

All Things Water: A Community Engagement Summary Report

Using Community-Driven Solutions to Protect Itasca County’s Greatest Natural Resource, Our Water

Prepared for Itasca Waters by:

unTapped

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Introduction

How might we close the gap between known best practices for sustained water quality and people's awareness and behaviors?

This is a vital question for the residents of Itasca County, home to over 1,400 freshwater lakes, major rivers (including the Mississippi) and multiple small creeks and streams.

In an attempt to answer this question, Itasca Waters applied for and received a Community Innovation grant from the Bush Foundation in early 2019. Itasca Waters is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to partner with other organizations and concerned citizens to maintain abundant, clean water for the region's continued health, enjoyment and economy. The two-year grant funded Itasca Waters' year-long community engagement process and a follow-up year to implement a community wide action plan to protect the county's water resources.

The goals of the community engagement process conducted from April 2019 to April 2020, were:

1. To learn from Itasca County residents about ways in which the quality of water in area lakes, rivers and streams impacts their lives while encouraging people to identify innovative ways to protect it.
2. To develop a community-defined vision and action plan. By leveraging newfound community awareness of the importance of clean water to their livelihoods, those insights will help identify actions needed to protect the quality of the water.

The following report is a summary of the community engagement process, insights learned, and recommendations for turning the insights into strategic actions.

Methodology: Community Engagement Overview

An in-depth community engagement process—one that generates shared meaning and ownership—can help close the gap between proven water quality protection strategies and people's behaviors in Itasca County. If done effectively, this work could become a model for water protection in other communities.

Community engagement is both a process and an outcome. The community in this engagement project includes all Itasca County residents. The engagement process is a way to learn about the community's values and beliefs concerning the quality of the water in our lakes, rivers and streams. At the same time, engaging with people around a specific topic also gets people thinking about the idea. It increases awareness and informs the community about the importance of creating a community wide vision to protect the quality of our water. It is a way to uncover widespread thinking and beliefs that will help generate sustainable solutions to the challenges we face. Itasca Waters' goal of building the foundation for a grass-roots movement to protect Itasca County's water resources in perpetuity shaped the community engagement strategy. The community engagement strategy included the following initiatives.

- 1) *Review the existing ways in which people are working to monitor and protect the water quality in Itasca County's lakes, rivers and streams, and fully understand the current initiatives and public policies intended to protect water quality.*

There are numerous federal, state, county, city and township agencies whose portfolios include monitoring or managing water quality to some degree. Identifying the resources and programs already in place helps to focus on designing solutions that build on existing efforts. There are also multiple local and statewide organizations and individuals working to maintain high water quality in Itasca County.

2) *Interview community leaders and elected officials.*

An important component of generating a community wide action plan requires a solid understanding of how people in leadership and decision-making roles view the issue of protecting water quality.

3) *Gather input from a broad cross section of the community through public surveys, focus groups, personal interviews and human-centered design ideation sessions. Targeted populations included business owners and managers, resort owners, lake associations, lakeshore property owners, fishing guides, tribal members, realtors, and the general public.*

Changing behavior requires an understanding of the collective consciousness about water quality protection. What are people's perceptions about water quality, why is water quality important to them, how do they think it should be protected, and who do they think is responsible for making sure it is protected? Multiple engagement processes were used to engage with a wide cross section of community residents. A general survey was created. An article about the survey was generated in the *Grand Rapids Herald-Review*; it was discussed in a live KAXE-FM radio interview; the survey link was posted on several websites (the City of Grand Rapids, Itasca County the Grand Rapids Area Chamber of Commerce, and KAXE-FM); and the survey link was distributed via a broad email initiative. Human-centered design sessions were convened with the area's largest lake associations and the Grand Rapids business community. Focus groups were convened, and scores of one-on-one interviews were conducted throughout the county.

4) *Research behavior and social change models to use an implementation template.*

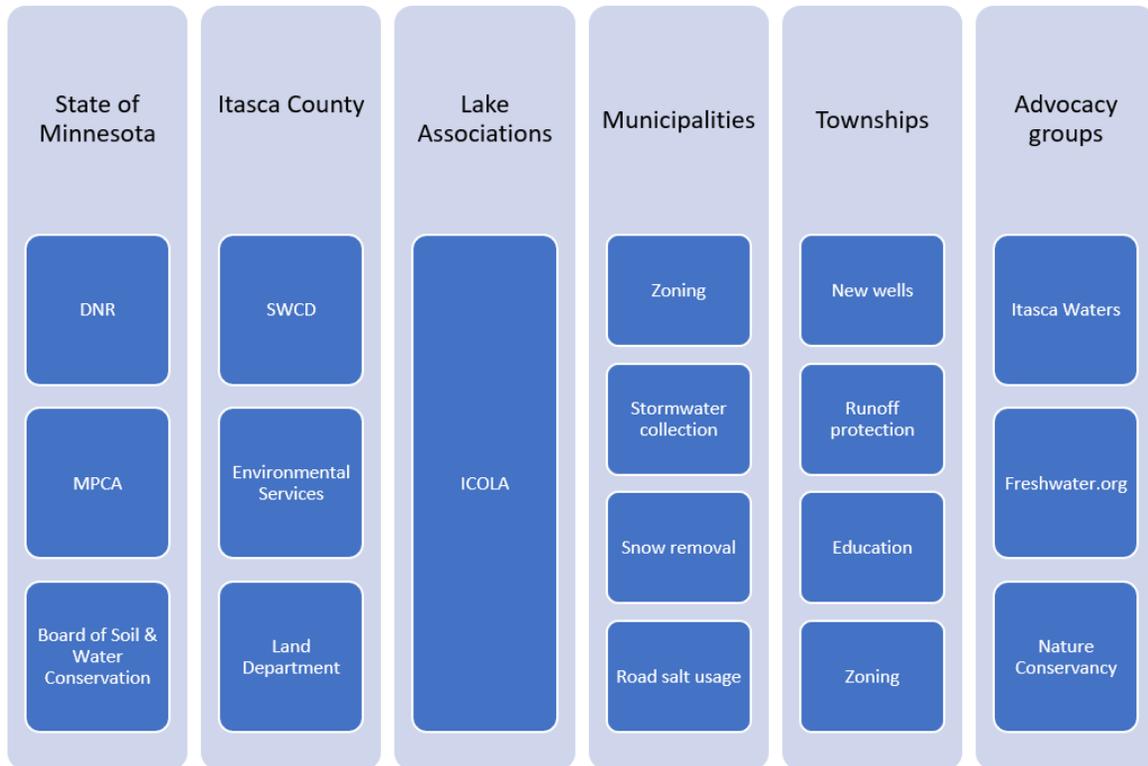
This portion of the work is on-going. Initially it seeks to understand how to permanently elevate the importance of water quality within the community consciousness and inspire new action that includes mechanisms to measure impact. It explores questions such as: How do you actually change people's perceptions, attitudes, and ultimately behavior? How do you understand people's behavior in the differing contexts of their lives? And how do you measure the impact of the changes you seek?

What We Learned: Community Engagement Insights

A) Review of Current Local Initiatives and Public Policy

There are a variety of local and statewide initiatives and programs intended to maintain high water quality in Itasca County. There is not, however, a coordinated system across all levels of government to protect public waters.

The graphic below summarizes existing programs managed by the following entities: State of Minnesota, Itasca County, lake associations, municipalities, townships and advocacy groups.



Municipalities

- Stormwater ordinances; snow removal and disposal; road salt usage and alternatives; zoning; construction management permits; rain gardens

Townships

- Stormwater runoff collection projects; well permits; education; zoning

Itasca County

- Itasca County Soil and Water District: technical assistance, cost-sharing and natural resource management information and education; aquatic invasive species (AIS) monitoring and education
- Environmental Services Department: planning and zoning, zoning permitting, subsurface sewage treatment program, shoreland alterations permitting
- Land Department: public water access maintenance

State of Minnesota

- Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR): watershed management planning; financial assistance
- Minnesota Department of Natural Resources: groundwater strategic plans; groundwater usage monitoring; boat usage; invasive species management; water appropriations permits; well permits
- Minnesota Pollution Control Agency: stormwater permits; wastewater permits; lake water quality monitoring; training; financial assistance

Advocacy groups

- Itasca Waters: education and advocacy
- Freshwater.org: education (Healthy Rivers and Lakes; Master Water Stewards) and advocacy

- Nature Conservancy: “Our Mississippi, Our Future”
- Minnesota Lakes and Rivers Advocates

Lake associations

Itasca Coalition of Lake Associations (ICOLA) includes 29 lake association members. Each lake association set its own priorities, and their work includes the following actions and programs.

- Education and implementation of improved shoreland management
- Promote education about AIS best practices
- Encourage citizen involvement in local government deliberations about water quality
- Invest in education initiatives related to water quality
- Sponsor shoreland advisors program

B) Elected Officials’ Insights

Townships and city councils

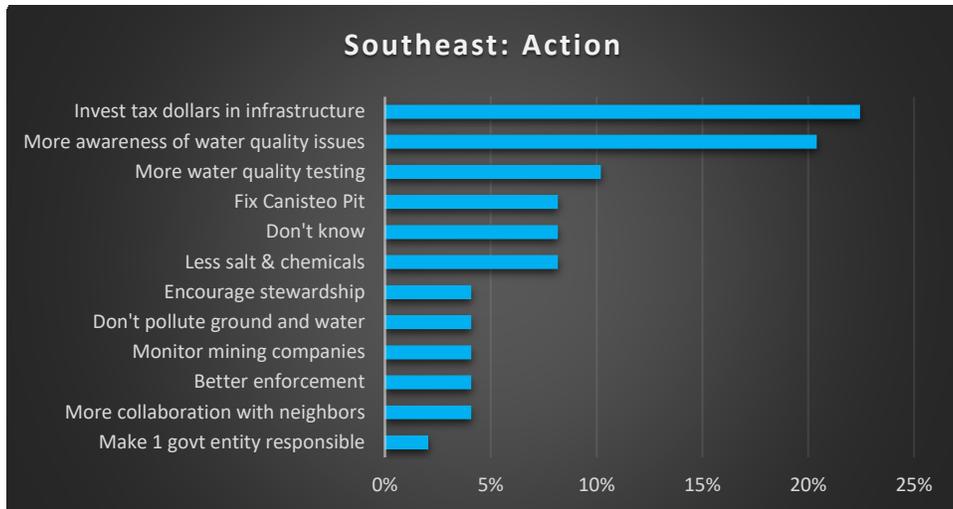
Over the course of the first year of the study, we interviewed elected officials from township boards and city councils representing populations of more than 400 people. For the purposes of the analysis, the county was divided roughly in half diagonally (creating northwest and southeast “regions”).

Across the county, the focus on water quality varies widely. Elected officials respond to issues that affect their constituents most directly and immediately. Localized issues (poor water supply and outdated infrastructure) appear to be much more critical for communities in the southeast (29%) than the northwest region (5%). When asked about voters’ perceptions of water quality, 40% of elected officials in the northwest region had not heard complaints about water quality or didn’t know what their voters felt about water quality.

