



MEMORANDUM

Comfort Lake-Forest Lake Watershed District

Date: June 17, 2024
To: CLFLWD Board of Managers
From: Mike Kinney, District Administrator
Subject: MP+G Shoreline Market Research Report



District Wide

Background/Discussion

This topic was discussed at the [August 10, 2023 regular board meeting](#), and the Board authorized the administrator to work with MP+G to begin working on public relations, particularly with a focus on the shoreline restoration campaign. Enclosed is the draft report pertaining to the market research that was completed under this effort.

The attached document is for Board review.

At the July 11 regularly scheduled CLFLWD Board Meeting, MP+G staff will be presenting the report. At that time, they will be answering any questions and discussing any concerns the Board has about the attached report.

Attached

MP+G Shoreline Market Research Report



MP+G Marketing Solutions

Comfort Lake-Forest Lake Watershed District Research Report



Photo Credit: Comfort lake – Forest Lake Watershed District

Revised June 18, 2024

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Purpose of the Market Research

The purpose of this research is to collect data from lakeshore owners (residential and/or seasonal) in the Comfort Lake – Forest Lake Watershed District (CLFLWD), specifically **those who have completed a site visit, but who did not proceed with a cost-share shoreline restoration project.**

To support this effort, MP+G Marketing Solutions planned, conducted, and analyzed the data from one focus group, one emailed response, and three interviews with key informants. The data will be used to provide CLFLWD with need-to-know intelligence for planning and decision making.

Background

The Comfort Lake – Forest Lake Watershed District began this project with a general goal to improve the District’s public relations. In consultation with MP+G, the goal was narrowed to the more tangible, measurable objective of **increasing communications that motivate participation in CLFLWD lakeshore restoration programs**—more specifically, CLFLWD’s Cost Share Program, which is intended to encourage and reward good stewardship practices that help maintain and improve local water quality. Participants receive grants and technical assistance to support restoration and/or preservation of natural shoreline.

Participation in the cost-share program begins with the lakeshore owner(s) receiving a site visit from CLFLWD field staff, with the ultimate goal of pursuing an inground project that contributes to lakeshore restoration/preservation. Agreeing to a site visit may follow participation in a District workshop, viewing a CLFLWD presentation at a lake association meeting, receiving a mailing, and/or other outreach effort. Lakeshore owners may also work with private landscaping companies as they make decisions about their property.

This research was designed to learn about and use communications to influence the decisions these homeowners make about lakeshore management.

With this in mind, the team set out to learn what changes to information, communications, workshops, site visits, and/or program structure may

increase the likelihood that participants will apply for cost-share and/or proceed to a lakeshore restoration project.

Research Approach

The research and communications development for this project has been divided into two phases:

- Phase 1: Research and communications development with lakeshore owners who have received a site visit but not yet proceeded with an inground lakeshore restoration project through CLFLWD. This audience group was chosen as most likely to inform us about thoughts, preferences, opinions, and experiences with lakeshore restoration, and CLFLWD programs and staff.
- Phase 2: Research and communications development with up to three other target audience groups TBD, such as:
 - Lakeshore owners who have completed a restoration project;
 - Lakeshore owners in the District who are new to lakeshore restoration and/or unfamiliar with CLFLWD's programs and services; and
 - Staff at landscaping companies that are knowledgeable about, and influencers of, lakeshore owners' decisions.

This report covers the Phase 1 research methods and findings.

MP+G conducted and analyzed primary (formative) research into the perspectives, preferences, and communication needs of the target audience. The formative research was structured to address the research questions, listed below under *Research Questions*.

Several methods for gathering data were considered: focus groups, interviews, and surveys. Focus groups were preferred as the method most likely to uncover new and nuanced information about the target audience in the form of qualitative data. Key informant interviews would be included, primarily to shape the focus group structure and questions. Surveys to gather quantitative data were not selected as a collection method for this project; while useful, they are most meaningful when administered to a larger (100+) sample, which was not available in this instance.

The research approach was structured to include:

- One focus group with seven people who reside or have seasonal property on Forest Lake, and one email response from a resident on Bone Lake (who wished to participate but was unable to attend the focus group), and
- Three interviews with key informants who work with members of the target audience

The number of participants was limited by two factors: 1) only one focus group could be completed within the project budget, and 2) participants were recruited from a small pool of people (at approximately 13 sites) who met the audience criteria as scoped for this particular group.

The focus group was used to collect data from the target audience. We conducted qualitative analysis of the responses of audience members, and compiled them in this report.

