



Allegheny County
Conservation District™

Up a Creek Without A Paddle

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District Manager

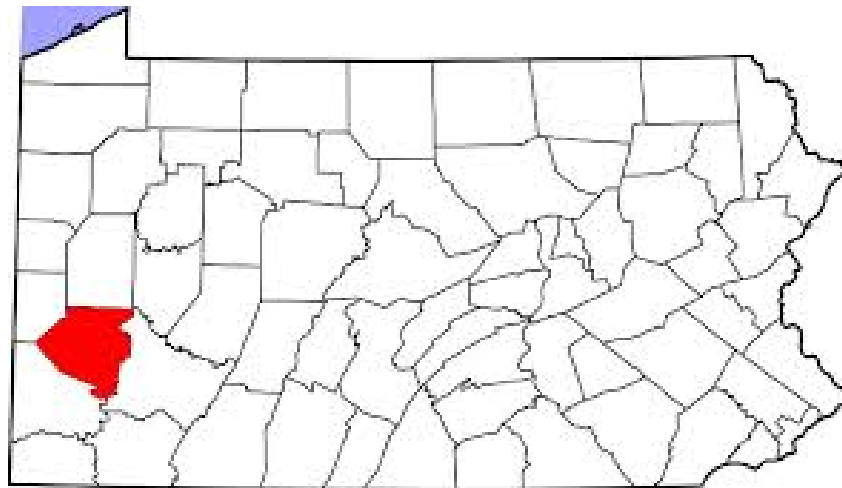
Allegheny County, PA



- “Allegheny” is of Lenape origin, meaning “fine river”
- Claimed by the French in 1749, a focal point of the French and Indian war



