

## 1.0 Portage County Watersheds Plan Introduction

### Why Create a Watersheds Plan?

This planning project was undertaken in response to the continued growth and development of Portage County in recent years. Portage County contains the headwaters and upstream portions of several rivers that supply water to major populations in Northeast Ohio – most importantly the Cuyahoga and Mahoning Rivers – the Cuyahoga River supplying the City of Akron with water via Lake Rockwell and eventually flowing to Lake Erie, the water source for the City of Cleveland and its suburbs; the Mahoning River providing downstream cities and communities in that watershed with consistent water flow. Walborn Reservoir is partially located in Portage County and is part of the water supply area for the City of Alliance in Stark County. This strategic location with respect to water supply and the fact that the county is in the earlier stages of development compared to more urbanized areas surrounding it, puts it at a crossroads for careful planning and wise management of resources and development.

Non-point source pollution and storm water have been identified as significant threats to water quality according to the Water Quality Management Plans for both the Lake Erie and Ohio River Basins recently prepared by the Northeast Ohio Four County Regional Planning and Development Organization (NEFCO). New development and suburbanization are major contributors of non-point source pollutants and storm water, resulting in negative impacts to the water resources in the county. With careful attention to the way development occurs in the county, the goals of supporting new growth for economic benefit and managing natural resources are not necessarily exclusive endeavors. This Plan was envisioned as a framework to manage growth, encourage sustainable growth, and protect the natural resources and highly-valued rural character of Portage County.

### Main Participants

The Portage County Regional Planning Commission was the lead organization for the Watersheds Plan. The primary partners included the Board of Portage County Commissioners, Portage Park District, Portage Soil & Water Conservation District, American Heritage River and Cuyahoga River Remedial Action Plan, Breakneck Creek Coalition, Davey Resource Group, Natural Resources Conservation Service, The Nature Conservancy, Northeast Ohio Four County Regional Planning & Development Organization (NEFCO), Ohio Department of Natural Resources Division of Forestry, Ohio Environmental Protection Agency, Portage County Office of Economic Development, Portage County Water Resources, Western Reserve Land Conservancy, and Western Reserve Resource Conservation & Development Program (Countryside Program).

The Board of Portage County Commissioners and the Portage Park District supplied monetary contributions. The balance of the partners lent their expertise and support through in-kind matching hours, serving on the Steering Committee and helping with public meetings and outreach. The expertise tapped for this project transcended political boundaries in the best sense of watershed planning.

An Advisory Committee was also created for input from other Portage County stakeholders who have an interest in watershed health and planning and to assure a broad base of support throughout the County for the Plan. Advisory Committee members included the Aggregate Industry, City of Akron Water Supply, Home Builders Association, Ohio Department of Natural Resources/Scenic Rivers, Portage County Emergency Management Agency, Portage County Engineer, Portage County Health District, Portage County Township Association, the Ravenna Training & Logistics Site, as well as citizens representing a variety of interests.

## Vision, Mission & Project Objectives

The *vision* of the Plan is to “Protect and enhance watershed health in Portage County.” The *mission* is to “Create a watershed plan that promotes protection and enhancement of natural resources, sustainable development, and public participation in watershed health.”

The project’s main objectives as stated in the original proposal were to:

1. Develop base data about the existing natural resources in Portage County, particularly the wetlands, woodlands and riparian areas, using digital mapping techniques.
2. Establish criteria to identify those wetlands and forests most critical for protection, preservation and restoration in the County’s watersheds (priority conservation areas).
3. Develop strategies that when implemented will lead to improved watershed health and the protection of the priority conservation areas identified.
4. Develop educational programs and strategies that when implemented will result in improved watershed health and stewardship of natural resources.

The objectives have been met. The wetland and woodland inventories were completed by Davey Resource Group from aerial photography. The Steering Committee helped prioritize these inventoried resources based on the goal of protecting water quality. Other data were compiled to determine where growth was occurring in Portage County and what types of issues were affecting natural resources and water quality. The Advisory Committee provided input in the prioritization process and helped identify issues of concern. From the existing conditions and base data, the Watersheds Plan committees worked to develop the strategies that will lead to improved watershed health and protection of natural resources.

The Watersheds Plan was created with a twenty-year timeframe, though updates must be incorporated as new information and data become available in order to maintain it as a

working document. Yearly evaluations of progress and changes will assure the Watersheds Plan remains functional and of value to planning efforts at all levels.

## Funding

The Watersheds Plan project was supported by a grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service through the Watershed & Clean Water Grant Program. While not originally chosen as a grant recipient in the first round in 2001, the grant was awarded to Portage County Regional Planning through a sub-grant from the Ohio Department of Natural Resources in late 2003 because the original recipient could not maintain the promised in-kind contributions. The amount of the grant from USDA was \$75,000 with \$51,000 in matching local cash contributions and in-kind contributions totaling \$24,000.

## Acknowledgements

The following Steering Committee members generously gave their time and expertise for many months. We appreciate their dedication to good stewardship of our resources and to maintaining the quality of life in Portage County for all residents, those working in our county, and those who visit. They are a voice as well for those furry, feathered, finned, and scaled creatures that inhabit our prized green spaces and abundant waters.

Kay Carlson	The Nature Conservancy
Chris Craycroft	Portage Park District
Claude Custer	NEFCO
Kirby Date	Countryside Program
Charles Frederick	Breakneck Creek Coalition, Kent State University
Cindy Hazelett/James Greener	Portage County Water Resources
Kerry Macomber	Board of Portage County Commissioners
Kelvin Rogers	Ohio EPA
Marie Sullivan	Cuyahoga River RAP, American Heritage River
Jennifer White	Portage Soil & Water Conservation District
Karen Wise	Davey Resource Group

The Advisory Committee members also gave their time to review and provide input to the Watersheds Plan. We also appreciate their efforts.

