



2026 Strategic Communications: H2O Workshop

June 2 - 3 | Virgin Hotels Las Vegas | Las Vegas, NV

All meeting rooms are located in Sage Hall unless otherwise noted.

As of May 21, 2026

Monday, June 1

1:30 – 4:00

Optional Resource Center Tour – Clark County Water Reclamation District's Flamingo Water Resource Center Tour

As the largest facility of its kind on the Colorado River and spanning more than 700 acres, the Clark County Water Reclamation District invites you to experience firsthand how we protect public health and the environment while serving unincorporated Clark County, including the iconic Las Vegas Strip. Our guided tour offers a unique behind-the-scenes look at how millions of gallons of wastewater are transformed each day into high-quality reclaimed water through advanced processes—from preliminary screening and biological treatment basins to UV disinfection and our state-of-the-art dewatering facility. While exploring our expansive campus, you'll enjoy stunning panoramic views of the Las Vegas Strip and the Spring Mountains, learn how we manage an average daily flow of more than 120 million gallons, and see how we're preparing for future growth in one of the fastest-growing regions in the country.

**** We have reached full capacity for the tour. ****

5:00 – 6:15

Sage Hall

Welcome Special Film Screening (Separate RSVP Required)

Join us for the screening of "Unless Something Goes Terribly Wrong," filmed with the Portland Water District. Enjoy a fun and eye-opening evening with refreshments and snacks. Bring your friends and join us!

Tuesday, June 2

Morning

8:30 – 11:30

Sage Foyer

Registration

9:00 – 12:00

Sage Hall

Plenary Session I

Opening Remarks

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

Welcoming Remarks

Mickey Conway, *NACWA President*
Chief Executive Officer
Metro Water Recovery | Denver, CO

9:10 – 9:40

Local Perspectives

Local Perspectives will focus on a range of issues affecting Clark County Water Reclamation District, which serves the Las Vegas metropolitan area. Attendees will hear about the role communication plays maintaining trust with governing bodies and elected officials.

Moderator

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

Panelists

Bud Cranor, Strategic Services Manager
Clark County Water Reclamation District | Las Vegas, NV

Michael Phillips, Communications and Government Affairs
Clark County Water Reclamation District | Las Vegas, NV

9:40 – 10:20

Winning the Water Rate Conversation: Affordability, Trust, and Impact

Water rates and affordability are among the most complex—and often contentious—issues utilities must communicate. But with the right strategies, even the most challenging conversations can lead to understanding, trust, and meaningful results.

Learn how Little Rock Water Reclamation Authority secured approval for a multi-year rate adjustment without opposition by combining early stakeholder engagement, transparent messaging, and data-driven storytelling.

Moderator

Jean Smith, *Co-Chair, Communications & Public Affairs Committee*

Panelists

Jean Block, *NACWA Board Member*
Chief Executive Officer
Little Rock Water Reclamation Authority | Little Rock, AR

Michael Rhoda, Chief Financial Officer
Little Rock Water Reclamation Authority | Little Rock, AR

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

10:20 – 10:35

Networking Break

10:35 – 11:50

The Power Within: Engaging Employees Through Strategic Communications

Employees are a utility's most powerful storytellers—and a key to building trust and enhancing both internal and external communications. This session highlights real-world approaches to employee engagement, storytelling, and internal communications, offering practical tools and strategies to better connect with your workforce and strengthen organizational culture.

Moderator/Panelist

Samantha Coppels, Chief Communications Officer
Daphne Utilities | Daphne, AL

Panelists

Lori Esteen, Utility Business Analyst II
Clark County Water Reclamation District | Las Vegas, NV

Laura Schirmer, Public Relations Specialist
Western Virginia Water Authority | Roanoke, VA

11:50 – 12:00

Closing Remarks

Jean Smith, *Co-Chair, Communications & Public Affairs Committee*

Afternoon
12:00 – 1:45
The Manor

Networking Luncheon

Catch up with familiar faces or meet someone new during a relaxed networking luncheon. Make the most of this time to spark conversations and build new connections in a fun and casual atmosphere!

1:45 – 4:30
Sage Foyer

Registration

2:00 – 3:15
Sage Hall

Choose Your Own Adventure – Breakout Sessions I

Option 1

Finding Your Voice: Tactical Tools for Confident Communication

This interactive session gives water sector communicators the tools, practice, and confidence to develop their authentic voice and deliver more effective, engaging presentations.

Speaker

Christy Harowski, Founder
HCB Strategies | New Orleans, LA

Studio 3A, 3rd Floor
Opal Tower

Option 2

Stop Feeding the Zombies: Strategic Triage for Communicators Drowning in Noise

In today's fast-moving communications environment, practitioners must balance knowing what to say and where to focus. This session explores how to distinguish meaningful reputational risks from distracting "noise," offering a practical framework to prioritize responses, allocate resources, and protect organizational credibility.

