

Tip Sheets 1-16 offered ideas, strategies, tools and other information to help you develop and maintain an effective public outreach effort. This Tip Sheet highlights individuals and organizations that have employed many of the techniques discussed in previous Tip Sheets to develop very successful outreach programs.

PE Tip Sheet No. 17:

Award Winning Public Outreach Efforts



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As water quality professionals, we all strive to protect our precious water resources using the best available technologies and practices. We have also learned to employ effective techniques and proven approaches to inform the general public of our efforts and engage them in our water resource protection and conservation endeavors.

Many individuals and organizations deserve accolades for their excellent outreach efforts, so the FWEA has created Public Education Awards in recognition of these efforts. The awards are intended to encourage utilities and other water-quality organizations to incorporate public education and outreach into their operating plans and to provide examples of successful public education programs and best practices. They recognize individuals, organizations, and events/campaigns for significant accomplishments in developing public outreach programs and integrating public education as a core element of wastewater and water utility planning and management.

The first-ever Public Education Awards were bestowed this past April at the Florida Water Resources Conference in Orlando. Here are the accomplishments of the 2006 Public Education Awards winners.

Individuals Can Make a Difference

Kelvin L. Baker, North Miami Beach assistant city manager and director of public services, was selected to receive the Public Education Award in the individual category for his exceptional water conservation education and community outreach efforts. Baker joined the city in 1994 to head up its Public Works Department. Three years later he was placed in charge consolidating Public Works and Public Utilities Departments as the city merged both groups to form its Public Services Department.

Serving a population of 42,000 residents and a water utility customer base of over 180,000, Baker provides guidance and leadership to all operations of the Public Services Department with a focus on public education and positive, mutual communications. He coalesced the city's outreach resources into a Water Education Team comprised of the utility's public information, water conservation, and neighborhood relations offices.

Through Baker's leadership, the city's Public Services Department has established a new model with a documented history of proactive, innovative public communications initiatives. His public education/communication initiatives are designed to actively engage and inform the utility's customers. They are resulting in greater consumer awareness of water quality and resource issues.

In a letter to the city's public services customers, Baker wrote, "As we forge forward in updating the city's infrastructure, addressing city, state and federal mandates and regulations, expanding the water plant and enhancing water quality, we remain committed to our many education, conservation and

community outreach initiatives. As a result, we continue, among all else, to develop and implement a myriad of programs designed for adults and youth in our service areas."

Through these outreach initiatives and his guidance, the city of North Miami Beach Public Services Department is recognized as a leader in the water utility industry. Many of the public outreach programs and techniques he has instituted have become models for the utility industry. Public education/communications initiatives employed by the utility have been highlighted in various trade publications and have received awards from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and other organizations for their excellence. Countless professional papers, many about the city's public outreach efforts, have been published and presented at state and national conferences.

Visit the city's Web site at www.nmb-works.com to view the innovative outreach elements used by the city's Water Education Team.

Organizations Can Make an Impact, Regardless of Size

Big Utility, Big Results

Pinellas County focuses on public education as the key to water stewardship. In recognition of its belief and practices as caretaker of the environment and water resources, Pinellas County Utilities received the Public Education Award in the large organization category for excellence in its environmental education and public outreach efforts.

The Utilities Department has two education centers, one located at the newly renovated South Cross Bayou Water Reclamation Facility and the second at the Cross Bar Ranch Wellfields. At South Cross Bayou, wastewater is collected, undergoes advanced treatment, and is then returned to the community as reclaimed water to be used for irrigation purposes. This facility also captures methane gas from the biosolids digesters for use as fuel to dry the biosolids, which is then processed into high-grade fertilizer pellets.

The Cross Bar Ranch Wellfield is the site

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Kelvin Baker, city of North Miami Beach, is the first Public Education Award winner in the individual category.

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of a formal school program teaching about watersheds and freshwater resources. Environmental tours of the wellfields are given to the public, showcasing good environmental management and preservation of resources.

At South Cross Bayou, Pinellas County Utilities developed the Discover a Cleaner Tomorrow Tour and Education Program. This program grew from the Utilities Department's commitment to educating the community about the vital role of clean water as it relates to quality of life and the importance of environmental stewardship of water resources.

Discover a Cleaner Tomorrow consists of two programs. One is geared for fifth grade through college and the other for the general public. The educational outreach program exposes visitors to the scientific processes involved in water reclamation and their role in conserving precious water resources. To facilitate the program's integration, quality assurance, and growth, a full-time Pinellas County School Board science educator was put under contract and permanently assigned to the site.

The Discover a Cleaner Tomorrow Program is a partnership among the Pinellas County Board of County Commissioners, Pinellas County Utilities, and the Pinellas County School Board. Both education centers are staffed with professional science educators, as well as utilities staff who are devoted to the mission of educating the public. Local teachers, professional consultants, and



Chris Helfrich of Boca Raton's Utility Services Department accepts the award in the medium organization category.

utilities staff combined resources to ensure that the South Cross Bayou curriculum met national and state education standards. Helping the students prepare for the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) was an important component.

