

## CHAPTER SIX

### THE ELIZABETH RIVER PROJECT WATERSHED ACTION TEAM

#### 6.1 Introduction

The Elizabeth River watershed covers an area of over 200 square miles and includes the cities of Norfolk, Chesapeake, and parts of Portsmouth and Virginia Beach (Elizabeth River Project, 1998). Once a wide, shallow estuary of the Chesapeake Bay, the terminus of the river is now twice its original depth but only two-thirds its original width (Elizabeth River Project, 1996). Three centuries of dredge and fill activities have changed the Elizabeth River from a marsh-lined estuary into a large canal with a single, deep, central channel. Its banks are lined by industries and shipyards (Elizabeth River Project, 1999). The watershed is developed over almost 90 percent of its land area (Elizabeth River Project, 1997)

Because tidal currents are slow and the freshwater influx low, little flushing of contaminants occurs (Elizabeth River Project, 1999). This contributes to making the Elizabeth one of the more seriously degraded urban rivers in the country. Health problems in fish and risks to human health are correlated to toxics that have accumulated on the bottom of the river (Elizabeth River Project, 1996). Since the 1920's, shellfish harvesting from the river bottom has been closed. In 1994, the Chesapeake Bay Program named the Elizabeth River one of the Chesapeake Bay's three toxic Regions of Concern (Elizabeth River Project, 1997).

Despite these impacts, the Elizabeth River is still a spawning, nursery and feeding ground for Chesapeake Bay and Atlantic Ocean fish and shellfish (Elizabeth River Project, 1997).

## **6.2 Information Obtained from the Elizabeth River Project**

The Elizabeth River Project, located in Virginia and founded in 1992 as an independent, nonprofit organization, is committed to creating broad community involvement in Elizabeth River environmental health restoration efforts. Two documents authored by the Project describe how a Watershed Action Team was established in order to develop a plan for cleaning up the river. These documents are:

- The Elizabeth River Restoration Watershed Action Plan, and
- The 1997 First State of the River Report.

The two texts illustrate the collaborative nature of both the Elizabeth River Project and the Watershed Action Team.

The Elizabeth River Project provided a list of the names and addresses of people who volunteered to be a part of the Watershed Action Team. All 119 people on this list were sent a survey questionnaire; 60 were returned -- a 50% response rate. Federal, state, and local government representation comprised 11%, 16%, and 18% of the respondents respectively. While only 4% of the respondents indicated they represented environmental groups, 26% indicated they attended meetings of the Watershed Action Team as private citizens. Another 11% stated they represented industry groups, and 12% indicated they were affiliated with civic groups. Of the 60 respondents, 81% were male. Seventy-two percent (72%) were between 41 and 60 years old; 14% were over 60 and 14% under 41. Eighty-six percent (86%) described themselves as white, and 11% described themselves as African American. Sixty-seven percent (67%) indicated they had graduate or professional degrees, 25% undergraduate degrees. Sixty-

four percent (64%) had family incomes of over \$75,000, 26% indicated incomes between \$50,000 and \$75,000. Forty percent (40%) live in a small city, and 26% live in suburbs. This group can be generally characterized as mostly white, well-educated, middle-aged, well-off, local, city people. A chi square test of significance was used to examine the responses for any connections between the answers provided by the respondents and participant sex, age, income, race, education, and residential location. When the expected distribution of answers was compared to the actual responses, at the .05 level of significance no significant relationships were found.

Seven people that participated in the Watershed Action Team were personally interviewed:

- Marjorie Mayfield, Executive Director of the Elizabeth River Project;
- Carl Fisher, Retired NOAA Captain and Oceanography Ph.D.;
- Diana Bailey, Assistant Public Affairs Officer, US Army Corps of Engineers;
- Cheryl Copper, City of Hampton Environmental Relations Manager;
- Thomas Stokes, President, Stokes Environmental;
- Keith Cannady, City of Norfolk Planning Department, Environmental Engineer;
- Elizabeth Waters, Facilitator, Elizabeth River Project; and
- A person who wished to remain anonymous.

