



2416 SE Lake Road, Milwaukie, OR 97222 - 503-550-9282 - [northclackamaswatersheds.org](http://northclackamaswatersheds.org)

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June 3, 2020

Dear North Clackamas Watersheds Council friends,

I hope you and your loved ones are all safe, healthy, and doing well. As I write these words, I'm sitting in my spare bedroom listening to a helicopter overhead. Those two things are connected to what I'm writing.

I'm working from home instead of our office. It's the third month of the Coronavirus pandemic, we're trying to slow the spread of the virus. The helicopter is a news chopper headed toward downtown Portland, covering the protest over police violence toward African Americans that's resulted in upheavals across the country.

It's impossible to avoid the connections between these issues and the work of the North Clackamas Watersheds Council.

It may seem strange to get a message from a Watershed Council about a virus and policing. We don't develop vaccines, and we're not experts on policing practices. But the connections are deep, and they bring an obligation to act.

Neither of these tragedies affect our society equally. Both hit our most vulnerable the hardest. Communities of color and low-income populations have higher death rates from Covid-19. They tend to live in areas with more air pollution, higher rates of asthma and other risk factors. They often also have less access to health care, parks and natural areas for exercise, and in neighborhoods with fewer trees that clean the air. They also have less access to paid sick leave and telecommuting, so it's harder to stay home. They're more likely to be exposed, which means their families and communities are exposed in turn, deepening the cycle.

A glance at the census tracts of our watersheds is all it takes to see how this plays out in the Kellogg, Mt. Scott, River Forest, Rinearson, and Boardman watersheds. We're not immune to these disparities. Household income is highest along the Willamette River, and in the forested hills of Happy Valley. It's lowest in areas that have the highest populations of color, along 82<sup>nd</sup> Avenue and McLoughlin Blvd, where a steady flow of vehicles and some industrial uses spew air pollution linked to respiratory diseases that raises the risks from Covid-19.

News that Ahmaud Arbery was murdered while jogging, and that police were called on Christian Cooper, an African American birdwatching in Central Park, also strikes at the core of our work. Those are things people do in our watersheds all the time. Our natural areas, parks, and trails were created for everyone to exercise and enjoy nature, not where we should fear ostracism and racial violence. Mr. Cooper's story reminded me of a 2011 survey about outdoor recreation. 43%--almost half--of respondents said they didn't spend more time in nature because they "didn't feel welcome" among others in the outdoors. That was nine years ago. This is not a new issue.

The combined weight of these tragedies reminds us all that our lives are interrelated, and that injustice--whether accidental, subtle, overt, and systemic--is very real, and yes, it happens anywhere. We cannot have a healthy environment without a healthy society.

### Our Work

I don't pretend to have the answers to the larger questions, but I know that we shouldn't duck them. As a Watershed Council, we must work to ensure that everyone shares in the benefits of a healthy environment. I was thankful last night, in a Zoom hearing with the Milwaukie City Council, that Milwaukie's Comprehensive Plan draft set goals not to only increase tree canopy--but to prioritize communities of color and low income neighborhoods for tree planting, to begin to address a historical lack of trees that exacerbates health disparities and lowers property values. It's also one way to begin patching one of the holes in our civic fabric.

### Here's What We Will Do:

- Advocate for policies and plans that deliver the benefits of a healthy environment to our most marginalized community members, and to those who have faced the biggest barriers in participating in environmental planning.
- Seek ways to expand our restoration work beyond stream front lands. Stream front properties often have higher property values and usually exclude low-income residents.
- Work to develop more and deeper relationships with the marginalized populations in our watersheds, and learn how we can help meet their needs.
- Build community in our watersheds. We must work with our landowners and partners to think about our streams beyond individual properties, to how our watersheds form a cohesive community, for people as well as fish and wildlife.
- Most importantly, we will reflect, and continue to reflect, on what we can do to make our watersheds what they should be--a place where nature and humans can thrive together, in all ways.

### What You Can Do

You also have a part in making our watersheds for all of us. You can:

- Help us advocate for parks, natural areas, clean water, trees, and trails--for everyone--especially those who have been disproportionately excluded from these benefits. (If you use Facebook, follow us there--we use it more frequently).
- Participate in planning processes like the Milwaukie Comprehensive Plan and the WES Stormwater Standards (coming up). Bioswales, like parks, should not be clustered in well-to-do neighborhoods.

- As we emerge from Covid-19 restrictions, join us for restoration, events, and stewardship activities in other parts of the watershed from where you live. Rub elbows, and help us strengthen our sense of watershed community.

I have no idea what the future will bring as we battle the coronavirus and the injustices in our society. There's a saying in watershed work: we all live both upstream and downstream simultaneously. What happens upstream affects us, good or bad; likewise, our actions, or inactions, affect those downstream of us. The same is true of human society. I'm reminded of the last speech Adlai Stevenson gave to the United Nations in the 1960s, another period of tumult and doubt:

*"We travel together, passengers on a little spaceship, dependent on its vulnerable resources of air, water and soil, preserved from annihilation only by the care, the work and the love we give our fragile craft. We cannot maintain it half fortunate and half miserable, half confident and half despairing, half slave to the ancient enemies of humankind and half free in a liberation of resources undreamed of to this day. No craft, no crew, can travel safely with such vast contradictions. On their resolution depends the security of us all."*

-Adlai Stevenson

Thank you.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Neil". The signature is written in a cursive style with a vertical line at the end.