragmites and other invasive species (five out of 15 people).** While the basin is home to the largest coastal wetland system in the country, it faces challenges of invasive species that thrive in these environments.

Less Common Elements

The next series of responses were identified by fewer than one-third of interviewees. However, these elements may still be a key component of a regional identity.

- **Wetlands (three out of 15 people).** This overlaps with the diversity of the watershed (summarized above). The region is home to the largest coastal freshwater wetland system in the country, which is a nationally, if not globally, unique feature of the watershed.
- **Algae blooms and muck (three out of 15 people).** Over the course of the interviews, these issues were identified as a challenge to attracting tourists to the region and supporting a high quality of life for residents.
- **Strong natural resource advocates (three out of 15 people).** These interviewees noted the region’s strong and growing contingent of natural resource advocates that are working to protect, enhance, and restore the Saginaw basin’s natural resources.
- **Large amount of protected properties (three out of 15 people).** Protected properties include a significant amount of coastal wetlands and the Shiawassee National Wildlife Refuge. However, over the course of the interviews, many participants discussed the need for enhanced public access to the bay and its tributaries.
- **Infrastructure concerns (two out of 15 people).** Two participants discussed infrastructure concerns as a primary element that comes to their mind when thinking of the Saginaw Basin—particularly, the recent drinking water crisis that occurred in Flint, Michigan.
- **Quality of life (two out of 15 people).** Two respondents said the watershed and its natural resource raises the quality of life in the area. As one respondent put it, “It’s a nice place to live. It’s my home.”
- **Bacteria pollution in the waterways (one out of 15 people).** Waterway pollution includes historical sewer overflows, which have largely been addressed at this point, and continued pollution associated with failing septic systems that contribute harmful bacteria into the environment, which can threaten public and environmental health and lead to beach closings.
- **Dam removal (one out of 15 people).** One interviewee discussed significant restoration efforts to enhance stream connectivity through dam removals.

FOSTERING A SENSE OF IDENTITY

The community leaders interviewed as part of this study identified a wide range of ideas to help foster a regional identity for the Saginaw Bay watershed. By and large, the interviewees believed there is a growing sense of a regional identity among the natural resource community. However, interviewees did not believe that such an identity or sense of place exists among the general public other than, perhaps, a negative sense of pollution and contamination. While significant progress has been made throughout the watershed to protect, restore, and enhance environmental quality, the interviewees believed that the general public is largely unaware. To help overcome this perception and develop a positive identity for the Saginaw Bay watershed, interviewees offered the following suggestions and observations. Due to the diversity and number of suggestions from interviewees, the responses were not ranked.

- The remaining concerns regarding environmental degradation must continue to be addressed, as they are harmful to tourism and public perception:
 - Bacteria contamination from failing septic systems and agricultural operations, which contributes pathogens to the environment that threaten public health, and results in beach closings
 - Algal blooms and muck buildup in the Saginaw Bay from enhanced nutrient loading
 - Legacy contaminants
- Efforts to rebrand the Saginaw Bay watershed under a different name, such as the Great Lakes Bay region, have had mixed impressions. Many interviewed felt that rebranding may be counterproductive because no matter what the branding, the Saginaw Bay will always be the Saginaw Bay, and its history and identity should be embraced. However, one respondent held a different point of view and believed that recent rebranding efforts have been beneficial.
- Connect people to their local watershed resources first and draw the connection to the broader watershed second. For example, connecting people in Chesaning to the Shiawassee River can be a first step in establishing a Saginaw Bay watershed identity.
 - Mark the boundaries of subwatersheds along major roadways throughout the basin and make the connection back to the Saginaw Bay (for example, a sign may say “Entering the Cass River watershed, part of the Saginaw Bay watershed”)
- Enhance opportunities for experiential connections to natural resources within the watershed and help people draw a connection to the Saginaw Bay.
 - Provide greater public access to watershed resources particularly on the bay through land acquisition and park development; a feasibility study that assesses existing public access points and identifies gaps could help regional partners prioritize their efforts
 - Support the development of water trails on the on the bay and its tributaries
 - Provide greater hunting and fishing access throughout the watershed
 - Enhance opportunities for natural resource experiences in urban centers
 - Support placemaking and redevelopment activities along waterfronts
- Build awareness of, and pride for, the region’s globally unique natural resources and environmental restoration.
 - Develop a marketing campaign similar to what has been done for the Chesapeake Bay and Puget Sound
 - Tell the positive stories about special places within the watershed, similar to the Pure Michigan campaign
 - Market the region as the natural resource mecca that it is within the watershed, throughout Michigan, and nationally; the marketing strategy should be tailored to the resources that it has
- Convene regional stakeholders to develop a consensus Saginaw Bay watershed strategy using the statewide water strategy as a framework.
- Convene regional stakeholders for a watershed summit on a periodic basis. These summits serve as a forum for partners within the region to come together, learn from each other, and help people think and act in a watershed context.
- Establish and capitalize an endowment fund to support ongoing restoration activities throughout the watershed; a source of funding and coordinating entity would need to be identified.
- Support place-based environmental stewardship education of youth.
- Develop a state of the watershed report on a periodic basis that highlights all the progress that has been made within the basin.

