



## MWCOG Regional Blue Green Infrastructure Community Engagement and Planning Project (RBGI CEPP)

### **FLOOD READY COMMUNITIES: REGIONAL OPEN HOUSE**

#### **MEETING SUMMARY: MAY 22, 2025**

##### **PROJECT TEAM**

- Heidi Bonnaffon, MWCOG
- Sushanth Gupta, MWCOG
- Amanda Vargo, ICF
- Jasmyn Noel, ICF
- Joe Arrowsmith, Straughan Environmental
- Richa Vuppuluri, CH Planning
- Erin Jones, CH Planning
- Mikayla Purnell, CH Planning

##### **PROJECT PARTNERS**

- Kenya Troutman, DC HSEMA
- Lilantha Tennekoon, Prince George's County

##### **PANELISTS**

- Vermecia Alsop, DC HSEMA, Panel 1
- Stephanie Dalke, UMD Environmental Finance Center, Panel 1
- Grace Dho, Chesapeake Bay Trust, Panel 1
- Dr. Estelle-Marie Montgomery, FH Faunteroy Center & Resilience Incubator, Panel 1
- Kelly Collins Choi, Casey Trees, Panel 1
- Dennis Chestnut, Groundwork Anacostia River DC; Ward 7 Resilience Hub Community Coalition, Panel 2

- Brenda Lee Richardson, Friends of Oxon Run, Panel 2
- Madeline Daugherty, Mount Rainier Nature Center, PG Parks and Recreation, Panel 2
- Ashley Drakeford, City of Seat Pleasant, Panel 2

##### **ATTENDEES**

- Matthew Tippet, M-NCPPC
- Joelle Burgard, DDOT
- Chanae Farmer, City of District Heights
- Monica Higgs, City of Seat Pleasant
- Garry Jones, City of Seat Pleasant
- Yishen Li, ICF
- Brenden Shane, Trust for Public Land
- Stella Tarnay, Capital Nature
- Valerie Fitton-Kane, Casey Trees
- Marian Dombroski, AWCAC
- Patrick McCarthy, Prince George's County Master Gardeners
- Brittany Baporis, Resident of D.C.
- Anna Connor, Resident of D.C.
- Chris Cromartie, Resident
- Christina Hughes, Resident
- Aliya Mejias, Resident of D.C.
- Krista Schlyer, International League of Conservation Photographers

## **MEETING SUMMARY**

On Thursday, May 22<sup>nd</sup> the Regional Open House was held from 4:30 to 7:30 PM at the Marvin Gaye Recreation Center, marking the final major engagement of the Blue-Green Infrastructure (BGI) Community Engagement and Planning Project. The event welcomed 26 attendees, including representatives from community-based organizations, local government agencies, and regional partners, as well as residents interested in learning more about and getting involved in flood resilience efforts in their communities. In addition, there were 9 invited panel speakers and 10 Project Teams and Partners. The event reinforced the importance of cross-sector collaboration, equitable environmental planning, and community-driven solutions in advancing flood resilience across the region. There was food and refreshments served for all participants, and local attendees that completed the evaluation survey received \$25 gift cards.

### **1. OPEN HOUSE EXPLORATION**

At the start of the Open House, attendees were encouraged to visit the Regional Open House engagement stations throughout the duration of the event. At the sign-in and resource table, participants could receive information about COG and project materials, including the project fact sheet, the project type booklet, and the BGI digital booklet. Below are the open house stations participants were encouraged to visit before the presentation began.

#### **Station 1: BGI Education**

Facilitated by ICF, this station provided an accessible overview of Blue-Green Infrastructure—what it is, how it works, and how it benefits local communities. Attendees were invited to share their knowledge and ask questions to deepen their understanding of BGI concepts.

#### **Station 2: “Let’s Find Your Project” Table**

Facilitated by Straughan Environmental, they used large maps and detailed subwatershed priority map booklets, to help participants explore the three draft priority areas within the three subwatersheds that were identified as strong candidates for BGI implementation projects.

#### **Station 3: BGI Participation Spectrum**

Facilitated by CHPlanning, this hands-on activity invited attendees to consider which local organizations might serve as valuable partners in future BGI efforts. Using a large spectrum board, participants placed sticky notes identifying organizations they believed would be strong candidates to be informed about BGI, be involved in BGI initiatives, or collaborate on BGI initiatives. Participants were able to both identify great organizations in the ecosystem and their capacity to be involved.

#### **Station 4: Flood Insurance Resource Table**

This table, hosted by DISB, provided attendees with information and resources on personal flood insurance options and preparedness.