### **6.3 Verifying the Presence of the Elements of Collaboration**

#### **Involvement of All Affected Parties**

The Elizabeth River Restoration Watershed Action Plan describes how four private citizens meeting around a kitchen table initiated the Elizabeth River Project. The group decided that the problems facing the river might be better addressed if based on community involvement as opposed to the government taking the lead. From its beginning, the Project was committed to bringing all parties to the table in an attempt to identify common interests among disparate people (Elizabeth River Project, 1996). In the end, one hundred nineteen volunteers from business, government, citizen and scientific sectors were able to gather together and produce a plan -- self-described as the result of the community having taken responsibility for the environment. Over the course of a year, the Team produced hundreds of pages of discussion papers before reaching consensus on a course of action. They came up with an 18-item action agenda. The last one, Action 18, reads as follows:

Build strong partnerships between the ERP and all public and private authorities relevant to this plan, for the purposes of ensuring public input and support; achieving environmental equity, and promoting speedy, effective implementation and enhanced regional watershed planning.

The Plan calls for the establishment of working relationships among businesses, residents, civic groups, educational and scientific institutions, recreational organizations, environmental groups, governments and agencies. The Plan's goal is to have an educated citizenry manage the river through a partnership of river users (Elizabeth River Project, 1996). The First State of the River Report describes how in 1994, the Elizabeth River Project brought citizens, scientists, business

leaders and regulators together to determine the river's worst problems (Elizabeth River Project, 1997).

In her interview, Marjorie Mayfield verified that the Elizabeth River Project began with a desire by a small group to involve a diverse representation of interests in addressing the problems of the Elizabeth River. Ms. Mayfield stated that the Watershed Action Team built a very large, far-flung constituency. Carl Fisher stated that Watershed Action Team meetings were open to the public, and anyone who wanted to be on the team could be. Cheryl Copper indicated that the meetings were open to anyone who had an interest in the river. Mr. Cannady also stated that meetings were open to the public. While Ms. Bailey stated that Watershed Action Team meetings were not publicly announced, she noted they were open to anyone, and everybody was welcome -- from citizens to CEOs. Ms. Waters indicated that the Elizabeth River Project recruited people from federal agencies, nongovernmental organizations, local consultants, and resource utilizers. However, according to the anonymous interviewee, meetings were not open to the public. Mr. Stokes' remarks clarified this when he stated that the public was not really invited, and yet, no one was prevented from attending.

### **Formal Organization Established**

A review of the Elizabeth River Project's literature indicates how the organization evolved from a handful of people having kitchen discussions to a community-wide, funded organization with a president, board of directors, and paid executive director. While four private citizens started the process, it quickly grew into a larger, more structured organization.

Carl Fisher stated how Ms. Mayfield came to him while he was still with the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration and asked him to participate. At that time,

there were about 80 people involved. Initially, the Project just produced several white papers on issues addressing the river's condition. The more formal Watershed Action Team arose when the Project began to consider how to deal with the information in those papers.

Marjorie Mayfield indicated that the first meetings were listening sessions. Despite public notices, they were not well attended. However, the EPA advised the group to reach out and contact people – not wait for them to come to the group. She stated that in 1994, the initial group interviewed 60 people -- leaders from all walks of life in the community. They found that most people wanted to see the river cleaner, but they wanted to take a collaborative, organized approach in doing so. The Elizabeth River Project took off from there.

### **Information Sharing**

Several of the persons interviewed indicated that the meeting's participants shared information. Mr. Cannady stated that, not only was information sharing going on among the members of the group, but also that the Elizabeth River Project brought people with special knowledge to the meetings to brief the Team. The anonymous interviewee noted that outsiders, primarily scientists, provided the participants with information and that there was a general exchange of information at the smaller committee meetings. Ms. Bailey stated that anyone could address the group, and if the group felt the need for more information, they would ask outside experts to provide it. Mr. Stokes noted that, at times, input was requested, and outsiders were brought in. Specifically, he reported that there were lots of resources in terms of factual data, assessments, and conditions. He further stated that communication was open, two-way, and oriented toward providing information.

