



## **Water Workforce Coalition Ad Hoc Committee Meeting** **Monday, April 20, 2026**

*Submitted for approval on June 3, 2026*

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**Ad Hoc Committee Members:** Kristen Genson, NWWSD; James Benschoter, City of Bowling Green; Liz Buening, Ottawa County; Chuck Campbell, City of Toledo; Jon Eckel, Perrysburg Township; Andy McClure, City of Toledo; Theresa Pollick, NWWSD; Paul Roman, City of Oregon; Alex Slawinski, Lucas County Water Resource Recovery Facility; Michael Somerville, City of Toledo; **Lake Erie West staff present:** Kari Gerwin, Marissa Bechstein, Jennifer Allen

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**Welcome & Introductions** – The Water Workforce Coalition Ad Hoc Committee met on Monday, April 20, 2026, at 10 a.m. in the Lake Erie West Boardroom. Kari Gerwin welcomed everyone and facilitated the meeting. Introductions were made around the room.

**Recap outcomes of USEPA grant-funded program** – Kari Gerwin gave a recap of the \$494,874 grant through the U.S. EPA Innovative Water Infrastructure Workforce Development Program and how it was used to engage northwest Ohioans in water careers. She explained the role of the Water Workforce Coalition and highlighted their recommended next steps.

On February 9, Water Quality Council recommended the formation of an ad hoc committee whose tasks would be to recommend scope, timeline, and funding for the Water Workforce Coalition in FY2027 and into the future. Kari noted that funding under Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) is still available but no RFP has been released for another round of grant funding.

**Water Workforce Coalition Scope and Timeline** – Kari presented Lake Erie West’s current work to maintain some elements of the program without funding 1) continue to raise awareness and enthusiasm for water sector careers; 2) share job postings, 3) maintain and update website and integrate current operator training into Water Workforce program. The priorities identified by the Coalition include on-going work to be completed in two phases –

**PHASE 1: FY 2027 (and into future)** – Expand and adapt training, seek funding; Lake Erie West has not heard from Owens regarding the future direction of the training program

1. Engage and expand operator training on the job opportunities;
2. Advise and support Owens Community College training program curriculum to ensure it continues to meet industry standards;
3. Identify Class II and III training needs and opportunities to offer training
4. Identify and pursue viable funding sources

Kari asked the group if they saw major gaps in the recommendations for Phase 1 and if there is value in continuing to coordinate water workforce development at a regional level

Paul Roman and Chuck Campbell noted that Oregon and Toledo respectively go through Civil Service Commission for their water positions and require passing exams. Union positions are 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> shift. Oregon is looking to fill Class IV positions. Paul sees value in a regional approach and noted that Oregon operator pay is higher than in most cities. Chuck Campbell

noted the operator “poaching” that takes place between municipalities. The WWC program was effective in filling entry level water positions. However, there is a continued need for advanced license operators.

Marissa Bechstein, Lake Erie West economic development program manager, noted that Metroparks Toledo has a summer camp that engages youth about water-related careers. There may be smaller communities that may benefit from a regional approach.

Andy McClure noted that the City of Toledo is looking for folks who don’t know where or what they want to do for a career but just want to “get their foot in the door.”

Do career tech programs have a program for water? The Maritime Academy had an operator program several years ago. Penta Career Center expressed interest in the WWC program.

Kari Gerwin sought feedback on the proposed FY 2027 Phase 1 next steps. The group concurred with recommended next steps.

Ms. Gerwin asked if there are opportunities to offer on-the-job learning at facilities or skilled trade academics (e.g. Ottawa County). Responses included the following.

- Advertise and formalize process of shadowing of students and make careers desirable and attractive.
- Work with Owens Community College and other programs in the region. The group concurred that the Water Workforce Coalition should advise operator training programs.

With regards to identifying Class II & III training needs, Ms. Gerwin asked the group if they see the Water Workforce Coalition playing a role in statewide efforts. The group concurred it could. OEPA does not offer operator training, but statewide industry groups do – OWEA and Ohio AWWA, OTCO. WWC could coordinate with these groups to make training opportunities available in NW Ohio.

Finally, Ms. Gerwin asked if there are any needs not represented under Phase 1? It was noted that there is a data gap that prevents full understanding of water workforce needs in the region and across Ohio. A needs analysis would be helpful at state level.

