



**Chesapeake Bay Program**  
*Science. Restoration. Partnership.*

**Identifying Communications Needs  
to Increase Tree Planting and Maintenance**  
Summer-Fall 2021

**Executive Summary**

**OPINIONWORKS**  
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## Project Overview

This evaluation of public outreach and engagement for tree planting and maintenance was undertaken by the Chesapeake Bay Program and its partners through the Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay. The goal of this work was to lift up best practices in public outreach employed by tree-related campaigns, and to identify the gaps that exist in tree campaigns' ability to carry out effective outreach.

In this inquiry, success is defined as an engaged public, resulting in demand to plant more trees and landowner/community commitment to maintaining trees over the long term. Three broad recommendations to improve public engagement with tree planting and maintenance across the watershed emerged from this work.

This project was led by Rachel Felver, Communications Director, Chesapeake Bay Program, in collaboration with colleagues from the Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay and U.S. Forest Service. The technical aspects of this study were designed and conducted by OpinionWorks LLC, a research and public outreach firm based in Annapolis, Maryland, led by Steve Raabe.

The observations in this report are drawn from in-depth interviews and focus groups involving 33 practitioners who are running or facilitating tree planting and maintenance efforts in state and local agencies, and regional or local non-profit organizations, in all parts of the Chesapeake Bay watershed. These interviewees were identified through a crowd-sourcing exercise early in the project, a survey of the Forestry community distributed peer-to-peer, garnering 289 responses and resulting in a database of 119 tree campaigns.

## Contextual Issues

Throughout the discussions with tree campaign practitioners, four contextual issues arose repeatedly. Though not directly related to public outreach, each of these is affecting the focus and priorities of tree campaigns, their reach and capacity, and their ability to be successful in public outreach.

- **A Focus on Tree Equity**

There are many efforts underway in urban forestry to map historically underserved areas and focus tree planting in those neighborhoods. This focus is moving practitioners into new communities where audiences may not respond to traditional environmental messaging, placing a priority on involving community members and understanding the perspectives of residents – a competency that we found was sometimes lacking in campaigns.

- **Lack of Resources for Tree Maintenance**

Participants in these interviews spoke over and over about how difficult it is to maintain the trees they have planted. They said funders do not prioritize maintenance of trees, focusing instead on new trees in the ground. There is an implication for outreach and engagement, practitioners said, because a poorly maintained project that is visible to neighbors can set back the effort to engage new people.

- **Difficulty Hiring and Retaining Staff**

Given the tremendous disruption of the pandemic and the “Great Reassessment” that is affecting so many workplaces today, organizations and public agencies charged with tree planting and maintenance are experiencing difficulties with hiring and staff retention like most every other field.

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Practitioners point out that this field is not highly paid, so the pressures on hiring and retention are even greater. People suggested that this hampers organizations that are trying to conduct outreach because they lose knowledge about programs and relationships with landowners.

- **Strained Tree Supply**

Given the widespread growth in tree planting efforts, tree supply has become an issue. Commercial nurseries are stretched, and public sector or non-profit sources are limited. Overall supply and specific tree species can be tapped out, putting a practical limit on what can be planted.

## Eight Ingredients for Success in Public Outreach and Engagement

Throughout these interviews, eight themes emerged and recurred as hallmarks of the tree planting and maintenance efforts that successfully reach and engage the public.

### 1. Relationship-Based Campaigns, Grounded in the Community

Investing time, energy, and resources in patiently building relationships with landowners (in the case of buffer programs) and community members (urban tree programs) to foster trust and understand and respond to their needs and perspectives. This means listening and building trust, not just telling a landowner or homeowner that their property is a good fit for trees. It means *involving* the landowner or community member in planning and decision making.

### 2. Trained Field Staff and Community-Based Stewards

Training and deploying professional field staff, as well as volunteer Tree Troopers, Watershed Stewards, and the like, so the sponsoring organization or agency has many legs in the community and can carry out a relationship-based effort. Partnerships between public sector agencies and local non-profits that can deploy staff and trained volunteers less expensively is a key to a successful field model.