An overwhelming majority of respondents to the survey (83%) indicated that they

believed information was shared among the participants in the process (Figure Six).

### **Power Sharing**

The Watershed Action Plan calls for a partnership of people from all walks of life and recognizes that the community is taking responsibility for the environment. It refers to an educated citizenry managing the river (Elizabeth River Project, 1996). The First State of the River Report declares that the Elizabeth River Project's mission is:

to form a partnership among the communities and all who earn their living from the river, to raise appreciation for its economic, ecological, and recreational importance and to restore the Elizabeth River system to the highest practical level of environmental quality

(Elizabeth River Project, 1997). The Project participants developed a vision of the river being managed by a partnership of river users, with all parts of the community participating in restoration (Elizabeth River Project, 1997). The Report addresses the success of the Watershed Action Plan by noting that volunteers from all segments of society agreed on the actions to take and implemented those actions through broad community support. The partnerships created in developing the plan were seen as necessary to ensure public input and support (Elizabeth River Project, 1997).

The survey respondents felt that some people had more influence than others (82%). However, 79% of the respondents did not think one person was responsible for making decisions. In fact, 79% indicated they thought that decisions were made by a majority of the participants. Almost half of the respondents thought that decisions were reached by consensus (42%); a third (35%) did not think decisions were reached by consensus; and a quarter (23%) were just unsure about consensus (Figure Seven). Thus, it appears that most respondents

thought that the power to make decisions was shared by the participants.

The anonymous informant indicated that the people who had more knowledge were more influential at the meetings -- usually agency and government representatives. Ms. Mayfield stated that, while some people may have dominated meetings, they did so only because they spoke up. Those with burning concerns were heard. Ms. Mayfield stated that participants took ownership of the process and all had a part in decisionmaking. This attitude spread throughout the power structure of the group as participants took control of the process. She felt that the Elizabeth River Project obtained buy-in from supervisors of different agencies, business and civic leaders, and others in the community. Ms. Mayfield indicated that she can now go to these leaders and get their support. Carl Fisher stated that participants from industry viewed the Elizabeth River Project as a broker. The Elizabeth River Project wanted to develop partnerships, and it achieved that goal.

Mr. Fisher stated that the group used a consensus approach to decisionmaking, and at every decision point asked "Is there anybody who can't live with this?" Mr. Cannady indicated that agreement was reached by leaders using the technique of asking people "Can you live with this?" Mr. Stokes also noted that there was no voting -- that participants provided their viewpoints and someone assimilated them. Ms. Copper echoed this, stating that decisions were made by consensus. Ms. Waters stated that they used a collaborative method, and there was no real voting. Rather, decisions were made by consensus, which worked well. Ms. Bailey stated that all participants made decisions. Participants would present recommendations, say this is what they found, and ask what others thought. If consensus could not be reached, the participants would talk about the matter some more in a reasoned dialogue. Ms. Waters noted

that there were no elected officials on the Watershed Action Team, and the only deference given was to those with scientific knowledge.

The anonymous interviewee indicated that Ms. Mayfield choreographed larger meetings. Mr. Stokes also felt that Marjorie Mayfield ran the meetings, yet he indicated that there were many other people involved. Mr. Stokes believed that Mayfield made decisions based on comments from the participants. Ms. Copper did not think the leaders in the committees had much of a role. She noted that Ms. Mayfield would sometimes show up at smaller meetings, and she was always working in the background, behind the scenes. However, Ms. Copper did not mean this in a derogatory sense as she also indicated that Mayfield put people forward and was certainly adept at “building a community.” Ms. Copper felt that Mayfield’s behavior reflected caring and community. Ms. Waters stated that the Watershed Action Team developed a plan and had everyone buy in to it and that Marjorie Mayfield drafted the document in conjunction with the chairs of the various committees. This arrangement occurred because there were huge amounts of materials and most people were interested in particular areas. Ms. Waters felt that power was shared among the participants because Marjorie Mayfield, the director of the Elizabeth River Project, is not a power hungry person. Mr. Cannady felt Mayfield was essential to the success of the Watershed Action Team process. She ran the meetings from behind the scenes. She got the right facilitator, set the agenda, got a place to meet, and put the issues on the table. However, he also indicated that in some respects, she made it hard to collaborate because she had already made a decision.

