



WATER RESOURCES RESEARCH GRANT PROPOSAL

Project ID: 2004CA110G

Title: Institutional Re-arrangements: forging “smart use” water policy coalitions at the intersection of geo-technical engineering with urban open space

Project Type: Research

Focus Categories: Law, Institutions, and Policy, Hydrology, Recreation

Keywords: institutional change, coalition formation, urban open space, watershed planning, management, policy, engineering, economic

Start Date: 09/01/2004

End Date: 07/31/2006

Federal Funds: \$70,767

Non-Federal Matching Funds: \$74,489

Congressional District: 48

Principal Investigator:

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Abstract

This research will examine the process by which water policy coalitions are emerging in large urban areas to meet two increasingly salient objectives: the first ecological (including non-structural flood control, stormwater treatment, and groundwater recharge) and the second socio-cultural (centered on urban parks, open space, and outdoor recreation). The two-year research program involves the development of a hypothetical model wherein urban water-centered park restoration projects provide the ground where new coalitions of policy actors align their environmental and quality-of-life goals. The model suggests that new water policy networks leverage the thematic objectives of specific epistemic communities, and frame public discourse in four American cities to create the opportunity for new water policy coalitions. These coalitions focus on the urban waterway parkland as a site not only for public recreation and social interaction, but also as a place for hydrological innovation and ecological restoration. In addition to exploring the opportunities created by these new water policy networks, the research will identify and examine the institutional problems that arise in the implementation of such inventive urban water policy arrangements.

These “watershed park” coalitions are being singled out for study as components of “watershed planning and management organizations that have a demonstrated capability to protect water supply quality” (104G R.F.P., Section III: Research Priorities). The problem is conceptualized as a local implementation gap, where the potential innovations of watershed ecologists, geo-technical engineers, and regional hydrologists fail to be tested and enacted on a wide scale, due to a lack of local political will, available and appropriate project sites, and existing institutional capacity. The watershed park is hypothesized as a particularly powerful policy objective in the mobilization of citizen support and tangible resources. While watershed partnerships (see Leach, Pelkey and Sabatier, 2002 for an overview) promise stakeholder collaboration across a broad spectrum of watershed issues, the watershed park coalition is conceived as a project-specific operationalization of consensus and intent, and the catalyst for improved institutional capacity.

Four cities with strong watershed park coalitions will be studied, using a multi-method research design to identify members’ characterization of, participation in, and goals for the creation of new or re-engineered urban waterfront open space. The project will build theoretically upon existing public policy research in network analysis, coalition formation and local institutional change. It will also address practical challenges faced by urban regions, including the provision of attractive and functional public open space, the creation of human networks and physical spaces to foster social capital, the support of urban nature conservation and environmental education, and the protection of local water supply quality.