



2025 Strategic Communications: H2O Workshop

June 10 - 11 | DoubleTree Suites by Hilton Detroit Downtown | Detroit, MI

As of May 8, 2025

Monday, June 9 **2:30 – 5:30**

Detroit River Cleanup at Belle Isle State Park

Supported by NACWA's Women's Water Network

Attendees will participate in a stewardship cleanup at the iconic Belle Isle State Park. Located in the heart of the Detroit River, Belle Isle Park is a historic gem that holds both cultural and environmental significance to Southeast Michigan and the city of Detroit. This 982-acre island is the largest city-owned island park in the United States—spanning 2.5 miles and is larger than Central Park in New York City. Belle Isle is connected to the city by the iconic MacArthur Bridge and features landmarks like the Anna Scripps Whitcomb Conservatory which is the oldest continually operating conservatory in the nation.

During the event, they will pick up litter while learning about and visiting local habitat restoration projects aimed at improving water quality and providing recreational access for all. Refreshments, light snacks and cleanup supplies will be provided. Transportation will be provided to and from the Workshop hotel by Great Lakes Water Authority. Participation in this event is limited to the first 10 people who register.

Tuesday, June 10 **8:30 – 11:30**

Pre-Function

Registration

9:00 – 12:00 *Crystal Ballroom*

Plenary Session I

Opening Remarks

Jeannie Smith, *Co-Chair, Communications and Public Affairs Committee*
Director of Administration and External Affairs
Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District | Cleveland, OH

Welcoming Remarks

Melia Howard, Deputy Mayor
City of Detroit | Detroit, MI

9:10 – 10:00

Local Perspectives

Local Perspectives will focus on a range of issues affecting Great Lakes Water Authority and Detroit Water and Sewerage Department, both of which serve Detroit. Attendees will hear about the role communication plays in educating residents about climate, infrastructure and resilience. followed by a moderated conversation highlighting crisis communication (including digital media), community engagement, and practical takeaways.

Moderator

Jeannie Smith, Co-Chair, Communications and Public Affairs Committee

Panelists

Navid Mehram, Chief Operating Officer, Wastewater Operating Services
Great Lakes Water Authority | Detroit, MI

Bryan Peckinpaugh, Director of Communications
Detroit Water and Sewerage Department | Detroit, MI

Kierra Smith, Public Affairs Specialist
Detroit Water and Sewerage Department | Detroit, MI

Aubrey Ziems, Public Affairs Specialist
Detroit Water and Sewerage Department | Detroit, MI

10:00 – 10:30

Networking Break

10:30 – 11:45

The Power of Rebranding in Infrastructure and Public Utilities

This three-part panel discussion will focus on how water utilities can enhance public perception and build stronger community connections through effective branding and communication strategies.

Moderator

AJ Axtell, Director of Community Relations
Western Lake Superior Sanitary District | Duluth, MN

Panelists

Holly Bomba, Education & Outreach Associate
Pittsburgh Water | Pittsburgh, PA

David Kennedy, Marketing Manager
Pittsburgh Water | Pittsburgh, PA

Closing Remarks

Jeannie Smith, Co-Chair, Communications and Public Affairs Committee

12:00 – 1:45

Terrace Room

Keynote Address & Luncheon

Keynote Speaker

Mack Bradley, President
StandPoint Public Affairs | St. Louis, MO

1:45 – 4:30

Pre-Function

Registration

2:00 – 3:15

Fort Wilkens

Choose Your Own Adventure – Breakout & Workshop Sessions I

Option 1

Using Communication to Attract the Next Generation of Talent to the Water Sector

In today's competitive market, attracting top talent is more challenging than ever. Delve into communications strategies for enhancing workforce development at multiple levels.

Courtney Kubu, Strategic Communications Specialist II
AECOM | Greenville, SC

Katie Shea, Educational Outreach Manager
Springfield Water and Sewer Commission | Springfield, MA

Fort Brady

Option 2

Engaging Your Workforce: Strategies for Building Trust, Alignment and Advocacy through Internal Communications

This session will explore how clear internal communication builds trust, boosts morale, and drives employee engagement. Attendees will learn strategies to recruit, train, and mobilize non-communications staff to support their organization's education and outreach efforts, improving performance, creativity, and innovation in the process.

Kenetta Ridgell, Director of Communications and Community Engagement
Little Rock Water Reclamation Authority | Little Rock, AR

Brantley Bissette, Community Education and Outreach Specialist
Hampton Roads Sanitation District | Virginia Beach, VA

Fort Lernoult

Option 3

Making Quality Content Easy

Learn how to tell meaningful stories with high-quality visuals without massive budgets and fancy gear. Arm yourself with the tools to elevate their storytelling and increase execution speed.

Jason Matthews, Public Affairs Specialist
Great Lakes Water Authority | Detroit, MI

Brett McDonald, Public Affairs Specialist
Great Lakes Water Authority | Detroit, MI

3:15 – 3:45

Networking Break

3:45 – 5:00

Choose Your Own Adventure – Breakout & Workshop Sessions II

Fort Wilkens

Option 1

From Data to Decisions: How to Use Customer Insights to Improve Communication and Influence Leadership

In this hands-on session, explore various tools to gather customer feedback and opinions to shape messaging, influence decision-making, and position communication as a strategic function within their organization. Learn best practices for public opinion surveys, how to align research goals with strategic outcomes, and communicate results to earn buy-in from leadership.