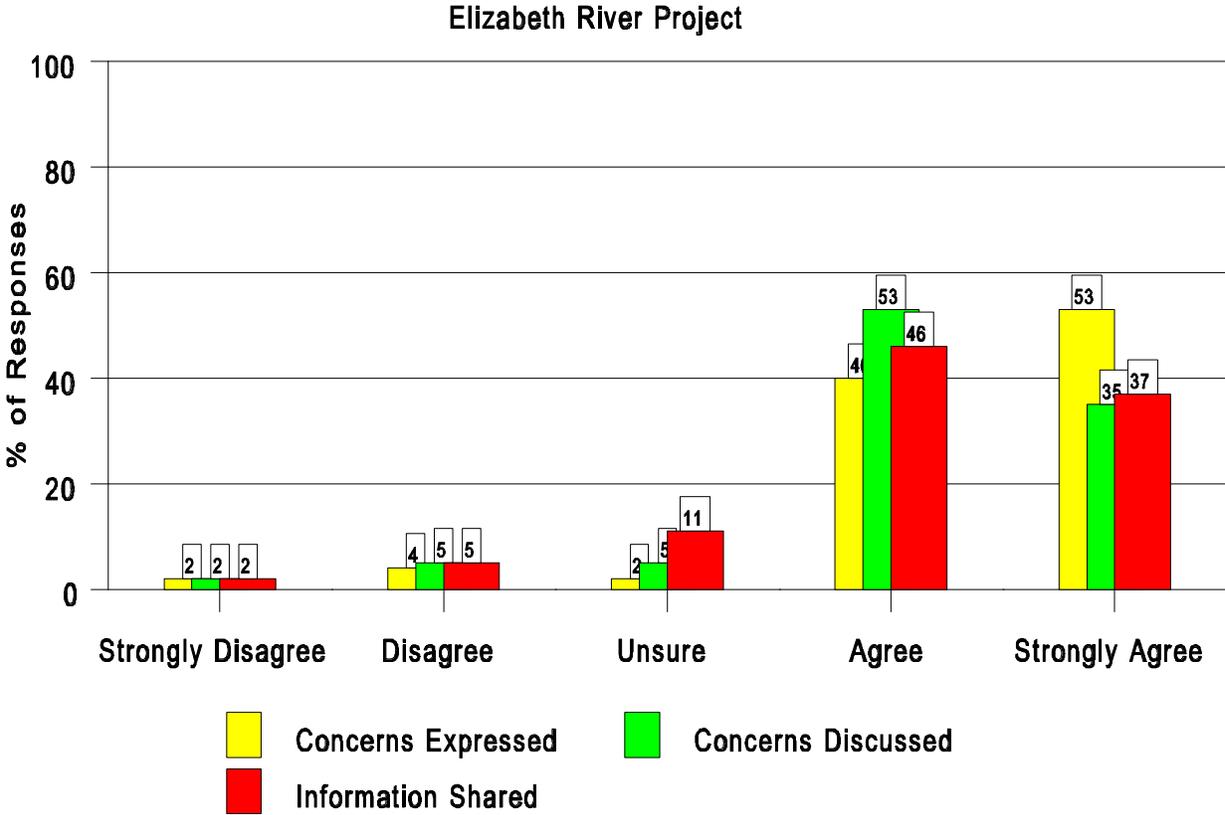
### **Open Discussions**

Respondents to the survey overwhelming indicated that they felt participants in the

Watershed Action Team had the opportunity to express their concerns (93%) and that the group was able to discuss the issues (80%) (Figure Six). These replies indicate that open discussions occurred and information was shared among the participants, two of the previously identified elements of collaborative decisionmaking.

