

News

# Cleaner Drinking Water Just a Phone Call Away

by Nancy Jones

**Y**ou could improve the quality of your drinking water just by answering the telephone.

During early March, many northern Baltimore County residents will be asked to participate in a phone survey about stream buffers. But don't worry, you will not be asked for money, just a little of your time to answer a few questions.

And a few moments spent now on the phone could help ensure quality drinking water later, say local environmental supporters hoping to talk with you soon.

The survey is a collaborative effort of local agricultural and conservation groups, led by the Prettyboy Watershed

Alliance. And the reason for the advance notice of the impending inquiry, say organizers, is to boost the response rate which for a typical phone survey is usually low.

Since the northern Baltimore County area being targeted is so sparsely populated, organizers say they are worried they won't hit the magic number of respondents needed for the survey to be statistically valid, about 400 households.

"We need help and want your opinions," said Nancy Shaper, president of the Prettyboy Watershed Alliance. "You may get called to participate and it will be better for our streams and watershed if you do."

**'Lack of understanding'**

The phone survey is a way for the groups to solicit residents' advice and help in getting landowners to enhance their properties to keep their streams and drinking water clean. The survey will ask owners with streams on their property to give their thoughts about the streams, streamside plantings or buffers, and about the current programs and incentives in place that help with the cost of planting buffers.

"Healthy streams are those with buffers. There's a widespread interest in keeping the rural watershed healthy," said Shaper. "But there's a lack of understanding of the importance of streamside plantings."

The groups, which include the Prettyboy Watershed Alliance, the Sparks-Glencoe Community Planning Council (SGCPC), the Valleys Planning Council, the Baltimore County Soil Conservation District, University of Maryland Cooperative Extension Services and Baltimore County Department of Environmental Protection and Sustainability, want to identify what are the barriers to getting the message out about the importance of buffers.

**"There's a lack of understanding of the importance of streamside plantings."**  
--Nancy Shaper

Armed with this knowledge, better outreach efforts can be directed to increase stream buffers in the area and improve drinking water quality.

**Low response rates**

Other conservation groups in different parts of the Baltimore metro area have sent letters out to gage landowners' thoughts on buffer and incentive programs. But the response rates were always quite low, making the efforts almost worthless.

So the Prettyboy Watershed Alliance (PWA) decided to take a different approach. Instead of simply sending out a letter, PWA leaders first held a focus group last November of 28 local landowners with streams on their property. The

**"We just don't know what the barriers are and why people are so reluctant."**  
--Teresa Moore

results of that focus group helped identify some issue but to make the survey of attitudes statistically valid, the leaders need to sample a larger group of landowners. That's where the phone survey comes in.

"So now we're in the second phase of the survey. But if we don't get at least 400 people to respond, it won't be valid," added Shaper.

### A worthy effort

OpinionWorks, a market research company, is conducting the survey and most of the calls will be made in the evening and on weekends. A call back number will be provided.

Lawrie Deering, with the SGPCPC, said the survey is a worthy effort.

"We've been concerned for a number of years about water quality in northern Baltimore County and in the greater metro area," she said.

What the Sparks Glencoe group saw interesting in this project was the ability to reach out to neighbors and those with a vested interest in the area.

"[The survey] will find out what they thought about water quality and what they know about buffers," said Deering. "We want to gauge their interest."

### Cost-free program

More than a year ago, the Valleys Planning Council sent out a letter promoting a Baltimore County program that at the time had funding for free tree plantings along streams.

Despite the cost-free program, there was a lack of response to the incentive, said Teresa Moore, executive director of the Valleys Planning Council.

That's too bad because about half of the streams in Baltimore County can benefit from tree buffers, she added.

"It's important. Stream buffers are a big part of water quality," said Moore. "We just don't know what the barriers are and why people are so reluctant."

### Easy-to-read report

To help kick off the effort, the Prettyboy Watershed Alliance also put together a new website, [www.prettyboywatershed.org](http://www.prettyboywatershed.org), with a section describing the phone survey called "Your Opinion Counts."

Once the results of the phone survey are in, an easy-to-read report identifying the main findings of the survey will be released. Then the groups will come up with ways to increase awareness about buffers and participation in buffer planting incentives.

"Instead of dictating a message, we're turning it upside down and we're asking the public to tell us what they think of our streams," said Shaper.

So when the phone rings this month, pick it up. The quality of your drinking water could depend on it.