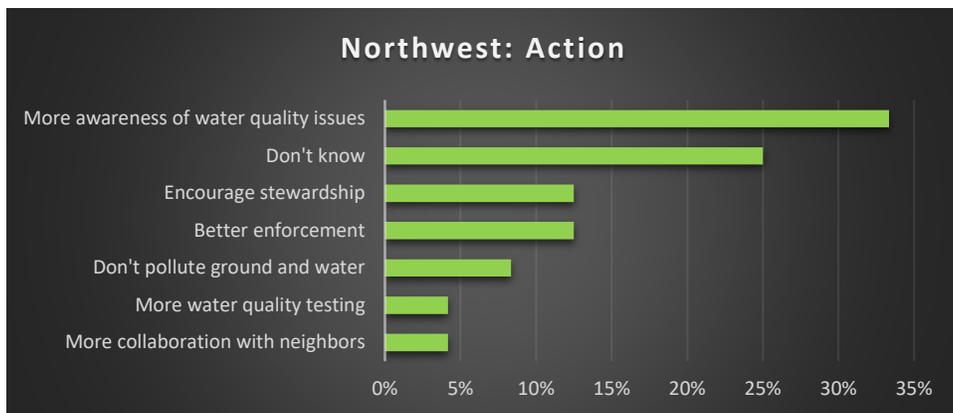
Nearly all elected officials in the County (townships, cities and county) understand the correlation between good water quality and the well-being of tourism and the recreation economy generally in Itasca County. There are no glaringly obvious and substantial variances in perspectives between office-holders in the two regions when asked about how good water quality impacts the area economically.

Elected officials in the northwest region expect to rely far less on other units of government (33%) than the southeast region (53%) to help address water quality issues. These elected officials are “the government,” but they either know they do not have the resources to deal with poor water quality or expect other entities (the State of Minnesota or federal agencies) to be available to help them solve those issues. Conversely, elected officials in the northwest region are more likely than their counterparts in the southeast region to identify “all of us” as being responsible (46% to 31%). These two observations are noteworthy as we look for ways to educate residents and visitors as well as for implementation partners.

One of the most significant ways in which elected officials from the two regions differ is evident in the responses to the question about what action should be taken to address water quality issues. **The southeast region communities, faced with drinking water quality and supply issues, are more inclined to see investing tax dollars in capital improvements as a high priority.** They also suggest more education and testing, as well as tackling issues related to former mining operations.

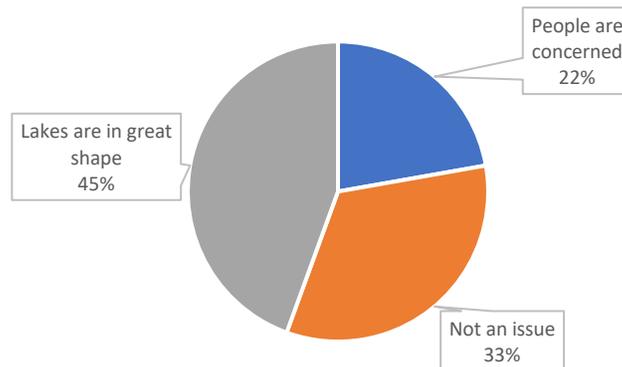


The northwest community officials recommend more education and better stewardship, but since water quality does not appear to be as much of a concern for residents in those communities, 25% had no specific ideas for taking action.

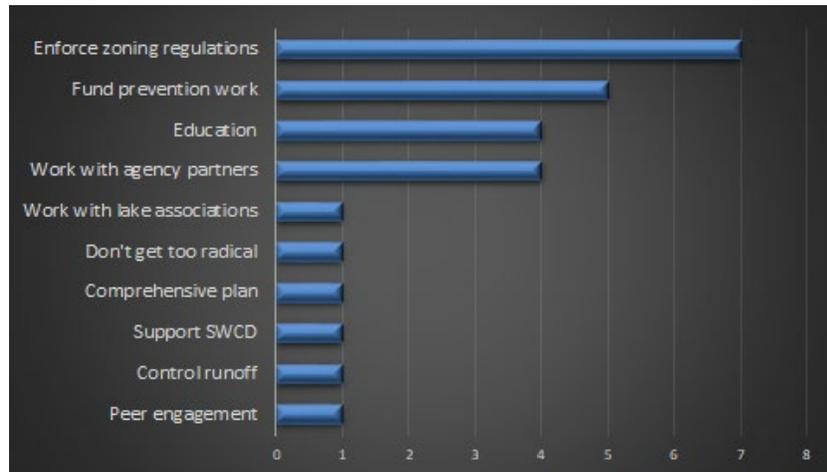


County board and City of Grand Rapids

Among the 10 people serving on the Itasca County board and the Grand Rapids city council (those officials representing the largest percentage of county residents), the graph of their perception of the quality of water here in Itasca County underscores one of the key learnings: there does not appear to be a sense of urgency about water quality (78% believe the water is in great shape or it is not an issue).



However, when asked to suggest ways to maintain or improve water quality, the initiatives they recommend suggest a close alignment with strategies that are being pursued by Itasca Waters and other advocacy groups.



C) Key Stakeholder Insights

The following insights were gathered through public surveys, human-centered design ideation sessions, focus groups and personal interviews.

Perceptions of water quality

The vast majority of stakeholders in the county believe our water quality is high or very high. Lakeshore property owners and the business community generally have the highest perceptions (89% and 83%, respectively) of lake water quality, and realtors in particular believe that outstanding lake water quality drives the “up north” ethic. Fishing guides, whose occupation provides them opportunities to evaluate firsthand the subtle differences in water quality from lake to lake, are less likely to rank our water quality quite as high. They cite examples of water quality deteriorating slightly over time, but they remain ardent advocates for Itasca County lakes.

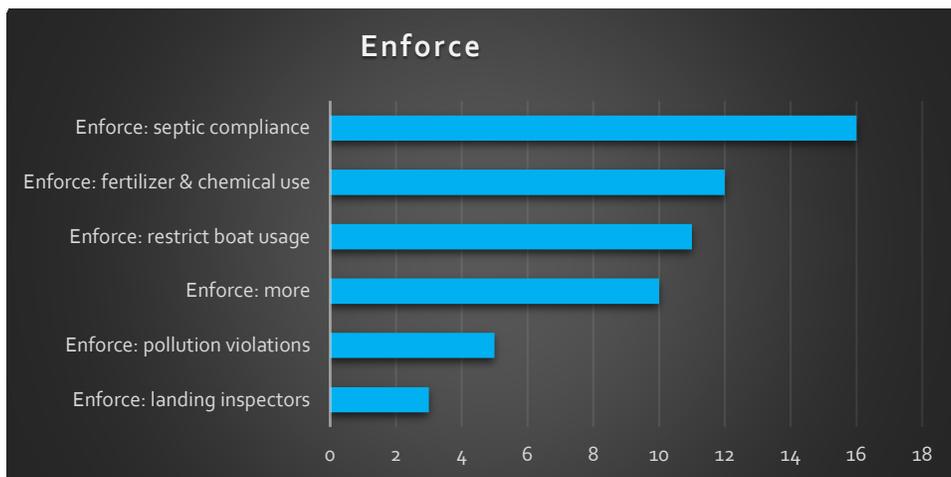
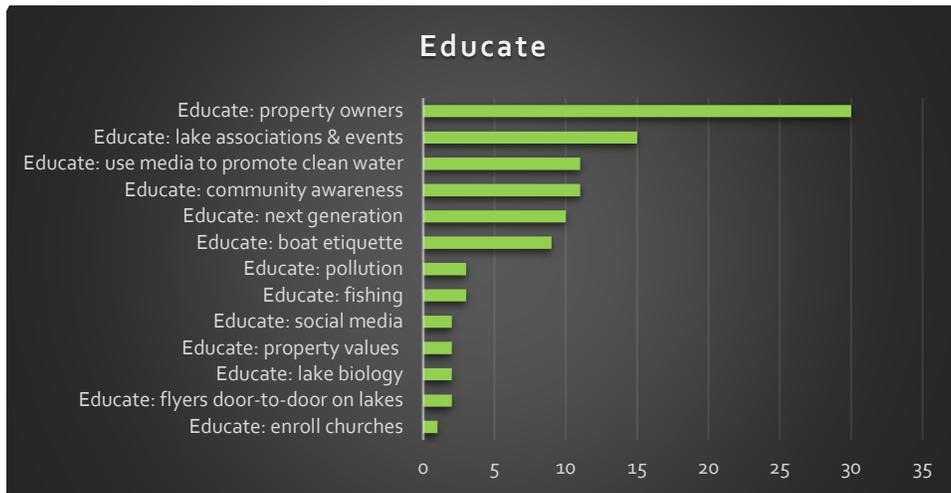
Reasons why water quality is important

Most stakeholders cite recreation and the economy as the primary reasons for maintaining lake water quality. Stakeholders who depend on access to lakes for their livelihood (resorts, fishing guides, and realtors, to some extent) are adamant that water quality is directly linked to the area’s economic wellbeing. Lakeshore property owners place high value on recreation, but following closely behind is quality of life and preserving something of value for future generations. This is a motivation not found among other stakeholders. Business owners and city residents, even those with no direct lake access or economic stake in tourism, believe that having high quality water in our area is important for the overall quality of life in the region.

Actions to maintain water quality

Two primary strategies were recommended by all stakeholders: education and enforcement. Education in this context means informing and explaining to various constituencies the effects of various behaviors on water quality along with myriad other actions. Resorts, fishing guides, the business community and realtors all suggested educating the public as the primary initiative for changing behavior, with numerous

suggestions about how to accomplish that. Lakeshore owners are the single stakeholder group who recommend substantial emphasis on enforcement rather than education.



Responsibility for maintaining water quality

All stakeholders believe that the responsibility to protect water quality is broadly shared. Lakeshore owners and the business community see “everyone” as primarily responsible, while realtors and fishing guides put that onus on lakeshore owners and lake users. Government entities are close seconds on everyone’s list. The concerning observation about the responses to this question is that when people expect “everyone” to be responsible, then perhaps it becomes no one’s responsibility.

D. Stakeholder-Specific Insights

As identified in the Bush Community Innovation Grant, during recent water quality studies in Itasca County (conducted by Itasca Waters and partners), it became clear shoreland practices (erosion control, septic system compliance, buffer zone establishment, etc.) directly affected water quality. It also became clear that there is a disconnect between proven practices and on-the-ground behaviors.

To effectively address shoreland practices and influence behaviors, Itasca Waters wanted to discover innovative solutions. The following are stakeholder-specific insights to the question: “How might we close the gap between best known water quality protection practices and people’s behavior?”

Itasca Waters Board of Directors

This group identifies relationships and education as keys to closing that gap. They see the need for a joining, non-polarizing approach to continue to build a grassroots movement, one that comes from the bottom-up vs. top-down, so that there is widespread shared understanding and shared responsibility within the community to protect our water.

Residents Aged 45 and Under

This age group generally is concerned about and conscious of environmental issues. However, since many people under age 45 are juggling careers, raising kids and perhaps even helping their parents, the need to be intentional about protecting our water often gets pushed to the background. Figuring out multiple ways to bring this issue front and center without adding more work is key to keeping this group engaged. ‘Don’t overwhelm them with information’, we heard; ‘they don’t have time to listen.’ There is great value to this group to expand the ways their children are educated about water quality and to learn about which actions are needed to keep the water clean. As one parent noted, “My kids love the fifth-grade water summit. I wish that could be done for multiple grades in all the schools in the district, so it is institutionalized in the education curriculum.”

Residents Over Age 45

This age group tends to see protecting water quality through the lens of legacy, the legacy of leaving pristine, usable lakes for future generations. They would like to see greater statewide buy-in, with more resources committed to protecting water quality instead of attempting to repair poor water quality. This group also identified the importance of learning from other communities dealing with poor water quality about what they would do differently if they could go back in time. Many reminisced about what the water was like in southern Minnesota when they were young, and they feel there is much to be learned.

Local Fishing Enthusiasts

This group holds unique perspectives that we can learn from. Many of them fished local waters when they were kids, and they know how the water has changed and what that means for the fish population. They frequently fish multiple bodies of water, so they can readily compare and contrast the water quality in those lakes over time. They have insights into why that is and what that means for the fish. Fishing guides love the water and are open to learning and doing what it takes to protect it.