Interviewees were also asked what role they felt WIN should play in embarking on these activities to continue to foster a watershed identity. Many cautioned that WIN should not be the lead organization to advance each of the potential activities described above, as it may represent mission creep as a funder and convener. However, WIN could support these activities through its grant funding and by providing its leadership as a convener.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES TO FOSTER AN IDENTITY

Interviewees were then asked what they thought were the most significant challenges and opportunities for fostering a regional identity for the Saginaw Bay watershed. Over the course of the interviews, key elements consistently emerged as the primary challenges and opportunities for the watershed.

Challenges

Nearly all of the community leaders interviewed identified three components as the primary challenges to fostering a regional identity for the Saginaw Bay watershed:

- **Size of the watershed.** The Saginaw basin covers approximately 15 percent of Michigan, or an area about the size of New Jersey. The sheer size of the watershed makes coordination more difficult, and to a certain extent, the bay itself disconnects communities. While just 26 miles across as the crow flies, it takes approximately two-and-a-half hours to drive from one tip of the bay to the other. Similarly, the headwaters of tributaries extend over 100 miles from the bay itself. The size of the watershed creates logistical challenges for coordination. Furthermore, respondents consistently suggested that people generally associate with the natural resources in their hometown first. Communities that are far away from the bay are less likely to draw their identity from it.
- **Diversity of the watershed.** The Saginaw basin may be the most diverse within the state. The watershed is home to vastly different land uses and communities—heavily urbanized cities, suburban communities, small towns, and rural areas—with varying values and socioeconomic statuses. The region is home to significant tracts of rural forest land and pristine areas in the northern region, to urbanized areas in the central basin that face greater degrees of environmental degradation, and significant agricultural operations. The watershed is home to the largest contiguous freshwater coastal wetland system in the United States, which is a globally unique feature. These and other factors can create significant challenges when working to establish basinwide restoration goals and priorities and foster a watershed identity. Some noted that many of the communities within the watershed are working on independent marketing and branding efforts, which should not be lost when working toward a watershed identity. As one respondent pointed out, “a regional identity doesn’t mean sameness.” This diversity, while challenging at times, may be one of the watershed’s greatest strengths. Simply put, the region has a lot to offer to a lot of different people. The underlying, if not uniting, assets of the Saginaw Bay watershed are its natural resources.
- **Perception of pollution.** The Saginaw River and Bay were designated as an AOC in the mid-1980s. This designation acknowledged that the region faced significant environmental degradation that affected public use and enjoyment of natural resources. The watershed has also been home to many Natural Resource Damage Assessments and cleanups to address legacy contaminants. Since the 1970s, when significant environmental regulations such as the Clean Water Act were developed, environmental conditions in the Saginaw Bay watershed began to improve. In the almost 50 years that have followed, significant progress has been made. Despite these improvements, interviewees suggested that the public perception of the Saginaw Bay watershed is still one of pollution. While interviewees noted that restoration activities are far from complete, the public perception of environmental conditions is far worse than it is. This creates a challenge in establishing a positive identity for the watershed, yet also represents opportunity for community resource leaders to better communicate the progress that has been made within the watershed.

Some respondents also discussed the recent Flint drinking water crisis and inaccurate media coverage that suggested the pollution within the Flint River was the cause. Many noted that the tragic crisis further ingrained a negative perception of environmental quality in the basin.

