



Recap of Water Quality Forum Held on April 26



Mayor Gary Becker of Racine

On April 26, over 60 community members gathered at the Algoma Farm Market Kitchen for *Sustaining Our Waters: Our Health, Our Livelihood*, an educational forum on

water quality in Kewaunee County. A full write-up of the report can be found at <http://www.uwex.edu/ces/cty/kewaunee/> and video tapes and DVD's of the full forum can be viewed at the UW Extension office. Please call 388-7136 to make an appointment. Below is a written summary of City of Racine Mayor Gary Becker's presentation.

Mayor Becker opened his presentation with a brief introduction to the City of Racine, and its image as an industrial town dominated by manufacturing. As the manufacturing sector started to decline, as it has across the state, Racine was left with a number of empty, blighted facilities with brown fields and contaminated water resources. The lakefront and rivers were polluted and undesirable for recreation, residential and other economic development.

The mayor, and other leaders in Racine, decided that water was one of the greatest assets the City of Racine had, and that it needed a comprehensive approach to strengthening and building on that asset. The mayor stressed that there was no one "silver bullet" but that many small steps combined have helped that city turn their water resources from contaminated bodies to true natural resources that attract locals and visitors alike.

The mayor's presentation aimed to answer the following question: **"What can local municipalities and other community groups do to positively impact our water resources?"** Below are some of the key steps the City of Racine accomplished to improve their water quality:

Wastewater treatment plant – The City of Racine built a state-of-the art wastewater treatment plant to ensure optimum levels of treatment before water is discharged back into local waterways. This is a very expensive option, but Mayor Becker feels that this should be a "given" for all municipalities and should be financed and planned for in a long-range plan.

Civic engagement – The mayor said when he ran for office five years ago no one asked his position on environmental issues. He stressed that it is up

to residents to talk with elected officials about concerns over water quality in their town. Because elected officials are so busy, oftentimes the issues they deal with are those that are pushed hardest by voters. Residents need to get involved with local politics to ensure their concerns get on the agenda.

Phosphorus ban – the City of Racine successfully banned the sale of lawn fertilizers with phosphorus. Only "no phosphorus" fertilizers can be sold within city limits. Phosphorus overloads in local waterways directly contribute to the growth of Cladophora, the smelly green algae that grows and rots in streams and along Lake Michigan beaches. The mayor commented that the ban was mainly educational in nature as they do not practically enforce the ban. . . residents can still purchase these fertilizers outside of the city limits. He feels that a state-wide ban would be most effective, however, if more municipalities adopt a ban ordinance progress could be made.

Household hazardous waste – the City of Racine established a permanent site with regular collection hours for household hazardous waste and pharmaceuticals. Often, people don't know what to do with these wastes and flush them down toilets or pour toxic substances down storm drains. Providing a regular option for proper disposal has helped keep these contaminants out of the water stream. The HHW collection site in Racine was funded with a quarterly \$1.50 fee added to the wastewater bill of City residents. He said that no one complained about the additional fee.

Sewer infrastructure – the City of Racine has an aging sewer infrastructure that posed a threat to water quality. To pay for improvements, the City created a sewer fee of \$50 per household to make necessary repairs.

Urban forest – In the last five years the City of Racine has increased their annual budget to replace parkway trees from \$8,000 to \$140,000. They had spent so little on tree replacement that they were actually losing trees every year. A well developed tree canopy helps with storm water runoff, improves neighborhood pride and increases property values. The benefits of a good forestry program are many, but contribute significantly to overall water quality.

Brownfield cleanup – Mayor Becker feels that for Racine, the manufacturing jobs that have gone are gone, and they will not be coming back. The economy has sufficiently rearranged itself such that the likelihood of these sites being redeveloped into traditional manufacturing is next to none. He acknowledged that local municipalities are scared to death to even get started on these sites, but the reality is that these sites are often next to water bodies, are very contaminated and

contaminants are seeping into the waterways.

Mayor Becker implored municipalities to identify and remediate brownfield sites as soon as possible. The benefits are far and wide. The removal of blighted buildings dramatically improves and creates more livable neighborhoods and can raise property values. In addition, new businesses can be attracted to build on the sites that wouldn't even consider the property prior to remediation.