Arts Community

This group generally understands the ways in which art has historically been a very effective way to affect change by creating greater awareness and highlighting community values. They identify creating public art which is reflective of community values as a way to increase awareness. Locally, art conveying the importance of our water continues to grow.

Business Community

The business community sees a role for itself in increased water quality stewardship, advocacy, and education. Many business leaders suggested they could help by telling stories of how their businesses are directly affected by water quality, educating their staff about water quality protection, and using their voices to influence policymakers. They also felt that an immediate way to help close the gap is to financially support groups already working to address water quality protection.

Resort Owners

The vast majority of resort owners are aware of the need to keep our lakes clean, and they talk with their guests about that. In particular, they talk about issues related to AIS and cleaning boats and trailers. However, only a handful of resorts have washing stations at their boat launches because they are expensive. Most lakes with public accesses in the county do not have washing stations, either. This stakeholder group views washing stations at public accesses as a key step to closing the gap. Most of them are prepared to provide educational materials to their guests.

Tribal Members

This group commonly identified that closing the gap will require us to work diligently to change the common perception of a beautiful shoreline. We know that a natural shoreline is key to protecting the water quality, yet natural shorelines are not what many people imagine when they think of an attractive or beautiful shoreline. They also spoke of the need to continue building trust between Native Tribes and the County, perhaps by partnering to organize an event (for example, a wild rice tasting event) that brings us together and acts as a means to inform people about the importance of water to our quality of life.

Lakeshore Owners

The most common responses from this group about how we might close the gap were: increasing education around water quality; being role models for best practices; monitoring public accesses and ensuring septic compliance.

Elected Officials

There is a wide range of views among elected officials about how we might close the gap between best practices and people's behavior. At one end of the spectrum we heard that "the water is cleaner than it has ever been, and our constituents aren't bringing it up. So why do we need to worry about it?" We also heard that "we need to get our residents involved and knowledgeable about how their actions affect water quality. We need more information about the status of our water quality and what they can do to improve it. We need to get them the information so they can change their behavior."

It is clear that concentrated effort is needed to organize community leaders and elected officials to be informed about and prioritize water quality protection. At the same time, we'll need to help shift the mindset to one of leading and modeling the importance of protecting water for our collective wellbeing.

Realtors

Knowing they are the first point of contact for many new lake property owners, their role in closing the gap can be summed up by this response: "Our primary opportunity is to educate." There is consensus among this group that clear, simple and concise information about water quality would be useful.

Translating Insights Into Action

Through the community engagement process, five elements of a community-wide plan to protect our waters emerged. Each component includes action steps that, when implemented, will create a more cohesive protection plan. The actions steps are by no means exhaustive, but rather the first steps that will put us on a trajectory to achieve a true community-wide water protection plan.



(1) Creating Shared Community Beliefs, Values and Behaviors

It is important to note that in all aspects of the community engagement process, increasing public awareness is most effective if done in a tailored way to fit the social context of people’s lives. The objective of this effort: work to shift community consciousness about water quality from one of taking it for granted to one of gratitude and a commitment to protect it. This requires changing how individuals see themselves in relation to both the problem and also the solution.

It is easy for people who live and work in northern Minnesota to take clean water for granted. It is all around us. We can access its benefits year-round. Even during the coldest days of winter, we can head to a lake, drill a hole in the ice and catch fish for dinner. Behavioral change research shows that people change their behavior based on their perceptions of risk and the potential benefits of their behavior. They also assess the barriers preventing them from making the changes necessary to affect positive change. In this context, it means that since all the water around us is apparently clean, there is no perceived risk present. Changing behavior requires changing what they believe about correlations between seemingly harmless human actions and the impact of those actions on water quality before the impacts are truly visible (i.e., the water is visibly dirty, swimming in lakes is no longer safe, and fish have died).

As people are encouraged to adapt their behaviors, they are influenced by those around them. They decide to change their beliefs and behaviors based on how easily that aligns with their lived experience and meets their real needs. While some will seek out expert opinions and information, more often people will listen to and learn from people they know and trust.

Actions

- Make the importance of maintaining clean water much more visible to the community through a variety of multimedia approaches.

- Create platforms to continue to teach community values surrounding our water such as: story-telling for change, social media campaigns ([#weloveourwater](#), for example), and more.
- Plan events in collaboration with the Leech Lake Band to build relationships and educate about water quality.

(2) Encourage Advocacy, Education and Public Awareness

People don't change their behavior simply by being provided information. Rather than simply attempting to increase individuals' knowledge, to be effective you must keep in the forefront of your change efforts the social context in which individual behavior takes place. Public awareness campaigns are critical in widespread change efforts, but they have to connect with the lived experiences of the people whose behavior you seek to change. If you are living in poverty, for example, and survival means simply meeting your basic needs, you act out of necessity. Burning garbage or dumping refuse in the woods is cheaper than paying for garbage disposal services. You may hop from lake to lake trying to catch fish for supper without thoroughly cleaning your boat. The education you will design for those folks is different than for someone who owns shoreland, has all their needs met and for whom "just close public access to public waters" seems to be an expedient solution to solving water quality problems in their lake.

Public awareness efforts and education need to start simply and work towards complexity, with each phase building off the previous one. People do not change their behavior based on data or science alone. While there is plenty of evidence that backs up the reasons to take action to protect water quality, people first need to see the value of clean water. Most people value clean water, but they don't connect the dots between their actions and water quality because clean water is all around us here in Itasca County. We want the value of the clean water to be front and center in everyone's minds, and once we establish that, we can move on to more complex education and awareness.

Actions

- Create simple, widespread messaging around the importance of our water ("We love our water"). Messaging campaigns, though, will need to target a variety of audiences and mindsets to ensure the message fits their social context.
- Convene discussions among representatives of all four school districts that serve our area's children to ensure water quality education programs are part of their curriculum.
- Create a simplified version of the shoreland guide for broad distribution.

(3) Cultivating Leadership Support

This initiative is focused on changing how people in public institutions address the problem. One critical step in creating change in the broader community is having people in positions of power act in ways reflective of the overall change you seek. There are subtle but large implications when people in positions of power have a fragmented approach to addressing problems. We will need to focus a great deal of energy in generating widespread and shared commitment to protecting our water by people in positions of power (elected officials and agency staff).

Actions

- Create a county-wide proclamation to be endorsed by all units of government to promote shoreland best practices.

- Convene discussions with representatives of local units of government to limit shoreland development that threatens water quality, including the practices of planting and fertilizing lawns to the water's edge, clearcutting within buffer zones, and others.

(4) Enforcement & Implementation

No public policy intended to modify people's behavior is successful without regulations and enforcement. Recommendations for implementing policy changes and enforcing those guidelines must include methods of ensuring compliance.

Actions

- Develop a plan to encourage installation of washing stations throughout the county, with first priority for lakes that have AIS as well as lakes with heavy boat traffic.
- Explore creating a text messaging campaign using the County's broadcast alert system targeted to lake users.
- Encourage installation of signs at boat landings and other public access points throughout the county with the top three things people should do and thank people for protecting our water.

(5) Monitoring and Assessment

As with any major initiative, monitoring progress and then adjusting tactics will be essential to maintaining progress.

Action

- Promote the creation of a countywide interactive online map of lake water quality. Update the map with changes as data becomes available. Include updates on the installation of boat washing stations. Generate electronic alerts that flag developments that could become areas of concern.

Conclusion

The grant application to the Bush Foundation included the following justification for this community engagement project.

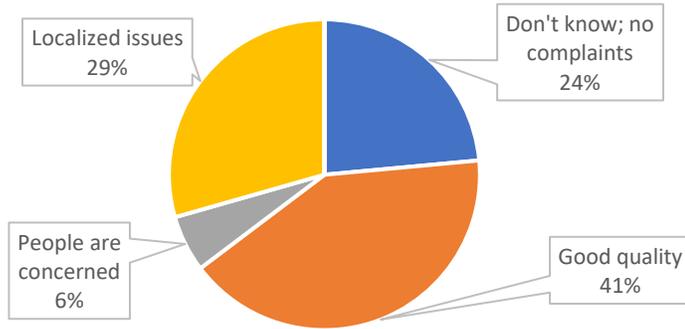
Itasca County's water resources are a primary reason why many people choose to live and work here. In addition, they form the foundation of the county's tourism economy. Taking community-driven steps to protect the quality of local water resources will not only help preserve current jobs and a way of life, but will bolster the ability of the local economy to grow new jobs and opportunities in the future.

Without clean lakes, Itasca County would be a different place. Residents would look for recreational opportunities and connection with nature elsewhere. Some might even move away. Businesses would have less reason to expand in or relocate to Itasca County. Visitors, the majority of whom travel to Itasca County because of its water resources, would turn to other areas of the state or country when planning their vacations or buying a cabin or second home.

The work described in the preceding pages of this report is focused on permanently altering the community mindset about water quality. The objectives are to create tangible and accessible tools that can be used to take action to protect water quality and fortify the county and its communities well into the

future. The next year of implementation will set in motion the recommended actions to help achieve those objectives.

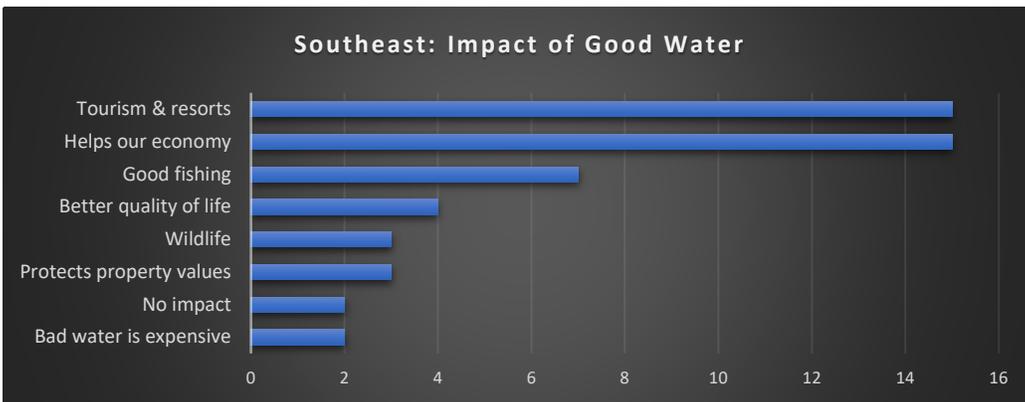
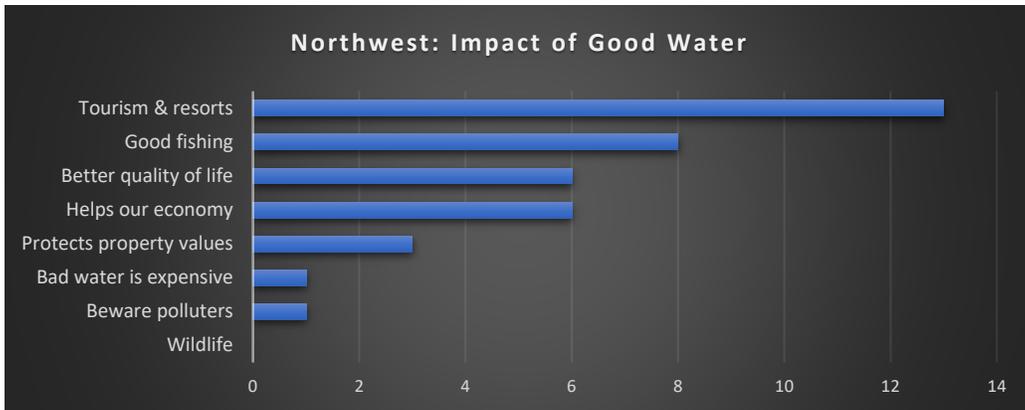
Southeast Region: Voters' Perspectives



Localized issues (poor water supply, outdated infrastructure) appear to be much more critical for communities in the Southeast Region (29% vs. 5%) than the Northwest Region. Conversely, when asked about voters' perceptions of water quality, 40% of elected officials in the Northwest Region had not heard complaints about water quality or didn't know what their voters felt about water quality.

