



2018 Schwartz Prize Nomination

**WE ARE
WATER**



Minnesota
Humanities
Center

Minnesota Humanities Center (MHC) nominates its ongoing “We Are Water MN” program for the 2018 Helen and Martin Schwartz Prize. This program exemplifies the possibility of the humanities to inspire partnership, engagement, and social change across disparate communities and sectors. As the Land of 10,000 Lakes and the headwaters of the Mississippi River, Minnesota has a special relationship to water—one that “We Are Water MN” has acknowledged and highlighted since its inception in 2015.



“We Are Water MN” combines personal stories, histories, and sciences to strengthen Minnesotans’ relationships with and responsibilities to water. This project began in 2015 as a pilot project between MHC, the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, the Minnesota Historical Society, the Minnesota Departments of Agriculture, Health, and Natural Resources, and six Minnesota communities. Through 2017, we involved 125 community organizations and engaged more than 7,000 Minnesotans in learning from water through histories, culture, and sciences.

With this project, we used the humanities to foster broad community engagement by connecting and building a cross-sector and interdisciplinary network of historians, artists, scientists, storytellers, farmers, public health officials, city, county, and tribal government officials, and other water stakeholders to protect and preserve Minnesota’s waters. We engage with communities and organizations that are ready to address important and difficult questions around water, are interested in collaborating with state and local partners, have the capacity to host the program, and will practice the Absent Narratives Approach™ that undergirds all of MHC’s programming. This approach emphasizes: building and strengthening relationships, recognizing the power of story and the danger of absence, learning from and with multiple voices, and amplifying community solutions for change.

Using a three-part process of education, engagement, and connection, MHC and its partners host community engagement and exhibit projects that feature three key messages about Minnesota’s water: we are the headwaters; no one knows water like the people who live here; and people change water, what you do matters.

The 2015-2017 project brought together six host site communities and together we engaged in a year-long exploration of water and the host sites’ identity, history, and culture that complemented content touring the state through the Smithsonian’s Museum on Main Street *Water/Ways* exhibit. Host sites created local companion exhibitions, community events, and educational programming with a goal of telling their unique water stories and engaging thousands of Minnesotans from across the state. The exhibit visited each community for six weeks and the state partners supported community engagement in host communities through trainings, expertise, resources, and contacts.

The project goals are to:

- Deepen relationships between partners
- Build community capacity to practice MHC’s Absent Narratives Approach™
- Support the expansion of local networks of those who protect and affect water
- Share state and local histories and narratives about water
- Build Minnesotans’ individual relationships with water
- Build Minnesotans’ individual responsibilities to water
- Build relationships between Minnesotans through engagement events and activities

2015–17 Pilot Tour

- Spicer/New London
- St. Peter
- Red Wing
- Sandstone
- Lanesboro
- Detroit Lakes

2018–2019 Tour

- Minneapolis
- Bemidji
- Crookston
- Fon du Lac/Duluth
- Austin
- Northfield
- Grand Rapids
- Onamia

Partnerships

MHC created a partnership for the “We Are Water MN” project with five state agencies that each have a role in managing, monitoring, and interpreting water: the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, the Minnesota Historical Society, and the Minnesota Departments of Agriculture, Health, and Natural Resources. While some of these partners had previously worked together, this was the first time all of these partners joined together on one project.

MHC led the partnership and had primary responsibility for planning with partners, building host site capacity, planning and executing events, and evaluation and reporting for the partnership. The Minnesota Pollution Control Agency lent significant expertise in exhibit development, publicity, and marketing, as well as co-planning and general partnership support. Each of the other partner agencies worked as closely on the project as felt appropriate and useful, choosing one or two individuals to represent the agency and participate in monthly partner meetings to assess progress and alignment with shared goals.

The model of state agency partnership brought access to large networks and significant financial resources to this project. While members of the general public often regard state agencies as little more than regulators, this project’s partnership model allowed these agencies to collaborate directly with local host communities on issues of local import. The host organizations guided this project to address what was most relevant and engaging for their communities, allowing the state agencies to make local connections and foster place-specific community engagement.

In turn, host organizations served as local ambassadors to the Absent Narratives Approach™. They each brought experience of building public awareness of how land use decisions and practices impact the waters around them; they also shared their diverse experiences and perspectives with each other.

