

KEEPING POLLUTED WATERS

OUT OF PUGET SOUND

Voter Attitudes Toward

Run-off Management

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INTRODUCTION

“The problem with growing out is that more land gets paved, so the ground doesn’t absorb the water and it gets washed off. It reaches bodies of water, rather than getting filtered through the earth.” Charlie (I), Seattle

“Boulevard used to be—you couldn’t go down there. It was landfill, it was tar. I remember taking my kids down in the 80s and take shovels and we’d dig for—well, it was landfill so we’d dig up old China and glass. Rubbish from the turn of the century. It was interesting, but it was lots of blackberries. You couldn’t access it. Now it’s a public park. You can walk all the way from Fair Haven to downtown Bellingham.” Lisa (D)

“It’s wonderful. We use it for crabbing.” Tanya (I), Bellingham

“One thing I notice about Tacoma in particular is just the gigantic amount of - like -industry on the water, I’ve never been a fan of that. What it does to the water probably isn’t that fantastic either. I’ve known people that have gone in little canoes and sampled the water, and pH-ed it and all that stuff and it’s just absurd.” Ryan (I), Tacoma

Eight focus groups were conducted with voters who regularly follow the news, in urban and suburban Seattle, Tacoma and Puyallup County, and Bellingham and surrounding area. Detail on the 72 respondents is attached to this report. Each group included a mix of political perspectives and ages.

The research built on and extended qualitative research done by ActionMedia in the Chesapeake Bay watershed in 2010. That research focused primarily on voter perspectives about the relationships between upstream activity and downstream pollution, with particular attention to agricultural impacts. The Puget Sound research focused on run-off management, and shared understanding and attitudes toward solutions.

Among the major findings from Chesapeake Bay reaffirmed by respondents from Puget Sound is that voters do not think in terms of a “watershed” and do not understand the word. 58 of 72 respondents in a pre-discussion survey reported that they do not live in a watershed. While they know water runs from its sources to the sea, their lack of understanding is not limited to the word itself: they do not think about water quality in terms of land use.

However, many of these respondents are very much aware that there is a causal relationship between *paved surfaces* and water pollution. They know from experience that roads are slick with oil during and after rain storms, and realize that rain washes this pollution into the rivers and ultimately the Sound. In nearly every group, at least one respondent describes this in terms of “impermeable surfaces”, and in all groups respondents are comfortable explaining that such surfaces prevent natural filtration.

In addition, respondents strongly express their desire to see the region’s water resources protected and maintained, and point with pride to achievements in that regard within their own memory. They also show pride in what they perceive as a local culture of environmental stewardship, described or alluded to in various ways, including being “green”.

But there are significant gaps in their understanding of the issue. These, and the tendency to reason about public decisions as an extension of individual household decisions, can lead voters to reject a range of policy prescriptions for improving run-off management. Advocates must inoculate against distrust of government, and against a belief that there is no real solution to non-point source pollution problems.

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This research indicates that advocacy for better water run-off management will be stronger if it focuses on *keeping pollution out of the water*, rather than cleaning up and restoring water bodies or “clean water” more generally; and if advocates are able to quantify the benefits of any proposed solutions. Solutions should emphasize new technology and techniques, thoughtful investment in infrastructure, and the different roles played by individual consumers, businesses, developers, and local and state governments.

UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEM

(In Kirkland)

“I think the waters are more protected.” Mary

“They did a big cleanup on Lake Washington.” Terry

“I remember my Mom telling me when I was little you didn’t swim in Lake Washington.” Mary

“Lake Washington’s gone from shipping— right where we sit here, this used to be the shipyards. We don’t see that anymore. There used to be a ferry in Kirkland, we don’t see that anymore. It’s more recreational now than anything.” Trudy

“It’s definitely in better shape, you can see to the bottom.” Michelle

MODERATOR: *Does anybody have a different view?*

“I think people individually are more responsible now too. They’re more aware of the ecology and the animals and the fish. Here in the Northwest there are a lot of fishermen so I think folks are more careful. I know I am on the lake, I don’t weed and feed and all that on the lakeside.” Donna

Respondents are proud of the region’s water resources. They view them as a key part of regional identity, and believe they contribute significantly both to their own appreciation and enjoyment of the area, and to property values. They express concerns about loss of habitat and shellfish, about the healthfulness of eating fish from some water bodies, about drinking water (in Bellingham) and about flooding.