Speaker

Jenn Elting, Senior Manager of Community & Media Relations
Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District | Cleveland, OH

Studio 3B, 3rd Floor
Opal Tower

Option 3

The Human Side of Infrastructure: Communication that Builds Trust

Learn how clear, honest communication and early outreach helps residents understand utility construction projects, stay informed during challenges, and see the benefits for their environment and daily lives. Leave with practical ideas for making complex projects easier to understand and more meaningful to the communities that benefit from them.

Speakers

Jimena Garrison, Public Information Officer
City of Phoenix Water Services Department | Phoenix, AZ

Bryce Coffey, Senior Strategic Communications Coordinator
HDR, Inc. | Irvine, CA

Kelli Brown, Strategic Communications Coordinator
HDR, Inc. | Phoenix, AZ

Studio 3C, 3rd Floor
Opal Tower

Option 4

Technology Cafe

Explore modern creative tools that streamline communications and content creation in a hands-on, café-style learning experience. Whether you design graphics, manage social media, create videos or just want to expand your skills, these tools can help you work smarter—not harder.

Speaker

Curtis Burris-White, Creative Services Manager
Great Lakes Water Authority | Detroit, MI

3:15 – 3:45

Networking Break

3:45 – 5:00

Sage Hall

Choose Your Own Adventure – Breakout Sessions II

Option 1

Smart Tools, Hard Decisions: AI, Ethics, and Public Trust

Knowing when and how to use AI responsibly is critical for today's communications professionals. In this interactive session, explore practical decision-making frameworks, ethical considerations, and the role of human judgment in maintaining credibility and public trust.

Speakers

Sarita Poirrer, Senior Communication Specialist
Little Rock Water Reclamation Authority | Little Rock, AR

Ashlee Frandell, Assistant Professor
University of Nevada, Las Vegas | Las Vegas, NV

*Studio 3A, 3rd Floor
Opal Tower*

Option 2

The Power of Pivoting: Rethinking Public Participation Plans

This presentation will demonstrate the power of pivoting when planned outreach strategies fall short, highlighting key lessons learned as part of the Buffalo Sewer Authority's Queen City Clean Waters initiative. This \$1 billion sewer infrastructure investment aimed to improve local waterways.

Speakers

Taylor Brown, Civil Engineer
JM Davidson Engineering | Tonawanda, NY

Brittany Fletcher, Project Controls Specialist
TYLin | Buffalo, NY

*Studio 3B, 3rd Floor
Opal Tower*

Option 3

Crisis Messaging Made Simple: Crafting Effective Holding Statements

In the early moments of a crisis, gaps in messaging can create confusion and erode trust. This session explores how to develop and use holding statements—pre-approved messages that provide timely, accurate information while details are still emerging—and offers practical strategies for creating clear, effective communications when it matters most.

Speaker

Jonathan Reeves, National Growth and Client Development Lead - Resilience
Arcadis US, Inc. | Seattle, WA

Evening

5:30 – 6:30

The Parlor

Networking Happy Hour

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

Wednesday, June 3

Morning

8:30 – 11:00

Sage Foyer

Registration

9:00 – 10:15

Sage Hall

Plenary Session II

Opening Remarks

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

9:05 – 10:15

From Insight to Impact: A New Approach for Clean Water Communications

After a year of research, collaboration, and strategic development, a major new communications initiative is here. Join us for an exciting preview of NACWA's bold effort to elevate the voice, visibility, and influence of public clean water utilities—and discover how this transformative initiative will strengthen the sector and deliver real value for members.

Panelists

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

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

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

Gabrielle Cherre, Chief of Staff
StandPoint Public Affairs | St. Louis, MO

10:15 – 10:45

Networking Break

10:45 – 12:00

Choose Your Own Adventure – Breakout Sessions III

Sage Hall

Option 1

Planting the Seeds: Growing the Next Water Workforce Generation

Early awareness and meaningful career pathways are the building blocks of developing a sustainable water workforce. This session explores strategies for engaging students and developing programs like apprenticeships and internships to cultivate the next generation of water professionals and strengthen long-term recruitment efforts.

Speakers

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

Sarah Baumgardner, Public Relations Manager
Western Virginia Water Authority | Roanoke, VA

*Studio 3A, 3rd Floor
Opal Tower*

Option 2

Making Water Make Sense: Turning Complexity into Clarity

Communicating complex water topics clearly and effectively is essential to building public understanding and trust. This session explores how to use plain language, visuals, and collaboration between communicators and technical experts to translate technical content into accessible, engaging messages that resonate with any audience.

