
SOURCE WATER PROTECTION COLLABORATIVE

Administered by  Environmental
INITIATIVE

Creating With & For Water

Lessons learned from the Source
Water Protection Collaborative's
community-wide, collaborative art
pilot project in Little Falls, MN



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Department of Health from Clean Water, Land, and
Legacy Amendment funds; additional funding
provided by the Minnesota Department of Agriculture
and the Board of Water and Soil Resources.*

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*This report
includes photos
by Leah Rathe*





Source Water Protection Collaborative

The Source Water Protection Collaborative engages diverse groups and perspectives across Minnesota to advance collective action for protecting drinking water. Facilitated by Environmental Initiative, the Collaborative includes individuals from state agencies, local governments, nonprofit organizations, higher education, and industry associations involved in different aspects of source water protection. Funding is provided by a Minnesota Department of Health grant through the Clean Water, Land, and Legacy Amendment.

Groundwork

Members came together following a series of statewide drinking water protection listening sessions held in 2019. They initially convened in 2020. Collectively, the Source Water Protection Collaborative aims to:

- Leverage and learn from the many projects, policy, and planning efforts that impact the protection of drinking water across the state and facilitate the sharing of knowledge between communities with similar efforts and concerns.
- Expand the capacity of local and state government officials responsible for providing drinking water—particularly to engage with those who have been marginalized from government decision making, like farmers, immigrant communities, people of color, Native nations, rural residents, and small businesses.
- Support local community partnership and trust-building efforts that are focused on those who have been marginalized, ultimately building a stronger civic fabric and greater collective capacity to secure safe drinking water for all.

These goals shaped discussions about collective actions the Collaborative could advance as project work in early 2021. As individuals, organizations, and government agencies, members recognized that current engagement practices were not making enough of a difference. The group moved away from the assumption that information alone creates behavior change, instead seeking projects that:

- Humanize our government and the services it provides.
- Utilize arts, culture, and play.
- Connect to human values and experience, not only technical components.
- Deliver multiple benefits, including accessible communication.

By the end of the year, members coalesced around two different projects: a pilot place-based creative engagement project and an online information clearinghouse for water resource professionals in greater Minnesota. This report will focus on the creative engagement project; to learn more about the Collaborative and the online clearinghouse, please [review our 2023 report](#).

Place-based creative engagement project

Background

As Collaborative members thought of ways to structure a place-based creative engagement project, they proposed using an artist-in-residence to move beyond traditional methods of public engagement and to visualize a project that incorporated arts and play. Many members had not worked with an artist-in-residence before and were unsure what to expect. The Collaborative heard from a panel of artists-in-residence during their full member meeting in May 2022 and continued to work with one of the panelists while developing this project.

Members decided to anchor work in a rural community in greater Minnesota because they knew there tended to be less focus, resources, and opportunity outside the Twin Cities metro for projects like these. They brainstormed a list of communities that were large enough to have a point person to assist the artist, had some kind of connection to the arts, and had drinking water issues the public could affect. Environmental Initiative staff then interviewed these communities about their interest and capacity and chose three potential hosts: Chatfield, Fairmont, and Little Falls.

While staff finalized potential hosts, a subgroup finalized the project structure. The [Minnesota Department of Transportation Sustainability and Public Health Fellowship](#) and the [Los Angeles County Creative Strategist Artist-in-Residence](#) served as guides for the subgroup as they worked out the structure and funding model. The Collaborative ultimately settled on a year-long residency where an artist would be guided by a local team and use their artistic mediums and engagement skills to:

- Empower community members to better engage around protecting drinking water sources.
- Create engagement capacity for the local officials responsible for providing water.
- Connect community members to their water providers.
- Encourage new ways of thinking of community engagement around water.



The [artist panel](#) consisted of five civic artist/engagement specialists that shared the breadth and depth of artists working in government, small towns, and tenuous public issues. They included [Ashley Hanson](#), [Mary Welcome](#), and members of the [Cross-sector Artists in Residence Lab](#)—[Mallory Rukhsana Nezam](#), [Johanna K Taylor](#), and Collaborative member [Amanda Lovelee](#). Their biographies are in the appendix.