However, most do not think of the area’s water resources in general as being especially polluted or degraded. They view the Sound as being more degraded than the rivers, and consider global factors (radiation from Japan, acid rain, world ocean conditions) as being part of the problem. When asked if area waters are in good, fair or poor condition, most respondents state that the lakes and rivers in general are in fair or good condition, and often comment that they are in better condition than in some other parts of the country. However, this discussion always leads to identification of some waters that are impaired, and to concerns about the condition of the Sound.

Asked to consider if the waters are better or worse than in the past, the response is mostly to cite improvements that have been made within living memory. A major reason cited for this improvement is the loss of some heavy industry that used to be in the region, though respondents also state that better understanding and regulation, and intentional clean-up efforts, have yielded important improvements.

Each group considered two series of statements based on current advocacy communications, one describing the problem, the other describing solutions. In every case, the problem statements generated dismay, confusion, doubt and objections. Four groups looked at

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“It’s kind of just a matter of numbers. If we have 100 people and everybody’s driving - 50 of them are driving a regular car that’s dripping oil all the time, and we say OK, we got to get these fixed or do something. But then our population increases. Now we’re up at 200 people and so we have 75 cars that are now dripping. So it’s going to increase. You’re going to have that unless you get rid of, you know, petrochemicals. Good luck. The pollution’s going to increase. What we do is, I don’t know, that’s the question.” David (I), Mercer Island

“It’s like the system that we have in place kind of keeps a certain balance. But yet with the increased, you know, numbers, it’s - The system gets overloaded.” Ron (D), Bellevue

problem statements first, and four looked first at the solution statements. Significantly, the sequence made no difference in the tenor of group discussion.

Respondents’ first reactions to problem statements often are “Is this true?” and “This makes me feel awful.” The latter response is sometimes accompanied by expressions of the intractability of the problem. Respondents reason that the higher the population of this or any place, the more pollution will be produced. This leads to the conclusion that the problem can’t really be solved – more people inevitably means more pollution.

In particular, respondents are certain that becoming significantly less car-dependent is not possible for their area, though most would like to see transit systems improved. They point out that the region has been developed as car-dependent, and people really have no choice but to drive. Any implication that people should stop driving, or drive much less, is greeted with suspicion or incredulity.

Respondents also object to, or find difficult to understand, several words and concepts used. When presented with a comparison of the total petroleum entering the Sound to numbers of cars dumping tankfuls of gas into the Sound, some respondents in every group are confused and/or judge it to be misleading. The total of “one-quarter billion dollars” spent annually by cities and counties to control and clean run-off is meaningless to most – “Is that a lot? A little?” For others, it reinforces negatives they already hold: we’re not getting what we should for the money, or that shows that we can’t solve this problem. Lists of human health impacts are considered doubtful by several, and even a description of shellfish harvesting limits, which otherwise was among the more successful of these statements with respondents, is criticized by some for being too general.

Even more significant than various objections to specific parts of individual problem statements, is the *tone* of the discussion. Respondents are put in a critical, doubtful, even nit-picking state of mind by descriptions of the problem, and those pre-disposed to do so focus on, and lead the group in, casting doubt on the problem.

Only one description, neutral in its tone, led to a unifying response and did not receive the same skeptical treatment:

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“If they had this sentence [most pollution comes from run-off] in the little tab renewal thing - if they put this paragraph there and then said, “Would you like to add \$5 to your tabs now to help clean up the streets?”, I would have checked it, I would have paid the \$5. Without it, I was like, uh, no.” Charlie (I), Seattle

“Most of the pollution entering local rivers and streams and Puget Sound does not come from industry, or from anyone dumping pollution into the water. It comes from the streets and parking lots and highways, from our towns and cities, and is carried into the waterways by rain running off the ground into the water.”