Research Questions

Note: The *research questions*, used for research planning, are different from the *focus group and key informant interview questions*, which are used for data collection.

Per consensus agreement with CLFLWD, the objective of the research is to answer the following research questions:

1. What do target audience members know and perceive about lakeshore health?
2. What makes *shoreline restoration and lake health* appealing to target audience members? Unappealing?
3. What makes the *cost-share program* appealing? Unappealing?
4. What do target audience members perceive about the usefulness of workshops and cost-share materials? What information is missing?
5. Is there anything about the workshops or cost-share program that the audience finds confusing, offensive, or wrong?
6. What do target audience members perceive about the trustworthiness of CLFLWD and the cost-share program?
7. What *messaging and outreach* does the research suggest may persuade the target audience to complete participation in the cost-share program (or use private funds to complete a restoration)?
8. What *strategies and program supports* does the research suggest may persuade the target audience?

9. What sources do target audience members follow and trust for information about lake health and lakeshore improvement? Do they follow and trust lake associations?

Hypothesis

Because this is market research, we are not testing a hypothesis, but rather increasing our understanding of the perspectives, preferences, and communication needs of the target audiences.

Methods

Target Population for the Research

Thanks to CLFLWD staff efforts, we were able to recruit people for a focus group and interviews who meet the following criteria:

1. Are members of the following audience:
 - a. People who live, or reside seasonally, on lakes in the CLFLWD; and
 - b. Who have completed a site visit with CLFLWD; and
 - c. Who have not yet acted to participate in a cost-share lakeshore restoration project (or possibly completed a project with private funds).
2. Key informants or stakeholders with knowledge about the cost-share program and participants who attend workshops and receive site visits.
3. Are above the age of 18
4. The study will exclude persons who do not appear to have a full-scale IQ of 80 or above as measured by standardized tests; they are a protected group at elevated risk of harm from the interview process.

MP+G provided the email invitation, scheduled the meetings, and tracked participant responses.

Data Collection

The focus group was designed to be non-coercive; subjects were be told they did not have to respond to any questions they did not feel comfortable answering. They were encouraged to share thoughts and opinions in their own words. **Researchers listened openly and welcomed a diversity of opinions and experiences.**

Descriptive and qualitative data was collected. Notes were taken during the focus group and interviews. Participants were asked for permission to allow recording to assist with note-taking. For confidentiality, recordings will be deleted at the close of the research process.

Analysis

Notes from the focus group and interviews were analyzed to better understand participants' knowledge, thoughts, experiences, and opinions on lakeshore health, CLFLWD site visits, and the cost-share program.

Qualitative analysis involved detailed review of transcripts, coding of data, and subsequent identification of themes and findings aligned with the research questions, including:

- Factors that make lakeshore restoration appealing or unappealing, or make it easier or harder to pursue;
- Factors that make participation in the cost-share program appealing or unappealing, or make it easier or harder to pursue;
- Perceptions, quality, and trustworthiness of CLFLWD materials, programs, and staff;
- Key messages, messengers, and channels for communicating with this audience; and
- Other findings.

The findings will be used to modify and/or create a limited number of communications materials, as manageable under the project budget. (The budget enables us to develop research-driven messages and materials, but does not allow for message and materials testing.) The research and materials are being designed for sharing with the CLFLWD board, and its stakeholders.

Protection of Human Subjects

Participation in the interviews was voluntary and confidential; no identifying information is associated with research subjects and the data is reported without names. There are limits to this confidentiality, however, as participants were invited by, and are known to, CLFLWD.

Participants were given a verbal disclosure (including who is conducting the research and why, why they are being asked to participate,

what the potential risks of the interview are, how their confidentiality will be protected, and what will be done with the information they provide), and asked to give verbal permission to proceed with the interview.

Participants were promised that their responses will be kept confidential by the research team. This report does not include their names nor their identifying information, within the limits outlined above.

Risks and Benefits

No significant risks of participating have been identified.

In appreciation for their time, focus group participants received a thank-you gift of native plant seed, and a book about Monarch butterflies. Some may also have perceived a benefit to participating in research to support, shape, or change efforts to improve CLFLWD lake health and recreational enjoyment.

Findings

The research findings expand our understanding of the behavioral choices about lakeshore use made by this target audience, and the ways we may be able to measurably influence those decisions through tailored communications. However, the value of the input from these seven focus group participants and one email respondent is limited to a small number of viewpoints. The results of the research should be regarded as more descriptive than predictive, qualitative not quantitative, and as not directly generalizable to the target audience as a whole.