“Who better to “build back better,” making the invisible visible, playfully bringing in all the community voices, and illustrating a new future together, than artists within government.”

- Amanda Lovelee,
Metropolitan Council

Members realized that, as a Collaborative made up largely of non-artists, they were not the experts and did not want to decide what the final project would look like. Instead, they designed the pilot project so the chosen artist could co-create it with the community and Collaborative input. The RFP for the pilot is [available online](#). While the project is primarily funded by the Minnesota Department of Health through Clean Water, Land, and Legacy Amendment funding, it received smaller amounts of funding from the Board of Water and Soil Resources and the Minnesota Department of Agriculture.

Implementing the pilot project

The Collaborative put out a call for artists in November of 2022. The position was advertised via social media, the Springboard for the Arts job board, and through Collaborative members' newsletters and personal connections. Environmental Initiative staff also held two online open houses to answer questions.

In total, 23 applications came in for this project. Submissions were accepted by video, audio, or in writing, and seven applicants used the video or audio option for part or all of their applications. While reviewing the audio and video files was more time-consuming, the applicant pool was broader than it would have been with a traditional application process.

A small team of Collaborative members from the creative engagement subgroup came together to review the applicants. They settled on six finalists. Out of that list, the team selected Sharon and Shirley Nordrum, two educators, storytellers, sisters, Red Lake Band members, lifelong residents of rural Minnesota, and advocates for those without voices and those unheard. The sisters chose to work with the city of Little Falls. Sadly, Shirley unexpectedly passed away in May, and the project was paused to allow Sharon time to grieve and determine next steps. When Sharon decided to step back from the work, the team reached out to another finalist, Su Legatt. Su was interested in the project, even on the shortened timeline, and she worked with Sharon to transition the work.

Su Legatt is an artist, community organizer, and educator who spent the first month of her time meeting with over 10 different Little Falls community contacts to think about her project design. In July, she proposed Creating With and For Water, a plan with two main parts. The first portion of the work was a series of community workshops around papermaking, which acknowledged the history of Little Falls as a paper milling town and connected community participants to that history and the current community water challenges. Participants used local water to make paper while Su led conversations about drinking water, allowing people to engage in hard conversations in different ways through the physical act of creation. She brought on Nicky Buck—a Dakota naturalist and advocate—to take community members on a nature walk around Crane Meadows Wildlife Reserve, and Laura Hanson—an award-winning local poet—to lead water-themed writing workshops using the paper made during previous events. Su also led painting workshops using that same paper and various natural dyes. Overall, she hosted nine public and private workshops in the community, working with the local arts center, high school, and Franciscan Sisters to reach over 40 community members.



Su held workshops from September to mid-November. She then combined the paper, art, poetry, and recordings of workshop conversations into a series of broadsides—large sheets of papers printed on one side—using a printmaking technique called chine collé that layers thin sheets of paper on top of a heavier support paper. Su also incorporated seeds she collected from plants in local ditches into the heavier support paper before layering on the community created text and art. In total, she created 13 broadsides that incorporated 23 different art submissions. These broadsides debuted on December 7 at Great River Arts in Little Falls and were made into printed window clings for local organizations to use. The original broadsides were on display at Little Falls City Hall for the first part of 2024. Su retained full rights to her work and will be selling reproductions to interested community members, with proceeds benefiting the Friends of Crane Meadows National Wildlife Reserve.

A [video overview of this project](#), made by Leah XR Creative, is available on Environmental Initiative's YouTube channel.

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“The beautiful thing about papermaking in relationship to this project is that we’re using paper, or we’re using water, to create the supplies we need to do the artwork for the project. But in the act of creating the paper, we’re also physically engaging with the water. It’s not an abstract, it’s literally putting our hands in water.”

