

Stakeholders' Advisory Committee – Beyond 2025 Bay Journal Op-Ed

Authored by: Dr. Chuck Herrick

The Chesapeake Bay Program Stakeholders' Advisory Committee is one of the few non-governmental voices within the formal structure of the Bay Program. It was established in 1984 to provide advice to the leadership of the federal/state Chesapeake Bay Program (CBP) on policies and programs impacting residents in the Chesapeake Bay watershed. Appointed by Watershed Governors, the Mayor of the District of Columbia, and the board of the Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay, our membership is 28 volunteers representing a variety of stakeholders including: restoration practitioners, farmers, retired government officials, environmental philanthropy, policy researchers and contractors, land conservationists, environmental justice advocates, community organizers, watershed organizations and educators. Our members have thoroughly and carefully reviewed the public draft of the Bay Program's "Beyond 2025" (B-25) document which charts a pathway for the Bay Program partnership beyond the deadlines associated with many outcomes in the *2014 Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement*.

The B-25 document addresses many critical issues and includes a wide range of thoughtful recommendations. Our members have commented on the need to simplify Bay Program structure, increase the transparency of the Program's deliberations and operations, maintain the frequency of 2-year milestone reporting, critically review and update the *Watershed Agreement* to assure that it is responsive to changing conditions, and establish a new near-term deadline for the Bay TMDL, the jurisdictions' "pollution diet" to meet clean water standards. But to me, an especially important aspect of the B-25 report is Partnership recommendation #3 which reads, "The Program and Partnership should commit to inclusive and meaningful engagement of people and communities that have been historically underrepresented, under-resourced, and underserved...The Steering Committee recommends...that the Partnership *institutionalize and actualize* the Program's Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice (DEIJ) Implementation Plan".

I don't think that this recommendation is important because it's a moral imperative, which it is. And I don't think it's important because it's consistent with the arc of history, which it is. There is, in my view, another compelling logic.

I'm convinced that we'll never "fix" the Bay until we learn how to deal with non-point pollution; and we'll never deal with non-point pollution until we have enough effective Best Management Practices (BMPs), and we'll never have enough effective BMPs until all Bay communities take full ownership of the Bay's health, which won't happen until all people in the watershed have an equal say and equal benefit in the Bay's and its tributaries' value, stewardship, management, and use. It also won't happen until community-level groups and localities have the resources

they need to initiate and maintain BMPs that make sense for them in their neighborhoods. In other words, a deep and committed approach to inclusion and justice is a causal prerequisite to the long-term stewardship of the Chesapeake Bay Watershed. I have come to believe that inclusivity and belonging must be the wheels on which the Bay Program moves, not merely programmatic attributes.

Like all large institutions, government and private, we've inherited systems that historically functioned in an exclusionary way. Some by design to limit access, benefit, and equal participation; others that merely get caught in the inertia of "business as usual". Designing inclusionary spaces must be intentional. It doesn't automatically happen when we make statements of commitment. Lowering barriers are actions, not just beliefs. That means we have to look at our systems and processes and ask what needs to change and then do the work. So, what might it look like if we took meaningful steps to *institutionalize and actualize* inclusiveness and leadership diversity within the Chesapeake Bay Program and Partnership? Three things come to mind.

Improving Grant Access: Local and community capacity building is critical for the long-term stewardship of the Chesapeake Bay. Over the years, the Bay Partnership has received substantial federal, state, and philanthropic funding. But this support has not been distributed in an equitable manner, with community-level groups and underrepresented stakeholders too often left wanting. The Stakeholders' Advisory Committee has pursued a sustained agenda to make Bay Partners aware of the systemic nature of funding disparities; and the Partnership needs now to implement an aggressive program of networking and outreach to identify underrepresented groups that might be in a position to co-benefit from incorporating BMPs into other community endeavors.

Simplifying Grant Administration: In our response to the B-25 report, we also recommended that the Executive Council (EC) kick-off an aggressive Partnership-wide effort to identify key factors that frustrate community-level groups in their administration of Bay Program grant funding. We feel like such an effort should involve Agency grants officers, legal counsel dealing with contracts and grants, and officials from oversight bodies such as Office of Management and Budget (OMB). This effort should address all factors that inhibit community group's ability to efficiently administer grants including regulatory and OMB prescriptions. While large nonprofit organizations have the staffing, expertise, and administrative infrastructure to deal with this sort of "muck," small, community-level, two or three-person operations simply do not. We recognize and respect that some of these factors exist to assure good stewardship of taxpayer dollars but feel that this is a situation in which public goods can and should be better balanced than they are.

Facilitating Engagement: Our members are all volunteers; indeed, many people who invest time, physical effort, and passion in matters of Bay and watershed stewardship do so on a volunteer basis. But volunteerism is a privilege that many Bay residents struggle to exercise because of job demands, family care obligations, and income shortfalls. A reliance on volunteerism can put hard limits on the number and variety of voices that engage in Bay-related deliberations. This is why we have recommended that the Bay Partnership provide need-based honorarium to broaden, diversify, and more meaningfully engage its volunteer base.

Things like this are not just nice and appropriate, if *institutionalized and actualized*, they will act as force multipliers for all CBP actions. They will help us to meet pollution reduction goals, achieve water quality objectives, sustain a healthy resource base, and benefit all communities within the Bay watershed.

Author: Dr. Chuck Herrick is the Chairperson of the Stakeholders' Advisory Committee to the Chesapeake Bay Executive Council. He has consulted extensively with a wide range of U.S. government agencies and water utility organizations, providing analytical input and strategic direction on a variety of environmental issues. Each Fall semester he teaches a class at New York University called "History of American Environmental Policy."