Speakers

Sarita Poirrer, Senior Communication Specialist

Diana Leonard, Communications Director
Carollo Engineers, Inc. | Walnut Creek, CA

Stetson Bassett, Program Manager
Carollo Engineers, Inc. | Salt Lake City, UT

Studio 3B, 3rd Floor
Opal Tower

Option 3

From Audience to Advocate: Engaging Communities Through Communication

This session showcases strategies for building cohesive messaging campaigns and creating engaging public education programs that strengthen understanding and trust. Gain practical tools for developing themes, adapting messages for diverse audiences, and delivering impactful communications across digital and in-person channels.

Speakers

Kathy Bentz, Director of Communications and Community Engagement
Prince William Water | Woodbridge, VA

Michelle Miranda, Community Engagement Manager
Prince William Water | Woodbridge, VA

Belen Carrillo, Senior Public Affairs Specialist
Orange County Sanitation District | Fountain Valley, CA

Daisy Covarrubias, Public Affairs Supervisor
Orange County Sanitation District | Fountain Valley, CA

Studio 3C, 3rd Floor
Opal Tower

Option 4

Technology Cafe

Strengthen your graphic design skills by exploring popular tools while gaining practical insights from case studies during the second day of this hands-on, interactive learning experience.

Speaker

Curtis Burris-White, Great Lakes Water Authority

Afternoon
12:00 – 1:45

Lunch on Your Own

1:30 – 3:30
Sage Foyer

Registration

1:45 – 4:00
Sage Hall

Plenary Session III

Opening Remarks

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

1:50 – 2:45

Changing the Narrative on Biosolids: A Communications Playbook for a PFAS Era

Today, the perception of biosolids is at a critical crossroads. While clean water utilities recognize their nutrient recovery benefits, a new wave of environmental and regulatory scrutiny--primarily focused on PFAS--has significantly altered public and policymaker opinions about biosolids, threatening programs that utilize them. The Water Environment Federation's Residuals & Biosolids Community (including collaborators from NACWA) has developed a Biosolids Communications Plan with the main goal of raising awareness of the role that biosolids plays in modern society as a vital circular water resource.

Speaker

Samantha Villegas, Principal Consultant
Raftelis | Chantilly, VA

2:45 – 3:00

Networking Break

3:00 – 4:00

Talking Shop: Peer Discussions for Real-World Communications Challenges

In this one-hour session, rotate through up to three small group discussions—gaining diverse perspectives, sharing insights, and engaging in meaningful peer exchange. Enjoy highly interactive, in-depth conversations on specific topics and real-world challenges.

1. *Public Education and Community Trust (Orange County Sanitation District)*

Discuss practical strategies for simplifying technical content, increasing participation, and building trust through education. Join the conversation to share ideas for creating impactful public education programs in your own community.

2. *Reaching Your Workforce (Clark County Water Reclamation District)*

This conversation explores practical ways to turn employee feedback into action, use visual tools effectively, and move beyond email to improve engagement. Come ready to share what's working—and what isn't—in your organization.

3. *Adapting Community Engagement Strategies (JM Davidson Engineers, TYLin)*

What happens when your community engagement strategy doesn't land? This conversation examines lessons from the Queen City Clean Waters initiative, including how the team pivoted to more creative, effective outreach approaches. Share your own challenges and ideas for turning setbacks into meaningful engagement opportunities.

4. *PFAS Communication & Transparency (Western Virginia Water Authority)*

This conversation explores how the Western Virginia Water Authority built a transparent, evolving communication strategy around PFAS—complete with real-time updates, public resources, and direct customer engagement. Share ideas for communicating uncertainty while building trust and keeping your community informed.

5. *Creative Campaigns That Break Through (Metropolitan St. Louis Sewer District)*

This conversation explores how utilities can tap into cultural moments and familiar media to create bold, unexpected campaigns that drive engagement and behavior change. Join the discussion to explore how creativity, timing, and a bit of irreverence can help your message stand out.

6. *Navigating Complexity in Infrastructure Programs (Carollo Engineers)*

This conversation introduces how Pure Water Los Angeles uses system mapping to navigate regulatory, political, and public dynamics while building alignment across stakeholders. Share perspectives on managing complexity, building trust, and advancing ambitious infrastructure programs.

7. *Social Media (Mount Pleasant Water Works)*

This conversation explores approaches to developing and executing a social media strategy, including when and how to partner with external experts. Share insights, challenges, and practical ideas for strengthening your utility's social media engagement.

8. *Community Outreach for Behavior Change (Clark County Water Reclamation District)*

This conversation examines strategies utilities can use to effectively engage residents, reduce barriers to participation, and build trust throughout the process. Topics include personalized communication, culturally responsive outreach, and cross-department collaboration.

4:00

Closing Remarks

Jean Smith, *Co-Chair, Communications & Public Affairs Committee*

Bess McCoy, *Co-Chair, Communications & Public Affairs Committee*