- Su Legatt

Assessing the pilot project

Participants in the workshops took informal bead surveys to help assess the impact of their participation. Overall, the majority of the respondents said they learned more about where their drinking water comes from and how water is managed locally. In all but one workshop, the majority of the participants also felt more comfortable reaching out to their local unit of government about water.

The Source Water Protection Collaborative also contracted with Dr. Amit Pradhananga, a social science researcher, to assess the impact of this project more formally. Dr. Pradhananga sent out surveys to workshop participants after each event; his full report is available in the appendix. While there was a small sample size, participants responded that they learned more about water, and the majority felt inspired to keep learning about water and take action to protect it.

As this pilot was being developed and implemented, other organizations and units of government reached out to Environmental Initiative to hear more about it. Members of the Collaborative and staff at Environmental Initiative also worked to publicize the project, presenting on it at the 2023 American Water Works Association Sustainable Water Management Conference and the Ground Water Protection Council's 2023 annual forum. Su and collaborative members held a panel on creative engagement in water at the 2023 Minnesota Water Resources Conference as well. In preparation for that panel, and in response to requests by other agencies interested in hosting similar programs, staff pulled together an [online Art and Water repository](#) to aggregate the resources used in development.

Lessons learned

Positive project outcomes

Community co-creation: Su's discussions with the city and other relevant community stakeholders allowed her to create a project that was relevant to the community, and that met their goals and the Source Water Protection Collaborative's goals. Giving the artist the ability to design their own process, and encouraging them to co-create it with the community, was very successful.

Flexible project designs: Knowing that she was working on a shortened timeline, Su explicitly designed this project to be flexible enough to accommodate quick changes, like lack of heating in a venue that required two workshops to be rescheduled. Su's flexibility also allowed her to reach community members who aren't normally involved in drinking water discussions.

Support teams: While developing this project, two ad-hoc teams formed to provide support. The hiring team stayed on as an artist support team, offering their feedback on Su's plan and staying as a resource Su could use in her work. A local support team, who are outlined in the appendix, also formed to provide Su assistance. Their help was invaluable to moving this project forward. Collaborative member Stephanie Hatzenbihler was on both the local team and the artist support team and is a Little Falls resident. Because of all these connections, Stephanie became one



of the primary support contacts for this work. Having someone connected to the Collaborative and to Little Falls was instrumental in this project's success.

Recommended improvements to project design

Contracts giving the artists full intellectual property rights: Environmental Initiative's contract with Minnesota Department of Health originally specified that all intellectual property developed through this work would belong to Minnesota Department of Health. For the RFP, the artist advisors recommended that instead, artists should retain full rights to their work, and the contract should be edited so that if Environmental Initiative or Minnesota Department of Health wanted to use any parts of the work, they would have to ask the artists' permission first. It took a great deal of coordination between Environmental Initiative and Minnesota Department of Health to amend the original contract so that artists could retain their intellectual property rights. It would be easier to have this process included in initial contracting to avoid contract amendments in the future.

Timing: Su and the staff team reflected that doing outreach during the fall and the holiday season made it much more difficult to reach people. The originally envisioned timeline, or even an expanded timeline where the project would be developed the beginning of the year and have outreach in the spring and summer, would likely bring in more community engagement.



Appendix

Artist bios



Ashley Hanson

Ashley Hanson is the founder of both PlaceBase Productions, a theater company that creates original, site-specific musicals celebrating small town life, and the Department of Public Transformation, an artist-led organization that collaborates with local leaders in rural areas to develop creative strategies for community connection and civic participation. She was named a 2018 Obama Foundation Fellow and a 2019 Bush Fellow for her work with rural communities. She believes deeply in the power of play and exclamation points!