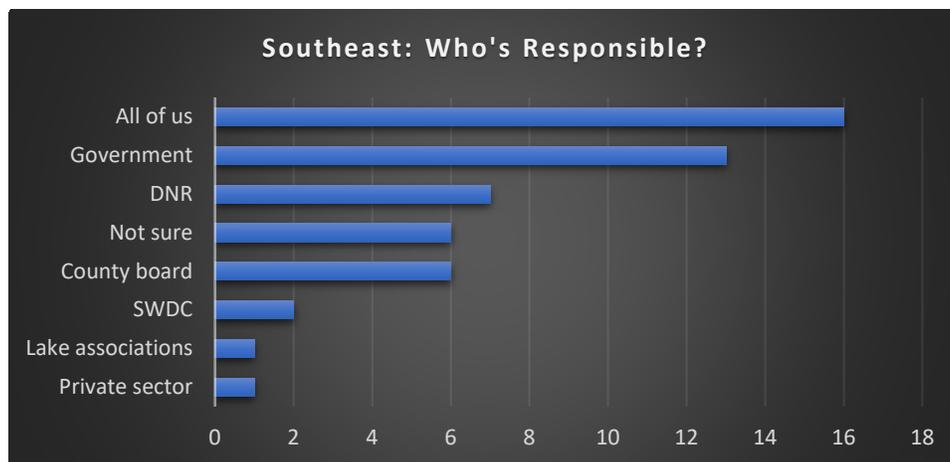
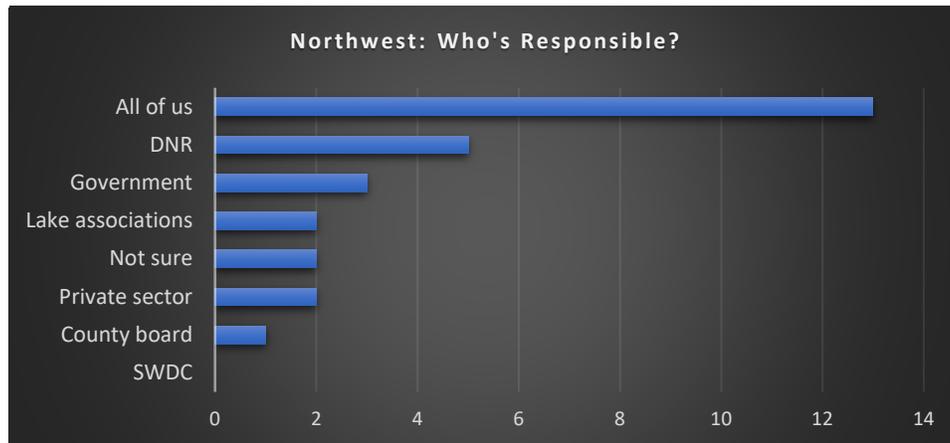
What is your understanding of the impact of good water quality on the economy of Itasca County?

There are no glaringly obvious and substantial variances in perspectives between the two regions when asked about how good water quality impacts the area. Nearly all respondents understand the correlation between good water quality and the wellbeing of tourism and recreation economy generally in Itasca County.



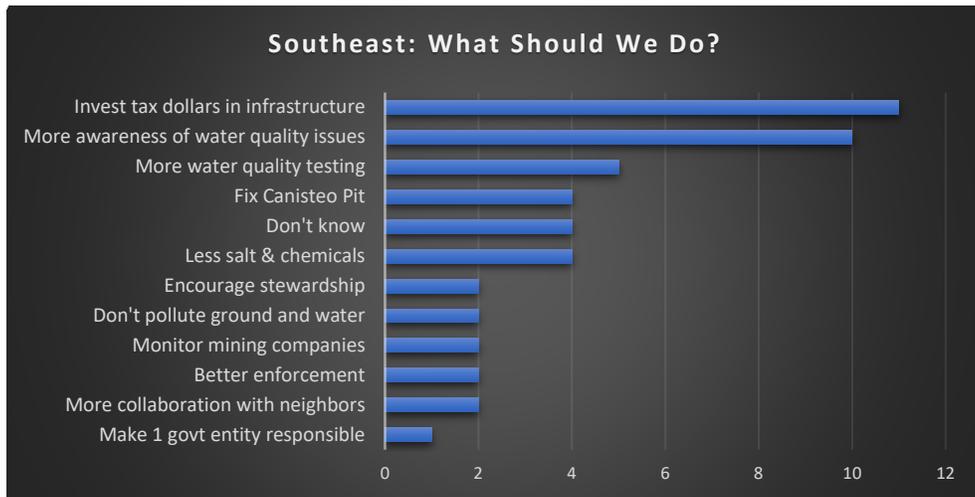
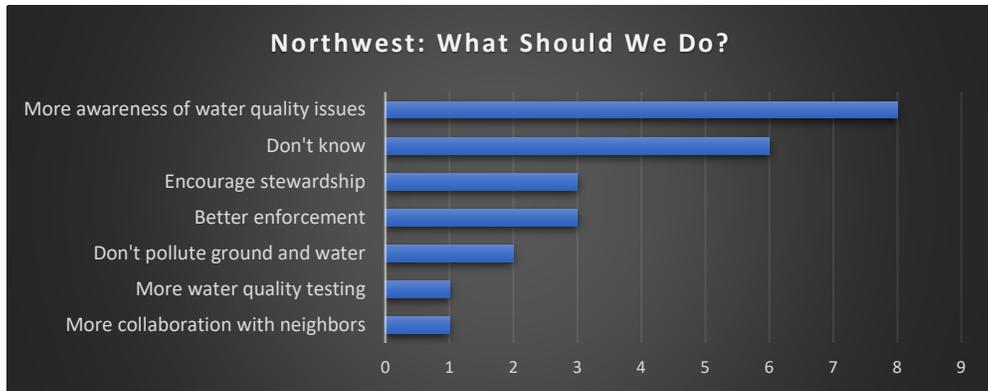
Who do you think is responsible for water quality in Itasca County?

The northwest region expects to rely far less on government ('government,' 'County board,' 'DNR' and 'SWDC') than the southeast region (33% vs. 53%) to help address water quality issues. Conversely, elected officials in the northwest region are more likely than their counterparts in the southeast region to identify "all of us" as being responsible (46% to 31%). These two observations are noteworthy as we look for ways to educate residents and visitors as well as for implementation partners.



What do you think the city/township should do to protect water quality in our area?

Again, the difference in the two regions is evident in the responses to this question. The southeast communities, faced with drinking water quality and supply issues, are more inclined to see investing tax dollars in capital improvements as a high priority. The northwest community officials are also less sure (only 8%) than the southeast region (25%) about an appropriate role for local government.

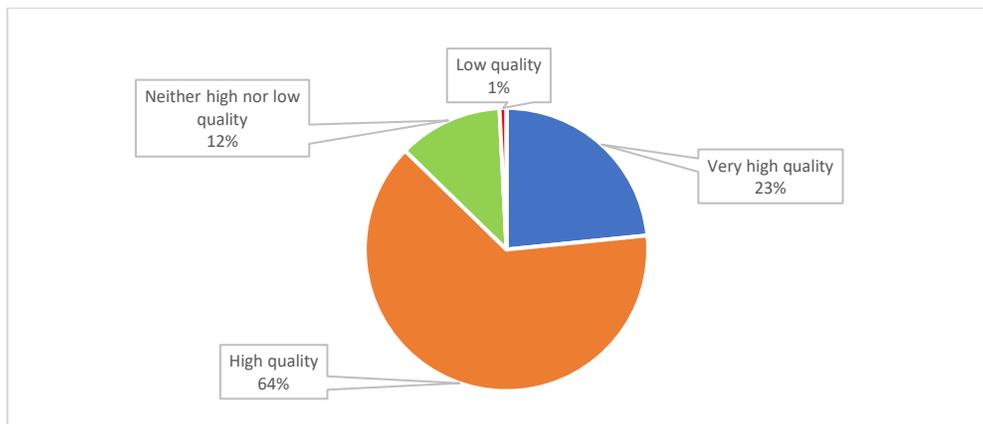


2. Lake Associations

Lake association input by the numbers

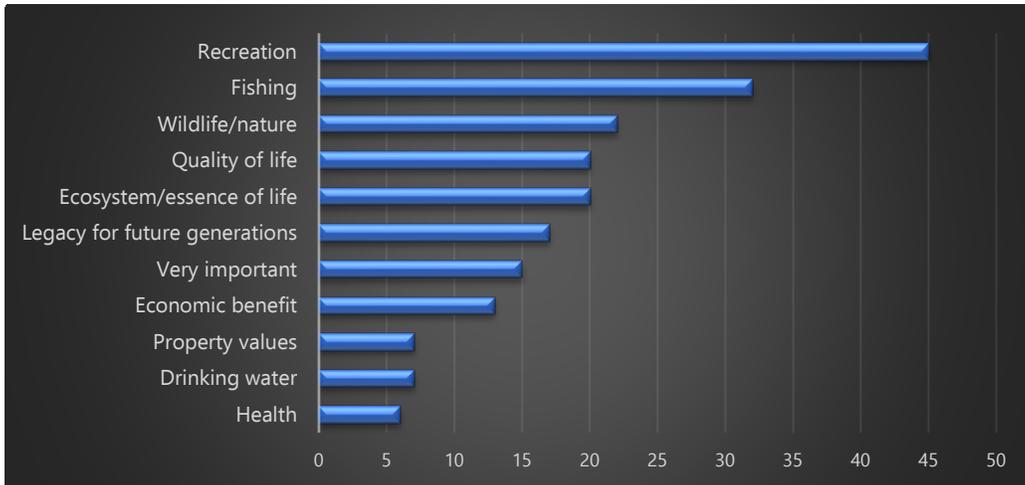
More than 200 members of the various Itasca County lake associations responded to the online water quality survey, and 25 lakes were represented (see above). The survey responses were received from June through October 2019.

How do you perceive the overall water quality of lakes in Itasca County?



People perceive water quality in Itasca County lakes as being generally quite good (high or very high), with only 11% feeling the quality is less than high or very high.

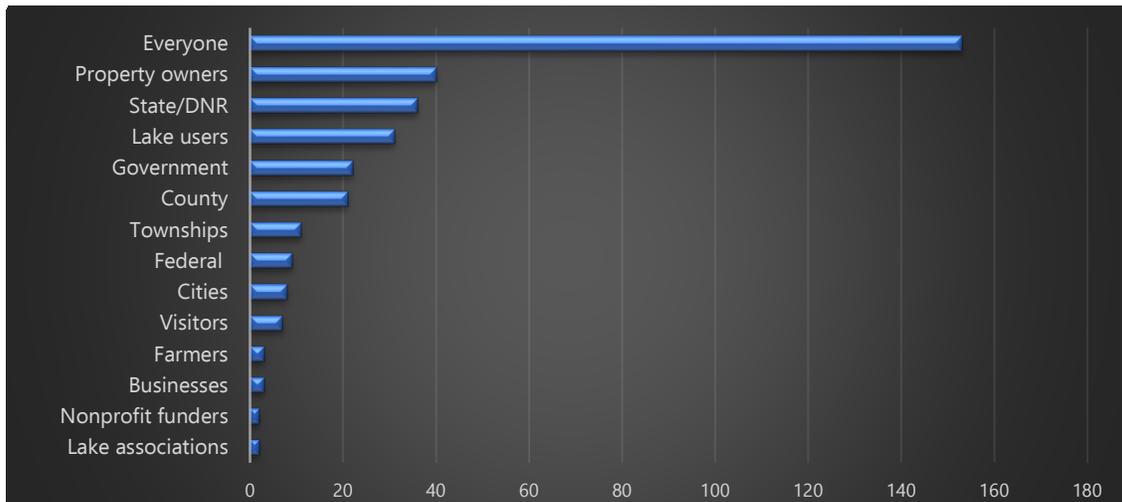
In what ways is the quality of our water (lakes, rivers and streams) important to you?