Funding to remediate brownfields is always an issue, but grants are available to do so. Municipalities can also be creative in how they approach funding. Companies that own these facilities have little financial incentive to clean up the property because they can abandon the site and not book the liability. Mayor Becker said that in Wisconsin, however, municipalities can drill wells around the perimeter of a suspected brownfield to determine if contamination is occurring. Once contamination occurs in the public right-of-way the municipality can then gain access to the site to do additional testing. The municipality can then order the site to be cleaned up, and choose the level of clean up too. Mayor Becker said that the City of Racine has found owners to be more open to dialogue after these steps have been taken.

Volunteers – many, many water quality improvements have been accomplished with the help of volunteers on a variety of projects. Volunteers have been critical to the redevelopment of the beach and other facilities improvements.

Dune establishment – one aspect to the redevelopment of North Beach in Racine was to create a more natural environment. Volunteers assisted with planting dune grasses that were donated by a local company. The project didn't cost the municipality a cent.

Kid's Cove Playground - this volunteer-built playground is a major attraction at the beach. It was custom designed for the beach with a pirate theme. Kids and families flock to the area because it is so much fun! Educational signs and interactive displays help bring kids closer to nature. The playground has been an anchor of the beach redevelopment project.

Gull abatement – Gulls and other nuisance birds contribute to high bacteria counts on the beach. Clear signage educating people to not feed the birds, and regular emptying of waste receptacles has helped keep the gulls at bay. Another important factor in keeping gulls away, however, is just having more people on the beach! The overall beach redevelopment has helped with that.

Urban Environmental Center – in a small public building along the banks of their river, they established an environmental education center that aims to bring kids closer to nature and learn about their water resources and other environmental themes. This center is located in the center of a high-poverty area where many kids never get to experience or understand their natural environment. The Mayor feels strongly that we must educate the next



KCEDC* Power Breakfast

July 8, 2008
North Brook Country Club
7:30 am
Cost \$10

The Prophit Marketing System: Maximizing Your Marketing Efforts featuring Joe Kiedinger of Prophit Marketing

Call 920-487-5233 to register or for more information.

*Kewaunee County Economic Development Corporation

generation in order to improve and preserve our water assets.

Beach raking/cleaning – North Beach suffered from high bacteria counts and subsequent beach closings. A research scientist observed that the beach raking machine left the surface of the sand very smooth, and wondered if that process helped incubate bacteria. She conducted tests, and found this to be true. As a result, they now rake the beach with a very "rough" finish so that air and light can reach more surface area, preventing the bacteria from incubating. As a result, they have dramatically reduced their beach closings, and last year they didn't have to close their beach one time.

Wetlands creation – to deal with storm water runoff the City built a wetland on the north end of North Beach. The purpose of the wetland is to remove the suspended solids and clarify the water of excess nutrients before it is dumped into the lake. The wetlands naturally filter the water and this has greatly contributed to improved water quality in the area. Volunteers assisted with the development of the wetlands and in planting water plants to create a beautiful, natural looking environment.

As a result of their excellent management efforts, the City of Racine has received multiple awards and recognitions, including the Governor's Award for Excellence in Environmental Performance, and the coveted *Blue Wave* designation, the first and currently only beach in Wisconsin to have received this esteemed designation.

The impact on Racine as a community has been tremendous: socially, environmentally, and economically. The waterways and beaches are truly an attraction, to tourists and locals alike. As a result, many events take place that contribute significantly to the local economy, like the Ironman qualifying Racine Triathlon and the Professional Beach Volleyball Tour, just to name a couple. New businesses have located at former brownfield sites, and residential and other commercial development is now oriented toward the water instead of away from it.

Mayor Becker closed his session with a quote from Senator Gaylord Nelson:

"The ultimate test of a man's conscience may be his willingness to sacrifice something today for future generations whose words of thanks will not be heard."

"What can local municipalities and other community groups do to positively impact our water resources?"
Mayor Gary Beck

Kewaunee County Medication Collection SAVE THE DATE!!



Residents of Kewaunee County can take part in a FREE medication collection. On Sept 27, 2008 between 9 and 12 noon you can bring your unused, old medication to the Hillside Highway Shop, located on Hwy 54, for proper disposal. More information is forthcoming so keep your eyes on the UW Extension Foghorn newsletter!