Amanda Lovelee

Amanda Lovelee is an artist who works in civic systems as a translator between government and community with the goal of building places where everyone belongs. The creative tools Lovelee has created for community engagement and connection have been used and replicated across the United States. She is interested in how people connect and the spaces in which they do. Lovelee holds an MFA in Visual Studies from the Minneapolis College of Art and Design and BFA in Photography from University of Hartford. At the time of the presentation, she was a member of the Source Water Protection Collaborative and was working as the Parks Ambassador for the Metropolitan Council based in the Twin Cities, where her job was to connect people to the outdoors with a focus on equity.



Mallory Rukhsana Nezam

Mallory Rukhsana Nezam is a cross-sector culture-maker who loves cities and believes that we have the tools to make them more just and joyful. Through her cross-sector practice, Justice + Joy, she engages government, artists, advocacy groups, elected officials, community members, and urban planners to de-silo the way we run cities and build new models of creative, interdisciplinary collaboration. She has helped build inaugural arts & culture teams at the Metropolitan Area Planning Council of Boston, Transportation for America, and PolicyLink. She was a 2020 Monument Lab Transnational Fellow, a 2019-2020 inaugural Practices for Change Fellow at Arizona State University's Herberger Institute of Design and the Arts, and a 2018 National Arts Strategies Creative Community Fellow. At the time of the presentation, she was the Curator of Partnerships and Programs for FORWARD, a publication by Forecast Public Art. She holds a Master of Design from Harvard's Graduate School of Design and seeks to be in every room she's not supposed to be in.



Johanna K. Taylor

Johanna K. Taylor holds a PhD in Urban Policy from The New School and an MA in Arts Management from Carnegie Mellon University. At the time of the presentation, she was an Assistant Professor at the Herberger Institute for Design and the Arts at Arizona State University and director of the graduate program in Creative Enterprise and Cultural Leadership. Her work is grounded in a core value of art as catalyzing force advancing justice in daily life; her research pursues questions of cultural equity through the intersection of art, community, policy, and place.



Mary Welcome

Mary Welcome (Palouse, Washington/Idaho) is a multidisciplinary cultural worker. As an artist-organizer, her projects are rooted in community engagement and the development of intersectional programming to address equity, cultural advocacy, inclusivity, visibility, and imagination. She brings a nuanced perspective to the contemporary field, as an organizer working in service to small towns, as a cultural producer across American geographies, and as a facilitator of place-based arts programming. At the time of the presentation, she was the artist-in-residence for the Washington State Department of Transportation and a civic designer for the City of Palouse.

Local support team members

- Dwayne Heinen, Little Falls Water Superintendent
- Stephanie Hatzenbichler, Source Water Protection Collaborative member, Water Plan Coordinator at Stearns County Soil & Water Conservation District, and Little Falls resident.
- Erika Powers, Great River Arts Executive Director
- Susan Prosapio, Little Falls business owner
- Jon Radermacher, Little Falls City Administrator

Survey findings

The survey was conducted at eight community events in Little Falls, MN from October to November 2023. Of the 46 attendees, 24 agreed to participate in the survey. Of the 24 attendees contacted, 11 completed the survey. Most survey respondents (70%) were residents of Little Falls, MN and 40% were students. 50% of the respondents obtained drinking water from the city.

The majority of the respondents had high levels of civic engagement, with 80% reporting that they have been or were currently involved in community organizations or events and that they would likely attend a similar event in the future. 70% of respondents were also likely to encourage friends and family to attend similar events. Most participants expressed creative or environmental interest as well, with 70% currently or previously involved with the arts and creative experiences, and 60% of respondents currently or previously involved with environmental organizations or events.

