

From the Mid City Messenger

<http://midcitymessenger.com/2014/09/29/environmentalists-urban-planners-launch-greater-new-orleans-water-collaborative/#more-7295>

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*Members of the Greater New Orleans Water Collaborative celebrate their launch on the banks of Bayou St. John in Mid-City (Della Hasselle, Mid-City Messenger).*

Last August, architect David Waggoner stood in front of a standing-room crowd at Xavier University, and presented a plan aimed to change the way New Orleanians look at water.

The Water Management Strategy called for a “new era” of stormwater management, utilizing rainfall to help solve problems related to water storage and even land subsidence, a sinking problem that cracks city streets and home’s foundations. If steps weren’t taken to ameliorate the city’s relationship with water, Waggoner said, the mistake would ultimately cost New Orleans \$20 billion in increased flood exposure over the next several decades.

The strategy morphed into The Greater New Orleans Water Plan, a proposal put together by local and Dutch consultants, and has garnered hundreds of supporters since it became public last year. Now, nearly one hundred organizations, businesses and individuals have taken one more step towards making the \$6.2 billion plan a reality with the official formation of the Greater New Orleans Water Collaborative. Members announced the organization’s launch Friday afternoon, on the banks of Bayou St. John in Mid-City.

“New Orleans has been a leader in the past century in water management and flood protection, developing technologies that are used around the world,” said Aron Chang, a spokesman for the collaborative and member of its steering committee. “At the same time we have to do a lot more to address the flooding issues, the subsidence, the use of the water resources that we have here.”

Highlights from the New Orleans Water Plan include diverting some rainfall out of the city through the Mississippi River — rather than pushing it all to Lake Pontchartrain — and expanding major drainage ditches like the Monticello Canal to have water-storage features. Those canals would not only prevent land from sinking, by allowing water under the soil to rise, Waggoner said, but the “spillway parks” would improve residents’ quality of life.

But until now, efforts to better control the city’s water were loosely organized, and often appeared in duplicate plans created by multiple organizations, according to Keith Twitchell, member of both the collaborative and a Committee for a Better New Orleans.

“The idea of a collaborative grew out of the recognition by many working on issues related to stormwater management that efforts were somewhat disjointed and piecemeal,” Twitchell said. “A more collaborative approach would help us all do our jobs more effectively by connecting us with expertise among our ranks, and helping us leverage our limited resources by minimizing duplication of efforts.”

Ultimately, Twitchell says the collaborative can facilitate the flow of information on emerging water management opportunities, acting as a sort of clearing house for that information.

In addition to the Committee for a Better New Orleans, the interim steering committee — which will be finalized at a later point — includes representatives from the Gulf Restoration Network, Louisiana Water Works, Global Green, Thomas Strategies and the architecture firm Waggoner and Ball.

“We need to learn from each other’s expertise,” Chang added, “to turn all that energy into action.”

Ultimately, Chang says, those efforts can better kickstart efforts in New Orleans, Jefferson and St. Bernard parishes to use resources and enhance residents’ quality of life by reducing flooding caused by rainfall, lowering rates of subsidence and improving cities’ water quality.

Long-term efforts are geared towards increasing sustainability in the area, addressing coastal protection and restoration efforts being made to stop land loss associated with severe weather and sea level rise.

The collaborative has established working groups to identify priorities in certain focus areas, and has brought together experts to examine how water issues are represented in the proposed Comprehensive Zoning Ordinance for the City of New Orleans. Members are also working with new leadership at the Sewerage and Water Board and the New Orleans Redevelopment Authority.

As of right now, however, the Water Collaborative is starting small. Events planned for coming months aim to raise awareness by educating city residents about small projects everyday people can implement in order to better conserve water.

Members have organized an activity called Walk-and-Learn, which showcases “backyard solutions” to excessive flooding and stormwater runoff. The collaborative also plans to organize a “model-building night” where elementary school educators and designers can come together to create water conservation lesson plans.

According to Robin Barnes, chief operating officer of Greater New Orleans, Inc., some parts of the Urban Water Plan have already been implemented. More than 100 projects are underway, ranging from individual projects like rain gardens, created with the help of a management company called Water Works, to large-scale infrastructure plans created by organizations like the Sewerage and Water Board.

“The plan has not only gained momentum and support, but we are beginning to see the seeds of our collective work taking place,” Barnes said. “Real and documented implementation is underway.”

Chang says this kind of large-scale collaboration is key to making water sustainability work in New Orleans.

“There aren’t many issues where we can bring together a lawyer, a homeowner, a teacher, a kid to come together to talk about this kind of issue,” Chang said. “It’s as essential to this city as the air that we breathe. It affects every part of our lives.”