Thirty-eight percent of the respondents identified recreation or fishing as the reason why water quality is important to them. Another 35% provided philosophical or altruistic reasons to explain why maintaining good water quality is important:

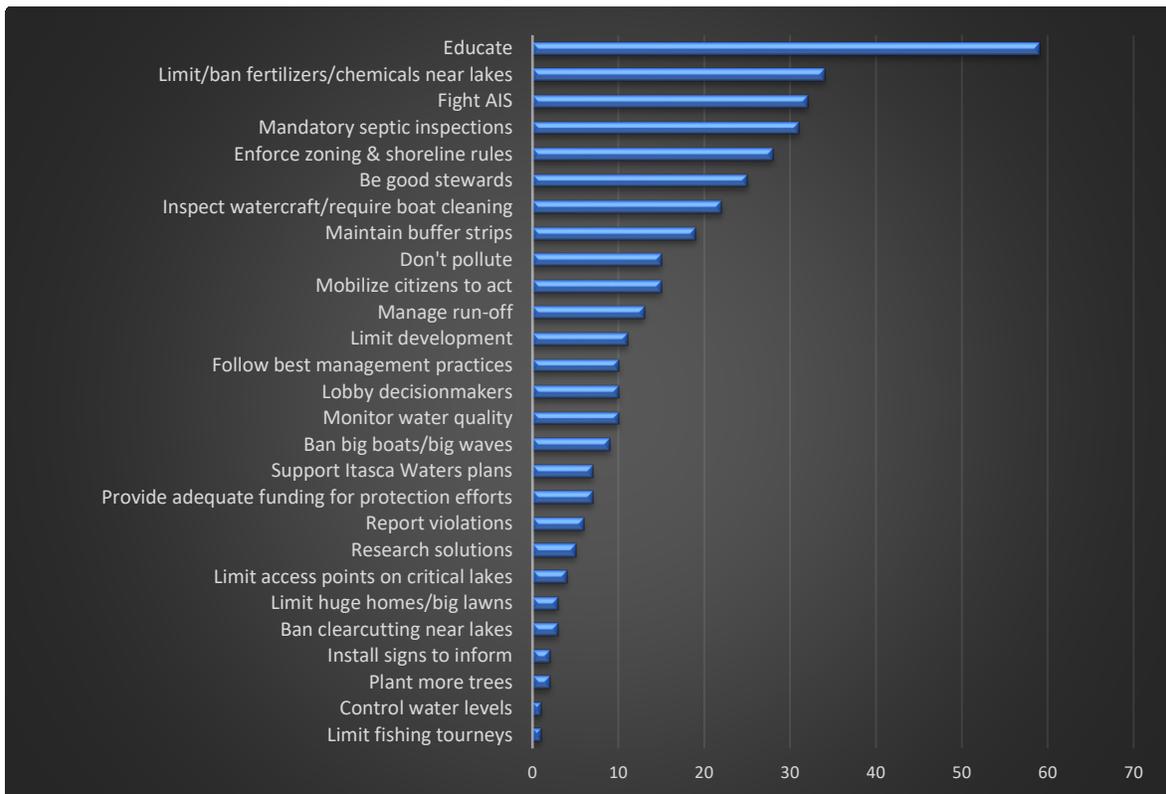
- *“It’s the essence of life”*
- *“It’s the main reason to live here”*
- *“It’s our future and our children’s future.”*

Who is responsible for protecting the quality of our water, and why?



Most all respondents to this question identified multiple parties being responsible for lake water quality, and nearly half of those felt “everyone” has ownership in protecting water quality. Nearly a third (31%) felt that some level of government is responsible, with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources being the most frequently cited as having primary responsibility for managing water quality. Finally, one of every five respondents felt that lakeshore property owners and lake users were primarily responsible.

What should we do as Itasca County residents or landowners to ensure good water quality for the long term?



Survey respondents had a wide range of ideas about what Itasca County residents or landowners should do to ensure good water quality, but education showed up as the single most recommended common action (15% of all responses). This question, more than any other in the survey, seemed to prompt multiple responses, and this follows suit with other stakeholder surveys. Of note, however, 46% of the people responding to the survey showed support for a range of initiatives that would restrict or limit some of their or their neighbors' uses of the lake or property:

- Enforce zoning and shoreline use regulations.
- Inspect watercraft at boat landings or require boat cleaning when moving from lake to lake.
- Limit development around lakes.
- Limit access points, especially on critical lakes.
- Ban large boats and the wakes they create.
- Limit the size of home and lawns next to lakeshore.
- Maintain buffer strips and manage runoff.

While there is a percentage that would resist any additional limits on their use of personal property, lake association members appear to be more inclined to accept usage constraints if it means maintaining or improving the quality of the water they enjoy.

3. Fishing Guides

Itasca County fishing guides by the numbers

- Interviewed 13 fishing guides between January and March 2020
- Three are full-time guides; others guide on a part-time basis in Itasca County and throughout northern Minnesota (Dale Anderson, Brian & Sue Harris, Brad Hawthorne, Bill Heig, Tom Neustrom, Grant Prokop, Cubby Skelly, Jeff Sundin, Randy Topper, Justin Wiese, Abe Wolf, Reed Ylitalo)

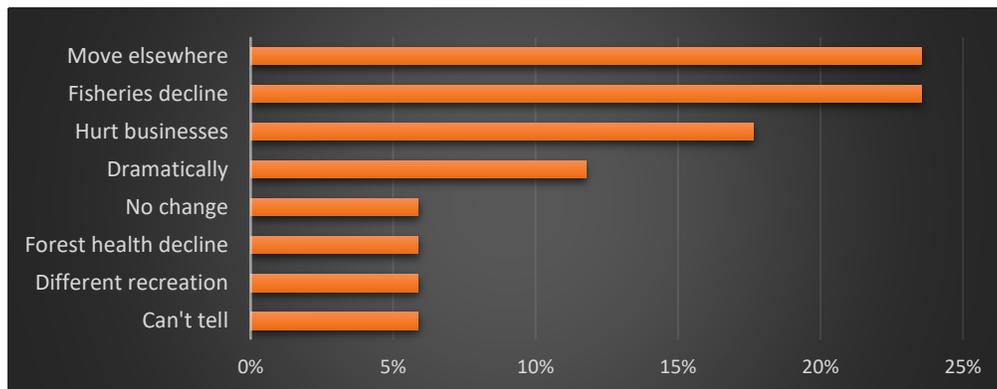
What is your understanding of the impact of good water quality on the economy of Itasca County?

Every one of the fishing guides interviewed agrees that water quality is vital to their business interests. Most of the professional guides in the area rely on other work for their livelihood, but all recognize that the water quality in Itasca County lakes is a huge attraction for visitors and permanent residents alike. They also are fully aware that water quality has an impact beyond their own livelihoods, that it keeps the entire fishing industry and its supply chain vibrant.

“People want a vacation destination with purity: pure air, pure water. For my customers, it’s pretty important to them to be able to experience those kinds of surroundings. As you look at the impact that tourism has on this county’s economy, you’d have to conclude that maintaining our clean water and air is vitally important.”

Just as they appreciate the impact of Itasca County’s clean-water asset, they realize it can’t be taken for granted. “People come here for fishing and recreation, and this is the land of 10,000 lakes. They have a lot of other options if our lakes become unusable.”

How would your life be changed if we didn’t have clean water in Itasca County?



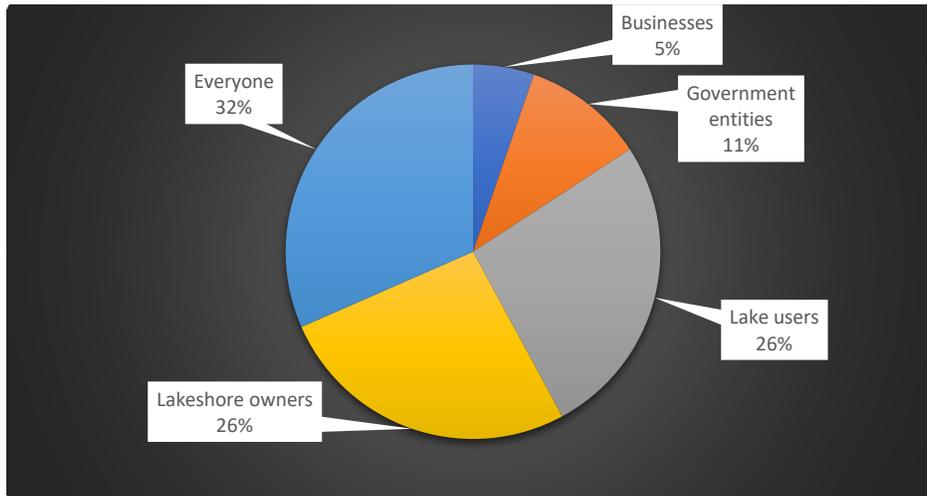
Most of the area’s guides live in Itasca County because of the work they love. Poor water quality in our lakes would cause most of them to leave the area or find new lakes on which to guide fishermen. Most understand that clean water benefits the fisheries resource.

Some of the more experienced guides are quick to tell stories about the change in lake water quality they’ve seen in Minnesota and even Itasca County. “At the end of the day when the smoke clears, it’s the quality of experience that brings people back here.” Some have witnessed a decline in the number of fish caught over the years here in Itasca County, but they acknowledge they’ve adapted to the changes.

Some are a bit mercenary about their work (“I take my guests to where we catch fish”), but others see the challenge extending beyond the number of fish in the lakes.

“I still see people who should know better, clearing lake lots down to the shoreline, and then they try to argue with the County or DNR to get around the guidelines. These are the same people who own businesses and property. This is an issue that shouldn’t be about political labels. We’re all responsible.”

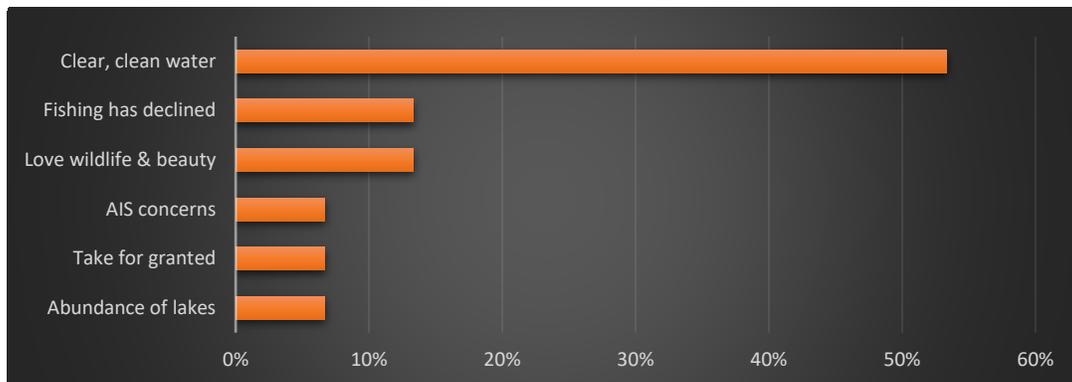
Who do you think is responsible for keeping the water clean and why?



