

# BWSR board conservationist tour offers opportunity to connect and learn



Tour attendees viewed Hidden Falls Creek at Highland Bridge. Located upstream, the central water feature can collect and clean up to 64 million gallons of stormwater annually from the 122-acre site of the former Ford manufacturing plant. **Photo Credits:** Anne Sawyer, BWSR

Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) board conservationists based in central Minnesota invited colleagues from across the state to the Twin Cities metro area in mid-July for the second Traveling BC (Board Conservationist) tour. The two-day tour provided an opportunity for BWSR staff to connect with each other and with local government partners by learning about programs, practices and priorities as diverse as Minnesota's landscape.

"The conservation projects and collaborative work being achieved in Minnesota is truly astounding," said Pete Waller, Detroit Lakes-based BWSR board conservationist.

"As field staff, we often get so engrossed in our local projects that we forget the big picture. The Traveling BC tour provides us an opportunity to get out and see what's happening in the rest of the state."

Waller and Brett Arne, Detroit Lakes-based BWSR board conservationist, organized the first Traveling BC tour in the northern region last year.

BWSR board conservationists provide technical and leadership assistance and implementation guidance to local units of government — such as soil and water conservation districts, watershed districts and cities — on water quality and quantity restoration and protection projects.



Capitol Region Watershed District Deputy Administrator Bob Fossum discussed site redevelopment at the Highland Bridge site in St. Paul, including Hidden Falls Creek, which once flowed through an underground storm sewer pipe. Today, a segment of the creek flows through a channel in existing bedrock, making its way toward Hidden Falls Regional Park and the Mississippi River. The creek is surrounded by rain gardens and native plants that collect and filter overland stormwater flow while providing pollinator habitat and landscaping.



**Left:** Community members told the story of the Bee Line, a years-long grassroots effort to increase pollinator habitat along Pierce Butler Route. In one year alone, more than 300 volunteers participated in the effort. **Middle:** BWSR staff identified native plants growing in a plot at the West Minnehaha Recreation Center, one of several sites in the Bee Line pollinator habitat project. **Photo Credits:** Michelle Jordan, BWSR **Right:** Joe Barten, senior resource conservationist at the Dakota County SWCD and administrator of the Lower Mississippi River Watershed Management Organization, discussed the 2019 restoration of Thompson Lake. The project removed contaminated lake sediment and constructed a treatment train of stormwater management features to clean runoff before it enters Thompson Lake. **Photo Credit:** BWSR

They provide fiscal oversight, technical training, administrative guidance and planning assistance for implementing local comprehensive water and land management programs.

Despite its name, the Traveling BC tour welcomed BWSR clean water specialists, grants staff, regional managers and others.

“Spending time outside together helps us all feel more connected to the BWSR team as well as to the natural resources we all care deeply about,” said Anne Sawyer, St. Paul-based board conservationist. “Many of us enter the conservation field because we want to preserve and protect our environment, but quickly learn that the work of conservation is about engaging with people.”

The tour illustrated the work that local government staff do to build and maintain relationships and trust within the communities they serve.

“Without these relationships, voluntary conservation would not be possible,” Sawyer said.

This year’s Traveling BC tour showcased projects and programs in highly developed areas with a focus on community, collaboration and creativity. The tour

kicked off early on July 11, when attendees met Britta Belden, Capitol Region Watershed District’s (CRWD) monitoring and research division manager, at Como Lake in St. Paul. Belden described the lake’s history and CRWD’s multipronged approach to improving water quality through its [Targeted Watershed Program](#).

Tour attendees learned about stormwater management at sites varying in scope from residential rain gardens to large reuse projects; and discussed alum treatments, invasive species management, shoreline restoration, and water monitoring. Belden emphasized the importance of developing an adaptive lake management plan that not only prioritizes and targets the most effective practices, but also has community buy-in to accelerate implementation.

The group later met up with CRWD’s deputy administrator, Bob Fossum, for a tour of the [Highland Bridge](#) site at the location of the former Ford assembly plant in St. Paul. This project to redevelop 122 acres of industrial land into a sustainable community centered on a park-like water feature with trails, natural stone, and pollinator plantings took years of planning, collaboration and creativity.

“The Highland Bridge project is amazing in scope, scale and the amount of foresight needed to bring it to fruition. However, my favorite part about the project is how it flips the script on stormwater, turning it from a potential pollutant to an extraordinary asset. The community is invited to engage with the water and other resources, re-establishing a connection with nature that’s been absent from this site for decades,” Sawyer said.