Despite their understanding that paved surfaces pollute water and prevent filtration, this is new information to most respondents, and they immediately accept and believe it because of their own prior knowledge. The statement is referred to repeatedly as important information – something everyone should know – and while it can reinforce the sense that the problem is insoluble, it more often leads people to think about individual behavior and practices.

Part of the reason for the statement’s positive effect is that it specifies the Sound, and explicitly refutes what many people imagine, that pollution comes from industrial waste. It perhaps doesn’t hurt that the statement contains no emotionally charged trigger words or images, such as “destroy” or “toxic cocktail”.

The crucial aspect of the response is that the statement puts people in mind of prevention: keeping polluted water out, rather than restoring or cleaning up degraded waters. This information primes listeners to think about solutions.

LEADING WITH SOLUTIONS

“It seemed like that paragraph was talking about the future, what society would be moving towards, the green infrastructure. I do not know what a green roof is. I really don’t know what a rain garden is. The paragraph definitely came out to me. It just kind of seemed like that’s what life will evolve towards—“ Mary (R), Bellevue

“I agree with Mary. It’s the wave of the future kind of.” Leslie (D), Kent

In contrast to the tone of response to statements of the problem, solution statements, while they generate questions and doubts, are met initially with a positive to enthusiastic response. In every group, respondents were most positive about this statement:

“There are two kinds of infrastructure for managing water run-off from rain. We’re familiar with the traditional kind - big pipes, sewers and treatment plants. But now many communities are using a different approach. Rain gardens, green roofs, the use of plants and vegetation to soak up the water, and new construction materials, such as permeable concrete that allows water to soak into the ground, are sometimes called ‘green infrastructure.’ ”

In every group, “permeable concrete”, which most respondents had never heard of, is quickly cited as being interesting or a good idea,

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“Infrastructure is anything that holds a city or community together, like roads. Our roads take a beating.” Danielle (D), Bellingham

“We talked about the industrial pollution being solved. So now it is coming from these sources, so we stopped the industrial pollution certainly, so that’s the next step. We have to figure out - now we’re not polluting this way, so how do we stop that, in different ways. Certainly, we should be pursuing solutions.” Erlin (D), Seattle

(In Seattle) Moderator: What about this phrase “low impact development, and streets”?

“It sounds great, ideally.” Carolyn

“I have no idea what that means.” Ruth

*“I don’t either.” Carolyn
[LAUGHTER]*

“It sounds like a politician. It sounds like all the politicians.” Colleen (D)

“We have a citizen committee and also a government one for sustainability and it seems like every time I turn around it’s like one more thing. They’re focusing on sustainability and there are the people who want you to just ride your bike everywhere and walk. I live in a small town but it’s also very hilly. It’s really not terribly practical.” Terry (D), Mercer Island

Respondents speak, mostly positively, about their experience seeing a rain garden or a green (or “living”) roof. They state that they appreciate the specificity of the list: “rain gardens, green roofs, the use of plants and vegetation... new construction materials...”

Although for most, the phrase “green infrastructure” is unfamiliar, it is readily understandable to all. Respondents have a positive reaction to the phrase itself. The word “green” in this sense is a term frequently used by respondents without being prompted, and many are proud to state that the people of their area are “very green”, meaning environmentally conscious.

Earlier in the discussion, the groups had been asked what makes a given place a great place to live. Their answers included nature and the outdoors, safety, a sense of community, and, also, access, convenience and transportation. When asked what they think of when they hear the word “infrastructure”, respondents in most groups referred to our shared physical requirements as well as providing lists of examples, and expressing concerns about the general condition and safety of our current infrastructure.

At the end of each discussion, respondents were asked to write down one or two things from the discussion they considered worth thinking more about, or worth repeating. Most frequently cited (34 of 70 responses) were some aspect of the appeal of “green infrastructure”, with 14 of those repeating the phrase itself. Respondents are generally positive about new techniques or products that mimic nature slowing run off or filtering water. Such practices, new products and innovations - if demonstrably successful -- are viewed as necessary solutions to prevent pollution from entering the Sound. Several respondents considered these in terms of past success in dealing with industrial pollution, and the need for new solutions for a new pollution source, characterizing it as the trend of the future, or the next step.

