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8390 Main St. 2nd Floor • Ellicott City, MD 21043 • 410-461-8323 (phone)
410-461-8324 (fax) • www.awsp.org • Bulletin@awsp.org

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KEY CONTACTS:

Co-Editors-in-Chief

Neely Law (nll@cwsp.org)
Karen Capiella (kc@cwsp.org)

Associate Editor

Lisa Fraley-McNeal (bulletin@awsp.org)

Sponsorship Coordinator

Erin Johnson (etj@cwsp.org)

AWSPs Membership

(membership@awsp.org)

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US Environmental Protection Agency Office of Wetlands, Oceans, and Watersheds

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Senior Research Scientist
Virginia Tech, Department of Biological Systems Engineering

CENTER FOR WATERSHED PROTECTION STAFF CONTRIBUTORS

Hye Yeong Kwon, *Executive Director*

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Ohio Balanced Growth Program

Through the Ohio Balanced Growth Program, the State of Ohio and participating local governments are working together to achieve healthy watersheds, economies, and communities. The program, which uses watersheds as the key organizing feature for land use planning, follows a voluntary, incentive-based strategy to protect and restore Lake Erie, the Ohio River, and Ohio's watersheds as a way to ensure long-term economic competitiveness, ecological health, and quality of life (Figure 1).

The Ohio Lake Erie Commission led the initial development of the Balanced Growth Program, which was piloted in the Lake Erie watershed in 2004–2008. In 2009, the Ohio Water Resources Council expanded the program statewide. The goal of the program is to link land use planning to the health of watersheds and major water bodies. As of May 2012, a total of 16 watersheds in both the Lake Erie and Ohio River drainage areas, covering 5,760 km², were participating in the program, with each of 131 local communities supporting a watershed balanced growth plan for its watershed (see Table 1). The state endorsed six new plans in 2012 alone.

The Balanced Growth Program works through the establishment of local watershed planning partnerships (WPPs) and endorsement from the State. Partners in each WPP include local government representatives who receive input from regional planning organizations, nongovernmental organizations, county metroparks, federal parks staff, business organizations (such as homebuilders associations), local farm bureaus, interested local citizens, district state agency staff, and others. The WPP works toward the development and implementation of a watershed balanced growth plan, which among other elements must contain maps of priority development areas (PDAs), priority conservation areas (PCAs), and priority agricultural areas (PAAs) based on specific measurable criteria; these maps will support watershed-based land

use planning and project implementation. A watershed balanced growth plan is a framework for coordinated, local decision making about how growth and conservation should be promoted by local and state policies and investments in the context of watersheds. The local role is to work toward the development, adoption, and implementation of the plan; the State's role is to support the local government effort and be responsive to the resulting State-endorsed plan. Once the State has endorsed a plan, the local community is eligible for state incentives to assist with plan implementation, including both financial and technical support.

For example, 26 state programs include special consideration for Balanced Growth participating communities in the form of grants, loans, tax credits, technical assistance, and regulatory programs. (A Balanced Growth participating community is one that has passed a resolution of support for a watershed balanced growth plan that has been endorsed by the State.)

Activities within the program fall into two broad categories: local activities geared toward planning and implementation, and state activities in support of the program. A summary of the status of Balanced Growth activities follows.

Local Implementation Activities in Endorsed Watersheds.

Of the 16 watershed balanced growth plans prepared by WPPs, 11 are in the implementation phase of the process following endorsement by the State. Ongoing implementation includes (1) activities funded by grants from the Lake Erie Protection Fund in the Swan Creek watershed (title: Swan Creek Urban BMP Inventory & Assessment; awardee: Toledo Metropolitan Area Council of Governments), (2) efforts in the Big Creek watershed (title: Big Creek Watershed Stormwater Retrofit Ranking; awardee: Friends of Big Creek), and (3) work in the Chagrin River watershed (title: Great Lakes Mall Green Infrastructure Program; awardee: City of Mentor). Friends of Big Creek has also used other funding to facilitate

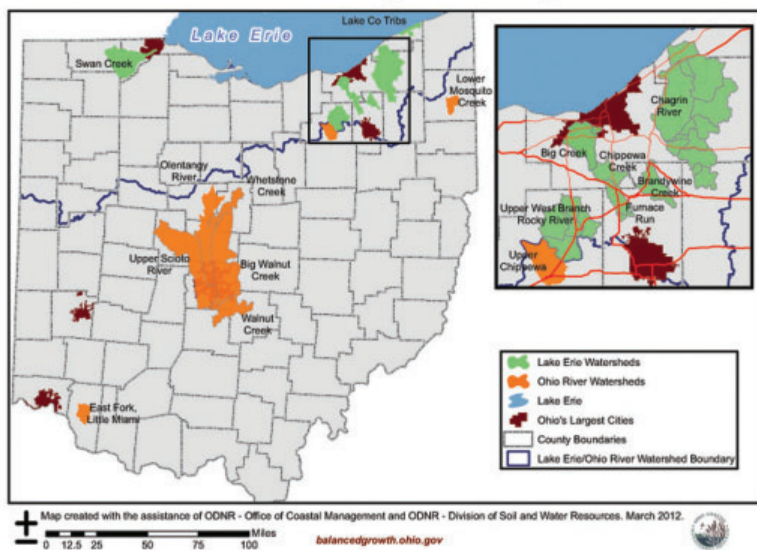


Figure 1. Balanced growth planning partnership watersheds. ODNR, Ohio Department of Natural Resources; 1 mile ≈ 1.6 km.

Table 1. Balanced Growth Program participating watersheds.

