

9.2 - Optimize for Equity - Mulberry Point Water Project

Residents in three coastal neighborhoods have experienced clean water access problems for many years. In the last 10 years, clean water access has grown significantly more challenging. Households struggled with excessive salt content, or with dangerous bacteria levels, rendering their water unusable. Others were burdened with water shortages or dry wells.

Town leaders responded to residents' requests for assistance, collaborating to find innovative solutions. Through grappling with the challenges of water accessibility, the Town realized this is a growing problem for other areas in the community and views this solution as a model that can be replicated in Guilford or other municipalities.

Residents with water issues lead the process with support from the Town. Through their neighborhood associations, they also engaged unaffected property owners. The Town responded to affected property owners with ongoing communications through many avenues including meetings, phone calls and emails. At the request of homeowners, the Town developed a financial plan that would minimize costs to homeowners with a range of abilities to pay, yet not rely on taxpayer subsidies. This collaboration was instrumental in bringing all stakeholders together to achieve a successful outcome. The process depended on bringing everyone to the table, where their needs and concerns became part of the decision making process.

1. Who lives and works in your community?

Located on the Long Island Sound, Guilford is a Shoreline community with a population of approximately 22,000. (See CERC Town Profile link for reference.) The Mulberry Point Water Project directly affected 145 households situated on the coastline. Solutions to bringing safe, clean water to these households engaged the Guilford community as a whole. Equity and inclusion was a primary driving force for Town officials as they listened to, responded to and used resident input to develop solutions. The following groups and stakeholders were active in successfully bringing the project to construction:

- Residents of Mulberry Point, Tuttle's Point, Long Cove and Indian Cove
 - Mulberry Point Neighborhood Association
 - Tuttle's Point Neighborhood Association
 - Long Cove Neighborhood Association
 - The Three Association Water Committee
 - All residents of Guilford
 - CT Water Company
 - State Representative Sean Scanlon
 - DPUC

2. How did you connect with each other?

Mulberry Point Water Project evolved over many years. Residents first organized to find a solution within their community around 2011. Ultimately, they contacted the Town for assistance. Construction on the project began in May 2019.

Through community co-creation and engagement process, the following were revealed as shared goals:

- Engagement of unaffected property owners in the neighborhoods was important to gain their support.
 - Clear and frequent information sharing to unaffected property owners was important to the process of obtaining voluntary approval for water main easements.
 - Diffusing controversy and building community-wide support would be key to success
 - A critical goal was to avoid a potentially divisive conflict over eminent domain by deepening research into alternate paths for the water main.
 - Developing a financial plan that considered needs of all stakeholders.

Examples of outreach and participation include:

- The Health Director held 24 meetings with neighborhood associations, at various times of day for the convenience of residents.
 - Town Selectmen and Board of Finance members met countless times with neighborhood residents.
 - A town-wide information meeting and public hearing were held to solicit input and respond to questions about the project and financing.
 - A town-wide referendum has held to approve the initial bonding.
 - A Town Meeting was held to approve the additional bonding required when project costs increased.
 - In conjunction with the the CT Water Company, the Town Health Director, who championed the project, distributed a monthly public newsletter explaining the project and step-by-step progress. These newsletters were a major factor in calming fears about the project.
 - Residents were able to stay informed via the Town website, local print media including the Guilford Courier, online media including zip06, and a community Facebook page.
 - Notices of Town meetings and referendums were made widely available through the resources listed above.
 - Rides to meetings were offered to elderly neighbors.

3. What emerged from your dialogue?

Equity is a priority element of Guilford's Mulberry Point Water Project because safe, clean water is necessary to daily living. Water is a basic right of all our residents. It is critical that all stakeholders have opportunities for their input to become part of the conversation and solution.

Residents and Town officials agreed that :

- All residents of Guilford would be affected to some degree by the issue of access to usable water.
 - All residents of Guilford would be affected by the process of finding a solution to water issues experienced by residents in the Mulberry Point Water Project
 - The importance of establishing relationships between the Town, residents, and outside organizations would be valuable experience for future water issues.
 - The importance of finding affordable solutions for residents of disparate financial means is critical to the values of our Town.

4.(a) What was the result of Your collaboration?

As a result of resident activism, a collaborative process developed between the Town and community at large, and a solution to providing residents with high quality water was developed and is now being implemented. *The process provided a learning opportunity for developing extended input from the community. Because input from the community was part of the process, implementation was cooperative rather than divisive. For example, there were three main reasons some individuals were opposed to the plan:*

- those who thought they would ultimately foot the bill
 - those who thought it would negatively affect their property
 - those who did not want government interference.

By collaborating with multiple groups, facts were widely shared while misinformation was easier to corrected. *As a result of the input from these opposing groups, the Town increased communications and information sharing.*

The community will be able to build on this success because cooperative relationships were formed. In the likely event that additional home owners in our Shoreline neighborhoods will be experiencing issues with residential water due to a changing climate and rising sea levels, our municipality now has a model to follow that is equitable.

4.(b) How did the Town use feedback from residents and how did it shape the project?

The Mulberry Point Water Project was initiated by residents from the beginning through

today as construction begins. Residents originally attempted to solve their water issues by commissioning a study which resulted in the residents approaching the Town for assistance. Residents provided information, community feedback and research which shaped the project.

The most recent example of residents shaping the project occurred on December 13, 2018. When the project went to bid a second time, estimated costs increased significantly (almost double.) A number of property owners could not afford to pay the increased costs. To assist their neighbors, the Three Association Water Committee (a coalition of area residents) requested a Town meeting. The Town agreed. A resolution was proposed to appropriate additional costs to the project to offset the recent increased construction bid proposals. The meeting was well attended.

Many residents influenced the outcome of the proposal by speaking to the merits of the project, providing feedback on the importance of the project and emphasizing the need to move forward - in spite of additional projected costs. Town officials, influenced by input from the residents, moved the funding resolution to vote. At the conclusion of the meeting a vote on the resolution was taken and the resolution was passed.

At the urging of residents directly affected by the water project and other residents not directly affected, the Town focused on equitable means for financing Mulberry Point Water Project. To address feedback from opposing residents who feared increased taxes, the Town went to great lengths to assure the community that taxpayer money would not be relied on for completing the project.

Resident input directly shaped development of financing solutions culminating in an equitable plan:

- The Town developed a financial plan that would not rely on direct taxpayer subsidy
 - The plan immunized costs to homeowners with a range of abilities to pay.
 - The plan did not burden the Town with costs. but at the same time, would make the costs accessible to homeowners with a range of ability to pay.
 - Together, Town residents, Town officials, and our elected State officials worked to secure grants, secure funding programs, contributions and homeowner assessments to cover all costs.

5. How will you refine, revisit and improve?

Guilford will build on the success of the Mulberry Point Water Project not only on future water issues, but will improve our focus on Equity in other areas in several ways:

- Start sending updates to the community earlier in the process.
 - Where appropriate, include the Town logo as well as logos from

collaborating agencies/organizations. Use of logos was found to strengthen the perceived veracity of the information.

- Establish better ride sharing to events/meetings
- Post informational flyers in public spaces such as the library or community center in addition to online notifications already in place.