In contrast, some ways of describing solutions create obstacles to respondents’ understanding or acceptance. Describing the desired resultant neighborhoods as “walkable” generates concerns as meaning bad for drivers. “Low impact development” is a meaningless phrase to most respondents, and several suggest it’s misleading, used as a screen or justification for the real (presumed negative) impacts of the development.

There is a range of response to the phrase “sustainable community”. In most groups, some or most respondents had heard the phrase, and for

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“To me, sustainable would mean your neighborhood is growing its own food and treating its own sewage and capturing its own water and all those kinds of things.” Lisa (I), Seattle

“Sustainable community and environments - it has to do with a lot of commerce. We’re not going to be totally sustainable. We can try, but we’ll never be sustainable. Maybe other places, but we’re too global.” Charleen (R), Seattle

many it is very familiar. Several characterized the word “sustainability” as over-used.

The meaning of sustainability, however, even for those familiar with the phrase, is very much contested. “Sustainable community” is widely viewed as an idealistic and impractical ideal, largely (but not exclusively) because it is believed to mean a completely self-contained community, self-reliant for food, energy, and commerce. The term has limited, sometimes negative, value, because it does not convey the intended meaning, and generates confusion and misdirection.

All groups reached consensus that any of the green infrastructure solutions discussed may be appropriate, if they are effective. Bio-swales and other engineering solutions can be done right, or can be done wrong. Respondents want specific information, about what works, and how it works, explained to them in terms of actual results.

TALKING ABOUT COST

“If you have filtered water - let’s say you have a type of street that’s going to filter the water. So when it runs off it’s filtered. So pretty soon the streets are going to be polluted again. Because they can’t keep filtering with all this pollution and hang on to it forever, so now what are you going to do?” Mary Jo (D), Tacoma

“It says that it’s affordable, but— for whom? That always kind of— “it’s affordable.” “It’s only \$12 billion.” “Look at all the money you’ll save.” That it has to be described as affordable automatically puts a question in my head as to how affordable it actually is.” Carmen (D), Bellingham

Respondents have a high level of awareness of polluted run-off, and there is general awareness of some specific solutions such as green roofs, bio-swales, and rain gardens. But the discussions in all locations revealed a very significant gap in common knowledge among these voters. They don’t know how these systems work, what the actual physical processes are, how effective they are, or in some cases, why their use will reduce pollution.

Objections to green roofs include questions about maintenance, structural needs, and purpose: if the water stays on the roof, it leaks or collapses; if it runs off, what’s the advantage? Objections to bio-swales include references to mosquitoes, safety, attractiveness, and efficacy. Objections to alternate paving materials include concerns about maintenance, appearance, and, again, what tangible or measurable difference will it make.

These objections become especially strong when respondents are looking at photographs of all these things. Even when looking at a picture of buffers planted within a parking lot or curbside, respondents become doubtful and focus on specific details such as the types of plants, the long-term maintenance, the positioning, etc. This occurs despite the fact that some of the same individuals had just discussed in positive terms the concept of “green infrastructure.”

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“It’s not worth the money and it’s just the plants they put in there and you can go by out there - every one that they put in Puyallup a year ago - you go out there and look at it and it’s just full of weeds, and nobody takes care of ‘em and they - just - they fill up full of water - you know - sometimes they fill it full of water and they just look like junk.”
Thomas (R), Tacoma

“Does it make a difference? I guess part of what I’m getting at is we know that there’s a problem with the lake. It’s not clear to me that we know the causes of the problem real well, but I think there is a tendency to say, Let’s do everything we can, whether or not we’re addressing the cause. And to the question of costs, some of those “everything we can” are pretty costly. It would be nice to have a pretty good feel that we’re approaching it in the most efficient way possible.” Steve, (R), Bellingham

Part of the problem with the photographs is a matter of context: looking at pictures without directive, explicit accompanying text leaves respondents unsure what to focus on, or how to evaluate what they are seeing. Given the evident lack of knowledge about the physical processes involved, it seems likely that schematic diagrams demonstrating the positive effect on filtering out pollution will often be more effective for telling this story than photographs meant to convey pollution control measures. (Photographs may of course tell important related stories, e.g., people enjoying themselves in a park, or the beauty of green space)

