

## **Marcellus Shale in Mountain Maryland: A Listening Project**

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## **Final Report Narrative**

Title of Project: Marcellus Shale in Mountain Maryland: A Listening Project

Grant Period: February 1, 2014 – June 30, 2015

Grantee Name: Frostburg State University

Project Director: Kara Rogers Thomas, Associate Professor of Sociology

### **Description of Project:**

Frostburg State University students enrolled in "Folklore in Appalachia" Fall 2014 and "Sociology of the Environment" Spring 2015, partnered with the Savage River Watershed Association in western Maryland to conduct a Marcellus Shale in Mountain Maryland Listening Project. Working in tandem with a number of other social and environmental organizations in the area, the Savage River Watershed Association is committed to ensuring that natural gas drilling can be done safely, mitigating dangers to the watershed while positively contributing to the local economy. Drawing inspiration from the success of similar projects in New York and Pennsylvania, this listening project was designed to objectively record public opinion on unconventional natural gas drilling by documenting the hopes and concerns of residents living in the Savage River Watershed. Students engaged in the project were trained in objective listening practices to ensure neutrality.

While avoiding an agenda oriented approach, the project was intended to build trust, foster community relations, identify community values, and create a social environment more open to exploring new ideas, feelings, and solutions. Savage River Watershed Association seeks to understand citizens' awareness of their source waters and work with them to enhance protection. Marcellus shale extraction is just one potential threat to Western MD water quality and may or may not be perceived as a threat by citizens. Having a better understanding of local opinions on unconventional natural gas drilling and other issues of concern is assisting the Savage River Watershed in developing techniques and processes to work more effectively in their communities. Moreover, the Listening Project was designed to assist in increasing awareness of the Savage River Watershed's efforts in western Maryland, which could in turn build membership numbers for the organization; the Savage River Watershed Association developed a "Do You Know Where Your Water Comes From" informational flyer for each event. Finally, the publicity surrounding the project encouraged area residents to share their opinions freely with student researchers, creating opportunities for people to share candidly

their thoughts on unconventional natural gas drilling, a topic that has become politically charged in western Maryland over the course of the last year.

### **Activities:**

•Students conducted a total of 6 Listening Events including:

Westernport Library- Monday, November 10, 4-8 PM  
Georges Creek Library- Wednesday, November 12, 4-8 PM  
Oakland Library- Monday, November 17, 4-8 PM  
Grantsville Library- Monday, November 24, 4-8 PM  
Friendsville, Northern Garrett Fire and Rescue- Tuesday, March 10, 4-8 PM.  
Pleasant Valley Community Center- Monday, March 23, 4-8 PM

•Students set up informational tables at the FSU Appalachian Festival, September 20, Frostburg's Solar Saturday Community Presentation, Saturday, October 18, Frostburg Arts Walk, Saturday, October 25, and Focus Frostburg on Wednesday, April 22.

Meetings with partners included the following:

- Wednesday, September 10 -Members of the Savage River Watershed Association provided students an introduction to their Association's mission and gave them an overview of issues related to unconventional natural gas drilling in the region. Students and Association members then began to identify project goals.
- Monday, September 15- Students and members of the Savage River Watershed reviewed materials from similar listening projects and met with individuals involved with those listening projects to discuss the importance of maintaining a neutral position in the interview process.
- September 20- Savage River Watershed Association Members and FSU students conducted a pilot run of the listening project at the annual FSU Appalachian Festival. Results of this trial run will allowed them to critique and improve their questions and approach.
- October 2- Students met with Savage River Watershed Association Members to finalize questions and establish project parameters.
- December 10- Students presented preliminary findings to Savage River Watershed Association members and identified project goals for the Spring Semester.
- February 11- Members of the Savage River Watershed Association and FSU students who worked on the project in the Fall provided students enrolled in SOCI 345 with an orientation to the project and training in objective Listening Project techniques.