70%

agreed that the event allowed them to **discuss their drinking water** in a comfortable setting

80%

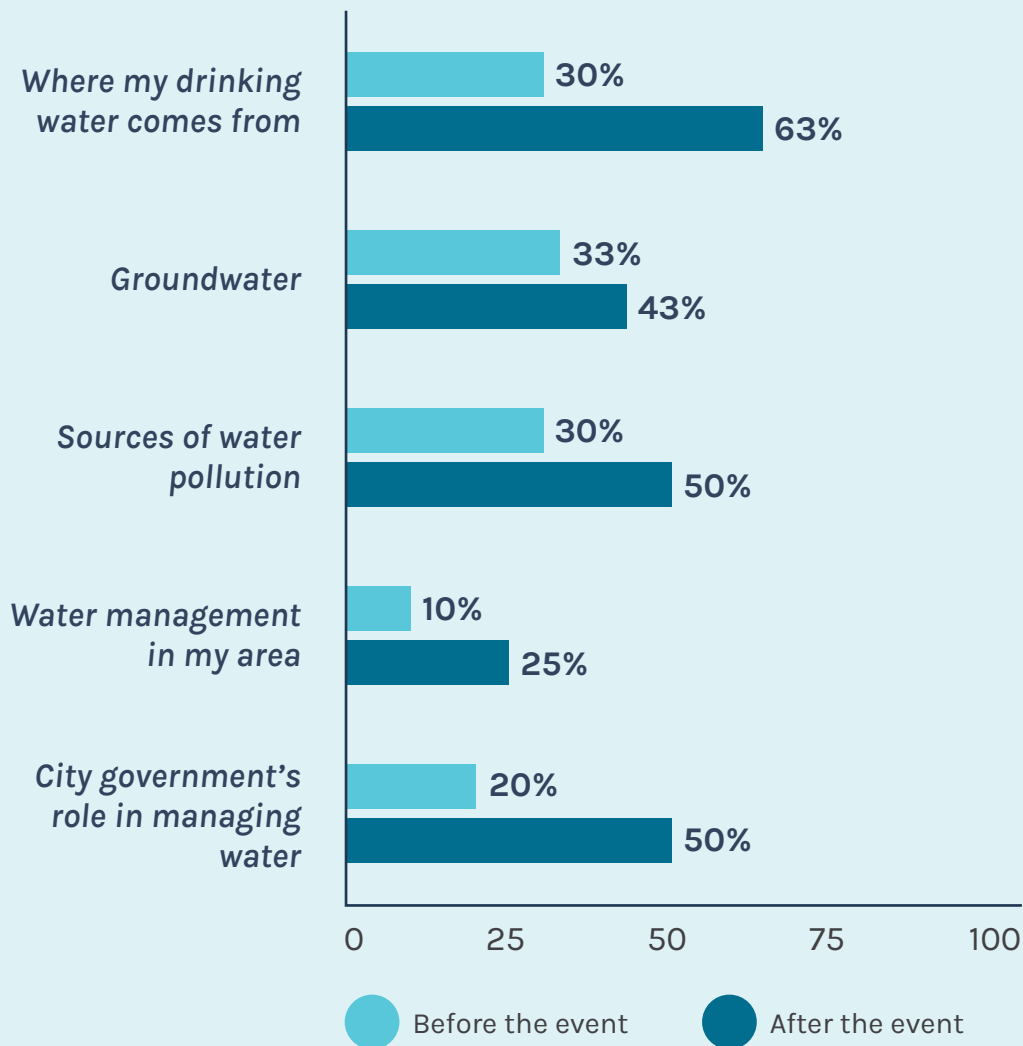
agreed that the event inspired them to **learn more about water**

78%

agreed that the event inspired them to **take actions to protect water**

Overall, the event increased participants' knowledge about water. While 30% reported that they knew "much" to "very much" about water before the event, almost two-thirds (63%) reported that they know "much" to "very much" about water after the event. Similarly, 30% of respondents reported that they knew "much" to "very much" about sources of water pollution before the event, and 50% of respondents reported that they know "much" to very "much" about pollution sources after the event.

Participant knowledge about water



One participant said “Water quality is so important. I would challenge a project coordinator to bring members of our agricultural community and small town/city dwellers together to experience an event such as this, to think about how we can all work together in our day-to-day lives to better our rural water quality.”

As for future events, participants recommended there should be improved promotion, increased diversity of stakeholders, and more learning opportunities provided around actions community members can take.