But the larger problem, and the basis for the strongest objections, is the inability to evaluate the results. In addition to wondering how it works in a physical sense, respondents want to know how *well* it works. This is stated as a problem of cost. Essentially, respondents view these solutions as expensive ways to solve a problem, and they ask if it is, or, in some cases, state that it is not, worth it. In the post-discussion survey, the item cited second-most often as important or interesting (26 of 70) was the issue of cost, including comments that this needs to be considered, and several who explicitly state that more should be spent, but were struck by the evident opposition of some other members of the group.

Respondents who suggest that the initial capital outlay is off-set by long term savings are generally unpersuasive to others. The proposition that it saves money in the long run is met with the acknowledgement that it may, but only if you have the money available up-front. However, being told that a green roof on a large building can reduce heating and cooling costs does gain some traction. Respondents reason that a business will only do something if it’s cost-effective; they know or are told that some large *private* buildings have done this, and so they accept that it must be cost-effective, at that scale.

No matter their political perspective or degree of environmental concerns, all respondents think of costs first in terms of themselves as consumers – I save money not growing a lawn; it would cost too much to replace my driveway or street; if farmers spend more on fertilizer, Oregon apples will be cheaper than ours. When governmental policy is discussed from this perspective, the question becomes either What is the government forcing me to do?, or, What am I getting for my taxes?

Questions of cost will always come up, from supporters as well as opponents. These questions should be understood to mean, Is it worth it? Successful communications must quantify the benefits of expenditures in terms of how

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much pollution will be kept out of the water. Communications must also distinguish decisions and benefits by scale, explicitly separating the roles of consumers, developers, businesses, and government.

THE ROLE OF CONSUMERS AND BUSINESS

“As long as developers are showing the right direction and given the opportunity to do it right and cost-effectively, they’ll do it the right way. But if it’s not cost-effective then they’ll try to sneak around it for sure.” Barry (R), Kirkland

“Again it goes back to regulation. They’re out to make a dollar. We’re all out to make a dollar. So they will do what the regulations require them to do. Probably most of them will not do more unless they can see where it’s an advantage to them.” Ronald (D), Bellevue

“And an advantage to include the good community relations. If the government can help them with that -- “These guys are Green Heroes” or some darn thing.” Keith (I), Kent

“Businesses have been doing a lot of reclamation and things like that, with the downtown office buildings, for many years now. A large business can absorb that cost and get some payback from it, whereas your average homeowner is just going to scream like crazy if anybody tries to put that stuff on them. Nobody wants requirements to reclaim water forced on them.” Lisa (I), Seattle

Respondents believe that increased development has increased pollution. Especially in King County but in other locations as well, respondents talk about requirements developers must meet that are designed to protect the environment. Even those who are politically opposed to “government regulation” agree that local zoning ordinances are an appropriate means to achieve public benefit or prevent public harm.

Proposals to further strengthen these requirements meet substantial though not unanimous approval. Respondents reason that the benefits have to be real, and proportionate to the expense. They believe that increased development costs will be passed on to consumers, but know that is already the case. Combining this with the idea of new solutions for a new kind of pollution, respondents believe developers should be required to adopt best practices, and that they will do whatever they are required to do (and not likely to do more.)

A distinction is immediately drawn between new development and retro-fits – the latter is presumed to be not cost effective, or not feasible for the private property owner. Some respondents, politically oriented against taxes, raise concerns about a negative impact on the economy, but this objection does not influence the thinking of those who don’t share the same political orientation.

The values of technological innovation for new products and new practices apply strongly to considerations about market place decisions. Consumers make choices based not only on price, but on other values as well, including their sense of what others like them do, and what the social expectations are. They point with approval to changes in practices, such as car washing or disposal of hazardous products.