### 3. A Commitment to Identifying and Cultivating New Audiences

Moving beyond just reacting to the neighborhoods and property owners that typically rush forward and request trees, to bring focus to new constituents who are more likely to respond to non-traditional messages and techniques. The intentionality of focusing on priority audience segments and determining how best to reach and engage them requires a sustained commitment of energy and resources, and often requires approaching old questions in new ways.

### 4. A Spark-Plug Leader

An energetic, relational leader who directs and sustains the effort, focuses on outcomes, constantly refines tools and approaches, all while inspiring people to become part of the effort. Such leaders bring colleagues together to discuss and solve problems and share best practices. And they are innovative, recognizing gaps and shortcomings in existing programs and inventing new ways to address them.

### 5. Active Organizational Partnerships and Collaborations

Strong, collaborative partnerships with peer organizations, characterized by communication, mentoring, and sharing what works. These relationships are sometimes formal and contractual, and sometimes less formal, but when they are successful they are always systematic and intentional, and characterized by strong communication and clarity of focus.

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## 6. Authentic Neighbor-to-Neighbor Recommendations

Leveraging the trust that neighbors have in each other and the power of social norming through testimonials, social media posts, and similar methods. One of the most successful motivators for planting trees, practitioners pointed out, is knowing that your neighbor has planted a tree or a buffer and is happy with the result.

## 7. Sustained, Mutually Reinforcing Outreach

Using multiple outreach channels and tools that are timed and designed to reinforce each other, rather than relying on a single outreach mechanism alone, such as a one-time mailing. The most successful campaigns are designing communications that have consistent messaging and delivering them thoughtfully through multiple channels.

## 8. Simple, Flexible Program Design and Approach

Addressing the problem of program inflexibility, including tree programs that require substantial up-front outlays by landowners, long-term contracts, or are difficult to apply or qualify for, innovative program managers are bringing additional flexible funding to the table, developing new or supplemental programs, and streamlining or eliminating applications to help address these barriers.

### Public Outreach Gaps Identified by This Research

There are many success stories that we heard in this project. But this project also identified significant gaps in public outreach capacity and execution. These are the most common gaps.

#### Gap #1: Technical Assistance and Training

Most often, tree managers are technical experts in planting and maintaining trees. Much less often, they are trained in social science, communications, or public outreach. Focused training, technical assistance, and coaching are needed in the best practices of public outreach and engagement.

#### Gap #2: Understanding the Motivations of New Audiences

Tree planting campaigns rarely employ tools to understand their audience beyond using their staff's own intuitive listening skills. This gap becomes especially important as practitioners are pushed to address unfamiliar audiences. Enabling better audience understanding is critical to effective outreach.

#### Gap #3: Lack of Systematic Networking and Collaboration among Tree Practitioners

Collaboration and coordinated communication among tree planting practitioners is uneven, and the sharing of best practices and lessons learned in public outreach is very limited in the tree planting community. Tree planting practitioners, particularly those running smaller campaigns, would benefit from more intentional networking and sharing of best practices in outreach.

#### Gap #4: Funding Constraints

Successful public engagement is constrained by public sector procurement rules and large funders' tight focus on the number of trees that go in the ground, devaluing the task of building community participation and buy-in. Funding criteria must be reexamined – if public outreach is a priority.

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### Gap #5: Program Inflexibility

Government programs meant to encourage tree planting are often complicated and restrictive, making them unattractive to some landowners and complicated and difficult for all but expert tree practitioners to offer. More flexible funding must be a priority watershed-wide.

### Gap #6: Lack of Availability of Basic Outreach Tools

It is a bottom line finding of this work that basic outreach tools and competencies are often lacking, with too little training in public outreach and too little sharing of successful and creative tools. When good tools are created, they must be made available freely and widely.

### Gap #7: Little Emphasis on Evaluation

Tree campaigns are doing very little evaluation of their public outreach efforts.