Other Challenges

After these top three challenges, community leaders interviewed identified other challenges facing the region to foster a regional identity, including:

- **Economically depressed communities.** Many of the respondents discussed the economic conditions of the region as a challenge to fostering a positive regional identity. Respondents suggested that the transition from an industrial to a service-based economy has been especially hard. As one respondent suggested: “The region has been economically depressed for the better part of 40 years. It’s hard for folks to get over that. There is a psychological aspect to it.” Others discussed crime and blight of central cities. As one interviewee suggested, “We can’t do all this work in the Saginaw Bay, but we need to address the issues in the city of Saginaw, in the city of Flint, in Bay City, and other communities throughout the watershed. We need prosperous cities for the watershed to be healthy.” This sentiment suggests that WIN’s continued focus on enhancing the sustainability of the region, including its environmental, economic, and social elements, will continue to support efforts to address these challenges.
- **Lack of leadership and coordination.** Many of the respondents suggested that there is a lack of leadership within the Saginaw Bay watershed, and environmental restoration efforts are uncoordinated. Many suggested that this challenge partially stems from the size and diversity of the watershed; others pointed out that there is not an organization that seeks to convene and coordinate restoration activities throughout the basin. WIN was consistently identified as the de facto leader for environmental activities at a watershed scale, but most suggested that it was not within WIN’s mission to be the implementer or an environmental management organization. However, many suggested that WIN could leverage its existing networks and convening power to help facilitate coordination of activities and fill this gap if WIN desired to. No other existing organization is better positioned to take on this task. As one interviewee suggested, “It doesn’t need to be WIN that gives the direction [of environmental priorities]. WIN can serve as more of a facilitator and they should look at doing more of that. That’s not to pick on them or to say they haven’t done it in past—it’s not their mission—but from my standpoint, there is such a gap. It’s hard to see how [that gap] would be filled if it’s not WIN.”

Opportunities

While the Saginaw Bay watershed faces challenges in establishing a watershed identity, opportunities abound. Those interviewed identified a wide range of ideas on how to foster a regional identity and how WIN may support those activities. While the suggestions varied, relative consensus emerged around three primary strategies:

■ **Connecting people to natural resources.** Providing residents and tourists with experiential connections to natural resource assets was consistently identified as one of the most effective ways to foster a regional identity for the watershed. Many of the leaders interviewed believed that the watershed offers unparalleled opportunities for natural resource–based recreation. While there is a long history of natural resource recreation in the basin, many interviewees suggested that the region’s potential remains untapped. Respondents discussed the many forms of recreation that currently take place and suggested that partners should work to strategically leverage these opportunities to further develop a unique sense of place, provide a high quality of life for residents, and become a tourism destination. Experiential opportunities that could be further supported by WIN and other organizations to provide connections to natural resource include:

- Hunting
- Fishing
- Birding
- Boating
- Bicycling
- Swimming

Actions that community partners could take to help support these and other opportunities include:

- Developing nonmotorized river trails
- Hosting triathlons
- Developing water trails along the bay and rivers
- Promoting the Shiawassee National Wildlife Refuge and the state game area
- Holding river cleanups
- Creating and promoting urban-based recreation along waterways and on vacant properties

Many respondents also discussed the lack of public access to the bay as a concern that should be addressed and suggested that enhancing public access will help foster a watershed identity.

■ **Convening natural resource organizations.** Throughout the conversations with community leaders, many suggested that the growing sense of a watershed identity within the natural resource community could be further supported—and that, by doing so, greater outcomes would emerge for continued environmental restoration efforts in the Saginaw Bay watershed. Interviewees suggested that WIN could play a critical role in this effort and may be the best positioned organization in the watershed to fill a leadership gap in the watershed. Community leaders suggested many different activities, such as:

- **Hosting a periodic watershed conference.** Many participants discussed the watershed conferences coordinated by the Michigan State University Land Policy Institute as a valuable activity that has supported a watershed identity. Many of those interviewed suggested that continuing this conference would provide multiple benefits for the watershed.
- **Developing a Saginaw Bay watershed strategy.** Many participants discussed the lack of coordination of natural resource organizations that are active in the watershed partly due to the size of the watershed. While many organizations are doing great work, participants suggested that further coordination of activities could achieve greater restoration outcomes. Interviewees suggested that WIN could play a key role as a convener and a facilitator of this activity but cautioned that WIN’s role is not that of an environmental management/implementation organization.

■ **Communicating successes and marketing the watershed.** Over the course of the interviews, many participants suggested that the public perceives the environmental conditions of the Saginaw Bay watershed to be far worse than they are. In one form or another, interviewees suggested that partners within the region should make a concerted effort to tell restoration success stories and market the region as a destination for natural resource recreation. Many suggested a marketing or branding campaign similar to those used for Pure Michigan and the Chesapeake Bay.