In several groups respondents mention the positive effect of stencils at sidewalk drains, reminding them and everyone else that what goes

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“There seems to be a lot more awareness about water run-off. The guy at the paint store said, ‘No, don’t use that. It’s killing all the salmon.’” Colleen (D) Seattle

*“They just need to make sure that they’re all up to code and they’re being installed properly and updated and maintained because there are ways to prevent a lot of storm water contaminants reaching their final destination. It’s going to take engineering, the engineering community and also the builders to step up and do something about it. It needs to be engineers, owners, contractors that take a lead in it and do something about it.”
Matthew, (R) Lynden*

“Part of the reality is that currently, people aren’t paying for their pollution, and as much as they’ll scream and yell when it happens, it’s going to happen in the form of rising fuel costs, rising trash disposal fees, all sorts of things like that. And it’ll just ratchet up little by little by little. People will start having to pay for their pollution. Get a smaller garbage can, pay a lower price. Are you taxing people for having a garbage can twice as big? No. You’re charging them for the amount of pollution that they’re putting into the environment. Call it a pollution fee, which is exactly what garbage removal is.” Lisa, (I) Seattle

down the drain goes into the water. This is a very effective communication, because of the medium used – right at the drain, where it is seen repeatedly. Similarly, one respondent mentioned being influenced by information in her water bill, comparing their household usage to average neighborhood use.

They believe consumers should have more choices, and that less polluting alternatives should be more widely available. They believe these choices are generally more expensive than products that are more widely used, and reason that those prices will go down as those products become more widely known, more readily accessible, and gain increased market share.

Across the political spectrum, respondents believe manufacturers, retailers, and builders should “step up to the plate” to do their part in keeping pollution out of the water. As consumers, they expect to get useful information from vendors about options available for what to buy or what materials to use, so that they can make informed decisions. They believe that businesses benefit from positive public image associated with helping to protect the environment and meeting social goals in the course of doing business.

Because they view consumer decisions as personal matters of individual freedom, and view pollution as causing shared harm, many believe it is in the public interest for more polluting alternatives to be more expensive: that it is fair for a homeowner who chooses to use the less desirable product, to pay more for it. In addition to fairness, they believe market place values will apply, causing more people to make better choices and consequently decreasing the costs of safer alternatives. Although there is some opposition to this principle, it is not expressed with the same conviction or resonance as opposition to over-regulation or to high taxes.

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THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT

“I just keep thinking those companies will just raise the prices. They tax them, then we have to pay more in prices as a consumer. At some point, right, that’s kind of OK because if you raise prices you at some point get a breaking point and people stop purchasing, so there’s a balance there. So, technically, we’re not attacking the consumer but the end result would be you have to pay more.” Susan, (D) Seattle

“Our lottery money was supposed to go to education and we all know where that went, I don’t trust government to take this money and do what they say.” Christine, (R), Bellingham

“Or the smoking thing. They did the same thing when they settled with the cigarette companies. They were supposed to do all of this campaigning for—I mean, I don’t see that many ads for it. I don’t see this big push in schools. They’re sitting on that money somewhere, or they spent it. Sorry, I’m a little bitter.” Danielle, (D), Maple Falls

Respondents apply their thinking about consumer choice to consideration of proposals to impose a tax on some polluting substances. Many, though not all, believe it is appropriate for government to influence the market place to increase the availability of less polluting products, decrease their cost, and increase the cost of choosing more polluting products. All respondents take it as self-evident that a tax or fee on manufacturers or wholesalers will increase consumer cost, and some believe that may be exploited by business to increase profits.

However, while a significant portion of voters readily apply this reasoning to discretionary choices, such as household cleaners or lawn treatments, very few agree, and virtually none believe most voters will agree, to apply this to additional taxes paid at the gas tank. Voters inclined to support the principle express the belief that any suggestion of raising gas tax, or increasing taxes on refineries, is a non-starter in the current economic and political environment.

The stronger objection to proposals like the Clean Water Jobs Act, one shared by those likeliest to support it as well those firm in their opposition, is the question of governmental commitment to spend the funds raised for the stated purpose. Long experience has led voters to believe that such promises will not be kept, and that the money will directly or indirectly go to general funds, not to preventing pollution.