Ms. Mayfield stated that the Watershed Action Team was formed to come up with a plan on how to address the river's problems. While she indicated that she ran the first meeting and that they were not truly an open process, after Elizabeth Waters came on as a facilitator, the meetings did become more open. Ms. Mayfield felt that the facilitator was the key to participation. Ms. Waters would have the participants do homework and then come to the next meeting with recommendations. She would then get the group to discuss the recommendations and reach consensus on them. Ms. Bailey indicated that meetings were open, although controlled by a facilitator. She felt there were no exclusions as to what anyone could say and that the openness of the meetings and the data provided to the participants neutralized the personal agendas of some participants. Mr. Fisher indicated that everyone had an opportunity to talk at the meetings. He felt there was open dialogue to the point of exhaustion. Ms. Copper also thought there was a little too much discussion and found herself becoming impatient. She wanted to implement the plans, but at the same time realized the importance of process. As Ms.

**Figure Six. Questions on whether Watershed Action Team participants were able to express concerns, discuss concerns, and share information. Results expressed as a percentage of the total responses (n=60).**



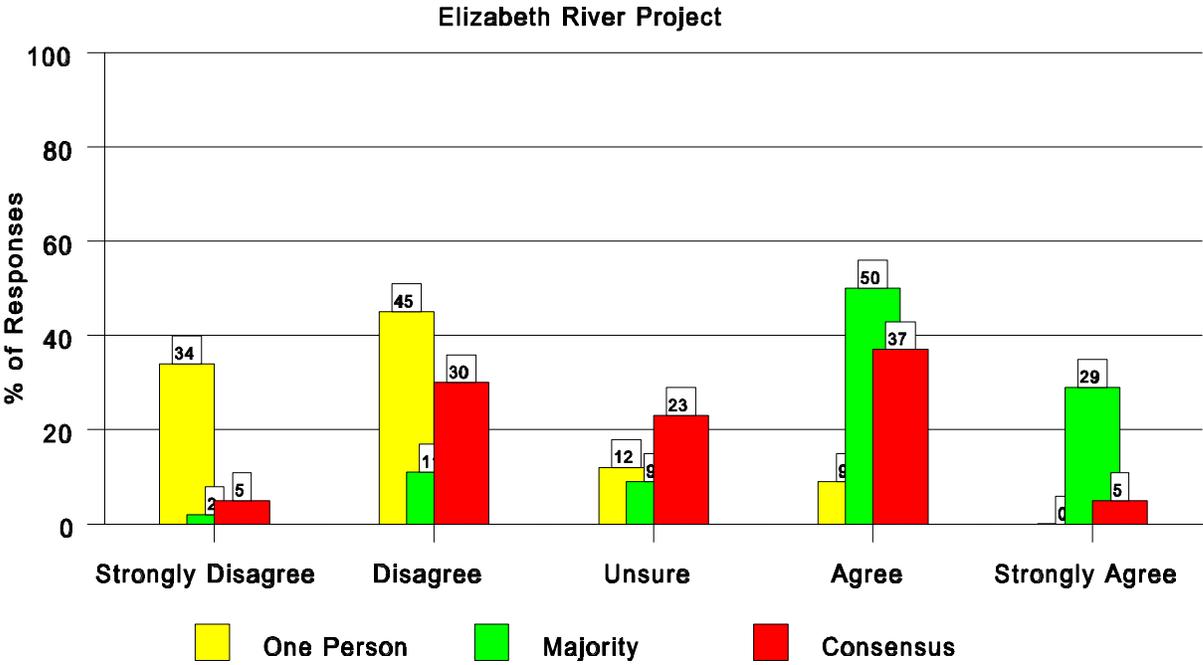
Copper put it, they were learning, and the process helped her understand other's positions. It bonded the participants and created a teamwork situation. Mr. Stokes indicated that some individuals had a lot to say, or wanted to get in the last word, but he was always able to comment at meetings, as were all participants. Mr. Cannady felt that communication was positive, but not overwhelmingly so. However, he also thought there were some cross purposes with respect to communication – that different committees did not communicate and the process was not centralized. While Mr. Cannady believed the communication could have been better, he indicated the participants freely expressed positions.

