

2018 Urban Waters National Workshop
Future of Urban Waters Panel – Moderator: Vernice Miller-Travis
Diana Toledo, River Network Leadership Development Director

Thank you to UW staff, Vernice, fellow panelists. Pleasure to join this conversation about growing and sustaining the UW movement and look forward to connecting w. many of you over the next couple days.

I want to put my comments in the context of Bob's challenge to us this morning, to reflect, to grow, to sustain the Urban Waters.... and based on my experience over the past 7-8 year supporting orgs. working in the urban water space as one of the coordinators of the UW Learning Network with my colleagues at Groundwork USA.

For those of you unfamiliar with River Network, we are a 30-year old organization that rose out of a need to support and build the capacity of what was then a fast growing movement of mostly grassroots river and watershed protection organizations. As I reflect on the growth of our own organization, our own evolution is reflective of what we see in the urban waters space... because today's River Network and our members have expanded well beyond traditional river and watershed groups.

It includes groups:

- addressing urban flooding challenges, not ONLY by working w. city stormwater depts., but by digging deep in affected neighborhoods, going door to door to reach the households that bear the brunt of consistent and repeated flooding and engaging them in finding solutions;
- neighborhood groups concerned about the quality of the water that comes out of their taps like Ixchel, in Cicero (Chicago),
- community development groups that focus first on equity and justice, working thru water to do so,
- tribal councils and interfaith conferences,
- universities and science research centers,
- municipal Sustainability Directors and Parks and Rec department staff,
- and entities like the Colorado River Basin Water Transactions Network, which brings together farmers and ranchers, anglers and conservationists, tribal groups and resource agencies to promote sustainable water management in light of the very uncertain future of water availability in that basin with changing climate.

The universe of interests focused on urban waters makes for a messy landscape. It's a diverse set of players, working through a broad range of organizational structures and networked approaches, all coming together to work in this space. The players are as unique to a place as the issues they're working to solve. And so there is NO ONE WAY to do this work.

Our challenge then, for us at River Network and for many of the entities represented in this room, is to support and sustain these efforts with what RESOURCES and EXPERTISE we have, AND do so in a way that respects local leadership and local knowledge, and BUILDS ON (not supplants) all the work that came before us, before we ever got there. That means investing the time upfront to observe, to listen

and to learn, so we have a good handle on the local landscape of players, interests, and relationships that really are key to our progress toward healthier urban waters and vibrant communities. The stakes are high. 80% of the U.S. population lives in an urban area, and because humans have settled near water since time immemorial, there is a river or stream running through pretty much every one of those urban centers. The work of the Federal UW Partnership and its 15 agencies has tremendous potential to impact people's lives.

Because the health of our urban waters is intrinsically tied to the health and well-being of the communities and the people around them. When we work with the community on water issues, it opens the door to improving both the water AND the community. And so our support to restore Urban Waters has to be integrated with efforts to address other community needs – related to public health, to jobs, to access to transportation, to development of our youth...

Not only are these two things intrinsically linked, I would go as far as to say we cannot sustain an urban waters movement if we don't put those community needs front and center, giving them equal weight and value. Not as "one-offs" – say the community garden next to the greenway along the river to address issues of local food desert- but as long-term efforts that result from us having built the infrastructure to sustain them over time.

#1 – Let's make THAT WORK more visible, elevating the stories of how UW work is helping communities meet other needs. And let's tell the story of how UW work is helping other federal agencies, like HUD, like DOT, like HHS carry out their own mission. Because the sum of the work is greater than its individual parts.

Yesterday I arrived early to do some work planning w. UWLN co-coordinators Ann Marie Mitroff and Maria Brodine. As we identified priorities for more in-depth, peer learning work over the coming year, we keep coming back to the one issue that has been a recurring theme every single time we have hosted a gathering of the Learning Network – gentrification and displacement of people.

We've all seen it happen. When we transform urban rivers from liabilities to community assets, property values increase, neighborhoods gentrify, affordable housing becomes harder to find and people are displaced. We see it happen again and again – from Los Angeles to Atlanta, from Newark to Detroit. I'm watching that progression play out in my own hometown of Asheville, NC. We see it, we even anticipate it, but how do we get in front of it, BEFORE we begin efforts to clean up, restore or redevelop a stretch of urban waters? Ensuring housing affordability needs to be foundational to urban waters restoration. What are the unintended consequences of our work? The last thing we want is for today's urban waters movement to become the urban renewal movement of the 1950s.

And we see this same arc following efforts to rebuild cities and communities following "natural" disasters – let's learn what we can from post-Katrina New Orleans and let those lessons inform how we rebuild elsewhere so we avoid displacing low income communities, people of color, as we rebuild communities in N. C, Texas and wherever the next storm hits.

Unfortunately, after all those LN sessions, we haven't found the fix. The fix isn't easy, we know that, but right now we lack a shared understanding of what tools and strategies are available to help

prevent this water restoration to displacement arc. What is working? Where? What hasn't worked? Can we bring that learning to each of the communities where we work?

#2 – Make housing affordability foundational to urban waters restoration. Begin by increasing our collective understanding of the extent of the problem, how it happens, what tools and strategies work, what doesn't. Bringing other federal partners into the conversation to share their expertise and resources (Commerce's Economic Development Administration, HUD) and together craft creative approaches. This is a sweet spot for innovation.

And this brings me to my last point... let's ALSO invest in the little guys. The high potential, low resource organizations.

#3 – Let's avoid "Trickle down community engagement" and invest \$ in that.

Some of you may be familiar with Vu Lay's blog for nonprofits. I strongly recommend it to understand the issues NGOs wrestle with. He coined the term "Trickle down community engagement" on a post that went viral last year, in which he writes *"We bypass the people who are most affected by issues, engage and fund larger organizations to tackle these issues, and hope that miraculously the people most affected will help out in the effort, usually for free."*

River Network, as one of those larger, national organizations, gives this a lot of thought, and through scholarships, regrants and travel stipends we work to ensure we don't become that larger org that absorbs the financial resources without bringing along other smaller groups.

Urban Waters work requires meaningful community participation and open dialogue, and it takes time and space to build the trust needed to get there. Long-term investments, not short-term gains. And if we agree that full, committed community participation is key to success, we need to acknowledge people's time and help pay for it. To share their vision for their community, to show up to meetings, to tell their stories, to participate in our field trips for funders or key officials.

To wrap this up, I'll say this. We have good work behind us, and BETTER work ahead of us. UW is complex and challenging work, but we have many of the right people in the room to forge ahead to keep building this movement on behalf of our waterways and our communities. Let's bring more people in to do this work w. us, more NGOs and more federal partners. I look forward to our discussion at Q/A and to individual conversations with many of you this week about how we can work together to make this happen.

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