

The Rock River Coalition: The First Five Years (1994-1998)

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There are just a few of us in the room who go back to the origination of the Rock River Corridor group which became the Rock River Coalition.

Since I am one of those who go way back, I have been asked to provide a few stories about the evolution of the organization. I have characterized these years into five categories:

- 1994: The Start Up Year
- 1995: Inspiration and Organizing
- 1996: Getting Traction (Formalizing and Recognizing)
- 1997: Issues and Planning
- 1998: Teams and Projects

1994

For me, the launch event for the Rock River Coalition was a March 16th forum at the Hoard Museum in Fort Atkinson. It was called together by Ginny Benz, a community leader in Waupun who spearheaded efforts to bring attention to the Rock River Corridor. About 60 people came to this forum. The meeting was called to order by one of the godfathers of the Coalition, Al Haukom, a Fort Atkinson community leader who headed up a Community Beautification Committee. Those gathered heard presentations by Hoard Museum Curator Helmut Kneiss talking about Rock River History and Heritage as well as UW Landscape Architecture student Sue Payne on her recreational and landscape plan for the Rock River Corridor in Jefferson County. This event hit on the first two steps in the leadership of change--#1) some sense of urgency to address the importance of the Rock River Corridor region; and #2) the notion of establishing a guiding coalition. (Note: these steps are from Professor John Kotter, Emeritus from Harvard University on *Leading Change*).

In May, a small group of participants from the March forum, met at Watertown City Hall to talk about follow-up activity. This meeting was convened by Mike Hoppenrath, Watertown City Clerk. A subsequent meeting in July was led by David Carpenter the Dodge County Planning Director who became Chair of a Pro-Tem Coalition Steering Committee. Early members of this informal group included Cully Dommissie from Waupun as Secretary, Mike Hoppenrath as Treasurer, and other members were Tom Jones from Beloit and Rock County, Dave Neuendorf from UWEX in Dodge County, Cindy Arbiture from the Jefferson County Historic Alliance, Dave O'Malley from the DNR, Bill Ehlenbeck from Dodge County Parks and me from UWEX in Jefferson County. This group determined that another forum was needed to test the level of support for this type of organization, and to see what the interests and needs were along the Rock River. A workshop was planned for September.

A large number of folks, again around 60 people, turned out for a forum in Watertown with presenters including Sarah Johnson from the River Alliance of Wisconsin. UW Extension agents facilitated an issues workshop where three issues of interest emerged: Tourism, Natural Resources/Environment and Communication/Education. Again, the sense of urgency

was reaffirmed to address these issues.

The Ad-hoc steering committee reconvened, and held another large session in October where participants discussed the type of preferred organizational structure. Two options were considered: An RC&D or Resource Conservation and Development Council with support by federal land conservation programs or more of a grass-roots, self-defined nonprofit. There was strong support for the more organic, customized nonprofit. The ad-hoc steering committee took this guidance, and with David Carpenter's leadership, cobbled together some working by-laws and draft constitution to try to keep things going. There was continuing guidance by the UW, UWEX, DNR, local governments, Chambers, the Wisconsin River Alliance and other nonprofits. A loyal group of community citizens brought energy, commitment and encouragement to this movement.

1995

The second year brought "inspiration and organizing". We had five large "General Membership Meetings" with dynamic and high impact speakers and presentations. In January, world renowned UW Landscape Architect Phil Lewis unveiled his new book entitled "Tomorrow by Design" and inspired us to think about his concepts of environmental corridors (a notion he invented), the importance of landscape inventories and cultural awareness centers. In March, Nels Akerland presented his photos from a book called "Our Rock River" which documented his kayak trip along the entire Rock River from Horicon Marsh to the Mississippi. In May we had our first Annual Meeting and heard about the Ecology and History of the Horicon Marsh. In September, we had an Achievement Award Banquet and in October, there was the first Rock River Connection Summit in Beloit where folks from The Friends of the Rock River in Illinois and Wisconsin were brought together to look at "Using our Riverfronts". All of these meetings had large turnouts of 60 or more people.

Throughout 1995, the steering committee, under David Carpenter's leadership, met monthly and developed a set of nominations for an elected rather than self-appointed slate of officers and steering committee members. The cash balance at the end of the year was \$1,200.

1996

In 1996 the Coalition started to get further traction in meeting its goals including five well-attended General Meetings with a variety of topics around Historic Preservation, Bike Trail Planning, Culture Along the Rock River, and the Status of River Organizations. The Second Award Banquet drew 55 people. By September, a year-long effort to become a 501-c-3 organization was completed, elections were held and the first official Board of Directors meeting was held in October. David Carpenter was elected President and I became Vice President.

1997

I have characterized 1997 as the year where "Issues and Planning" became more prominent. The Coalition held two general meetings about the pros and cons of dam removal which has been a controversial issue in the City of Jefferson. A January meeting focused on the environmental implications of dams and then the March meeting was on the benefits of dams with user perspectives. The Coalition took care to educate on both sides of this issue. Later that year, Cindy Arbiture became the second President and initiated a series of organizational planning meetings with Joe Moskal from UWEX in Rock County facilitating. This was the first of several cycles of strategic type planning for the Coalition. (Planning, Visioning and Strategy

Setting are parts of Step 3 in Kotter's steps in leading change.)

1998

In 1998, Teams and Projects were formed. The Coalition formalized its relationship with the DNR as a designated Geographic Management Unit which provided more direct technical and management involvement with the DNR. In addition to another year of popular General Meetings with informative topics, a major gathering called "A Rock River Basin Forum: Partnerships for the Future" was held. This session drew 170 people and from this meeting, seven issue Teams were formed. This laid foundation for some significant projects.

In summary, the first five years clearly followed Professor John Kotter's steps for leading change. Because of the community energy and strong feeling for making a difference along the Rock River, within five years the Rock River Coalition had become a well-known and recognized lead organization around natural resource, environmental, water quality and tourism issues.

Suzanne is going to take us through the next phases of the Coalition!.