This leads to the associated belief that government will not spend the money wisely – either because too much of the expenditure will go into planning instead of action, or because decisions will be made without consideration of, measuring and reporting back to the taxpayer what actual benefits result from the expenditure.

The statement that the new revenue stream dedicated to water management will create jobs does not increase support. Those inclined to support or at least consider such a proposal characterize an emphasis on jobs as being a political ploy. They point out that building and maintaining highways also creates jobs, and that if the point of the bill is to reduce pollution, the jobs are incidental. The topic of job creation also triggers discussion of “government jobs” and “big government”,

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*“Infrastructure is what supports your community or a business. In the business that I’m in, our infrastructure is our database. It’s the internal mechanisms that support the larger community. I think as a municipality, as a city, we’re counting on infrastructure of government to regulate.”
Ruth, (D) Seattle*

*“I think taxpayers are willing to pay for reasonable projects that make sense if it’s going to benefit the environment, historically we’ve shown that.” Ronald,
(D) Bellevue*

*“But you’ve got to sell that, you’ve got to do a really good job and this is where government comes in, being able to explain upfront what you’re doing, what the impact is going to be, how much is it going to cost. And I think where they’ve failed a lot is, after the fact. They need to go back and say here’s what we did, you know, publicize it, and say here’s the result from this and it cost each taxpayer X amount of dollars but we got this benefit from it. And then you start believing in government. And if you don’t believe in government you’re not going to want to give any money.”
Rodney,(D) Bellevue*

strengthening the viewpoint of those ideologically opposed, and weakening arguments in favor of the bill.

However, reactions to this specific proposal should not be interpreted to mean voters are opposed to government action to reduce pollution. On the contrary, respondents believe government is an appropriate and necessary means to prevent and reduce polluted water from entering the Sound.

Respondents reacted differently from respondents in similar research conducted in Eastern and Midwestern states in their response to the question, “Who’s responsible for keeping the waters clean?” In previous research, the first response has always been “Everyone, we all are.” In groups near the Puget Sound, the first response was to name a governmental entity such as King County, the Water Department, the Puget Sound Partnership, or state government. On further discussion, respondents would add that ultimately it’s everyone’s responsibility, since everyone contributes to pollution. But there was broad consensus that government should be held accountable for the condition of shared natural resources. We believe this difference reflects the success of government sponsored education campaigns, and the fact that Washington has more public land and relatively more regulation for water protection. It is also related to broadly shared pride in the region’s perceived ethic of environmental stewardship.

Respondents identify or respond positively to four different functions of government on this issue: information, infrastructure investment, influence on the marketplace, and setting standards reflecting public interest.

Voter concerns about governmental accountability are not limited to proposals about a specific new tax or fee. Respondents believe government has an important role to play in informing the public about the actual condition of shared water resources. Several mention reading the information that comes with their water bill, often to illustrate their contention that they don’t get the information that they need. In particular, respondents want information about what has been achieved in efforts to reduce pollution, so that they can evaluate proposed additional efforts.

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“When you’re talking about these kinds of alternative technologies, a lot of it has to do with retooling of industry. If you look at the way these things have happened in the past, it’s been a little give and a little take, and a little give and a little take. And a technology becomes - like this kind of driveway - it becomes a little more affordable and so it becomes politically possible to push a regulation through, because it becomes a little more affordable. And then once that regulation is in place, more people start doing it, and then because there’s more demand it becomes even more affordable, ‘cause industry retools, and then it becomes politically viable for someone who’s elected - they can actually require that without getting themselves immediately unelected.” Nathan (D), Seattle

“I don’t think anyone’s thrilled to be paying more, but I think it’s probably one of those issues, we’re going to have to step up and do - if it would help develop technologies that would help decrease the pollution.” Erlin (D), Seattle

“We’re a green state. We support green. I think that we would be willing to put forth a little more money to push our state even further green than it is.” Kjani (R), Puyallup

Across the political spectrum, respondents believe that building and maintaining infrastructure is the responsibility of government, and that government itself can be understood as part of the infrastructure. They want to see government play a leadership role in adopting and promoting new practices.

