

Middle Rio Grande Urban Waters Partnership

Albuquerque, New Mexico

2020-2022 Work-plan

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Supporting documents available:

Project Wish List (unfunded projects)

Quarterly Meeting highlights

Background

The vision for the national Urban Waters Partnership program is to “restore urban water quality, revitalize our communities and reconnect communities to their urban waterways”, particularly those that are overburdened or economically distressed. The strategy for pursuing this vision in each partnership location is to improve coordination among federal agencies, local government and municipalities, non-profits, educational institutions and other community-led groups in order to integrate efforts at a local level.

The Middle Rio Grande (MRG) Urban Waters Partnership in the greater Albuquerque area of New Mexico was established in 2014 as one of 20 partnership locations. Like many western river ecosystems, the MRG faces numerous challenges in balancing competing needs within a finite water supply and other resource constraints. Historical practices by our ancestors and immigrants to the MRG have established the conditions that we have inherited. Long-term drought exacerbated by climate change is changing conditions that affect natural and human communities as we strive to improve our precious Rio Grande. The needs of a growing populace must be met while still preserving natural systems, the agricultural economy, and the cultural practices of Pueblos and villages up and down the valley.

From its inception in 2014 until March of 2019, local representatives from Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) coordinated the MRG Urban Waters Partnership (the Partnership) as co-leads. During this time, quarterly meetings served a venue for partners to report out about the status of their various projects and become familiar with each other’s work. After a number of years operating in this way, this initial goal of building relationships among the partners was accomplished and it became necessary for the Partnership to re-evaluate community value of the group.

In March of 2019, the MRG partners and stakeholders met for a strategic planning session to determine if and how the Partnership should continue. The group agreed that the Partnership still held great potential value and decided on an expanded leadership structure in the form of a steering committee that would represent the diversity of stakeholders involved.

Leadership

The Steering Committee (SC) is responsible for guiding and facilitating the Partnership. The SC is coordinated and supported by the Urban Waters Ambassador (the Ambassador), a position that is currently filled by an Americorps VISTA but may be filled through different avenues in the future. In order to stay connected to national Urban Waters leadership, the Ambassador maintains a relationship between the Partnership and the EPA program leads, as well as with the Ambassadors of other cities in the Urban Waters Learning Network. However, the work of the Partnership is predominantly driven by local leadership. The membership, operating guidelines and role of the SC as well as the role of the Ambassador are described below:

SC membership:

In order for the membership of SC to accurately represent the balance of diverse stakeholders who participate in the Partnership, the ideal representation in the SC is as follows:

- 2-3 non-profit representatives
- 2-3 federal agency representatives
- 2-3 local government representatives (city, county, or other regional municipal authority)
- 1 state government representative
- 1 or more tribal representative(s)

SC Operating Guidelines:

- The SC will operate collegially – there will be no slate or election of officers
- New SC members agree to a minimum commitment of one year
- The SC will meet as needed, usually about once a month
- The SC will have 8-12 members, not including the Urban Waters Ambassador
- There are no term limits imposed by the SC
- There will be opportunities for turnover twice a year, in March and in September, when SC members may decide to step down or a new partner representative may decide to join
- SC members who are stepping down should give at least one month notice, and should do what they can to help find someone from the partnership to fill their seat
- Any member of the greater partnership can volunteer to join the SC, or may be invited to join by the current SC
- SC member seats are filled on a first come, first served basis. However, the SC will work to maintain a balanced representation of organizations
- Partners that are interested in joining the SC are encouraged to attend a SC meeting to observe and ask questions

Role of the SC:

- Represents a balanced diversity of stakeholders and types of organizations involved in the partnership
- Works together to direct and support the vision and activities of the Partnership
- Attends monthly SC meetings to plan for general partnership meetings and discuss progress on MRG Urban Waters partnership goals
- Supports the Ambassador by providing direction and feedback on Partnership initiatives, and by completing occasional action items
- Attends and supports Partnership meetings, including logistical support
- Advocates for and represents the partnership in the community, encourages participation from partners, identifies and invites new partners

- Helps Ambassador with developing general Partnership meeting content and identifying presenters

Role of the Ambassador:

- Coordinates and facilitates the SC and Partnership meetings
- Maintains Partnership files including project documentation, steering committee meeting notes, general partnership meeting content, and other key partnership documentation
- Serves as the liaison between the Partnership and the national Urban Waters Network; attends monthly national calls
- Identifies partners to present their projects at partnership meetings; supports partners in preparing for their presentations and break-out sessions
- Follows through on action items identified by the SC
- Develops and improves materials and resources for the Partnership
- Serves as point of contact for the Partnership
- Maintains the newsletter; collects project updates, announcements and other information to distribute to the partnership

Newsletter

The Ambassador will maintain a regular e-mail newsletter via MailChimp, with a new issue sent out every 2-4 weeks. The newsletter’s function will be to keep the partners connected and informed between Partnership meetings. Newsletters can contain any combination of the following:

- Information about past and future Partnership meetings, including links to presentations and other materials presented at whole partnership meetings
- Partner project updates (submitted by partners using a form maintained by the Ambassador)
- Announcements, photos, and other updates submitted by partners
- Requests for action, feedback or involvement of some kind from the partners (i.e. request for project updates)
- Relevant funding opportunities
- Local job announcements
- Items of interest from the National Urban Waters Network newsletter