- March 2- Members of the Savage River Watershed Association and FSU students finalized plans for the Spring Semester
- April 22- Students and members of the Savage River Watershed presented their findings during FSU's annual "Focus Frostburg," an event highlighting Environmental Sustainability issues.

required presentations of student research to community groups other than the primary partner

- Participation in and presentation at the December Appalachian Teaching Project gathering in Washington, DC. Saturday, December 6, 2014.
- Development of poster documenting project that was made available at the DC Gathering, Friday and Saturday, December 5-6, displayed at Mountain City Traditional Arts (MCTA, a Frostburg venue) during the Spring Semester, and presented at each of the Spring Listening Events.
- Poster session at the Appalachian Studies Association's Annual Conference at ETSU in Johnson City, TN, March 27, 2015.
- Participation in public program and discussion during Frostburg State University's "Focus Frostburg" sustainability symposium, Wednesday, April 22, 2015.

### **Project Outcomes:**

- Students developed leadership skills and awareness of key community issues
- Students learned how objective, active listening can build trust and strengthen community relations
- Students were engaged as active learners and participants in community projects
- Students conducted active research to assist a local organization in increasing awareness and visibility of their environmental efforts in the region
- Students conducted a total of 6 Listening Events and 4 table displays at community events.
- Students conducted a total of 118 interviews.

### **Problems Encountered:**

Although we knew that this was a controversial issue, the class and organization hadn't expected the project's theme to become as politically charged as it has over the course of the last year. Initially, we'd anticipated piggybacking on community events- setting up listening booths at scheduled events we knew would

attract large and diverse audiences. That approach has worked well in the past with other locally based efforts. But because the project was launched during a Governor's Campaign, and area events were being overwhelmed with campaigning, several organizations instituted new measures disallowing outside entities to have a presence at community events. That move had a significant impact on the project, forcing us to develop a plan B. Rather than set up booths at events with ready-made audiences, we scheduled our own series of Listening Events. We found that those people who did make an effort to attend those events had very strong opinions- we didn't get as many "on the fence" or undecided respondents as we'd anticipated attend these events. The fact that the vast majority of responses we gathered through door to door canvassing were undecided, led us to believe that we weren't getting as broad a response at the listening events as we'd hoped.

Moreover, while my students did an excellent job of maintaining their own neutrality during the project, they encountered several community members who doubted students' objectivity and were suspicious of a hidden agenda. Additionally, community members expected students to be able to provide them with information about unconventional natural gas drilling and its impact and were sometimes disappointed to find that was not the intent of the project.

Further, while I had students in both classes who were highly motivated many were not. This project made up a portion of students' grades, but did not make up the entire content of either course. That being the case, several students approached it in the same lackadaisical manner that they might approach writing a research paper. While I encounter some level of apathy every year, I found it especially vexing this year given the very public nature of this project, which was promoted and featured several times by the University.

### **Program Continuation and Sustainability:**

Because the students were engaged in conducting interviews through the end of the Spring Semester, we've not yet had time to fully analyze and share the results of the project beyond the presentation at Focus Frostburg in April. This Summer and Fall, I will be working with a student via directed studies to complete a fuller analysis of the material collected. At that point we will share the results widely with the community and together with the Savage River Watershed will determine what the project's next steps should be.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations:**

I hope the Savage River Watershed Association will continue this project; I have a few former students who would like to see the project continue and are willing to make a commitment to it. Overall, the project was perhaps too ambitious for the courses in which they were incorporated. In the Fall, I found that course content was too often neglected in favor of project prep. In Spring, I lightened the weight of the project to prioritize course content, but that resulted in my students taking the project less seriously than I would have preferred. I believe this project

would have been much more effective had it been part of a special topics course in which we could have devoted the majority of our time to it.

What was revealed during the project was the fact that many area residents have little to no knowledge about unconventional natural gas drilling. Several wanted my students to provide them with objective and scientifically-based studies on the topic. Providing such material fell beyond the scope of our project, but those efforts need to intensify should the project continue. To date, though students did speak with a handful of area residents who supported unconventional natural gas drilling in western Maryland, many more were strongly opposed to the practice, and a great number believed they had too little information to have an informed opinion on the topic.