## 2. PRESENTATION

*Heidi Bonnaffon, COG*

*Amanda Vargo, ICF*

*Richa Vuppuluri, CHPlanning*

*Joe Arrowsmith, Straughan Environmental*

### WELCOME AND OPEN HOUSE OVERVIEW

The Open House presentation began with a presentation led by members of the project team, including Amanda Vargo (ICF), Richa Vuppuluri (CHPlanning), and Joe Arrowsmith (Straughan Environmental). They provided a brief framing of Blue-Green Infrastructure (BGI) as a tool that integrates natural systems into urban infrastructure to manage stormwater, reduce flooding, and enhance community flood resilience. Richa Vuppuluri shared that since October 2024, a series of virtual and in-person engagement events have been held, culminating in this Regional Open House. The main purpose of the Open House was to drive future funding and implementation strategies for the BGI projects identified through the planning study. It brought together potential partners and oriented them to resources and tools for identifying projects in their communities, with a focus on funding feasibility, stakeholder collaboration, and community engagement.

### Summary of Study Outputs

Joe Arrowsmith from Straughan Environmental shared updates on the study outputs for the BGI project, and the team is developing a summary of findings that will be available online. This includes:

- Mapping of existing water system management
- Consolidated flood risk mapping using both local and federal data
- A repeatable process to identify and prioritize BGI opportunities
- Visual maps identifying sites for potential BGI implementation

The team introduced a new tool to rank BGI project sites based on four criteria: social equity, flood risk, actionability, and watershed impact.

### Who Can Use This Work:

- **Local Governments:** Identify priority areas for retrofits
- **Stewardship Groups:** Spot opportunities in their neighborhoods
- **Community Members:** Advocate for local improvements
- **All Stakeholders:** Collaborate with funders to develop viable, fundable projects

The central theme of the event was how to build partnerships across sectors and how to secure funding. The process developed through this project positions communities along the Oxon Run, Watts Branch, and Arundel Canal subwatershed areas to make substantial proposals for funding and implement solutions. It also offers a replicable model for neighboring areas.

### 3. PANEL DISCUSSIONS

The panel discussions were a cornerstone aspect of engagement for the event. There were two panels lasting 30 minutes each that covered the topics of: 1) best strategies for securing funding for flood resiliency projects and 2) how to build cross sector coalitions in the flood resilience ecosystem.

#### **Panel 1: Funding in Uncertain Times: Feasibility of BGI Project Concepts**

Panel 1 was moderated by Joe Arrowsmith from Straughan Environmental.

Arrowsmith asked the panelists questions about sourcing and successfully applying for project funding in a time where funding patterns are rapidly shifting. The full set of responses to the moderated questions is available in the appendix.

#### **Panel 1 Discussion Questions:**

1. This project is unique in that it is a collaboration between neighboring states. How can regional collaboration increase fundability?
2. When are projects too big or too small in scope for funding?
3. If you were providing funding, which types of organizations may be the best positioned to effectively garner support/ be awarded grants?
4. What key partnerships are most critical to strengthen partnerships and make projects more fundable?
5. How are we relating to current large scale BGI opportunities that are ongoing?
6. What are some good financial models for addressing some of these challenges?

#### **Panel 1 Key Takeaways:**

- **Funding Changes:** There is a noticeable shift towards cuts in federal funding which places pressure on municipal and state governing bodies to bridge gaps
- **Spending on Disaster Mitigation Pays in the Back End:** In proposal writing, emphasize the value of framing project benefits in terms of avoided costs. One panelist stated that every dollar spent on disaster mitigation saves \$4 – \$16 in recovery costs.
- **Alignment and Community Centered Design:** Projects with long-term success heavily involve local communities' voices and visions. Projects that are more likely to get funding should aim to demonstrate how they are incorporating community voices in a substantial way throughout the project.

The first panel concluded with a reminder that BGI must be treated—and funded—as critical infrastructure, not merely a beautification effort. Stewardship, sustained community involvement, and capacity-building for community-based organizations were presented as essential pillars for the long-term success of BGI initiatives.

#### **Panel 2: Implementation Partnerships: Lessons Learned for Stakeholder and Community Engagement**

Panel 2 was moderated by Erin Jones from CHPlanning. Jones started this panel by emphasizing evolving engagement strategies, highlighting the importance of building

partnerships that extend beyond the planning phase. She stressed that strong alignment among stakeholders is essential for lasting impact. The full set of responses to the moderated questions are available in the appendix.