Nearly all fishing guides acknowledge that the job of keeping lakes clean belongs to everyone, with more than half calling out lakeshore property owners and lake users as being particularly liable for that responsibility.

“The problem is always that people expect someone else to fix problems like this, but in reality, it’s a lifestyle issue that we all have responsibility for.”

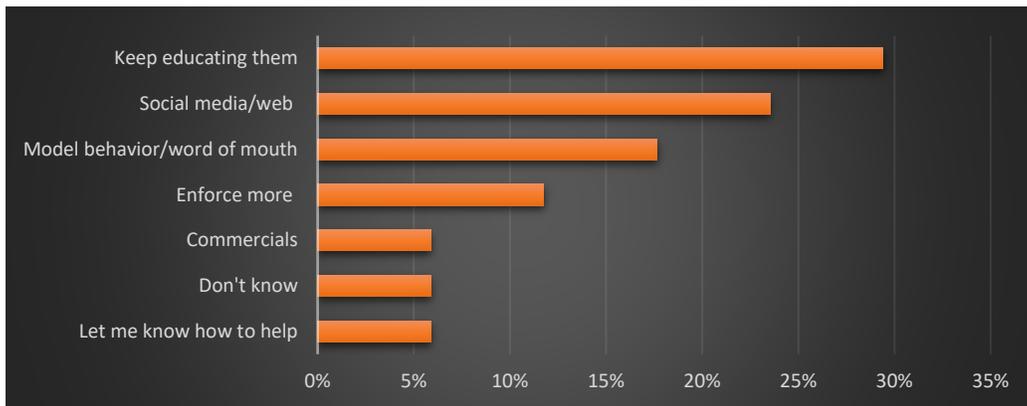
What do your guests think about the quality of water (lakes, rivers and streams) in Itasca County?



Most guides report that their guests are appreciative and impressed with the number, clarity and beauty of lakes in Itasca County (“We have something special here in northeastern Minnesota,” and “My guests think that we have some of the cleanest water they’ve ever seen, and that’s no doubt true”). However, guides can see evidence that things have changed, and not for the better.

“I do know that fishing today is not what it was when I first started guiding on these lakes 35 years ago. I’m not sure exactly why there’s been a decline, but I assume it’s a number of things: fishing pressure, netting, invasives. Things are changing.”

Do you have suggestions about how we could make the greatest impact with individual fishermen about how to take care of our water?



Most fishing guides are willing to help tell the story about the importance of clean water to their guests, and many already do that work as part of their standard interaction with fishing clients.

- “I am a conservationist, and that means I care about sustaining the fish resource.”
- “When you’re a guide, you do a lot more than fish. We talk about the quality of life, and our natural resources are the connection we share with visitors.”
- “If there’s anything more I can do, please let me know.”

These three comments seem to summarize the guides’ perspectives about communicating the importance of safeguarding water quality with their guests.

Fishing guides are open to using any form of communication that works, including traditional advertising, web-based tools and social media.

Do you have any other observations about water quality you’d like to share?

Guides are business people who see the lakes in our area as their workspace. Even though they are viewed by some other lake users as prima donnas who give lip service to the notion of conservation, they expressed sentiments that exhibit a genuine concern for the lakes that provide them a livelihood.

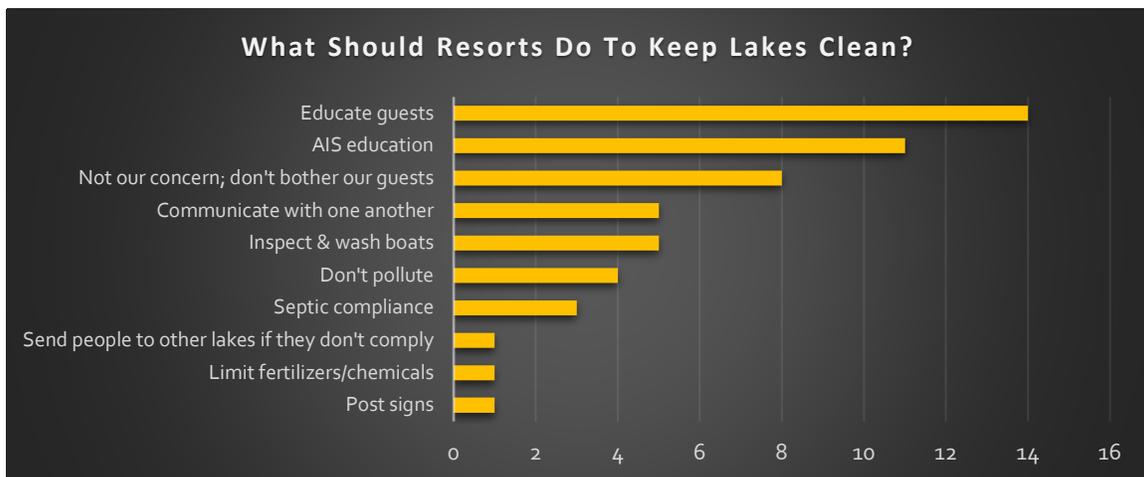
- If you use the lake a lot, learn to love it for what it is. Learn to love the weeds that tangle up your fishing gear.
- People tend to forget or not be aware of other things that affect water quality, like the storm sewers in cities like Grand Rapids. If I didn’t work for the City, I would have no idea of the efforts the City puts into managing our storm sewers and filtering out pollutants before the water runs into the Mississippi River.
- I realize there is much more to learn and promote about the links between having healthy forests and having clean water. More and more private landowners in watershed areas are becoming aware of the impact that they have on water quality by doing some good forest management.
- Some of the hardest people to work with are lakeshore owners who figure they’ve bought their piece of heaven (“I’ve got mine”); they are intolerant and make it hard to cooperate with. They only accept a narrow way of doing things.
- I truly believe that some of the things we’ve done in the name of improving water quality have made it a lot of our lakes susceptible to invasive species. We may need to pull back a bit on the effort to make these lakes “clean” so we can protect them better from the spread of invasives.

- Most fishermen aren't lakeshore owners, and we need to have different messages for different audiences.
- Any kind of drainage from salted roads is a big problem for our lakes. I think we should be focusing on that more than we do.
- When you're on Highway 2 and every other rig you see on the road is worth \$100,000 of boat, motor, truck and trailer, these guys are also rigged up with the best technology. Those fish can run but they can't hide, and these guys know how to catch them. You know, there used to be hardly a walleye in Red Lake, and now that's one of the premier fisheries. We can manage these lakes back to health if we want to.
- The DNR has responsibility to come up with rules, but it would help if they cared less about making rules and more about practical ways to get things done.

4. Resorts

Resorts by the numbers

- 28 resort owners interviewed on 17 different area lakes
- Do you have **boat washing stations** at your resort?
 - Yes: 5
 - No: 23



Resort owners, like other stakeholders, were quick to suggest more education should be provided to encourage people to take care of water quality, and most of them felt lake users respect water quality once they're made aware their behavior can affect water quality. Several resorts already assist customers with washing boats, providing information about the behaviors they can take to preserve water quality.

There are a small number of resort owners who will not confront their guests about their behavior relative to water quality issues. In some cases they felt it was not necessary (they don't perceive a problem) or they don't feel it's their place to challenge their customers' behavior or do anything that might deter them from patronizing their business.

5. Realtors

By the Numbers

- 36 realtors contacted (8 phone interviews; 20 participants in 2 focus group; 8 online survey responses)
- Research conducted March 2020

What is your understanding of the impact of good water quality on the economy of Itasca County?



Realtors in Itasca County clearly understand the value of the area’s water resources, and they work hard to promote them. The quality of the water in the county’s lakes, rivers and streams is “unmatched,” many believe. Others, echoing the same sentiment, said that it is “the basis for the whole ‘up north’ concept.” Proximity to lakes and other water in the County drives property values, and they acknowledge that the quality of water can be measured directly in monetary terms (the better the water quality, the more valuable the adjoining lakeshore).

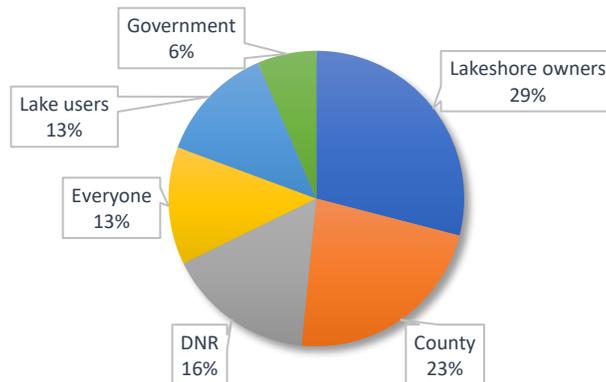
On the flip side, they are quick to point out factors that detract from that quality: aquatic invasive species and poorly enforced zoning regulations. Some of the lakes in the county are tannic, naturally occurring darker water that is an aesthetic but not a purity factor. They do their best to explain these lakes are “stained” but not polluted.

At least one experienced realtor observed that ensuring good water quality is “not just about managing the quality of the water in the lakes, it’s about managing the activity on all the land surrounding the lakes.” They went on: “People don’t appreciate that the real battle for water quality in a lake is won or lost on the land around the lake.”

Some offered a cautionary note: “If our regulations are too tight, then we get a reputation that we’re not welcoming to visitors. I’ve already had people complain about the DNR, and I don’t want to be in the middle.”

Realtors, aware of property values throughout the area, note that the quality of our drinking water even has an impact on the value of property in towns, too. They also believe that awareness of water quality is more important and significant to buyers now than it has been in recent years.

Who do you think is responsible for keeping the water clean and why?

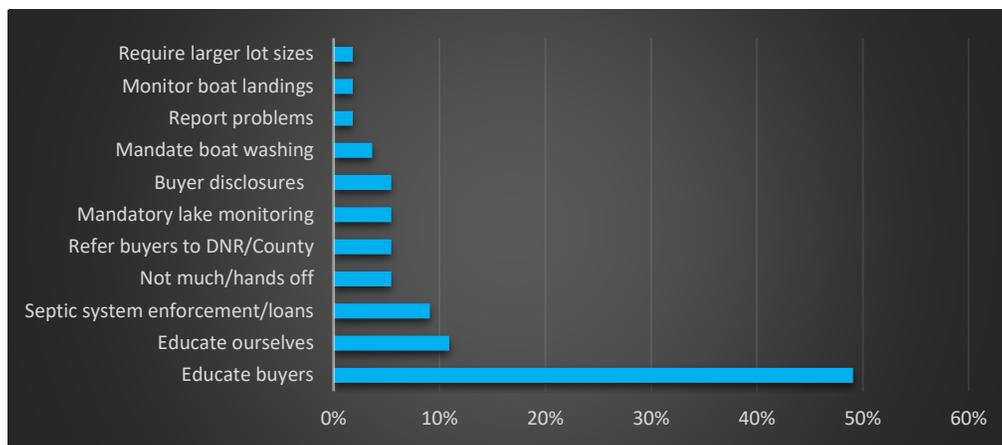


There is a strong sense among realtors that lakeshore owners and users (42%) are largely responsible for maintaining the quality of lakes and other water bodies in Itasca County. The notion of individual responsibility is pervasive (“Whoever uses our lakes should take responsibility for what they do on or in the water” and “Property owners are the first line of defense in keeping our waters clean, and we need to educate them”).

