

📍 **MUNICIPAL CASE STUDY**

Berks County Water and Sewer Association, Pennsylvania

Berks County’s county-wide planning in the 1990s and Albright College’s established and unbiased leadership set the stage for municipalities, sewer and water authorities, nonprofit organizations, consulting firms, and others to work together under the Berks County Water and Sewer Association to meet different regulatory goals and educational aims to improve the county’s water quality.

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Background

Due to its proximity to Philadelphia, open space, and fertile soil, Berks County experienced both agricultural and industrial development throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. The Schuylkill River served as a crucial transportation route that moved goods from Berks County into Philadelphia. By the second half of the 20th century, parts of Berks County were experiencing the sprawling suburban development patterns of the post-war period; some of this development continues today. Currently, the City of Reading remains the county seat and the largest municipality in Berks County. Berks County is comprised of 29 boroughs and 44 townships.

Berks County includes three major watersheds: the Schuylkill River Basin, the Lehigh River Basin, and the Chesapeake Bay Watershed. Ninety percent of the county is considered to be part of the Schuylkill River Watershed.

Berks County Water and Sewer Association

The Berks County Water and Sewer Association (“the Association”) was created to “advance the theory and practice of the design, construction, maintenance, administration and operation of water and sewer services; disseminate information and share experiences to promote improved practices in water and sewer administration; expand local training opportunities; promote cooperation among water and sewer service providers and the economic development community; and encourage adherence by water and sewer officials to a continually higher standard.”

Quick Stats

Berks County

Major waterbodies:

Schuylkill River, Ontelaunee Lake, Blue Marsh Lake

Population:

415,271 (2015 American Community Survey)

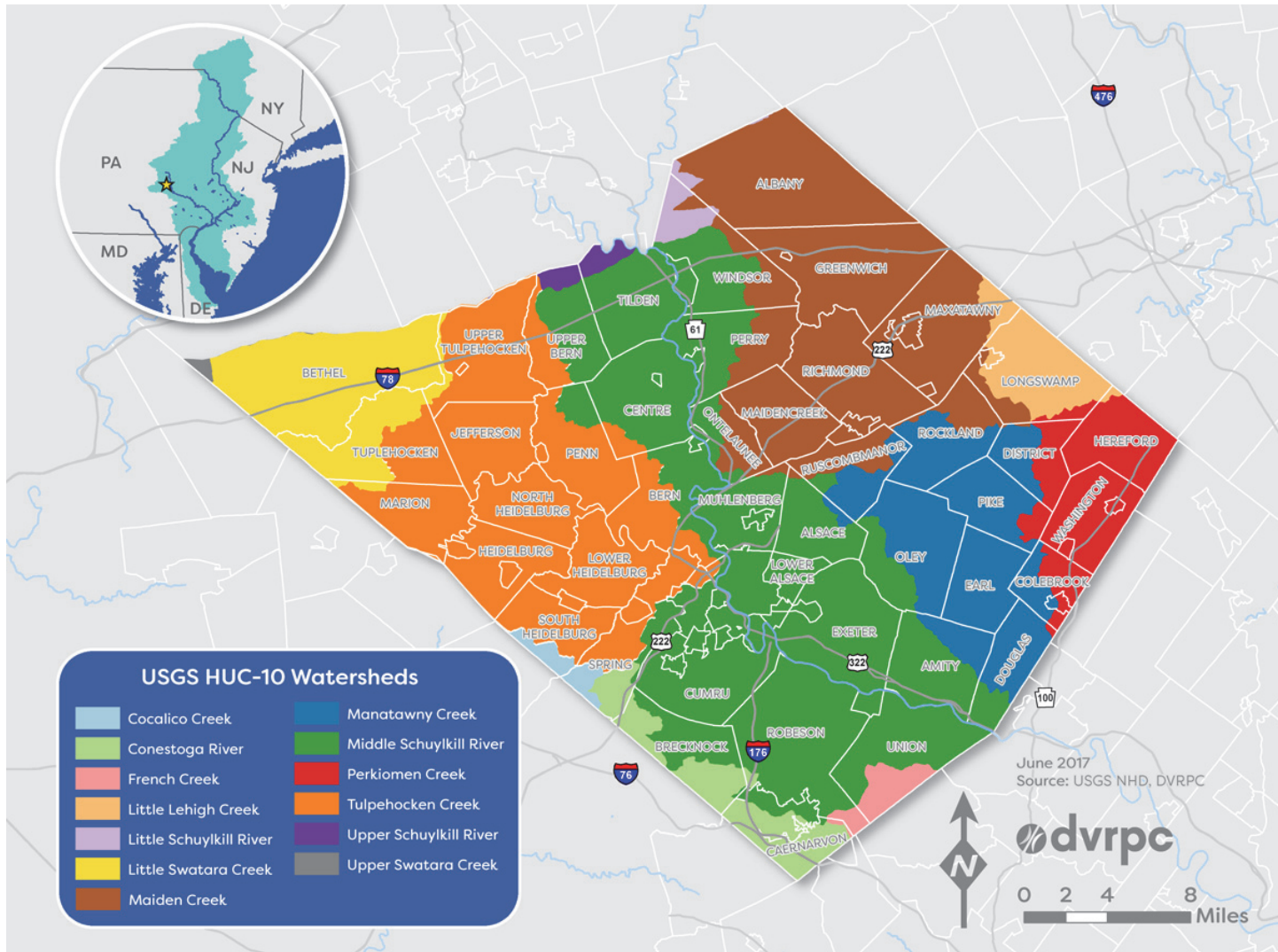
Land area:

857 square miles

Water area:

9.2 square miles, (1.1%)

Map: Berks County Watersheds



Though only formalized in 2013, the Association has developed over a long period of time. In 1998, the Berks County Planning Commission (BCPC) originally conducted a Sewer and Water Regionalization Study to take inventory of water and sewerage systems and look for opportunities to improve them. At the time, there was little support for joint actions since most municipalities preferred to retain control of water and sewer activities occurring within their jurisdictions. However, a few of the smaller municipalities with their own public water and sewer systems began to purchase water services from large water companies that could provide water more reliably.

In 2007, when many of the municipalities were struggling to maintain balanced budgets, some municipalities began to express interest in joint actions and shared services that might reduce overall costs associated with water and sewer. In order to gauge interest, BCPC reached out to Albright College’s Center for Excellence in Local Government, with whom it had had a prior relationship and it thought could act as an unbiased entity, to update the 1998 study.

During the update process, BCPC realized that implementation of the plan would require municipalities to take ownership of sewer and water issues; the county could not implement the plan alone. In order to garner support for the plan, BCPC created a “road show” and presented the plan to its constituents at various locations throughout the county, with an emphasis on the question, “What will *you* do with the plan now that it has been written?” The roadshow was successful and was the main driver in the initial formation of the Association. Given Albright College’s involvement in the initial study and an existing pooled procurement program, it was a natural candidate for hosting the new Association.

Collective Actions

The Association has three main focuses: economic development, source water protection, and disaster planning and response. It operates under the leadership of a 10-member executive board, whose members are elected by the rest of the association. Board members have terms ranging from one to two years, and rotate off in alternating years so that there is never a complete replacement of the board in any given year. Though the Association is a volunteer organization, it has been supported by various funding sources.

Initially, the Association was supported by six organizations that provided seed funding: the Greater Reading Economic Partnership, the Western Berks Water Authority, the City of Reading, the Reading Area Water Authority, the Joint Municipal Authority of Hamburg, and the Pennsylvania American Water Corporation. More importantly, Berks County committed to a three-year seed budget of \$15,000 per year, to be matched by dues paid by members of the Association. The three-year seed budget expires in April 2017, at which point the Association will be supported only by dues and sponsorships. The Association has ended each of the past three years with a surplus budget. Membership dues were, and still are, assigned in a tiered system based on the number of people served by water providers, or the type of organization (municipality, consultant, individuals). Member municipalities that do not operate a water or sewer system pay \$100 annually and are permitted two voting members. All funding goes toward administration by Albright College’s Center for Excellence, training, conferences, and educational materials.

Training

One of the Association’s main initiatives is providing local training to municipal professionals. Within the Association, the Education Committee works to find training opportunities that provide required contact hours for accredited water providers. The committee seeks opportunities that are located nearby in order to assist water providers and other professionals with remaining up to date with cutting-edge practices and studies, without requiring excess travel time. The Association also hosts its own training workshops, which are rigorously reviewed by the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (PADEP) to ensure contact hour/continuing education credit eligibility. Previous topics have included pipeline maintenance, leak detection, process instrument verification, and hypochlorite verification. The Association also hosts an annual conference, attended by over 100 interested individuals and professionals. Past conference topics have included source water protection, disaster planning and management, and partnerships.