As a collaborative of partner organizations, we practiced a three-tiered approach to work with host communities:

Connect

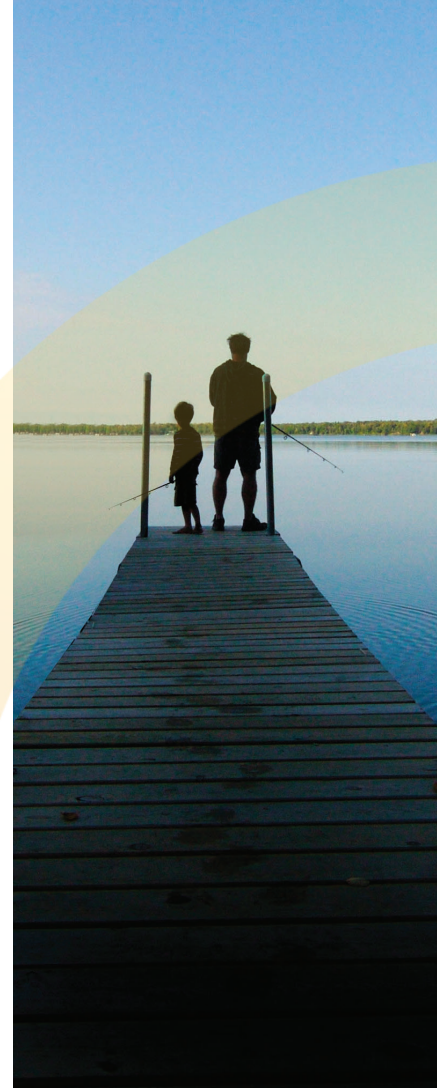
Representatives from host communities became a community of practice, learning from and with each other. This network participated in a kick-off workshop, mapped the water stakeholders in their communities, and defined water-change actions specific to their community.

Engage

The state partners co-designed customized community engagement and water action activities in collaboration with host communities. The state partners helped host sites plan supplementary engagement activities such as book reads, lectures, panel discussions, water action/stewardship projects, and theatrical productions. The state partners administered small grants (up to \$5,400 per site) to help host communities with these costs.

Educate

Interviewers collected stories from local residents about why water matters to them and their community. The partnership collected inspirational stories and highlighted local water conditions. This content was then incorporated into a site-specific exhibit that was a companion to statewide stories and facts about water. The exhibit includes ways that visitors could add their own stories and these stories were then collected in a database of stories and made available to the general public on the web.



Theory of Change

We built We Are Water MN upon the theory that building community capacity to protect water requires building relationships between community members, organizations, and sectors. We applied the principles of MHC's Absent Narratives Approach™ as a framework for building relationships, and we assessed how relationships changed community capacity according to the Social Measures Monitoring System (SMMS).

The Humanities Center's Absent Narratives Approach™ recognizes that the assets and solutions to address intractable issues—such as decisions around land use and water protection and restoration—lie in a multiplicity of voices. Relationship-building is foundational to our approach and programming.

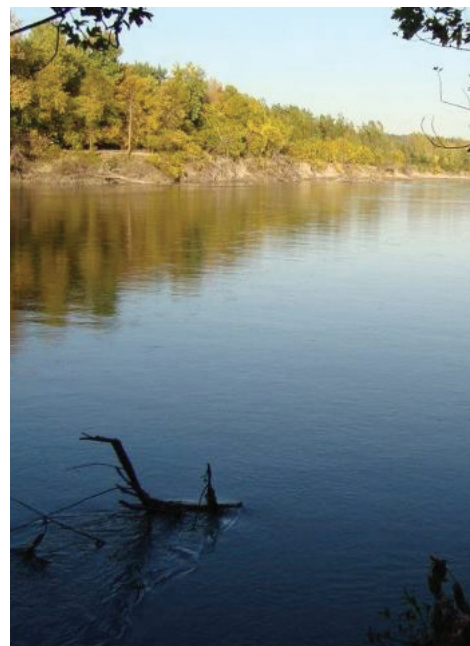
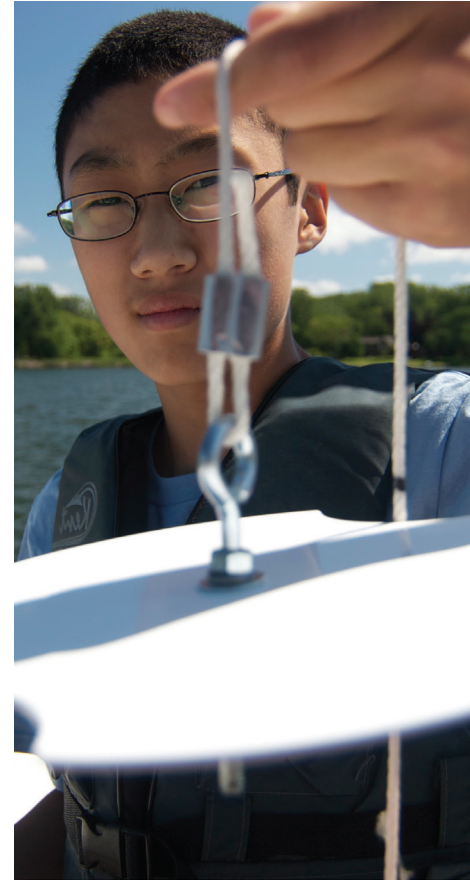
Because we use this approach:

