

5 Baltimore Watershed Groups to Merge

By Timothy B. Wheeler The Baltimore Sun, January 2, 2010

Five Baltimore watershed groups have agreed to merge this year, hoping to boost their efforts to clean up the harbor and the city's degraded streams by pooling their staffs, fundraising and volunteers.

The groups combining are the Baltimore Harbor, Gwynns Falls, Herring Run and Jones Falls watershed associations, as well as the Baltimore Harbor Waterkeeper.

"There will be a stronger water or watershed voice, a united watershed voice, in Baltimore," said Eliza Smith Steinmeier, the Baltimore Harbor Waterkeeper.

The decision, ratified by the groups' boards of directors over the past two months, caps nearly two years of study and negotiations. The groups' leaders say the merger was driven by a quest to stretch their limited budgets. But it also stemmed from a desire to increase their political clout in seeking government action to remedy the sewage spills, trash and polluted storm water that render the city's streams and the harbor generally unfit for swimming or other human contact.

"We've lived hand to mouth," said Mary Sloan Roby, executive director of the Herring Run association, which focuses on a 31-square-mile stream network flowing through the northeastern corner of the city and emptying into Back River.

Her group, which got its start in 1978, relies heavily on foundation and charitable giving to sustain its annual budget of "just under \$500,000," Roby said. The association has about 300 dues-paying members but draws more than 2,000 volunteers to its stream cleanups, tree plantings and other activities. It also has a year-old "green" headquarters and education center in the Belair-Edison neighborhood, with a mortgage to pay.

While the Herring Run group's finances have been "fairly stable" the past few years, Roby said it's clear all five groups - with combined budgets of almost \$1 million - could save money by merging. Joining forces also would leverage their ability to stage big events like the Run for the River, she said. The festival was an annual occurrence until 2007, when costs and sponsorship issues prompted the Jones Falls group to skip a year.

Many of the activities the groups undertake, such as tree plantings and stream cleanups, are similar, as are the problems they confront in their watersheds.

"There are issues that cut across geography," Roby said, "like sewer problems, sediment control and storm water."

The new entity will address those issues "from a citywide perspective," Steinmeier said, adding that the individual missions of each group will get attention. Her group remains part of the Waterkeeper Alliance, an international water-quality watchdog coalition that has filed lawsuits over pollution violations.

One of the trickier aspects of the merger, said Phil Lee, president of the Baltimore Harbor Watershed group, has been concern over how to retain and attract the volunteers who have been the backbone of some of the groups. Volunteers tend to rally mainly for cleanups and other projects in their neighborhoods, so the new group will have committees assigned to work on each of the old groups' waterways.

"The unique focus on individual watersheds isn't going anywhere," Roby said.

A "transition" board made up of representatives from each group, plus new members, is expected to meet in January. Legal paperwork will be drafted to formalize the merger over the next several months.

For now, group leaders are calling the merged entity the Baltimore Water Alliance, Roby said, but the name, like other details, remains to be worked out.

Also unsettled is the new group's base of operations. Roby said the Herring Run green building might not have enough space for the dozen staff members of all five groups, so the space for workshops and other meetings might have to go, or satellite offices might have to be found.

Still, Roby said she's excited about the merger. "We're hoping as a merged organization we can have more impact," she said.

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