#### Panel 2 Discussion Questions:

1. What does it mean to “meet people where they are”?
2. What has made your most successful community implementation partnership effective?
3. What can we do to effectively spread information to the community within community engagement?
4. What does a successful partnership look like in this space?
5. Have you encountered instances of concern regarding Green Gentrification?
6. How do you engage youth and make it accessible across generations?
7. What is one piece of advice for other consultants or practitioners to engage in community projects?

#### Panel 2 Key Takeaways:

- **Meet People Where They Are:** Always aim to reduce barriers to accessibility, whether financial (stipends and food), linguistic (culturally competent verbiage), logistical (childcare or virtual options)
- **Leverage Community Spaces:** It is important to leverage spaces in the community that already have substantial networks and physical spaces for the community to congregate. Tapping into these centers will enable organizations to expedite outreach and maintain consistency to meetings.
- **Community Led Solutions:** When organizations maximize making these spaces accessible and remain consistent, they can see the fruits of genuine community-led solutions. When communities are empowered to lead projects first, the result is lasting, substantial outcomes in the project implementation and maintenance

#### 4. CLOSING REMARKS AND NEXT STEPS

Richa Vuppuluri from CHPlanning closed out the presentation by highlighting the engagement stations and encouraging attendees to visit each one, complete the Open House evaluation, and take time to connect and network with fellow participants.

## APPENDIX

### Targeted Outreach

The BGI Regional Open House was designed primarily for practitioners, with community-based organizations, local governments, agencies, other professionals, and residents in mind. The team sent targeted outreach emails to residents engaged through previous workshops and pop-up events. Invitations were also sent to local governments within and around the three subwatersheds to highlight the project's replicability, and to CBOs engaged throughout the project's duration.

There was a total of 25 people who RSVP'd prior to the open house, with most of the potential attendees representing organizations throughout Prince George's County and the District.



### Engagement Station Takeaways & Photos

Participants were eager to visit our four interactive stations around the room:

#### Station 1: BGI Education Table



Station 2: "Let's Find Your Project" Table



Station 3: BGI Participation Spectrum Table



For Station 3, Participants identified 6 organizations as candidates for involvement and collaboration in BGI Projects. In particular:

**Involve Organizations (support and coordinate):**

- DOEE
- HSEMA
- The Capital Market

### Collaborate Organizations (fund and co-lead):

- CBT
- DDOT
- Joe's Movement Emporium
- HSEMA (listed again)

### Panel Discussion Detailed Notes

#### Panel 1: Funding in Uncertain Times: Feasibility of BGI Project Concepts

##### Moderated Discussion Questions:

1. This project is unique in that it is a collaboration between neighboring states. How can regional collaboration increase fundability?
  - a. **Federal Funding Perspective:** Alsop, speaking from the federal funding level of emergency management, emphasized that momentum must continue despite funding cuts. She highlighted DC HSEMA's success in securing nearly \$100 million for resilience projects as a powerful example of what's possible with strategic coordination.
  - b. **Cost Efficiency Argument:** Dalke pointed out that every dollar spent on disaster mitigation saves \$4–\$16 in recovery costs. She stressed the need to think creatively about funding, especially in multi-state collaborations where pooled efforts could unlock new opportunities.
  - c. **State-Led Disaster Mitigation:** Dr. Montgomery expressed enthusiasm for the Maryland side of the project, particularly the potential for community-driven design of a resilience hub. She noted that we are in an unprecedented moment where states are increasingly obliged to lead disaster mitigation. She suggested leaning into this state leadership role and making the most of this in terms of how state-led efforts may be rolled out differently.
2. **When are projects too big or too small in scope for funding?**
  - a. **Funder Alignment is Key:** It's not just about the size of the project—you have to find the right funder for the right project. Understanding a funder's goals and priorities is essential for success.
  - b. **No Idea is Too Big:** Dho emphasized that even large-scale ideas can succeed if they're strategically aligned with the right funders. The critical step is making intentional connections and clearly articulating how the project fits within the funder's mission.
3. **If you were providing funding, which types of orgs may be the best positioned to effectively garner support/ be awarded grants? (CBO's? Local government organizations, residents?)**