Drainage	Watershed	Area (km ²)	Final Support Communities ^a	Total Population
Lake Erie	Chippewa Creek	44	3	18,993
	Swan Creek	528	20	112,538
	UWB Rocky River	181	8	98,169
	Chagrin River	691	28	269,879
	ELCCT	78	7	20,641
	Furnace Run	52	6	8,483
	Big Creek	101	5	168,928
	Brandywine Creek	67		21,688
	Subtotal	1,742	77	719,319
Ohio River	Olentangy River	963	27	277,439
	Upper Chippewa Creek	114	9	12,046
	Lower Mosquito Creek	106	9	46,699
	Middle East Fork	145	9	19,181
	Upper Scioto River	1,165		414,867
	Walnut Creek	388		45,019
	Big Walnut Creek	974		477,203
	Whetstone Creek	163		12,497
	Subtotal	4,018	54	1,304,951
Total	5,760	131	2,024,270	

Notes: ELCCT, Eastern Lake County Coastal Tributaries; UWB, Upper West Branch.

^a Empty cells indicate that watershed balanced growth plans are under development, with final support communities to be determined at a later date.

the purchase of property along the creek corridor identified in their plan as PCA, and the Clean Ohio Revitalization Fund has provided funds to clean up a PDA in Toledo's Swan Creek watershed.

Local Watershed Planning Projects in Progress. Five WPPs are currently in the planning process: Brandywine Creek in the Lake Erie watershed, and Upper Scioto River, Big Walnut Creek, Walnut Creek, and Whetstone Brook in the Ohio River watershed. A sixth new WPP forming in the Upper Cuyahoga River (Lake Erie) watershed—which is dominated by the City of Akron in population and area—will be led by staff from the Northeast Ohio Four County Regional Planning and Development Organization. Once this WPP has formed, Balanced Growth Program staff will meet with the group to help kick off their process. The

Cuyahoga River Community Planning Organization will also assist the group. The addition of this partnership will bring the total number of WPPs in the Lake Erie watershed to 9 and the total across the state to 17.

The Walnut Creek watershed's balanced growth plan is in the late stages of development; a draft has been provided for state staff review. This WPP is led by the Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission. The Big Walnut Creek plan will be next, and then the Upper Scioto River plan. Currently, a series of public meetings are being held to support plan development. The Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission, which is administering the WPPs, will be seeking formal resolutions of support for these plans from the local communities through 2012.

State Assistance Work Group/State Activities. The updated *Ohio Balanced Growth Strategy*, adopted by the Ohio Lake Erie Commission on December 21, 2011, was adopted by the Ohio Water Resources Council at its meeting on February 21, 2012. This version of the strategy expands the program statewide, incorporating the previous planning framework and strategy into one document, and updates the state action items for implementation of the program. One of the key action items in the strategy is for the participating state agencies to continue to augment state incentives. The final document is available on the Balanced Growth Program's website.

Balanced Growth Best Local Land Use Practices. In place since 2006, the Ohio Balanced Growth Program's Best Local Land Use Practices Program provides education, technical assistance, and resources to local communities, encouraging them to adopt recommended zoning and land use practices. Training sessions on these practices have reached more than 1,600 individuals since program inception.

The recently updated *Best Practices* document (2012) provides guidance on the best local land use practices for (1) minimizing the impacts of development on water quality wherever the expansion of developed areas occurs and (2) reducing impacts to water quality in redevelopment situations. The document includes a set of example zoning ordinances and resolutions recommended for voluntary adoption by local communities, a set of guidance documents for the best practices, and training opportunities for local elected officials and staff. Guidance documents address comprehensive planning; conservation development; compact development; stream, wetland, and floodplain protection, stormwater management and erosion and sediment control; source water protection; agricultural lands protection, tree and woodland protection, scenic protection; historic preservation; steep slopes protection; transfer of development rights; brownfields redevelopment; and access management. Supplementary marketing materials are also under development.

In conjunction with Ohio State Extension, the Best Local Land Use Practices Program will hold a statewide conference in January or February 2013 in Columbus. The conference will focus on changing trends in growth and development,

tools and practices that are available to local governments and regional planning groups to address those trends, and resources available to help with implementation. The conference program target officials from local government agencies (township, municipality, and county), professional planners (e.g., local government planners and consultants), and the development community. This conference will be followed by a series of technical workshops through April 2013 to provide more detailed information for local officials and professionals who are in a position to implement the recommended practices.

Participants have been able to see and appreciate direct local benefits, such as improvements in stormwater/flood management, protection of areas suitable for conservation,...

Interest in the Ohio Balanced Growth Program is growing. The WPPs report that this program has brought to the table conservation and development groups that do not usually communicate with each other on planning issues. In addition, local officials have been able to coordinate more closely with the state to address local land use. The program has been very successful in encouraging the majority of the local governments in the Balanced Growth watersheds to participate in watershed planning and to consider

the PCAs, PDAs, and PAAs in their own local land use plans. Participants have been able to see and appreciate direct local benefits, such as improvements in stormwater/flood management, protection of areas suitable for conservation, encouragement of low-impact development, enhancement of redevelopment opportunities, and encouragement of more efficient infrastructure development.

List of Sources

Ohio Balanced Growth Program. No date. Home page. <http://balancedgrowth.ohio.gov/>.

Ohio Balanced Growth Program. No date. Fact sheets. <http://www.balancedgrowth.ohio.gov/Home/FactSheets.aspx>.

For More Information

For more information, contact Sandra Kosek-Sills, Ohio Lake Erie Commission (Sandra.Kosek-Sills@lakeerie.ohio.gov).

Contributor

This vignette was prepared by Sandra Kosek-Sills, PhD.