Knowledge of Lakeshore Health

Because these participants have received a site visit, we can expect they may have more knowledge about lakeshore health than other CLFLWD lakeshore residents.

These people appeared to vary in their knowledge: two demonstrated more extensive knowledge, while the rest exhibited more limited knowledge, with several having unanswered questions. For example, one was unsure if “foamy” runoff was a sign pollution or algae.

When asked about ways to know if a lake is healthy and water is clean, participants mentioned getting water quality data reports from CLFLWD and/or the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources. A few also talked about high algae levels, high phosphorus levels, poor water clarity, and warm water temperature as being indicators of unhealthy water.

Based on this research, education of the target audience should continue or be increased. Some areas **mentioned** or inferred by researchers were:

- Which lake plants are beneficial/normal, and which are harmful/invasive
- The appropriate use of riprap as it relates to erosion prevention
- Simple, laypersons' methods for recognizing/judging healthy waters

What Participants Value about Lake Life

Participants seemed to enjoy talking about life on the lake. Valued experiences that they mentioned included:

- Time with family
- Peace and quiet
- Fishing
- Boating/pontooning
- Seeing wildlife/the flyway: Loons, turtles, ducks, eagles, frogs
- Water sports: paddleboards, tubing
- The town of Forest Lake
- "Openness" and being able to look at the lake
- Beauty of the lake

"...It's my happy place, my place to get away."

—Focus group participant

"I'm here for the fishing; she's here for the grandchildren."

—Focus group participant

"[I like that] my kids have all grown up on the lake."

—Focus group participant

Effective messaging for this audience will highlight the ways in which shoreline restoration supports these values.

What Participants Dislike about Lake Life

A majority of these participants mentioned aquatic “weeds” as a thing they disliked about lake living. No one distinguished between beneficial and harmful species of aquatic plants. One person mentioned zebra mussels, and noting that they had lessened in recent years.

When prompted with a question about upkeep and maintenance, participants again mentioned weeds and also erosion, especially in the context of wind, waves, ice movement and heaving. One noted a high level of maintenance on their large property.

“[The weeds.] It’s awful. It’s so bad. I just, oh my goodness.”

—Focus group participant

Effective messaging for this audience will provide education about beneficial aquatic plant species, and practical advice for managing plant growth.

Perceptions about Shoreline Restoration

Among these respondents, having a wild or natural lakeshore was mentioned more often; researchers note this is unsurprising since participants have all requested and received a site visit from CLFLWD.

This line of discussion was sometimes linked to differences in the type of shoreline, the way their shoreline was used, and particulars of the lake lot the participant owned. One person said of their preference for a less manicured lot, “That’s my choice.”

“I think...the difficult part here is everybody’s lakeshore is different.”

—Focus group participant

“I like an intentional use of landscaping but with a wild flair, and to juxtapose that, I like to see some manicured lawn.”

—Email respondent

Things participants mentioned as beneficial to the lake were limited to:

- Not using phosphorous or fertilizer

- Rocks to control erosion and heaving

Things participants saw as harmful to the lake were limited to:

- Mowing all the way to the lake edge
- Poorly maintained boats
- Use of chemicals

Also mentioned regarding shoreline management were differences of opinion with neighbors and family members.

"...the neighbors hate us because we have a tree. They all have lawn that goes right to the lakeshore. The neighbors on both sides of us have put in riprap indiscriminately without getting any kind of permission from the DNR. They put fertilizer on their lawn, they spray weeds all the way to the lakeshore. It goes on and on. And we're the neighborhood pariahs."

—Focus group participant

"We have eight units here in this condominium. Trying to get everybody to decide on what we should do with [shoreline and lakeshore] is one thing. But, you know, everybody wants to be able to see and look out at the lake. That's what they're here for."

—Focus group participant

Effective message to this audience will provide education and approaches for different kinds of shoreline. Also, these lakeshore residents need help explaining and negotiating natural shoreline choices to neighbors and family (e.g., a handout and messaging).

Barriers to Shoreline Restoration Participation

Three people mentioned that the resulting project plan was "expensive," and another said their plan was a lot to do all at once.

"When [CLFLWD staff member] came out, the plan was great, but it was expensive...I didn't take him up on the plan or the funding that was available because it was still gonna run, you know, \$15,000. I think better, easier solutions, like more modest solutions [would be more doable]. Overall, I think to really protect the shoreline, you gotta get more [shoreline owners] to buy in to doing something."

—Focus group participant

"It's great to have the big plan, but it would kind of be nice if it were broken down into phases. Like everything didn't have to happen in one year."