- a. **Cross-sector Collaboration:** The most effective projects are those that engage all parts of the community ecosystem and ensure alignment with community needs.
  - b. **Community Ownership is Essential:** Dho noted that although there may be eligibility limitations (such as 501(c)(3) status), funders often look for projects that foster community pride and ownership. Also, when residents are directly involved, the impact tends to be more extensive and longer lasting.
  - c. **Established Organizations Offer Stability:** Collins Choi emphasized the importance of ensuring project longevity, especially during times of reduced funding. As a result, larger, well-established organizations with strong track records may be more likely to receive support.
  - d. **Strategic Alignment Boosts Fundability:** Alsop advised focusing not just on funding, but on demonstrated community need. She highlighted the importance of being embedded in local, state, and municipal planning efforts, assembling a team with co-leads, and aligning with frameworks like the DC Flood Task Force and Hazard Mitigation Plans to ensure shared responsibility and long-term accountability.
  - e. **Diverse Partnerships Amplify Value:** Dr. Montgomery advocated for a multi-partner approach that includes community members, academia, government, and the private sector. She stressed the importance of understanding and communicating the unique value each partner brings—whether as a connector, translator, or intergenerational bridge—to help build sustained community capacity.
4. **What key partnerships are most critical to strengthen partnerships and make projects more fundable?**
- a. **Biodiversity Strengthens the Pitch:** Collins Choi emphasized habitat restoration and biodiversity as compelling co-benefits that appeal to funders like Audubon, Ducks Unlimited, and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation.
  - b. **Public Health:** Dalke noted that while public health benefits are a critical co-benefit, they are often difficult to quantify, which can make them more challenging to leverage effectively in funding applications.
  - c. **Workforce Opportunities:** Dr. Montgomery framed BGI as a potential tool for economic mobility—introducing youth to green career pathways starting in elementary school and supporting lifelong learning and employment through the lens of environmental resilience.
  - d. **Invest in Small Organizations' Capacity:** Dho discussed the importance of building financial resiliency within local organizations. She talked about Capacity Building for Local Organizations, focus on building financial resiliency and the amplified impact of small grants to bigger funding down the road. Highlighted Chesapeake Bay Trust's capacity-building programs, which support small organizations in

developing grant-writing and administrative expertise. For example, she described a progression from \$5,000 in year one to \$10,000 grants in year two for a small organization she had worked with as evidence of the impact of growing community readiness and capacity.

- e. **Balance Co-Benefits with Core Goals:** Dalke shared that many innovative pilots successfully serve dual purposes but warned that co-benefits should enhance—not overshadow—the core mission of BGI projects.
- f. **Demonstrate Measurable Risk Reduction:** Alsop shared that FEMA evaluates the effectiveness of mitigation projects by tracking measurable outcomes—particularly reductions in National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP) claims and decreased strain on emergency services (e.g., police and fire stations). She emphasized the value of framing project benefits in terms of **avoided costs**: how many homes won't require federal disaster relief thanks to proactive prevention and intervention. Understanding how many properties fall within the federal disaster relief “bucket” helps quantify impact and strengthens the case for funding.

#### Audience Questions

- 5. How are we relating to current large scale BGI opportunities that are ongoing?
  - a. We still contend with the complexity of “who is the lead” since we all have aligned goals and how do we all move into the same direction given we are all operating in the same ecosystem.
- 6. What are some good financial models for addressing some of these challenges?
  - a. **Prioritize Maintenance Through Community Involvement:** Dalke emphasized the importance of balancing new infrastructure with long-term upkeep. She highlighted the value of engaging community members in the sustainability process, keeping them engaged and invested in maintaining structures once they are initially installed as a sustaining strategy that keeps infrastructure lasting and functioning well.
  - b. **Leverage Volunteerism and Local Grants:** Collins Choi noted that many efforts rely on strong networks of volunteers and partnerships with community groups. She also pointed out that DC offers a variety of grants that can help fund local initiatives and supplement volunteer-based work.
  - c. **Assess and Support Organizational Capacity:** Arrowsmith explained that the funding conversation is shifting—from solely focusing on construction to evaluating whether organizations have the capacity to maintain infrastructure over time. This includes staffing, budgeting, and planning for durability, not just initial implementation. DC is increasingly treating BGI as functional infrastructure rather than cosmetic enhancement, signaling a shift toward sustained capital and O&M investment being a key area of importance.

Panel 2: Implementation Partnerships: Lessons Learned for Stakeholder and Community Engagement  
Moderated Discussion Questions

1. What does it mean to “meet people where they are”?

Brenda shared the following:

- a. **Virtual Opportunities:** Leverage the flexibility to be virtual, especially when safety and travel accessibility is an issue.
- b. **Language:** The environmental context of what language you use is important. Keep people engaged by using language that is accessible and culturally responsive to them as the target demographic.
- c. **Food as an Engagement Strategy:** Lee Richardson’s org has spent a lot of money on food. There is an importance to providing nutritious meals, not just as a gesture of hospitality, but to draw people in and show care for their well-being.