- We ground our work in story as a vehicle for expressing and sharing knowledge;
- We reflect on our relationships and process during our meetings and trainings;
- We amplify local knowledge, concerns, and solutions when developing exhibit content and programs;
- We focus on preserving and adhering to our process, trusting that this will create robust and relevant products;
- We seek multiple sources of knowledge in a community; and
- We learn and grow together.

Developed by Dr. Mae Davenport of the University of Minnesota's Center for Changing Landscapes, the SMMS offers us a framework to gather data on a community's capacity to engage in water resource protection and restoration, as well as a protocol to determine how water resource education, outreach, and civic engagement activities/programs affect that capacity.*

There are five primary social measures outlined in the SMMS:

1. Change over time in individual capacity to be engaged in water resource protection and restoration
2. Change over time in relational capacity to be engaged in water resource protection and restoration
3. Change over time in organizational capacity to be engaged in water resource protection and restoration
4. Change over time in programmatic capacity to be engaged in water resource protection and restoration
5. Water resource management is perceived as fair and legitimate



*Davenport, Mae A. *Social Measures Monitoring System: Overview and Metadata Sheets*. University of Minnesota Center for Changing Landscapes. https://www.changinglandscapes.umn.edu/sites/changinglandscapes.umn.edu/files/social_measures_overview.pdf

Theory of Change (Cont.)

Practicing the Absent Narratives Approach™ leads to the outcomes for water protection and restoration described in the SMMS, such as:

- Positive interpersonal relationships within communities that promote information exchange, build trust, foster shared identity, and promote common awareness, concern, and sense of responsibility for water.
- Networks that can promote positive social norms and share a vision for and participate in water stewardship.
- An increased and broadened community awareness of local water issues because visitors to the exhibit and public programming come from more diverse backgrounds than one host organization could convene on its own.

Rather than ignoring the social side of water issues, “We Are Water MN” directly addresses clean water as a human problem. Through impactful personal stories, we are building public awareness about water-quality issues such as agriculture pollution and possible solutions including sustainable crops and practices among farmers.

By creating relationships around water—among community organizers, farmers, educators, tribal and local government officials, nonprofit leaders, religious leaders, business owners, journalists, artists, and residents—we are broadening the scope of allies working together to promote and participate in water stewardship. Ultimately, we hope this work fosters widespread public support for sustainable clean water practices and policies.