Bess McCoy, Co-Chair, Communications and Public Affairs Committee
Public Affairs Manager
Metropolitan St. Louis Regional Sewer District | St. Louis, MO

Braxton Payne, Senior Strategist, Director of Research &
Digital Communications
The Kelley Group | St. Louis, MO

Fort Brady

Option 2

Making an Impact with Visual Communication

How do you take complex environmental data and turn it into something that resonates with local residents? Find out how to use interactive visual tools to enhance storytelling, from water quality to capital projects.

Heather Haskell, Senior Consultant
EMA, Inc. | Grand Rapids, MI

Leneyde Chavez, Engagement and Public Affairs Manager
Carollo Engineers, Inc. | Los Angeles, CA

Fort Lernoult

Option 3

Learning from Failure: Post-Mortem Lessons in Proactive Communications

In this interactive session, learn how to better frame communications for capital projects and identify some of the less visible symptoms of communications challenges before they cause greater damage. Sharpen skills for best practices for keeping customers and stakeholders engaged before, during and after critical projects.

Mack Bradley, President

5:30 – 6:30

Motor City Kitchen

Networking Reception

Join us with other *Workshop* attendees at the Networking Reception. Connect with fellow attendees, rekindle old connections, and network in a beautiful atmosphere. All attendees and their guests are welcome.

Wednesday, June 11

8:30 – 10:30

Pre-Function

Registration

9:00 – 12:00

Crystal Ballroom

Plenary Session II & Breakouts

9:00 – 9:05

Opening Remarks

Bess McCoy, Co-Chair, Communications and Public Affairs Committee

9:05 – 10:15

Harnessing the Power of Community Collaboration

Listen to examples of utilities using deep collaboration, cross-sector coordination, and strong community relationships to educate, engage, and empower the public in addressing the complex challenges of water management—together.

Moderator

Bess McCoy, Co-Chair, Communications and Public Affairs Committee

Panelists

Daniel Gold, Management Professional – Watershed & Systems Planning
Great Lakes Water Authority | Detroit, MI

Melissa Reeves, Community Relations Manager
Johnson County Wastewater | Johnson County, KS

Mary McMurray, Director
Johnson County Museum | Overland Park, KS

Andrew R. Gustafson, Curator of Interpretation
Johnson County Museum | Overland Park, KS

Chantel Dominguez, Community Campaigns and Engagement Director
American Rivers | Reno, NV

10:15 – 10:45

Networking Break

10:45 – 12:00

Choose Your Own Adventure – Breakout & Workshop Sessions III

Fort Wilkens

Option 1

Addressing PFAS Communication with Clarity and Transparency

This dynamic session will focus on effective PFAS customer education and outreach and also provide strategies for communicating PFAS while maintaining—and strengthening—customer trust. Attendees will come away knowing how to handle sensitive media interactions, protect reputations, calm public anxiety, and keep essential stakeholders informed, all while ensuring long-term success in PFAS management.

Emily Barnett, Communications and Government Relations Manager
Central Contra Costa Sanitary District | Martinez, CA

Alyssa Downs, Manager of Communications
California Association of Sanitation Agencies | Sacramento, CA

Mike McGill, President
WaterPIO | Hampstead, NC

Fort Brady

Option 2

Letters and Columns: An Overlooked Way of Touting Your Utility Success

Utility communicators don't have to rely solely on reporters to secure coverage in local and regional newspapers. Find out how to use letters to the editor, columns and other tactics to spotlight utility achievements.

Vince Morris, Senior Vice President
KGL Communications | Washington, DC

Fort Larnoult

Option 3

Pipes, Pavement and People: Keeping Communities in the Construction Loop

Construction is disruptive, but smart communications can transform chaos into community buy-in. Drawing from real-world successes learn key public engagement strategies at every project stage. Expect practical exercises and real-world application, helping turn projects into proof points, not pain points.

Matt Wittern, Senior Consultant
Raftelis | Greenwood Village, CO

12:00 – 1:45

Lunch on Your Own

1:30 – 2:30

Registration

Pre-Function

1:45 – 4:00
Crystal Ballroom

Plenary Session III

Opening Remarks

Bess McCoy, Co-Chair, Communications and Public Affairs Committee

1:45 – 2:45

Building Customer Trust Amid Rate Increases

In this interactive session, discover how to effectively communicate rate increases while building trust. Learn how to frame a narrative message that helps ratepayers understand the necessity of the increase, and not just the financial impact.

Moderator

Tricia Garrison, Public Affairs & Education Manager
NEW Water | Green Bay, WI

Panelists

Erin Collar, Public Affairs & Education Specialist
NEW Water | Green Bay, WI

Matt Wittern, Senior Consultant

Karen Thomas, Marketing Manager
City of Dayton Department of Water | Dayton, OH

2:45 – 3:00

Networking Break

3:00 – 4:00

Campaigns in a Box: Plug and Play Success Stories

This discussion blends research, creativity and action! as panelists share insights from recent public opinion research. Discover messaging strategies to energize voters and learn science-backed approaches to inspire lasting behavioral change in communities. Plus, get an exclusive behind-the-scenes look at the development of an award-winning campaign.

Josh Weinstein, President & Creative Director
Creative Co-op | Exeter, NH

Lara Wyss, President
Responsible Flushing Alliance | Seattle, WA

Amy Souers Kober, Vice President of Communications
American Rivers | Portland, OR

Sinjin Eberle, Managing Director
American Rivers Action Fund | Durango, CO

4:00
Crystal Ballroom

Closing Remarks

Bess McCoy, Co-Chair, Communications and Public Affairs Committee