#### **6.4 The Success of the Process**

Eighty-nine percent (89%) of the respondents indicated that the group discussed alternatives and solutions (Figure Seven). Further, the second question of the survey provided a list of pertinent issues, including a blank space labeled “Other,” and asked respondents to rank what they thought were the three most important issues facing the Elizabeth River at the start of their participation in the Watershed Action Team. Having then answered questions about participation, the discussions during meetings, the decisionmaking process within the Watershed Action Team, and the success of the Team, the 16th question asked respondents to rank what they thought were the three most important issues facing the Elizabeth River at the end of their participation. Sixty-four percent (64%) changed their ranking. Thus, between the beginning and the end of their participation on the Watershed Action Team, almost two-thirds of the respondents changed the way they thought about the issues facing the Elizabeth River.

Ms. Mayfield indicated that the Watershed Action Team broke down into smaller committees where most of the debate occurred. She stated there were “lots of high feelings,” but by the time issues left committee and reached the whole group, the problems were resolved. In committee, people would state their positions, discuss ideas, and decide if they could all live with a proposed solution. Participants were often amazed that agreement was reached. This process helped Ms. Mayfield understand the other participants. She was educated and enlightened on the depth and breadth of the issues. It appeared to Mr. Stokes that, initially, the industry people perceived the causes of the problems were being placed on them. There were some adversarial positions at the beginning, but they started appreciating the other side as time went by and more meetings were held. Ms. Bailey indicated that a couple of people quit participating in

**Figure Seven. Questions on whether Watershed Action Team participants made decisions by consensus, whether one person made decisions, and whether a majority made decisions. Results expressed as a percentage of the total responses (n=60).**



the meetings. She stated that they had extreme points of view that were based on prejudice, not reality. She felt they came into the process with an agenda and were not willing to move on. They might have then had the perception that they were being excluded. Ms. Waters stated that any infighting or bargaining that occurred took place within committee meetings. The industrialists vs. environmentalists squabbles were overcome in these committee meetings. By the time the Team was ready to draft a comprehensive plan, the fighting was over.

Mr. Cannady found the process to be enjoyable at the beginning when it was unstructured, but it got big and had to be formalized. However, he also indicated that the ability of the Watershed Action Team to reach decisions changed over time. Mr. Cannady saw fear as the initial motivator of the process. Agency representatives came into the process with their positions formed. However, fear of being left out of what soon became apparent was going to be a successful process led them to change positions. He saw the fear go away over time as the participants began to feel like they belonged and were being listened to. For a time Mr. Cannady felt there was gridlock, but the group was able to move on because all the necessary parties were there. He observed barriers break down through discussion as the participants found common ground. Ms. Bailey indicated that the process got easier over time as mistrust was put aside. Mr. Stokes noted that he went to many meetings, and while he found them cumbersome, he became better informed and understood other participants better as a result. Ms. Bailey indicated that objectivity arose because of the gentle behavior of the participants, and that happened because everyone understood that they would be listened to. A calm, considered, response took hold; there was respect, with give and take. Misperceptions were corrected and accepted because of the openness with which the data was presented. Entrenched positions were

tempered. Bailey stated that the keys to the process were the openness of the discussions and the sharing of information. At times, Ms. Mayfield was frustrated by the length of the planning phase. She would have preferred a shorter process. However, she felt collaborative processes are the way decisions will be made in the future. She stated that the Elizabeth River Project would not be around today if they had not taken a collaborative approach. They would never have been able to get the Army Corps of Engineers, four city governments, and state and federal agencies to buy in to the river's cleanup any other way.