2. What has made your most successful community implementation partnership effective?

- a. **Remove Participation Barriers:** Lee Richardson and Chestnut both emphasized the importance of eliminating obstacles such as lack of childcare, food, or compensation. Providing stipends, meals, and support services helps ensure broader, more equitable participation from the community.
- b. **Use Accessible Language:** They also highlighted the need to make language welcoming and understandable, ensuring that communications resonate with and include the full diversity of the community.

3. What can we do to effectively spread information to the community within community engagement?

- a. **Leverage Trusted Institutions:** Drakeford highlighted the role of faith-based institutions, civic associations, and local nonprofits—organizations that already have strong community ties, intergenerational reach, and built-in communication channels like newsletters and meeting spaces. Churches are one of the biggest land holders. It’s important to share these stories. Take advantage of these local institutions. Trusted institutions like churches, civic associations, and local nonprofits have built-in networks and are often underutilized assets for outreach.

4. What does successful partnership look like in this space?

- a. **Substantial Relationship Building:** Chestnut says building relationships is key. Doing it virtually is difficult. Successful partnership means to meet a community where they are with the communication component of outreach. Use language that is accessible and leverage tapping into spaces the community already flows. At the Ward 7 Resilience Hub, they started this work by launching an environmental literacy initiative—breaking down terminology to empower residents to participate meaningfully. Resilience Hubs are “community-serving” facilities—not necessarily municipal—that function as

multipurpose infrastructure for education, emergency response, workforce development, and climate resilience.

- b. **Physical Spaces to Congregate:** Daugherty says successful partnerships look like creating physical spaces for people to come in and meet. A lot of people don't know what resources they have access to in their own communities. Face to face connections are very important to developing any kind of relationship.
- c. **Rooted in Local Identity:** Drakeford highlighted using storytelling and trusted community spaces to make projects relatable. For example, once she worked at an organization that partnered with the USDA Soil Shop Project. They adapted USDA's materials to be culturally and linguistically accessible, leading to her community having one of the highest participation rates across the USDA Soil Shop Project

## Audience Questions

### 5. Have you encountered instances of concern regarding Green Gentrification?

- a. **Humanizing Engagement:** Drakeford emphasized the importance of bringing people together to foster interpersonal connections, urging to see individuals as people rather than just organizations. She noted that face-to-face interactions make concerns more real and help build genuine understanding beyond abstract discussions.
- b. **Community-Led Solutions to Green Gentrification:** Chestnut highlighted the Parkside Community as an example, where fears of displacement from green improvements were addressed by involving residents in the community directly in designing a stormwater capture park. They worried that green infrastructure would inevitably lead to their own displacement. The project responded to local issues like flooding and dumping and engaged the community in decision-making, including choosing the design. Supported by a DOEE grant, the park fully manages stormwater and won regional recognition. This approach shows that prioritizing local voices is key to dispelling misinformation about green gentrification and ensuring that green projects benefit, rather than displace, longtime residents.

### 6. How to engage youth and making it accessible across generations?

- a. **Empower Students:** Drakeford noted that youth are already aware and interested; educators just need to break down the topics and provide space for their input.
- b. **Find Easy Entry Points:** Daugherty emphasized creating accessible ways for youth to join conversations, allowing them to naturally engage and interact with peers.
- c. **Be Present in the Community:** Chestnut stressed the importance of showing up where the community gathers—whether at civic associations or local events—to engage across generations effectively.

### 7. One piece of advice for other consultants or practitioners to engage in community projects?

- a. **Notice Who's Missing:** Drakeford advised that when gathering stakeholders, it's crucial to observe who is not present and consider how to seek and include those missing voices.
- b. **Respect Time:** Lee Richardson emphasized starting and ending meetings on time, recommending keeping them to one hour to maintain engagement and respect participants' schedules.
- c. **Be Consistent:** Daugherty stressed the importance of consistent programming over time to sustain engagement and avoid losing community interest once people are involved.
- d. **Create Opportunities for Involvement:** Chestnut encouraged finding meaningful ways for participants to actively engage and feel involved in the process



*Photo from Panel 1*



*Photo from Panel 2*

**Post Evaluation Survey Results:** At the conclusion of the event, we collected [post evaluation surveys](#) from three residents of the local area.

### Key Feedback:

- (2/3) participants shared they are “moderately concerned” about flooding in their community, with one participant sharing they are “slightly concerned”
- (3/3) participants rated the information provided at the Open House as “very useful”
- (2/3) participants shared that the Open House “mostly” helped them to understand the concept and importance of BGI. One person shared it “somewhat” helped them
- In terms of the amount of information presented in the workshop, we received feedback that the Open House was “manageable”, “clean and well-paced”, and “manageable”