Implementing the State Water Strategy in the Saginaw Bay Watershed

WIN was interested in assessing stakeholders' priorities for advancing and implementing the state water strategy within the Saginaw Bay watershed. Community leaders were asked to discuss their familiarity with the strategy and to identify recommendations they thought should be prioritized within the watershed. Building from this, participants were asked to identify the top three projects that partners within the watershed should focus on to implement the strategy locally to advance restoration of the Saginaw Bay watershed.

Respondents' levels of familiarity with the water strategy ranged from being extremely to not at all familiar. The majority of those knowledgeable about the strategy spoke generally about priorities for the region rather than identifying specific recommendations. Many of the community leaders interviewed suggested convening stakeholders from the region to develop a Saginaw Bay watershed strategy to identify shared priorities and build consensus for restoration activities in the basin. WIN was consistently identified as an organization that could provide this leadership in the basin.

Community leaders who participated in the interviews discussed potential priorities for the Saginaw Bay watershed strategy. The following goals were identified:

- Enhancing coordination of restoration activities to achieve greater outcomes
- Managing nonpoint source pollution, including stormwater runoff, bacteria from agriculture and septic systems that leads to beach closings, and phosphorus, which contributes to algal blooms and beach muck
- Preventing the introduction of new invasive species and managing established populations
- Enhancing public and schoolwide watershed education activities
- Promoting the region as a destination for natural resource–based recreation
- Establishing a sustainable source of funding to support restoration activities
- Leveraging watershed resources as a strategic asset for community and economic development
- Enhancing recreational opportunities and public access to natural resources

To implement these strategies, participants suggested the following action steps:

- Convening regional stakeholders to develop a consensus Saginaw Bay watershed strategy that uses the state strategy as a foundation
- Advancing a sanitary code that addresses failing septic systems within the watershed
- Establishing a Saginaw Bay Watershed Endowment Fund to provide sustainable funding for restoration activities
- Acquiring and developing new public access points along the Saginaw Bay and tributaries and connecting these points through water trails
- Continuing to focus on restoration activities to remove beneficial use impairments and delist the Saginaw River and Bay as an Area of Concern (AOC)

Other suggestions include:

- Managing muck at public access points
- Controlling the spread of phragmites
- Improving habitat on land and in the water
- Enhance green spaces and natural resource–based recreation opportunities in urban areas
- Decreasing sediment loading

Summary and Conclusion

Over the course of the interviews, the community leaders identified many elements of a Saginaw Bay watershed identity—a sense that appears to be growing, at least within the natural resource community. These leaders offered many suggestions to further develop a positive identity for the region. The interviewees also discussed strategies and specific projects that could be implemented within the region to advance restoration of the watershed and implementation of the statewide water strategy.

Next Steps

Community leaders who participated in the interviews offered many suggestions to implement to continue to foster a watershed identity and implement the state water strategy in the Saginaw Bay watershed. WIN may want to consider the following as priority action steps to evaluate with community partners.

- Convene regional stakeholders to develop a consensus Saginaw Bay watershed strategy using the state strategy as a foundation.
- Develop a process to host a watershed summit on a periodic basis.
- Engage communications professionals to develop a strategic marketing approach to continue to foster a positive regional identity, which may include sharing restoration success stories and marketing the region as a natural resource-based recreation destination.
- Conduct an assessment of existing public access along the bay and throughout the watershed to identify priority areas to expand public access to watershed resources.
- Enhance WIN's efforts in urban communities to foster a more positive identity and enhance the quality of life.

Additional Recommendations for WIN

In addition to the recommendations from community leaders on methods to help foster a regional identity and implement the state water strategy within the Saginaw Bay watershed, WIN may want to consider the following:

- **The majority of interviewees suggested that WIN is the only organization that truly operates at a watershed scale and, because of its convening power, it is the de facto leader for environmental activities at the basinwide scale.** The region would benefit greatly from enhanced leadership and WIN may be the best positioned organization to provide that leadership. WIN should consider the extent to which it can leverage its existing networks and standing within the community to achieve a greater result for the watershed by expanding its mission. As one interviewee stated, “From my standpoint, there is such a leadership gap, it is hard to see how it is filled if it's not WIN.” Absent such leadership, it is unclear how the activities identified throughout this report would be implemented in the watershed.
- **WIN may want to consider conducting a public opinion survey to further evaluate perception of environmental quality and better determine if the perception of community leaders accurately reflects the public's.** The interview pool included a small group of people active in natural resource management within the Saginaw Bay watershed. A public opinion survey would enable WIN and other organizations in the watershed to better understand the public's viewpoints, as well as more effectively evaluate education, outreach, and marketing strategies.