Allegheny County, PA

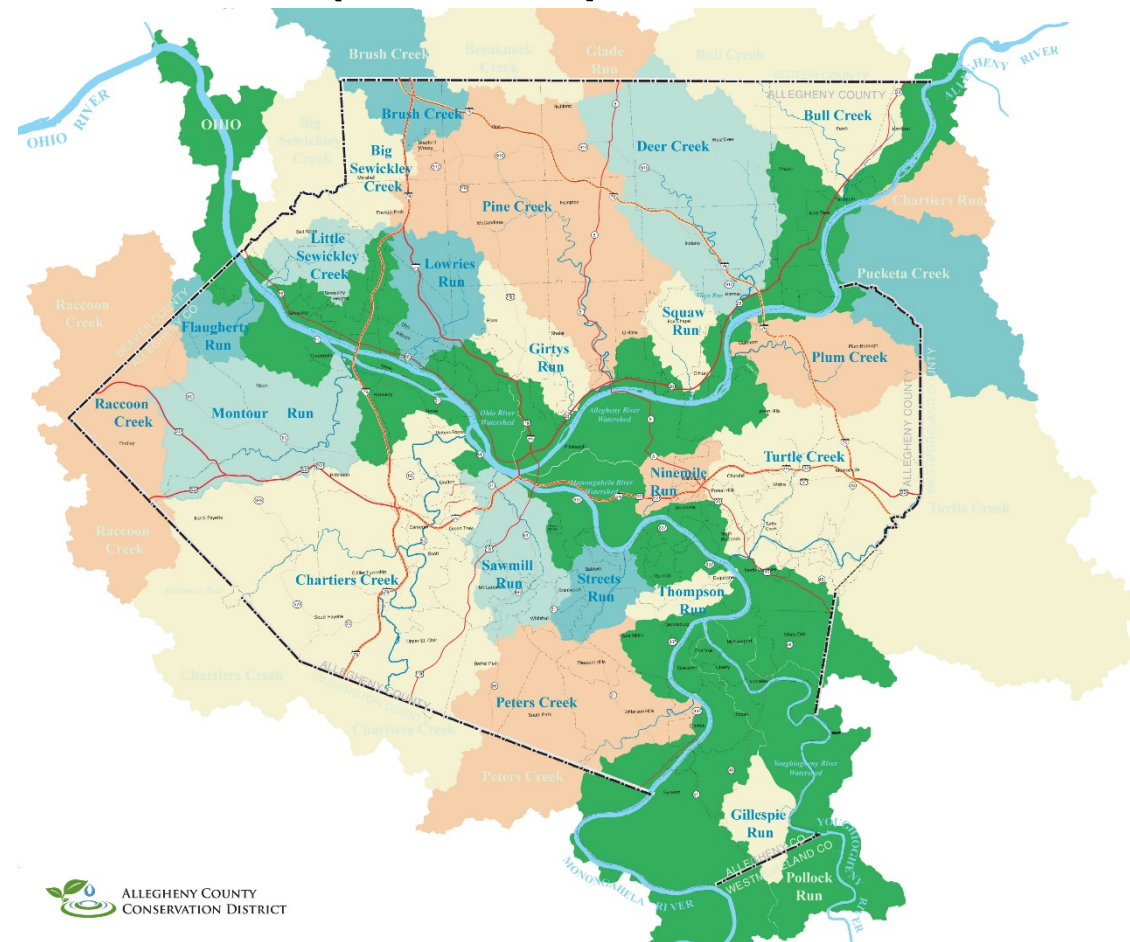


- Once steel capital of the world, “Hell with the lid off,” typhoid capital of the world
- Now voted most livable three times
- Comprises 745 square miles, of which 2% is water
- Third largest inland port in the country

Allegheny County, PA



- Origin of the Ohio River, created by the joining of the Allegheny and Monongahela Rivers
- Metro Population – 1.25M (2014)
- 130 municipalities



Early Leader Among CD's



- Pennsylvania's first districts were formed in 1945 under the authority of the Conservation District Law (Act 217)
- Within a year, nine districts were created, with Allegheny among them (out of 67 counties)

Maintained Leadership Role for Decades



Conservation Awards Made

PITTSBURGH (AP) — The Allegheny County conservation district has been named winner of the Goodyear Award for the best district in the state.

Richard Crawford of Juniata County was named conservationist of the year.

The awards were announced at the 24th conference of the Pennsylvania Association of Conservation District directors here.

October 21, 1971

Took New Opportunities in Stride



District Entered Troubled Times



- Leadership did not recognize the need to adapt the organization in order to keep up with growing demands
 - Science changed, but District could not adapt
 - Needs outstripped organizational capacity
 - Business processes worked at small scale but not at larger scale
 - No investment in technology, needed tools, staff, training; focus on building a rural education center

Organization Dysfunctional



- Business processes collapsed
 - Plan reviews were months behind
 - Files/records were in disorganized chaos
 - Reports were over two years late to the state
 - HR practices were unevenly applied and not aligned with personnel manual
 - Phones worked sporadically, computers were generations behind
 - Over 1,000 Quickbook accounts/deposits were not detailed

Lack of Investment in Programs



- No interest in program operation/ development
 - Watershed and agriculture programs funded by state grants, but staff was provided no support or tools (no computer, etc.)
 - Funding for Farm Preservation program and Roads subsidy program returned to state – over \$100,000

Organization Went Dark



- Input/output became totally centralized
- Staff not empowered or even allowed to do their own jobs
- No training or outside meetings
- No communication with community, the county, or state

Occurred despite large bank account!

Out of the Darkness...



2009 - planning meeting held between County and State Conservation Commission to discuss what had to be done:

- Option one - Shut it down
- Option two - Save the District
 - First, a new, highly qualified, strategically chosen board had to be appointed
 - Second, a well-administered strategic plan was needed

Enter New Leadership



Within a two year period, the board was replaced:

- Municipal stormwater engineer
- Civil/enviro. engineer from Carnegie Mellon University
- Executive Director of Penn State Extension program
- Engineer training inner city youths
- Only remaining dairy farmer in Allegheny County
- Elected municipal official serving for 20+ years
- Leading landscape contractor
- County Councilman
- Professional engineer and real estate developer

Strategic Plan Development Concurrently



- Members of the “old Board” said that a strategic plan had been done back in 1987 – ‘Why do we need a new one now (20 years later)? ‘
- They also said that it was a waste of money. But the SCC offered a \$2,000 reimbursement for expenses related to a new plan. So with that, the motion was approved.