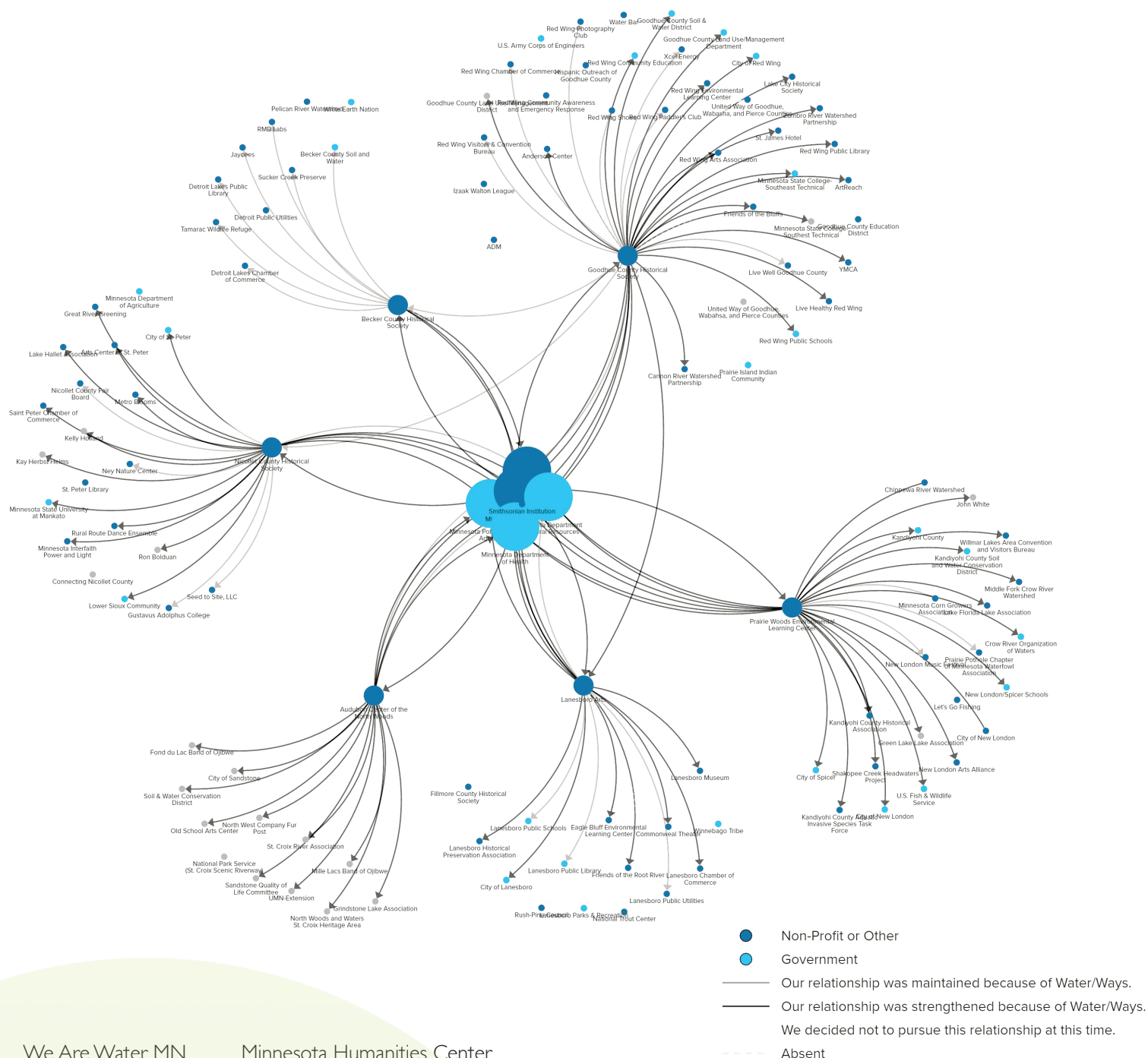
Impact

MHC retained the services of an external evaluation firm, the Improve Group, to assess the impact of “We Are Water MN” during the first phase of the project from 2015-17. Embedded throughout the project at all stages, evaluation activities focused on both partner relationships and visitor experiences.

“We Are Water MN” succeeded in strengthening relationships and building local water networks in host communities. When asked to report on the effect of the program on their organizational and community relationships, host sites indicated:

- 68% of relationships were strengthened because of “We Are Water MN”
- 18% of relationships were maintained because of “We Are Water MN”
- Host sites didn’t report any relationships that were weakened because of “We Are Water MN”

Host sites reported cultivating a plethora of relationships with a breadth of water stakeholders. We used a network map to demonstrate the way the network of state partner agencies supports the development of local water networks.



Visitors committed to nearly 750 actions to conserve and protect water by filling out a water drop for the exhibit's "Tell us" action panel. Actions ranged from small personal actions, such as recycling and taking shorter showers to community level actions, including joining water protection groups and influencing local policy. One-in-five people listed challenging personal actions such as planting rain gardens, updating plumbing, and reducing chemical use.

In addition to pledging to take action to protect and conserve water, over 200 community members participated in protection and conservation activities before, during, and after the exhibition tour. Each host site held at least one conservation and protection activity as a part of the project. Activities included a community clean-up day, Adopt-A-Drain sign up events, and joining watershed clean-up activities.