The school and public education programs are very extensive. The highlight of the South Cross Bayou learning experience is a 2.5-hour on-site tour taught by the certified science educator, during which the students learn real-life science lessons while seeing how the wastewater is treated.

The education program was made more complete by the addition of a tram holding 40 people to move around the 35-acre site, informational signs at each tour stop, and a modern public education center.

Through the county's outreach efforts, students and the general public develop a sense of collective responsibility for the preservation of water resources. They are encouraged to make educated, environmentally sound decisions as they lead their lives. As proof of the Utilities Department's success, there has been a 40-percent reduction in potable water usage from 1989 to 2005 because of greater public awareness about water conservation and the expanded use of reclaimed water.

Medium Category Winner
Focuses on Outreach

The city of Boca Raton received the Public Education Award in the medium organization category for the city's excellence in its water and wastewater utilities public

outreach efforts. The city's Utility Services Department provides treatment, distribution, maintenance, and storage of potable water for human consumption, irrigation, and fire protection. It also treats and disposes of wastewater, all in conformance with local, state and federal standards to protect the health and welfare of the residents of Boca Raton and adjacent service areas.

The Utility Services Department has aggressive and multi-faceted Public Education/Outreach programs that result in a unique partnership between the department and customers. Public outreach/education programs conducted by the department involve participation at local environmental fairs, presentations to neighborhood association groups and the Boca Raton Chamber of Commerce, resulting in over 600 contacts a year with the citizens of Boca Raton.

These programs continue to grow in 2006. The Utility Services Department conducts tours of the water treatment and wastewater treatment facilities for local schools, homeowners associations, and civic groups upon request. A flyer announcing the department's public education/outreach programs has been distributed to local school principals and to all city employees in an effort to increase participation.

There is value created to the department, the citizens of Boca Raton, and ultimately the environment by these programs and activities. The value of the programs to the department is seen through better-educated customers who eagerly participate in water conservation programs and support the efforts of



Jan Tracy accepts Pinellas County Utilities' award in the large organization category.



Maureen Phillips represents the city of Titusville, selected for the award in the campaign category.

the department. The citizens become educated in the processes utilized by their water/wastewater treatment provider, water conservation, and current issues, resulting in a direct and positive impact on the fragile ecosystem. The ultimate resulting value created is the wise use and protection of our valuable water resources.

Well Organized Campaigns Can Produce Measurable Results

The city of Titusville was selected to receive the Public Education Award in the campaign category for the city's excellence in its Chlorine Dosing Project public outreach efforts. The Chlorine Dosing Project was initiated in response to a series of water quality complaints from some residents in various sections of one neighborhood located at the end of the distribution system. Because of these complaints, the water distribution network needed to be flushed with higher-than-normal but still safe amounts of chlorine to wash out organic and other matter that was deposited naturally in the water pipes over time.

The project had the potential to cause substantial negative customer reaction and was successfully completed with relatively little negative customer feedback because of the public education campaign initiated by Titusville's Water Resources Department. By being proactive and developing a comprehen-

sive public education plan for the Chlorine Dosing Project that addressed the primary concerns of water customers—namely safety, taste, and odor—Titusville was able to prevent a host of public-relations issues fueled by customer misunderstandings and concerns.

The public education campaign emphasized the city's efforts to ensure that Titusville water customers received only the highest quality water possible. It focused on the actions being taken by the Water Resources Department, described what customers could expect during the dosing process, and reassured water consumers as to the safety of their water.

Personalized letters, billing inserts, press releases, Web site notices, and a presentation repeatedly aired on the city's government access TV channel were employed to inform water consumers of the project and its potential impacts. When it became apparent that the dosing would need to be extended beyond the initial estimated completion date, these same steps were again undertaken, except for the billing insert and the replacement of the press release with a display ad.

In addition to the communication techniques used before, during, and after the dosing, a very important aspect of the public education campaign was the Chlorine Dosing Hotline. This special phone line was established in early December 2004 and remained

in existence through to the end of May 2005.

The phone number for this line was referred to in the public notices for the campaign and was set up with an announcement that provided the dates for the dosing and addressed what effects the customer may experience as a result of the dosing. During office hours, callers could speak to a representative who was well versed on the Chlorine Dosing Project.

Now It's Your Turn

You and/or your agency deserve acknowledgement and kudos for the fine work you are doing to educate your customers and other stakeholders. So—what are you waiting for? Apply for a 2007 Public Education Award to showcase your efforts. You, too, can be winners in the eyes of your colleagues and constituents. Visit the Florida Water Environment Association Web site at www.fwea.org and click on Committees, then Public Education, to learn how to submit your potentially award-winning program for consideration. Applications are being accepted now.

You can download a reprint of this and other PE Tip Sheets from the FWEA web site at <http://fwea.cnsusa.com/cms/index.cfm?primarykeylist=,234,248,266,1669,1675> ♡