An equal percentage of respondents put that responsibility on government, especially Itasca County and the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR). The DNR and the Itasca County Zoning Department are the enforcers of rules and regulations. While realtors appreciate the role of government in managing water quality, they offer suggestions for improvement:

- They want clearer, more understandable communications.
- They recommend stricter enforcement of existing regulations.
- They would prefer a one-stop shop for information about water quality guidelines for all units of government.
- Finally, they suggest financial incentives for landowners whose septic systems are not up to code, along with strict enforcement to address noncompliance.

What role could real estate agents play in helping protect the quality of water in Itasca County?



Continuing to educate lakeshore buyers is far and away the most important role realtors see for themselves in helping to maintain and improve lake water quality. Most realize they are ambassadors for promoting water quality, which as noted earlier, is one of the most attractive features of Itasca County. They are eager supporters of efforts by others to invest in activities to preserve or improve water quality.

Those realtors who accept an educator’s role for themselves had suggestions about what tools they need to do that job well:

- Online resources
- Social media
- Brochures (brief and easy to understand)
- Continuing education about water quality regulations and best practices

A smaller yet significant number of area realtors don’t want to be perceived as enforcers or “in the middle” of the process of explaining lakeshore guidelines. They see this as the government’s job and, while willing to refer buyers to government information sources, don’t want to discourage landowners from using their land as they see fit.

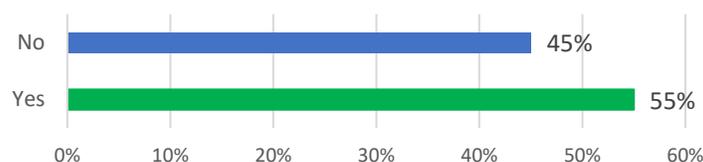
Again, some realtors fault Itasca County for not following through as well as they should in enforcing regulations, particularly septic system code compliance, or providing significant financial resources to incentivize compliance. Others suggest there be more education about use of fertilizers and lakeshore buffer strips.

The realities of the real estate industry are also recognized. Most realtors do their work on a part-time basis, and turnover is high. Therefore, the work of educating these folks must be ongoing. “We need to shoulder that responsibility,” was a theme that came through from many, and some suggested having buyers sign a disclosure statement to verify they had been educated about water quality best practices.

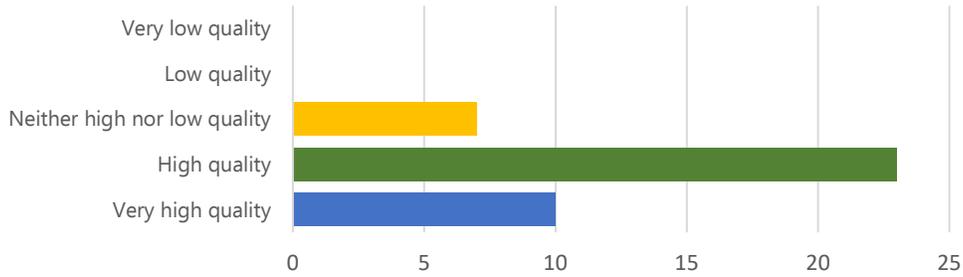
6. Grand Rapids Business Community

The following report summarizes the responses from three sources: a Grand Rapids Chamber of Commerce member survey (September 2019); a focus group of Chamber board members; and a survey of the Downtown Business Association (January 2020).

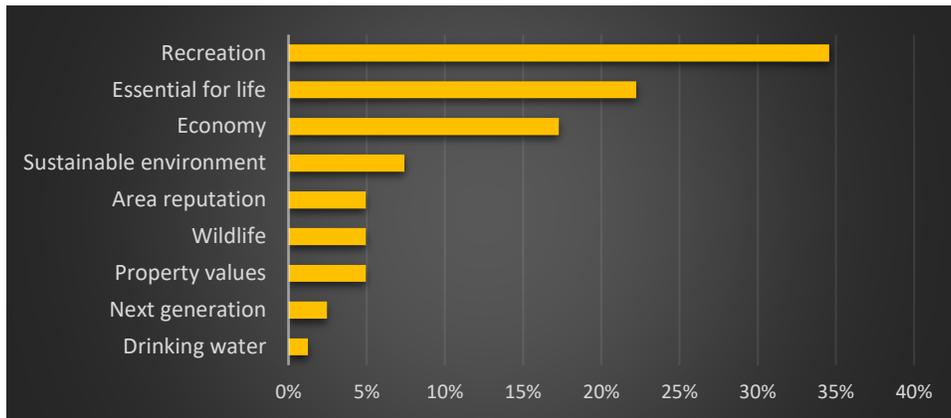
Do you own lakeshore in Itasca County?



How do you perceive the overall water quality of the lakes in Itasca County?

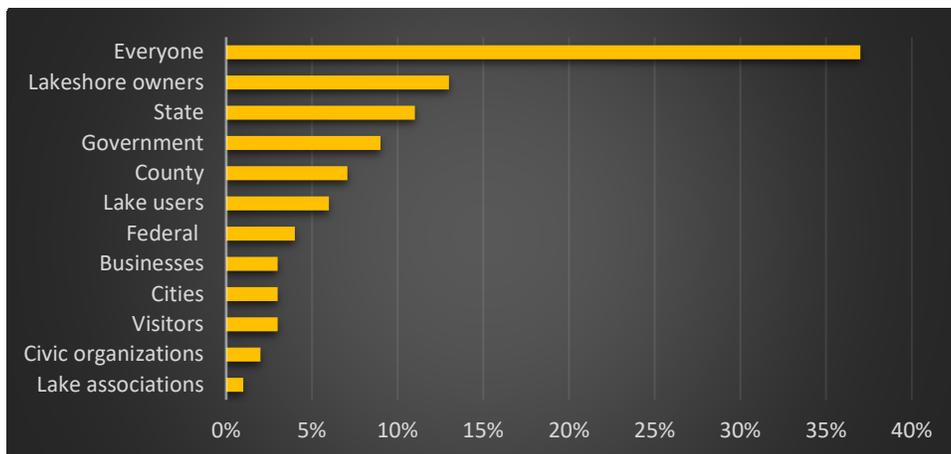


In what ways is the quality of our water (lakes, rivers and streams) important to you?



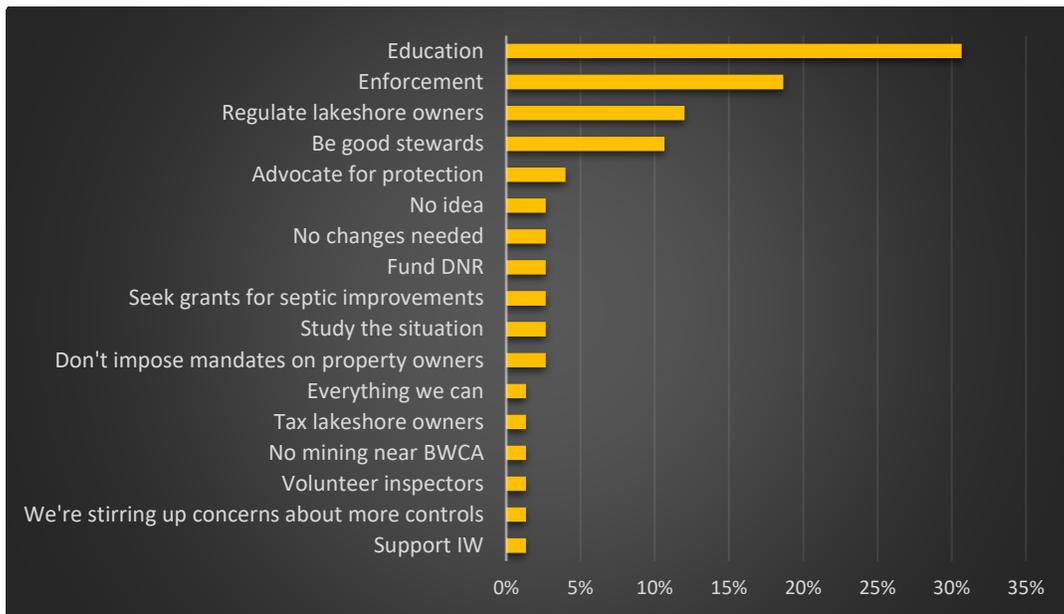
Half of the business owners felt that water quality was important for recreation or the area’s economy. Others linked water quality to property values or the area’s reputation as an attractive place to live, two factors that also relate to the area’s economy.

Who is responsible for protecting the quality of our water, and why?



There was a strong understanding among the business community that we all have a responsibility to maintain water quality of our lakes. At the same time, even more respondents believed “government” should have the primary responsibility, with more than half of everyone who referenced “government” or some unit of government identifying the State and Itasca County as having primary roles.

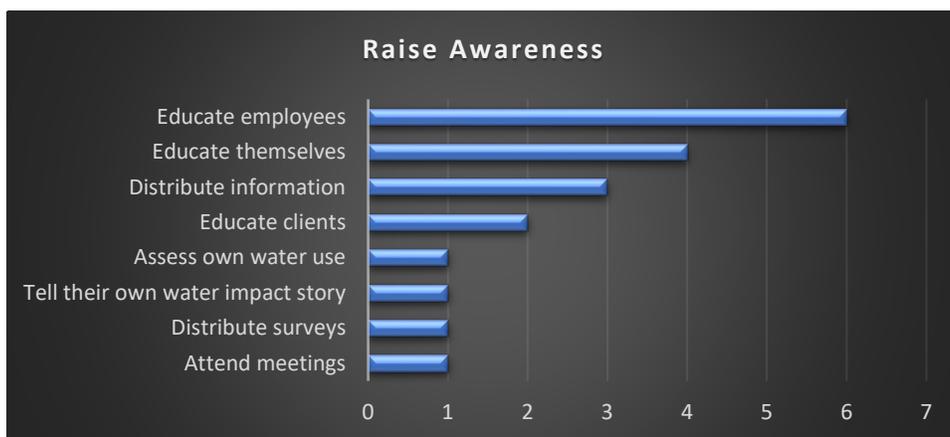
What should we do as Itasca County residents or landowners to ensure good water quality for the long term?



The thematic consistency of thinking among Chamber members broke down when asked about what people should do to ensure good water quality. One-third believed more education and advocacy for clean water are needed. Another 30% felt that more enforcement and regulation of lakeshore property owners (seen as the primary influencers of water quality) was necessary. Ten percent of all respondents felt that things were acceptable as they are today, had no idea what to do, or felt that property owners should not be told how to use their property. One respondent suggested that this study process was stirring up concerns about “more controls.”

How might the business community or individual businesses help protect the water quality in Itasca County?