Local water stories were a way for visitors to share their own personal experiences while learning about other community members' relationships with water. Over 700 water stories were collected during the "We Are Water MN" project including 108 interviewer-collected stories that were gathered before the exhibition period. These stories captured a wide range of experience with water – from water as a daily part of visitors' lives to deeply personal stories of love and loss. In addition to sharing their stories, visitors also marked where the story took place on the water story map in the exhibit. At the end of the exhibition period, the water stories were preserved in online Story Maps so people can continue to explore the stories.

While preparing to host the exhibit, host sites planned events and community meetings to foster a sense of community ownership of the project, to come to a shared understanding of water resources, and to increase participation in water protection activities. Community engagement events and activities were designed to expand the "We Are Water MN" exhibition beyond a one-time visit to a community-wide event.

Community engagement events and activities helped build awareness of local conservation, restoration, and protection efforts. In all, host sites held over 60 events before, during, and after the exhibition tour. Events ranged from film screenings, arts exhibits, river walks, history tours, and musical performances, to water protection and conservation activities. These events were intended to bring the messages of the exhibit to community members who may or may not have attended the exhibit. Over 1,600 people attended host community events before or during the exhibition period.

Many of the events helped to strengthen community members' relationships with water. In Lanesboro, a water blessing held at the Historic Stone Arch Gravity Dam attracted 80 visitors, including a well-known local writer. The dam is at risk of collapsing, and the city has failed to get it in the state's bonding bill for the past five years. Following the water blessing, the writer wrote an editorial article reflecting on his relationship with water and his experience at the event. That article stimulated dialogue and discussion about local water issues.

The focus on the power of narrative encouraged host sites to seek out new partnerships and relationships that reflect their community. All of the host sites said the project's focus on incorporating absent or missing narratives encouraged them to seek out new partnerships that reflect the diversity of their communities. Host sites partnered with schools, recruited speakers from Native communities, and tried to build relationships with recent immigrant groups. A few host sites said they were disappointed that they were unable to make some connections during this project, but they plan to continue to seek those relationships out.

Collaboration with local partners increased the quality of exhibit components and content. All the host sites stressed the role collaboration and relationship building played in making the exhibition successful. They explained that collaborations with local partners helped to create exhibit content and programming that supported a plurality of narratives. In particular, collaborative efforts between host sites and schools allowed sites to incorporate student narratives. Host sites said collaborative approaches reinforced individual relationships with water and responsibility for water through art, music, history and environmental science. They added that participants found the events welcoming and inspiring.

7,468

Exhibit Visitors

1,600+

Event Participants

398

Opening Ceremony
Attendees

901

Water Drops
Shared

718

Water Stories
Shared

750

Water Protection
Pledges

In Their Own Voices

Emily Buermann Detroit Lakes Resident

My great grandma was born September 8, 1918 in a wigwam on the shores of Basswood Lake at wild rice camp. And she was born, her birth name was Aychewazhid Cayuganig and that translates to She Flies Across the Water. And as she grew older she was given an English name and that name was Isabelle Cordelia Bagley. She was later married to Fred Hatlen and she is buried under the name Cordelia Hatlen.

And I was given her story to tell because she once told us what she thought heaven was like. And so we asked her, “Grandma Cord”—we called her Grandma Cord—“Grandma Cord, if heaven is your most beautiful day, what’s heaven going to be for you?” And I thought she would say the day we moved into a house, a house with a real roof and a real floor or a real stove; or the day we got a car and didn’t have to ride in a wagon anymore; or I thought maybe the day we got air conditioning; or electricity; or running water. But she chose, she said, “heaven is going to be fish camp.”

And so I said, “What do you mean fish camp?” and she said fish camp is where they went in the summer. They would move the wigwam and they would put it on the shores of the lake and the kids—all day long the kids—would play and swim and they would gather berries while their parents went fishing and gathered the fish and then they would preserve the fish so they would have something to eat in the winter.”

And I said, “Well what about strawberry camp? Or what about maple sugar camp where you got eat candy? Once a year you got to eat candy. Or, was it like hunting camp? You know, maybe where it was warm with a fire?” But she insisted that it was going to be fish camp. Because kids could run free, and they could be in the water, and she said, “Heaven is going to be when your hair smells like lake water and you’ve got sunburn on your shoulders and your cheeks, and the smell of fresh fish frying and roasting over the fire, and salt in your hands because you were helping preserve the fish, and it meant your family was going to have food for the winter. And everything—the sun was shining and the sky was blue—and everything was going to be okay.”