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Because respondents are concerned about the condition of current infrastructure, there is opportunity to inoculate against some objection to increased costs, by emphasizing scale. Capital expenses invested in infrastructure are not the same as individual home-owner decisions, and should be distinguished from them. At the scale and timeframe of these decisions, future savings to taxpayers are a strong argument, if concerns about results and accountability can be met.

Because they view the marketplace as dynamic, respondents believe the government can have a positive influence on market conditions that support better individual choices. Investment in effective new products and technology will increase the visibility and availability of those products. Incentives are always preferred to penalties or requirements, but, as noted above, most respondents do not oppose as a matter of principle making some choices to pollute more expensive than other options, if other options are available. They also believe that government should play a role in providing businesses with the means to realize public relations benefits from making choices that protect water quality.

Voters’ belief that the Sound and lakes and rivers are an important part of local identity, and their pride in their local culture of environmental stewardship, create significant opportunity to promote standards that can be shown to keep polluted water out of the Sound. Respondents know that many waters in their region have been improved by better protection measures. When respondents learn that most pollution now comes from run-off, and consider solutions in terms of new techniques that mirror and support natural systems, they are open to setting standards that will apply new knowledge to the new problem, and they expect their fellow citizens to be supportive of such standards.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

- Lead with solutions, not problems, and describe these solutions as preventive: keeping pollution out of the Sound.
- Build from values of local pride in the region's physical assets, and tell stories about past success, both in reducing point source pollution, and in controlling run off.
- Quantify the benefits of new approaches to filtering and slowing down run off, and be specific in terms of scale, pollutants and bodies of water. Educate voters about the physical processes that lead to positive results. Emphasize the concept of natural filtration, and adapting processes to take advantage of natural systems. Build on values of technological innovation, and when appropriate, increasing consumer choices, in promoting these solutions.
- Promote investments in shared infrastructure, and promote green infrastructure in terms of its quantified benefits in keeping pollution out of the Sound, as well as ancillary benefits, including cost savings, aesthetics, convenience, property values, health and ecological values.
- Make messages about the extent of the problem secondary to promoting solutions. Focus communications describing the problem on informing voters about the scale of pollution deriving from polluted run-off, quantifying and specifying to the extent possible the general idea that "most pollution" comes from run-off. Use the image of oil slick roads following a rainfall.
- Avoid buzz words such as sustainable communities, low impact development, and walkable neighborhoods. When addressing transportation issues, emphasize and explain the concept behind "complete streets" – increased choices, more accommodation, and better conditions for drivers, pedestrians, transit riders and bicycles.
- Emphasize that many pollution problems from point sources have been solved, that many of the region's waters are in better condition than in the recent past, and that the new problem of polluted run-off can also be dealt with successfully.
- Help voters distinguish between communications addressed to them as consumers-homeowners, and as voter-taxpayers, explicitly describing the differing roles of consumers, developers, business and large institutions, and local and state government. Use social norms marketing to influence consumer choices, and use consumers who have made these choices as primary messengers.
- Build leadership roles for businesses and large institutions, and promote these sources as messengers about saving money as well as keeping out pollution. Strategic campaigns to engage businesses in educating consumers will help strengthen social norms, and can be adapted to advocate for clear and effective government standards.
- Seek policy proposals and communication opportunities to demonstrate government accountability and effectiveness. Promote stories that tell how government money has been and is being spent, the participation of the private sector, and the resulting impact on water quality and the economic and social life of the community.
- Promote standards for preventing pollution based on their proven worth, and in terms of the responsibility that real estate developers have to meet the public interest.

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RESPONDENTS

Seventy-two people participated in the eight focus groups, 36 men and 36 women.
All respondents vote and follow the news somewhat or very closely.
Ages ranged from 26 -72, with a mix of ages in each group.

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Political preference:

Democrat – 29
Republican – 19
Independent – 24

Locations:

Kirkland – 7
Mercer Island – 2
Bellevue – 7
Kent – 3
Bellingham – 9
Ferndale – 3
Blaine – 2
Maple Falls – 1
Lynden – 2
Tacoma – 9
Puyallup Co – 9
Seattle (mixed zips) - 18

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