At the University of Minnesota’s St. Anthony Falls Laboratory, the group met with Jeff Marr, associate director of engineering and facilities, and Andy Riesgraf, research scientist. They led a tour of the facility followed by a presentation on their latest research on [wave impacts from recreational watercraft](#), including wakesurfing boats, on Minnesota’s lakes. A robust discussion of the connections between research, community engagement and outreach, best management practices (BMPs) and regulations ensued. The group received a sneak peek at research results not yet available to the public.

The day ended with a visit to the [Bee Line project](#) in St. Paul’s Frogtown and Hamline Midway neighborhoods, where residents have been

working for more than six years to establish native pollinator habitat along a 2.5-mile-long corridor. In 2022, with help from Frogtown Green and the Hamline Midway Coalition, a group of residents from the community were awarded a Lawns to Legumes Demonstration Neighborhood grant (now known as a Pollinator Pathways grant) from BWSR to support and expand their work.

At one of the gardens, known as Monarch City, attendees learned that in the past year alone, more than 300 volunteers have participated in activities to support the effort. Partners from the [MN SEED \(Saving Essential Edibles and Diversity\) Project](#) — which was co-created by community members Courtney Tchida, Dawn Lamm and Stephanie Hankerson to address the knowledge gaps in saving and growing seeds — joined the group. The MN SEED Project hosts seed collection workshops, seed processing events and seed swaps, and guides anyone interested in saving seeds from vegetable, fruits and native plants.

“I enjoyed learning about the unique partnerships with the community councils and MN SEED Project, in particular. So many people

in the neighborhood are excited about the project and engaged in all aspects, from collecting and growing seeds in containers at home to maintaining the sites and educating others. It's incredibly powerful to see how they've developed a shared vision that inspires community and moves the project forward," said Barb Peichel, BWSR clean water specialist.

On the second day of the tour, attendees met with Joe Barten, senior resource conservationist at the Dakota County SWCD and administrator of the Lower Mississippi River Watershed Management Organization (LMRWMO). The group first stopped at Thompson County Park in West St. Paul, where discussion centered on the challenges and benefits of conservation in the Twin Cities metro, particularly when working with overlapping jurisdictions, multiple levels of watershed and comprehensive plans, and competing local interests. Barten reiterated the importance of establishing and maintaining collaborative relationships among local partners in heavily developed areas, where projects often coincide with other infrastructure redevelopment, are usually very expensive, run on tight timelines, and have multiple partners.

BWSR Executive Director John Jaschke joined the tour at the Thompson County Park stop, where the group learned about [the restoration and stormwater BMP projects](#) undertaken by the LMRWMO in collaboration with multiple partners.

"The Thompson Lake rehabilitation project — which has made much progress with



*BWSR board conservationists, including Dave Copeland, listened to Britta Belden, Capitol Region Watershed District's monitoring and research division manager, explain the history of Como Lake, the CRWD, and the district's Targeted Watershed Program, which aims to improve water quality at Como Lake in St. Paul. Photo Credit: Anne Sawyer, BWSR*



*A researcher explained how a mock river system is created in the laboratory and used to study woody debris transport during storm events at the University of Minnesota's St. Anthony Falls Laboratory. Photo Credit: BWSR*

still more planned ahead — is one of thousands of places accruing public benefits because of Clean Water Fund implementation investments. The strength and commitment of the local government-led watershed approach is foundational to that everywhere in Minnesota,"

Jaschke said.

The last official tour stop was [Seidls Lake](#), a 6.5-acre lake with no natural outlet that straddles the Inver Grove Heights and West St. Paul boundary. Multiple BMPs installed over several years include an iron-enhanced sand filter, tree trenches

that intercept and filter stormwater, and a pump station and force main to stabilize lake levels. A shoreline and habitat restoration is in progress.

"The metro area is a complex and challenging place for conservation, with the overlapping plans, infrastructure and multiple jurisdictions," said Dave Copeland, Rochester-based BWSR board conservationist. "But the projects and work being achieved are incredible."

The day ended with an optional guided tour of CHS Field, home of the St. Paul Saints, to learn about the [stadium's sustainability and water quality features](#). Most notable among them is a stormwater reuse system, where rainwater is treated and used for irrigation and flushing toilets, reducing municipal water consumption by up to 450,000 gallons per year. The stadium also uses tree trenches, planted swales, rain gardens, and other BMPs to reduce pollutant-loading to the nearby Mississippi River.

The tour allowed metro area board conservationists to showcase the achievements of local government staff.

"It was interesting to see the work going on in the metro. It's so much different than what I see on a day-to-day basis," said Matt Fischer, Bemidji-based BWSR board conservationist.

"Not being in the field of water quality, I had no idea how much thought and work goes into making our water resources safe for drinking and playing in. It was really great, and I learned so much," said Laura Godfrey, BWSR grants compliance specialist.