## Baywide Recommendations for Improving Public Outreach

This project is premised on the idea that more effective public outreach and engagement will advance tree planting goals and will help ensure that trees are cared for long after they are planted. Landowners and community members who are involved in the process of planning buffers or urban tree planting will not only create more demand for trees today, they will also become advocates who will increase tree adoption within their personal and community networks in the future.

These recommendations are intended to move public outreach for trees significantly forward. They are based on an understanding of what a watershed-wide tree planting strategy truly rooted in the best practices of public outreach would look like.

### 1. Baywide Staff and Support for a Focused Public Engagement Strategy

One of the key takeaways from this work is how siloed tree efforts can be. Public outreach successes are often not known or shared outside their home jurisdiction of region, and young tree campaigns are often inventing their outreach plans from scratch. There is a great need for coordination, encouragement, training, and strategic direction of outreach from the Chesapeake Bay Program level, by a staff team that understands tree planting and maintenance, while being steeped in social science and communications.

This commitment would be reflected by these actions:

- Create a new Baywide staff position, a Forestry Outreach Coordinator, housed in the Bay Program's Communications Office, to support tree campaigns with a coordinated outreach strategy and toolkit, including bringing practitioners together for networking and training around public outreach.
- Identify, make visible, and support a cadre of mentors, recruited from among successful tree practitioners, creating a career pipeline for people who feel they have topped out in their current positions.
- Network a corps of external technical assistance providers who will be available to tree programs to expand their capacity to implement public outreach – such as marketing and communications agencies, graphic designers, writers, audience researchers, etc.
- Encourage funders to formalize public outreach and community engagement requirements and evaluation in grant RFPs, and to follow that up with sufficient and dedicated funding for those efforts.

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## 2. A Web Portal to Aggregate Public Outreach Tools and Best Practices Information

To aid the sharing of expertise and best practices, plus the practical tools used in outreach, the Forestry community should create an online clearinghouse and promote it heavily among tree planters. ChesapeakeTrees.net is an existing resource that could be updated to more intentionally support public outreach. An updated portal would:

- Share effective public outreach tools and templates for practitioners to download and adapt, including sample letters, emails, door hangers, postcards, web content, etc.
- Share messaging advice and relevant audience research for multiple audiences – beyond the agricultural landowner and traditional environmentally motivated audiences, which are already well-understood. This is particularly important today, given the equity mapping which is driving tree efforts into new neighborhoods with differing priorities.
- Curate and host an image library, with content contributed by various local tree campaigns, augmented by the Bay Program’s professional photography resources.
- Outline successful public outreach models and campaign plans for others to emulate in their own settings.
- Provide a primer on essential best practices, such as how to understand audiences, identify trusted messengers, do outreach that is mutually reinforcing, etc.

## 3. Systematic Coordination of Networking and Frequent Training

There is a great deal of collaborative discussion underway in the Forestry community. But there is little focus in those conversations on building public outreach capacity and expertise. And many practitioners are not tied into those collaborative conversations at all. Tree-related outreach would be greatly improved if the Bay Program and its partners would:

- Regularly bring together tree managers for sharing best practices in public outreach and focused training opportunities, with attention to community type (urban, suburban, small town, rural) and buffer vs. urban tree programs.
- Expand and continually update the database of tree campaigns and their key staff people that was created through this project, to help ensure that every practitioner can be included in these coordinated networking and training opportunities.
- Cultivate and train colleagues, such as Soil and Water Conservation Districts, who are not *exclusively* focused on tree planting and maintenance, but who are valuable partners in those efforts.
- Encourage a regional strategy of messaging and branding based on what has been shown to work. That means staying actively engaged with tree campaigns that are producing the best results. Fund a deeper toolkit for those most effective campaigns and make those tools available so that other practitioners throughout the watershed will adopt and use them.

We commend these recommendations to the Chesapeake Bay Program and its partners. Our full report is available, offering more detail to support these observations and source material from the practitioner interviews.