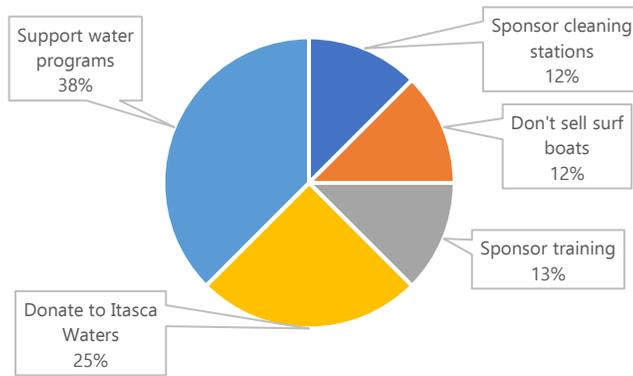
1. *Raise awareness and educate.*



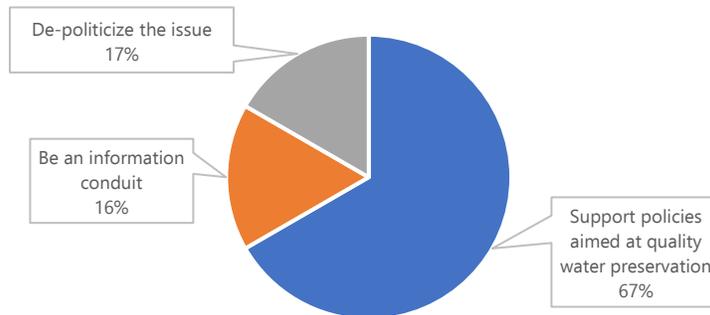
2. *Be stewards of and advocate for clean water.*



3. *Make financial contributions towards protecting water quality.*



4. *Influence legislation.*



Other proactive ideas

- Find a solution to eliminate AIS
- Sell products that promote water quality
- Plant a lawn that helps filter pollutants
- Stop using fertilizer
- Install rainwater recycling systems

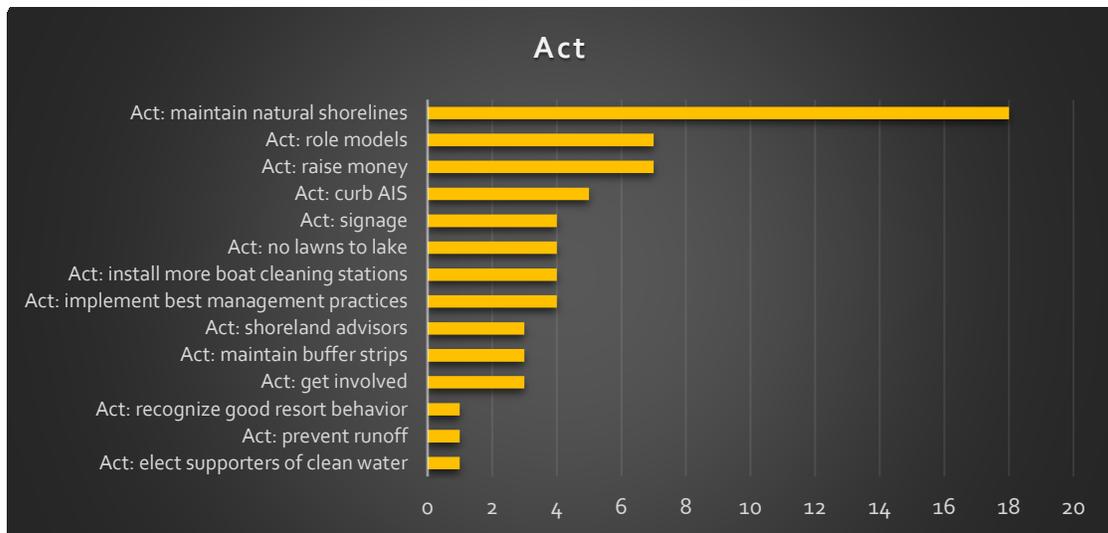
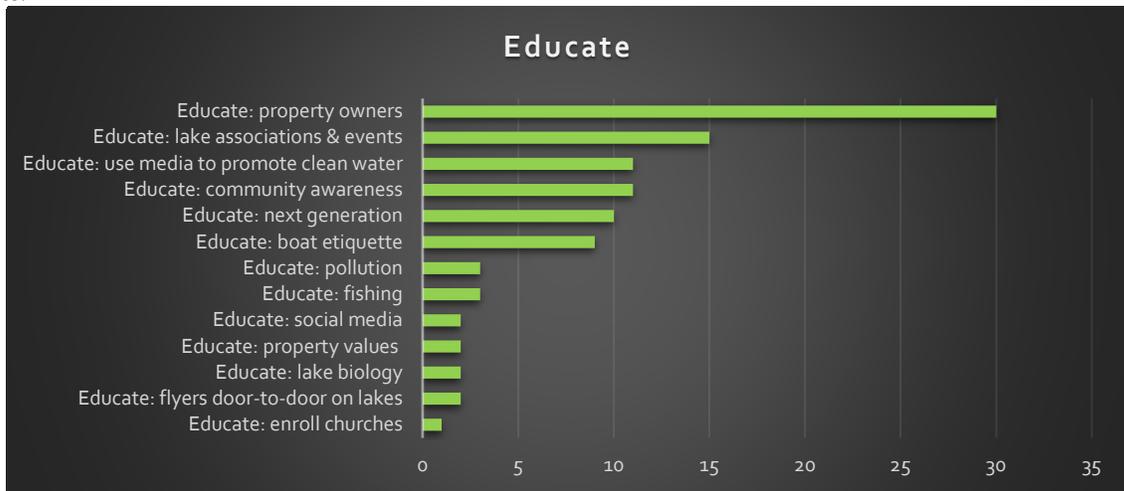
7. General Public Human-Centered Design Focus Groups

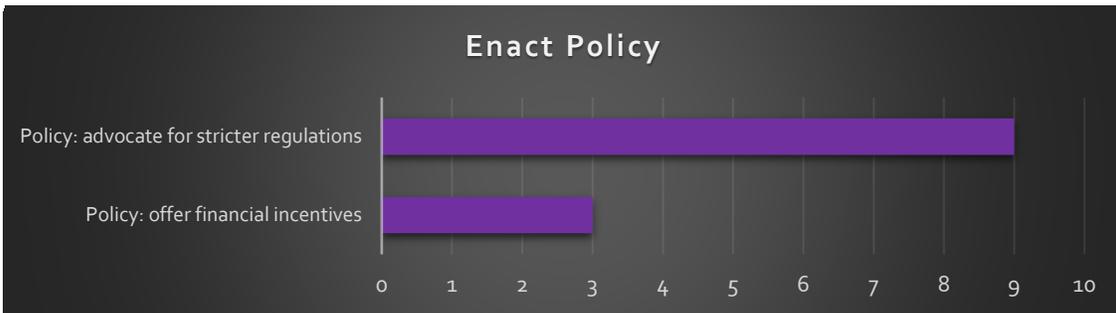
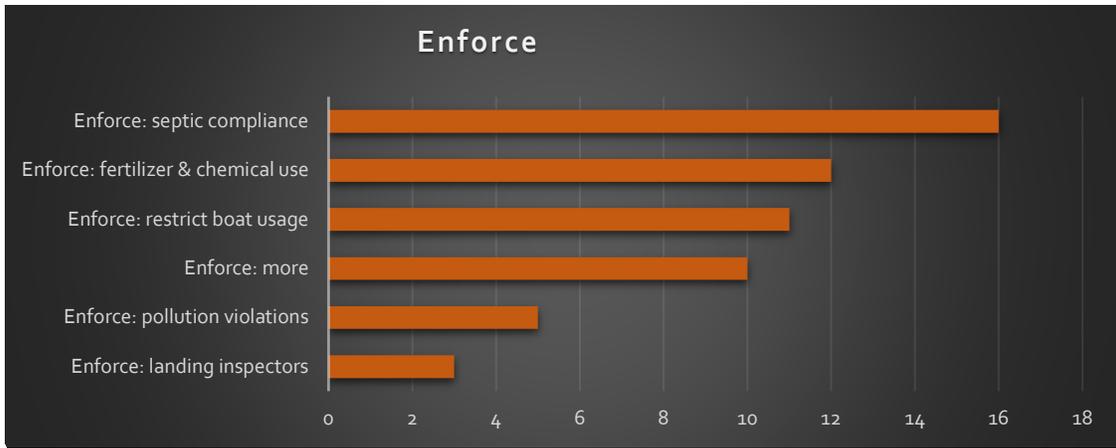
- 8 facilitated human-centered ideation session discussing water quality
- 235 responses
- Meetings convened July-Oct 2019

The facilitated focus groups included broad ranges of people from throughout the county: lakeshore owners, business owners, part-time residents, life-long residents, lake users, and more. The feedback about what to do about water quality in area lakes fell into four categories:

- Educate: 43%
- Act: 28%
- Enforce: 24%
- Enact policy: 5%

The specific summary of recommendations in each of the categories are displayed in the following four charts.



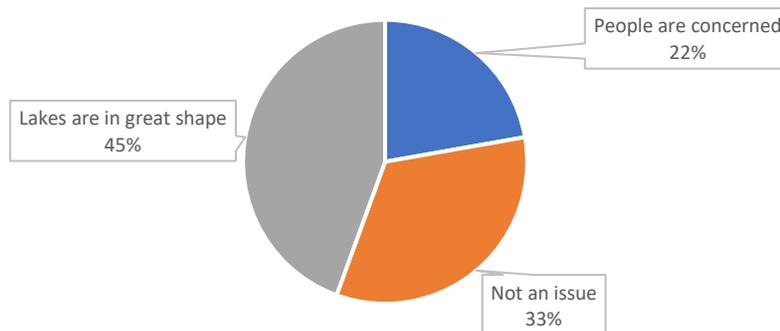


8. County Board and Grand Rapids City Council

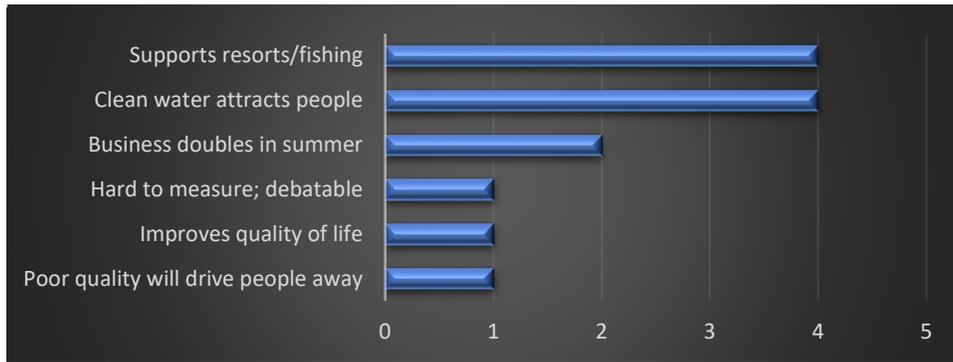
By the numbers:

- 5 County Commissioners interviewed (May-July 2019)
- 5 Grand Rapids city councilors interviewed (July-August 2019; April 2020)

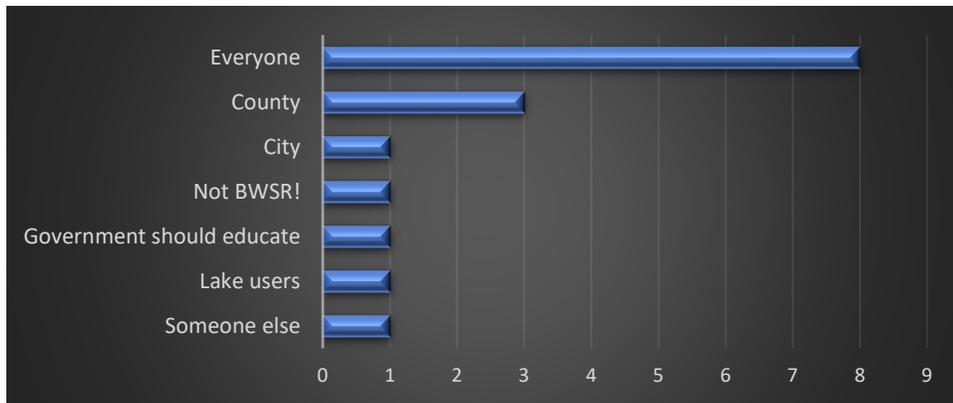
What do your constituents think about the quality of water (lakes, rivers and streams) in Itasca County?



What is your understanding of the impact of good water quality on the economy of Itasca County?



Who is responsible for water quality in Itasca County?



What do you think the County/City should do to protect water quality in our area?