According to the anonymous interviewee, there was a concerted effort to avoid the hard, political issues. He felt the group only addressed general topics. However, he also stated that while they picked some simple things to do, they did get good things under way. At the last meeting this person attended, he noted that some positions were being taken. This individual also acknowledged that at about the time the process got serious, he stopped attending meetings. Mr. Cannady indicated receiving some feedback from those who left the process indicating that they liked what the group was doing but there were other things the group needed need to do. Mr. Fisher stated there were some people on the team that did not want to change, and people came and went. Mr. Fisher himself came into the process with a position that contaminated water and risk assessments were the main matters for the Watershed Action Team to address, but over time this changed. To him, the main issue became the process -- up front consensus building. Mr. Stokes saw positions change during the course of the process, mostly due to good ideas. Ms. Waters stated that the Elizabeth River Project recruited scientific input and used it as the basis for understanding problems. It was Ms. Waters' belief that education resulted in the changing of positions. Ms. Waters believed that science, overlaid with public involvement,

resulted in the creation of the Watershed Action Plan. Ms. Copper found the process to be as important as the outcomes. To her, the whole thing was magic; she thought it was miraculous that 100- plus people could reach consensus on a plan.

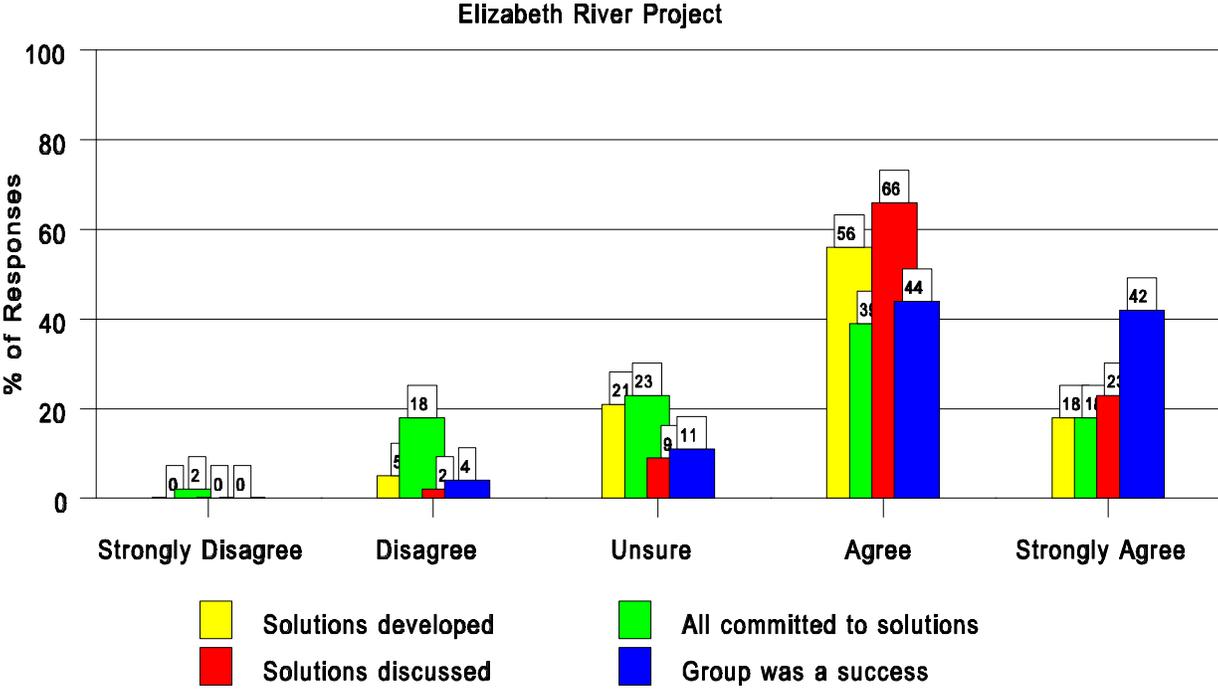
## **6.5 Achieving Results**

Seventy-four percent (74%) of the survey respondents related that solutions were reached, and 86% agreed that the process was successful (Figure Eight). However, 20% did indicate that not all participants were committed to reaching solutions. While it appears that the group reached solutions, all of the participants may not have been committed to reaching those solutions.