## **PHASE 2: Timeline to be determined**

1. Update curriculum to emerging issues and changing industry standards;
2. Develop succession planning program, career advancement, support, and training;
3. Identify opportunities to standardize incentive and pay/pay scales regionally;
4. Develop a network of seasoned operators who could train others;
5. Develop stakeholder partnerships to support operator training;
6. Develop 5 - 12 education/outreach
7. Launch annual career fair or other opportunities to connect employers to job seekers.

Ms. Gerwin asked if there are components that the WWC should do short-term or long-term or should we look further out? Mrs. Bechstein asked where does the work of the WWC align with Pathways to Public Service? She also noted that BGSU and the Chamber ran the Macro and Micro Workforce Coalitions consisting of stakeholders from Fulton, Lucas, Ottawa, and Wood counties.

The group was asked if the WWC should begin planning for Phase 2 plan or hold off? Is there a role for WWC to accomplish some of the goals through statewide coordination? Jon Eckel felt that it is unlikely that the first four priorities under Phase 2 will be accomplished. Ms. Gerwin stated that succession planning and standardized pay was a recommendation of the steering committee. Paul Roman stated that municipalities are in need of Class IV workers. OEPA should be collecting data regarding needs. Michael Somerville said that unless OEPA changes their testing for Class

IV, which requires a comprehensive written exam similar to a thesis, there will be a shortage of Class IV water and wastewater operators. The written exams are specific to the applicant's current facility, so they are not standardized.

Since some barriers are with state requirements for licensing, the group concurred with working with OEPA and statewide partners short term. Is there a forum for people to go to and work out with OEPA on how to accomplish this?

In terms of organizational structure, Ms. Gerwin asked how does the WWC fit Lake Erie West's current membership and committee structure? Option include an advisory group to the Water Quality Council, a standing agenda item of the Community Water Resources Advisory Group, or a standalone voting/dues-paying committee, similar to Stormwater Coalition. Should it be member based? Perhaps, a formal committee isn't needed, but could serve in an advisory capacity, with ongoing conversation or semi-annual (4 times a year) check-in to address issue. The group concurred that it should be a standalone committee that meets quarterly and seeks input from the Economic Development Policy Board, Water Quality Council, and other Lake Erie West policy boards and committees.

It was suggested that we don't start planning for Phase 2. Instead, focus on a couple priorities from Phase 2 and lay groundwork with Penta and career tech schools.

**Water Workforce Coalition Funding** – Ms. Gerwin discussed the estimated ongoing costs to operate the water workforce program, funding sources to offset training costs, and potential funding to expand the program, including: 1) USEPA Innovative Water Infrastructure Workforce Development Program; 2) Community Project Funding (CPF) or Congressionally Directed Spending (CDS); 3) Strengthening Community Colleges Training Grants Program; 4) Ohio Industry Sector Partnership (ISP) Grant Program; 5) Allocation of funds from water and wastewater utilities; 6) Workforce Pell Grant; 7) Scholarships, and 8) workforce grants administered by county Departments of Jobs & Family Services Program.

**Recommendation to Lake Erie West Water Quality Council and Governing Board** – Ms. Gerwin asked the group if they were prepared to make a recommendation to the Lake Erie West Water Quality Council and Governing Board regarding a scope, timeline, funding, and organization structure or if they would prefer to meet again. The ad hoc committee was not prepared to make a recommendation.

**Next Steps** – The group agreed to meet again in 1-2 months (June). It was noted that feedback from water superintendents is critical. It was suggested that the municipalities at the table go back to their respective water superintendents and bring that information back to the next meeting. Chuck Campbell reiterated the data gap to help utilities plan ahead for future need. It was suggested that results from the 2018 operator summit questionnaire be obtained—get survey and data. The group will ask Ohio EPA to conduct an updated study. Lastly, it was noted that some smaller utilities may have needs that are not represented at the table.

Ms. Gerwin announced that OEPA is hosting a Certified Operator Workforce Forum on May 27<sup>th</sup> from 9AM to Noon at the Ohio Means Jobs Center in Columbus. She asked if there was anyone interested in attending the forum. A select group (superintendents) should attend the forum, which is by invitation only. Ms. Gerwin will forward the group information about the forum and they can recommend colleagues who they think should attend to best represent Northwest Ohio.

Ms. Gerwin will provide the Water Quality Council an update at its May 11<sup>th</sup> meeting. The meeting concluded at 11:41 p.m.