—Focus group participant

"It might be helpful to add some funding for the first couple of years for maintenance. It is my understanding that native plantings need to be managed carefully until the native plants are established and that could be a barrier for some to maintain."

—Email respondent

When asked directly about the voluntary maintenance buffer, several people said they viewed it as impractical, inconvenient, or undesirable.

"The difficulty is...my property is very flat, very low. And the talk was having to put plants back like 30 feet from the lake. And then it's like, well, maybe 10 feet [remaining]. And you gotta keep in mind that...some of the lots are shorter. To take a fourth of your yard and have it be these plants, it would be also very difficult to maintain. [And] it was a very expensive project."

—Focus group participant

"I just couldn't imagine taking my whole 107 feet and not even having walk spaces to get to the lake. We got boats, we got pontoons, we've got docks, you gotta remember you're storing all this stuff in your yard and dragging it across this buffer zone. And so again, the buffer zone definitely threw me off."

—Focus group participant

"I think the level balance for lake health and people usage, is a bit off. Wondering if the determination could be based on the open land available by the shoreline. I still want to be able to pull in my lake equipment, dock, lift etc., and use my land for storage, without having to fight reeds. Also want a clear sightline to lake from home and yard."

—Email respondent

Effective outreach and program support for this audience will expand and diversify options to accommodate different types of lakeshore, fitting within a range of budgets, and offering a variety of good-enough-though-not-ideal plans for natural shoreline (e.g., "pocket garden" plans at various price points).

Views on Materials and Site Visit/Workshop Content

These participants viewed the site visits and materials favorably, and gave CLFLWD staff high marks.

"I thought it was very informative."

—Focus group participant

"The information was great and I think everybody understood how important it was."

—Focus group participant

"They gave us a spreadsheet with different kinds of plants that could grow in water that were shade tolerant...And some ideas about where you could actually get those...which was really helpful."

—Focus group participant

"It was good information and enough to get started."

—Email respondent

Several participants valued the "validation" that came with a site visit.

"...validation that my shoreline is good—so I can tell my brother that he needs to stop with telling me <laugh>, it needs to be...a golf course. We have strong disagreements about that."

—Focus group participant

Effective outreach and program support for this audience will distribute natural shoreline educational materials more widely, and continue using trusted messengers including CLFLWD field staff to deliver messages. It will also provide avenues for validating and supporting the choice of a natural shoreline—perhaps including certificates, signs, and/or public acknowledgment—that serves to normalize the choice of plants and trees over "golf course" lawns and riprap.

Perceptions about CLFLWD and Staff

When asked if they felt the information and assistance they received from CLFLWD was reliable and trustworthy, these participants said “yes” and expressed no concerns.

“I thought it was reliable. Absolutely.”

—Focus group participant

Trusted Sources of Information

Most of these participants mentioned the CLFLWD staff member who had conducted their site visit as their trusted source of information about lake health and shoreline restoration, and said this person was the one to whom they would turn with questions. The Watershed District itself was relied upon to provide water quality statistics and advice.

The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources was also mentioned as a source of information. One person said their lake association sent out information and emails, and hosted meetings at which CLFLWD or DNR staff appeared and provided education and information. One participant was a member of a lake association.

“I believe the MNDNR does and our watershed district does a good job of providing information, if you seek it out.”

—Email respondent

Communication Recommendations

Research-driven Key Messages

The top key messages—or talking points—emerging from this research are:

1. Emphasize the benefits of lake life and how natural shorelines support these.
 - a. A well-maintained natural shoreline will help preserve the lake life you and your family love.
 - b. A natural shoreline helps filter water for a clean, healthy lake for fish and wildlife.
 - c. A clean, healthy lake with natural shoreline is great for fishing, swimming, boating and watersports.

- d. Enjoy the peace and quiet of your lake with the beauty a natural shoreline provides.
- e. Loons, ducks, turtles, frogs and butterflies all thrive in natural shoreline habitat and add to the lake life you love.

Communications Channels

While participants only mentioned a few trusted communications channels, below, we will recommend more as we complete the project.

- Watershed District website, presentations, communications and staff, especially field staff
- Lake associations
- Available Minnesota DNR communications opportunities
- Natural shoreline champions, and neighbors talking to neighbors

Trusted Messengers

The trusted messengers mentioned by these participants include:

- Watershed District presentations, communications, and staff, especially field staff (website was not mentioned)
- Lake associations
- Minnesota DNR

Next Steps

As part of this process, the research findings will be used to recommend and develop communications materials (within budget limitations) to enhance outreach for natural shoreline maintenance and restoration.