Berks County Water and Sewer Association

Year formed: 2013

Municipalities participating:

Kenhorst Borough, Wyomissing Borough, Sinking Spring Borough, City of Reading, Cumru Township, Topton Borough, Kutztown Borough

Current members: 75

Annual operating budget: \$30,000 (\$15,000 from Berks County and \$15,000 membership dues and contributions)

Pooled Purchasing Power

One of the major benefits of the Association, as a multi-municipality organization, is its collective purchasing power. Under the Association, the Berks County Cooperative Purchasing Council (BCCPC) was formed allowing certain entities to join together in order to purchase necessary goods and services, and to share information regarding these purchases. An example of a past joint purchase is chlorine for water treatment, shared by multiple water providers. Pooled procurement allows participating members to reduce expenditures thanks to bulk prices or collective bargaining. The council meets quarterly, separate from the Association, and each participating entity is represented by one individual.

Multi-Municipal Planning

Though not a member, PADEP is currently partnering with the Association and working with members to produce a joint source water protection plan. Many of the current members have individual source water protection plans, but the joint document seeks to identify common goals and complementary actions that will eliminate duplicate efforts and fill existing gaps in source water protection within the Schuylkill River Watershed.

As Carolyn O'Hare of SSM, an Association consultant member, puts it, "Everyone feels like they don't have enough time to get [everything] done, so if you can prioritize effectively and look for other people who have similar goals to each other, [we can] take a piece of the burden, then a lot more gets done a lot more quickly... everybody has a specific piece. You can get policy from the agencies, but they can't provide money, so you need a nonprofit to be able to apply to get money, so it all hangs together."

Along with pinpointing next steps in the short, medium, and long term, the Source Water Protection Plan will also identify potential agencies and actors who have the authority and resources to implement actions and redistribute responsibilities where possible to match capacity. The plan is slated to be released in 2017.

Given that source water protection is generally considered an "upstream" activity and stormwater management is considered a "downstream" activity, one plan that addresses both holds much promise for water quality improvements. One plan will involve a variety of different agencies and outline specific plans and projects that require cooperation, hopefully breaking down some barriers and building valuable relationships. In addition, the plan may incentivize municipalities to participate in more coordinated actions. Coordinated efforts could save both time and money: precious resources for local governments and public agencies.

Challenges and Benefits

The Association meets once a month. Given that the Association's membership is voluntary, it can be challenging to accomplish time-intensive actions since members do not receive additional compensation, and participating can conflict with already busy schedules. Another challenge that the Association

Motivating Factors

Countywide planning: In 1998, BCPC undertook a Sewer and Water Regionalization Study to inventory water and sewerage systems spread throughout multiple municipalities. BCPC updated the study in 2007.

Recognized leader: Albright College's Center for Excellence in Local Government is seen as an unbiased entity working for the good of the group. It already hosts the BCCPC.

Shared goals: Members have explicit goals around keeping the county economically competitive, protecting water sources, and providing professional training.

faces, common to many other membership-based organizations, is maintaining sufficient membership to sustain the financial needs of the organization.

Despite these challenges, members find that the Association offers a highly cooperative and supportive environment. Members circulate news and events that they are hosting. Members often participate in community events that impact water quality, such as community cleanups. The Association also provides an environment where professional relationships can be forged and strengthened. The opportunity to network and partner with other professionals in the field provides more intangible benefits to members and serves to solidify the cohesion of the water quality community in Berks County as a whole.

Conclusion

According to members of the Association, the key to starting similar initiatives starts with countless small actions. Members began by considering the possibilities of building on existing relationships to partner in new ways. The impetus for new action stemmed from countywide planning that required the collaboration between multiple municipal and private-sector actors. A key player that enabled action between multiple jurisdictions and municipalities was the administration at Albright College, which could act as an unbiased third party—and just as important are the dues that finance their work. Actions may be difficult to accomplish as an individual, but they can be accomplished when split between multiple partners with a common goal.

Sources

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