Strategic Plan Called for Change



New Board member elected Chairman in January 2011, strategic plan adopted early 2011. Key points included:

- New location in an urban setting
- Hiring of an outreach/education director
- Succession plan – Manager in place for eight years, nearly 50 year employee; new type of management needed

New Leadership



- Manager offered a generous retirement buyout and executive recruiter contracted to run search – decided to look outside CDs
- New District Manager: engineer, non-profit experience, successful startup and turnaround history, extensive experience with running programs, successful at pursuing grant funds from public and private sources
 - **NO** experience with Conservation Districts!

The Early Days



- First day(s) - spent on phone with people yelling at me
- First night - panic attack
- First week – trying to get my arms around how bad it truly was (bad) and figuring out where to start
- (involved a lot of deep breathing)

Six Months of Rebuilding the Basics



First item on agenda: **CLEAN**



Six Months of Rebuilding the Basics



- Catch up on core business – hire temps, rebuild processes, create new information management system
- Catch up on reporting
- Prepare for move in five months:
 - Design new space, bid, and build out
 - Spec and build new filing system
 - New technology – phones and computers
 - Dump, pack, and move!

Rebuilding the Staff was Critical



- Put a push on training and professional development
- Provided tools
- Established clarity and equity– new personnel manual, new benefits structure, ethics framework
- Created flexible work environment – flex time, virtual office, telecommuting, etc.
- ***Empowerment and trust was key***
- Staff stepped up and made it all possible

2014 – Process and Program



- It was time to start looking at what our role in the community was and more importantly what it could be
- Benefit of splitting my first year over two very different Board chairs – both very heavily engaged:
 - First six months – organizational infrastructure
 - Second six months – fulfilling our civic role

So Where do We Start? With the Law!



Act 217 Provides a Broad Mission

*It is hereby declared to be the policy of the Commonwealth to provide for the **conservation of the soil, water, and related resources** of this Commonwealth, and for the control and prevention of soil erosion, and thereby to preserve natural resources; assist in the control of floods; prevent impairment of dams and reservoirs; assist in maintaining the navigability of rivers and harbors; preserve wildlife; preserve the tax base; protect public lands; and protect and promote the health, safety and general welfare of the people of the Commonwealth.*



What We Knew...



- We knew the community wanted much more
- We knew we had to start thinking about ourselves differently and do things differently
- We knew we had to rebrand
- We knew we had to grow – with additional staff and new tools, culturally, and professionally
- We knew we needed a plan

Pieces Started to Fall into Place



- We started with a new strategic plan
- Solution Centers emerged as an organizing principal – to provide technical assistance, resources, and leadership
- Foundation funding to encourage new thinking and programs (new fee structure to provide sustainability)
- Focus groups/advisory groups to keep us honest and give us new perspectives and ideas

Your Conservation Solution Center



- Soils solution center
- Agriculture solution center
- Watershed solution center
- Municipal stormwater solution center

At Two Years, Where Are We Now?



- Expanded E&S staff from 4 to 7; expanded admin from 1 to 3; added second Assistant Manager; hired 2 interns and 2 fellows – staff at 18
- Creating new information management system
- Awarded foundation grant and put fee increase in place
- Expanded delegation; exceed expectations!
- Built out programs
- And more!

Our Lessons Learned



- If the patient is dead, CPR won't kill them
- Your customers have some of the best ideas
- Learn/steal from your peers
- If you empower your staff and then challenge them, you may be surprised at the results
- Change is a slow process
- Recognize achievements no matter how small
- Say often: that was then, this is now