And that was fish camp. And that was heaven.

Casey Mathern Goodhue Co. Historical Society

The fellowship created through *Water/Ways* and “We Are Water MN” among our community’s non-profits whose missions are devoted to conserving water and water culture has been unprecedented. Watching individuals from organizations meet each other for the first time at *Water/Ways* and “We Are Water MN” planning meetings and events and make plans for future collaborations has been powerful to witness. It’s been a privilege to be the organization at the center of these meetings, and a reminder that a dynamic community is only enlivened by its nonprofits when they work together.

Britt Gangeness Minnesota Pollution Control Agency

We’ve been working with MHC since 2015, leading a multi-agency collaboration and community engagement initiative about water in 14 Minnesota communities. Through this project, we bring science, history, and stories together and shine light on local problems and local solutions. We engage hundreds of partners in the process, and reach thousands of visitors. And most importantly, we are all changing the way that we approach partnership and problems.

Never before have our State agencies considered humanities content in their program planning at such a depth and over such a length of time.

A central part of this work is the face-to-face, relationship building and humanities content provided by the Humanities Center during retreats, workshops, and facilitated meetings. During these times, we are able to focus on the challenging content presented by the Humanities Center and consider how declining water quality is a human problem that requires human solutions—ALL humans.

Financial Structure

“We Are Water MN” operates on a stable financial model thanks to the shared contributions of its state agency partners, as well as additional grant-funded support. MHC has contributed over \$120,000 to this project drawn primarily from the State of Minnesota through the Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund, adopted by the State in 2008. These funds are a result of a tax increase voted on by the people of Minnesota and are dedicated to protecting the State’s water sources, to preserve arts and cultural heritage, and to support parks and trails. Money is appropriated to the Humanities Center for its own programs and purposes, of which We Are Water MN has been a significant investment over the last biennium.

The Minnesota Pollution Control Agency has to-date dedicated \$20,000 from its general fund toward We Are Water MN, as well as committing \$150,000 from its Watershed Restoration and Protection Strategies (WRAPS) Fund toward the future of the project. The Minnesota Departments of Agriculture, Health, and Natural Resources, as well as the Minnesota Historical Society, have also each contributed \$10,000 to \$25,000 for work to-date, as well as making \$20,000 commitments toward the future of the project.* The Environmental Protection Agency also contributed \$92,000 to the 2015–2017 phase of the project.

Other funders of this project going forward include Hormel Foods (\$5,000) and the McKnight Foundation** (\$100,000).

The National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) also contributed through general operating support for MHC.

**Minnesota Department of Natural Resources contribution pending approval*

***McKnight Foundation contribution pending approval*



Project Future

Thanks to enthusiastic support from visitors and state agency partners alike, “We Are Water MN” continues its work in Minnesota communities. Beginning October 2018, the program and exhibit will begin its second tour of the state, independent of the Smithsonian components. Host communities for the 2018–19 tour include:

- River Life Program, University of Minnesota - Twin Cities is a program of the Institute for Advanced Study that creates new knowledge about the relationships between community, water, and place by connecting the campus’s location on the Mississippi River to community work and needs.
- Headwaters Science Center, Bemidji is a nonprofit museum located at the headwaters of the Mississippi River that teaches children, adults, and educational organizations using hands-on science and technology exhibits and programs.
- West Polk County Soil and Water Conservation District, Crookston is partnering closely with the University of Minnesota Extension Regional Office in Crookston as well as the University’s office of diversity and multicultural programs for this project.
- Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, Fond du Lac, and Duluth. Fond du Lac’s Office of Water Protection is partnering with Ashi-niswi Giizisoo (13 Moons Program) at Fond du Lac Tribal College to build partnerships in their area; the exhibit will be displayed at the Great Lakes Aquarium in Duluth.
- Cedar River Watershed District, Austin is working closely with the Hormel Nature Center as both an exhibit venue and program partner.
- Cannon River Watershed Partnership, Northfield is an environmental nonprofit that focuses on three main areas of engagement: community-building in cities and towns, working with farmers and landowners, and helping communities with wastewater.
- Itasca Waters, Grand Rapids is a citizen-driven nonprofit organization building partnerships to work on water-quality issues in Itasca County, part of the Mississippi River headwaters.
- Mille Lacs Indian Museum, Mille Lacs/Onamia is a Minnesota Historical Society museum dedicated to telling the story of the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe located within the boundaries of the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe.