Vision

In March of 2019, the Partnership hosted a strategic planning meeting that marked a shift in the vision and structure of the Partnership. In July 2019, the SC launched the new “Project Incubator” model, which is described below:

Project Incubator Model:

- Function as an interdisciplinary think-tank
- Help to successfully launch new projects
- Help existing projects overcome challenges
- Connect projects to the correct resources and people
- Serve as a networking hub

Under this new model, the Partnership meetings will all follow the same format, allowing the Partnership to highlight partner projects throughout the year. Each meeting, the Ambassador will work to feature four different partner project presentations: one partner to share a Success Story of a recently completed project, followed by three partners to present new or existing Incubator Projects and facilitate a collaborative think-tank session following their presentation. The new partnership meeting format is outlined below:

Partnership Meeting Agenda

1. Ambassador and Steering Committee welcome and meeting norms
2. Success Story presentation, using provided template (5-7 min)
3. Three incubator project presentations, using provided template (5-7 min each)
4. Break-out sessions: attendees choose an incubator project and join for think-tank session (~45 min)
5. Re-group: share break-out session outcomes
6. Partner announcements, updates, and networking needs
7. Built in networking time to close the meeting

Based on the outcomes of the March 2019 strategic planning meeting, the SC and the Ambassador led a visioning with the goal of establishing a distinct niche for the Partnership to fill in our community. Many of the Urban Waters partners collaborate outside of the Partnership, and the SC wanted to establish the Urban Waters Partnership meetings as a unique and useful way for the partners to collaborate, rather than becoming redundant.

The inspiration for the “Project Incubator” model came from the realization that some of the greatest past successes of the Partnership occurred during the informal networking time after the quarterly meetings ended, when partners made connections or shared resources that resulted in a project moving forward or overcoming challenges. The question became: How can the Partnership intentionally facilitate this type of synergistic collaboration? The vision became to design Partnership meetings to harness the collaborative power that exists when so many diverse stakeholders are in one room, to provide a platform for partners to ask for specific types of support, and to give partners an opportunity to engage with their colleagues to help move their

project forward. The “Project Incubator” model will continue to be developed and refined, but the concept has received positive feedback and interest from both the local community of partners and the national Urban Waters Learning Network.

Themes and Goals

The MRG Urban Waters partnership initially used the mission, vision, and principles of the National Urban Waters Partnership to guide their work. During the March 2019 strategic planning meeting, participants added to, refined and restructured these principles to establish local goals for the Partnership. The goals are organized under four distinct core program themes. A project can be designated as an “Urban Waters project” if it corresponds with at least two of the following four themes:

Theme 1: Invest in Healthy Watersheds

- Promote landscape level conservation and restoration
- Utilize green infrastructure to manage stormwater
- Emphasize everyone’s role in watershed stewardship: government, private, public, individual
- Maximize natural infrastructure for healthy ecosystems
- Measure results for future initiatives
- Support reliable and resilient water utilities
 - Diversify and stretch water supplies
 - Transform wastewater into a resource
 - Pursue alternative funding and financing models
 - Incorporate climate resilience into utility planning

Theme 2: Engage in Education and Outreach

- Engage with and hear voices from the community around watershed issues
- Encourage education and engagement opportunities for all ages and audiences
- Utilize community science for ecosystem monitoring and watershed restoration
- Enhance community capacity to engage in water planning and governance
- Encourage programs and events that help community members access, understand and appreciate their urban waterways
- Educate local governments on how zoning changes can support Urban Waters initiatives

Theme 3: Facilitate Economic Revitalization and Prosperity

- Foster community resilience in the face of a changing climate

- Promote and invest in tourism, outdoor recreation, and conservation jobs
- Encourage youth employment and training opportunities
- Utilize green infrastructure to mitigate urban heat islands and revitalize neighborhoods
- Encourage integration of water stewardship in corporate and agency strategies, establishing water stewardship as an essential part of operations and decision-making
- Reflect Urban Waters goals in municipal planning documents and development ordinances
- Create partnerships and promote sustainable agricultural systems, including urban agriculture
- Leverage water investments to generate community benefits

Theme 4: Foster Active Collaboration and True Partnership

- Leverage resources, share information and work collaboratively to support joint projects and objectives.
- Facilitate regular and extensive stakeholder and community input and engagement
- Support upstream and downstream public-private partnerships and communication
- Integrate planning across the water cycle
- Sustain a foundation of success by emphasizing benefits of collaboration
 - Networking
 - Sharing resources
 - Promoting leadership opportunities

2020-2022 Objectives

- 1.) Continue to develop and improve the vision, goals and themes of the Partnership
- 2.) Continue to develop and improve the format of Partnership meetings and explore different ways of utilizing the break-out sessions.
- 3.) Increase participation in the Partnership and actively invite stakeholders that are not yet involved to participate.
- 4.) Explore methods for tracking collective outcomes to help direct future projects and to monitor progress towards the Partnership's goals.
- 5.) Develop a standard format to catalog past, present and future Urban Waters projects.