Ms. Mayfield related how, at a final retreat, the Watershed Action Team participants argued for a day and a half. While they would not agree to prioritize issues, they did identify five critical areas. Ms. Mayfield indicated that while she has tried to honor this, she has found it frustrating concentrating on these five areas. In the anonymous interviewee's opinion, the Watershed Action Team did accomplish several things -- it created a few good wetlands and got some wrecks out of river. However, he felt that the process was not successful with respect to key issues. They emphasized things where they could to show success, but they never advertised the short-term nature of their improvements. Yet, despite his misgivings, this individual still felt it was worthwhile to have participated. However, he was not sure what more the Elizabeth River Project could accomplish. The shoreline is too built up, and economics are too important - - the economic value of the port is more important than anything else.

While Ms. Bailey noted that the Watershed Action Team was successful in identifying

**Figure Eight. Questions on whether the Watershed Action Team was able to develop solutions, to discuss solutions and alternatives, and to reach solutions; and whether participants believed the process was a success. Results expressed as a percentage of the total responses (n=60).**



stressors to the river system, leveraging money, and getting four cities to cooperate, she felt that nonconfrontation was what the Elizabeth River Project does best -- getting people to the table that otherwise would not be there. Prior to her participation, she did not think an environmental group could be successful without being confrontational. Afterwards, she thought that talking about process could bring objectivity to the perceptions of all the participants. Ms. Bailey noted that industry professionals are not villains, and politicians are more caring than she thought. She found that people want to do the right thing as citizens of the river. Companies now seek out the Elizabeth River Project to help them. They can now discuss the river's problems with politicians routinely and continuously. She believed that the message of the process is important; even the Corps has learned how to do consensus from the Elizabeth River Project. Mr. Stokes believed that, in the end, the Watershed Action Team produced a lot of good ideas, some assessments, and some plans. Mr. Stokes believed there might be no better way to have accomplished what they did. He felt the process was a success and has had an impact, and that it was worth his time to have participated. Mr. Fisher noted that the Watershed Action Team developed recommendations for restoring the river that were based on effectiveness, affordability, and acceptability to the authorities and the public.

Mr. Cannady considered the Elizabeth River Project to be one of the major planning success stories he has observed during his career. The Watershed Action Team empowered people by creating the feeling that they could be part of the solution. To Mr. Cannady, that was the accomplishment of the Watershed Action Team -- that together people can begin to do something positive, despite conflict, disagreement, and lack of scientific knowledge. He felt the Elizabeth River Project needs to go on forever. He believed it is in the city's best interest to

have a strong group out there and that the Elizabeth River Project has done a good job keeping all of the participants from all sides at the table. Ms. Waters felt that the Watershed Action Team set a lot of things in motion. What is implemented will be only one of its contributions. It has also raised citizen consciousness and encouraged environmentally sensitive development. If it can successfully change the thinking of local governments about development along the waterfront, and if it can alter the way major businesses and government players do business, it will be a success. The Elizabeth River Project in general has made a big effort to change the mentality of the public -- from decisionmakers to landowners -- through exhibits, awards, riverboat cruises, slide shows, and even a song about the river. Ms. Waters considered the Elizabeth River Project to be a good, successful model of collaborative decisionmaking.

## **6.6 Summary of Information Obtained from the Elizabeth River Project Watershed Action Team**

The documents produced by the Elizabeth River Project Watershed Action Team indicate that this was a process where volunteers from business, government, science, and the private sector were able to create an environmental management partnership. All affected parties were involved in decisionmaking. Further, the surveys corroborate this documentary evidence.

Responses to the survey questions indicated that discussions were open and information was shared among the participants. Most respondents thought that the power to make decisions was shared by the participants. The participants in the process that were interviewed also echoed these elements of collaborative decisionmaking.

The interviews indicated that participants took ownership of the process and all had a part in decisionmaking. People would state their positions, discuss ideas, and then decide if they could all live with a proposed solution -- a consensus approach to decisionmaking. More than one person affirmed that open discussions and information sharing are keys to the process, and several indicated that decisions were made by consensus.

The Elizabeth River Project can be considered successful both because it developed a plan that was implemented and because the participants believed it was successful. Further, the documents, surveys, and interviews reflect the elements of collaboration identified by the initial synthesis of several collaborative processes. While the presence of these elements cannot be deemed as the reason for the success of the process, their occurrence in a notable collaboration gives some credence to their value as basic elements of the methodology.