

# Building Community Trust Through Partnerships

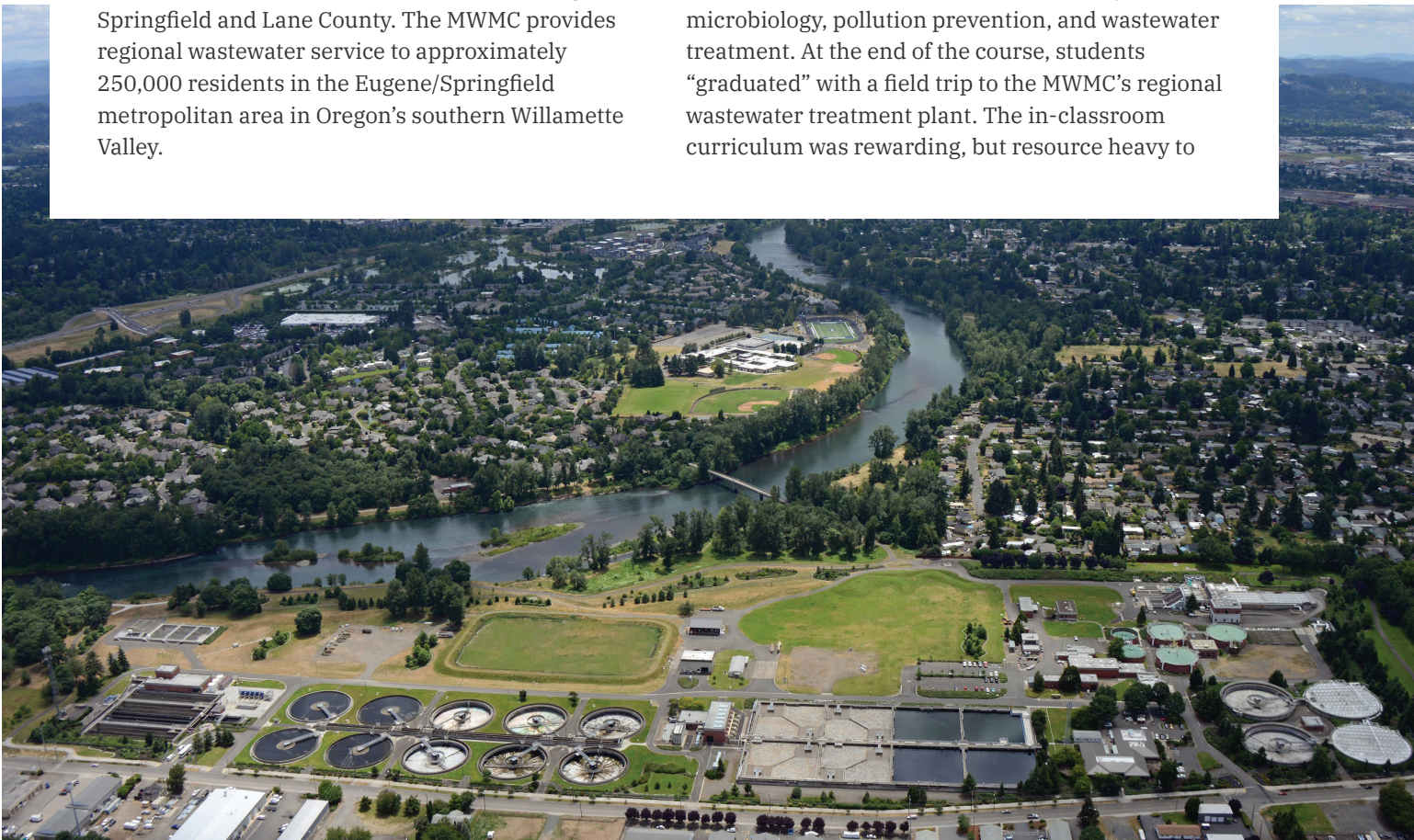
BY MATT STOUDER | SPRINGFIELD, OR

Now more than ever, it seems to be a trying time to be in the clean water business. Utilities are faced with unprecedented challenges, including increased regulatory requirements, revenue shortfalls caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, and building public awareness, understanding and trust among our constituents. At the same time, we must continue to protect community health and provide excellent customer service.

One strategy that can help utilities overcome these challenges is working to build effective partnerships. In the Eugene-Springfield metropolitan region of Oregon's southern Willamette Valley, the Metropolitan Wastewater Management Commission (MWMC) is doing just that. The MWMC, which was founded in 1977, is built on partnerships between the Cities of Eugene, Springfield and Lane County. The MWMC provides regional wastewater service to approximately 250,000 residents in the Eugene/Springfield metropolitan area in Oregon's southern Willamette Valley.

Along with our governing partners, staff working on behalf of the MWMC are advancing one of the Commission's strategic planning objectives – building public support and effective partnerships. To accomplish this, we have embarked on a grassroots effort with local community partners, including school districts, universities, watershed councils, drinking water utilities, local non-profits, and others.

One of the most effective partnership opportunities we have realized has been with the local school districts in a program affectionately dubbed “Clean Water University.” Clean Water University started in Springfield in 2011, where staff delivered a series of in-classroom lectures on the stormwater and wastewater treatment processes to 5th grade students. Class topics covered the water cycle, microbiology, pollution prevention, and wastewater treatment. At the end of the course, students “graduated” with a field trip to the MWMC's regional wastewater treatment plant. The in-classroom curriculum was rewarding, but resource heavy to





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implement. To streamline staff time, reach more students, and expand the program into Eugene, the event was shifted to the wastewater treatment plant in 2018. The new and improved program takes place over two full days (and will likely be expanding to three after the pandemic), with students from each class spending two or more hours at the plant.

Expanding Clean Water University to the wastewater treatment facility afforded additional partnerships to be developed. City stormwater staff from Eugene and Springfield were eager to participate, as were both local drinking water utilities. The overall emphasis of Clean Water University has shifted to the “One Water” concept, in recognition that all water (drinking water, wastewater and stormwater) is connected and must be managed sustainably.

The revised curriculum includes 10 different activity booths where students learn about the water cycle, along with all aspects of the One Water concept. Games like “Trash It” and “Big Bugs” allow students to learn about which items should be placed in the trash and not down the drain, as well about what types of insects are key indicators to a healthy ecosystem. The drinking water utilities discuss the importance of clean water for public health and potable water supply, and show demonstrations of how water is filtered to become safe enough to drink. The students still get to take the ever-popular wastewater plant tour to see how dirty water is cleaned before being safely returned to the Willamette River. There is even a booth that teaches students about the MWMC’s Biocycle Farm, where poplar trees are grown with recycled water and land-applied biosolids.

With all activities taking place over a two-day time period, reliance on staff to fill “volunteer” shifts has been key. Additional partnerships have been forged with public works staff from the two cities to fill the shifts, and even some of the MWMC’s Commissioners help out. In addition to the 700+ students that attend the event, teachers, chaperones and parents also participate in the program.

Feedback from the students, teachers and community has been overwhelmingly positive. The success of the program would not be possible without the partnerships of all involved, as well as the hard work of the MWMC’s communications team. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this year’s event was held virtually, but staff and students alike are looking forward to a return to the wastewater treatment facility next year.

More information about the MWMC’s Clean Water University program can be found on our website at, [www.mwmcpartners.org/community-education/clean-water-university/](http://www.mwmcpartners.org/community-education/clean-water-university/).

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**Matt Stouder** is the Executive Officer at the Metropolitan Wastewater Management Commission in Oregon.