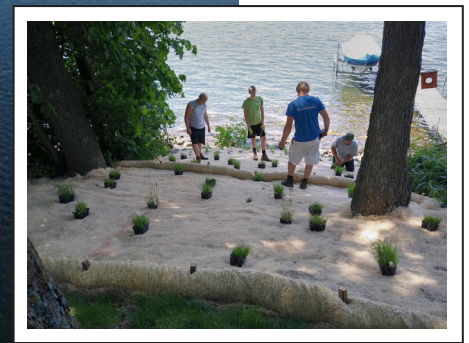


Mille Lacs' Compass Program moves ahead



"The lake's huge, but I think anyone who lives on Mille Lacs Lake loves that lake," Margaret Vos said of efforts to preserve and protect Lake Mille Lacs' water quality through the Compass Program.



*Working through the Compass Program, Margaret and Leo Vos chose Minnesota ShoreWorks Landscape & Restoration of Elk River to install their project, **above**, which included 500 plants on the steep embankment leading to the lake. Vos, **left**, became a program ambassador. A Clean Water Fund grant from BWSR allowed Mille Lacs SWCD in July 2017 to hire Harmony Maslowski to spearhead Compass. By mid-February 2020, she had contacted 540 landowners about the program. It serves Mille Lacs, Aitkin and Crow Wing counties.*

Contributed Photos

One landowner at a time, a 3-county, Mille Lacs SWCD-based program and its ambassadors are growing a community committed to water quality



Lake Mille Lacs is known for its size, its fishery and its sought-after lakeshore properties.

At 207 square miles, Minnesota's second-largest inland lake draws boaters, anglers and recreationists from throughout the state and beyond. Lakeshore properties' estimated market value exceeds \$670 million. Lake Mille Lacs' water quality is important to the state's largest population center, too. The lake is the headwaters of the Rum River, which drains into the Mississippi



Maslowski

River — a source of drinking water for the Twin Cities.

Around such a large and important lake, how does one build a community of lakeshore property owners who care about water quality?

One landowner at a time, the Mille Lacs Soil & Water Conservation District (SWCD) is learning.



Harmony Maslowski, the SWCD's watershed coordinator, leads the [Compass Program](#), a three-tiered recognition of individuals' commitment to water quality improvement. The program aims to build a community of landowners

who appreciate and protect the resource.

Maslowski was hired in July 2017 through a Clean Water Fund grant from the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR). It's her job to contact landowners about the program.

All landowners who express interest in Compass receive a free Shoreland Stewardship Plan. It includes the opportunity to work one on one with a shoreland technician, who walks the property and explores options with the landowner.

"We work to align the plan with their goals and with water-quality goals. Every stewardship plan is different; the stewardship plan is unique to the property," Maslowski said.

Those who receive a plan become Bronze-level Compass Program members. Silver members act on their plan. Gold members are ambassadors, which might involve showing neighbors their project or speaking at events.

Margaret Vos, 68, a retired St. Cloud State University administrator living in Foreston, agreed to be a Gold-level ambassador.

"It starts with one person. The lake's huge, but I think anyone who lives on Mille Lacs Lake loves that lake," Vos said. She and her husband, Leo, bought a cabin near Isle 26 years ago when their son was young. "We both decided there was nothing greater than to spend summers on the lake sailing, swimming, watching sunsets."

Vos credited previous generations with keeping Lake Mille Lacs healthy, and said she wanted to help keep it that way for future generations.



The Compass Program had a booth at the 2019 Rivers and Lakes Fair in Aitkin.

"We really want this lake to live on," Vos said.

When Maslowski walked onto their property to introduce the program, the Voses had talked about how dangerous it was to mow the steep hill leading to the shore bound by riprap. But they had never talked about converting the lawn to plants, and likely would not have done so without the Compass Program.

"I needed the resources of the experts," Vos said.

Maslowski left them with a brochure, a packet of seeds and an invitation to a workshop. That led to a walk-through by SWCD conservation technician Lynn Gallice. In June 2019, Minnesota ShoreWorks Landscape & Restoration of Elk River installed 800 plants in three sites on the Voses property — about 500 of those on the hillside. The plants will help to stabilize the shoreline, curb erosion and keep pollutants out of the water. Grant funds covered half of the project costs.

"Lynn presented us with 25 to 30 plants that could fit into that area. We really drove the project. They suggest solutions. They suggest plants, but it was really us," Vos said.

Vos wondered how much control she would have over plant selection and timing (a lot), and if signing up made participation mandatory (it

doesn't). Vos said Maslowski and the SWCD staff answered all her questions and tailored plant selection to allow unrestricted lake views.

Now, the Voses answer questions when people stop in to ask about the project. A PowerPoint documenting the installation was shown at a conference and to a watershed group.

"When something is really good and exciting and positive, I really want to talk about it," Vos said.

She is among four Gold-level members. By mid-February 2020, eight had obtained Silver status, 27 Bronze.

To date, Mille Lacs and Aitkin SWCD technicians have completed 20 site visits and written nine stewardship plans. The program also involves Crow Wing SWCD.

By mid-February 2020, Maslowski had talked to 540 people about the program one on one. Nearly 90 of those landowners expressed interest in water quality or stewardship.

"Once they realize that I am not running for office and want to chat about Lake Mille Lacs, their doors open wide because everyone has a great story about the lake," Maslowski said.

Kurt Beckstrom of the Mille Lacs SWCD Board described

support for Compass.

"We let Harmony adjust her schedule to visit landowners when they are home. This will involve working early evenings and some weekends, but it is an effort fully supported by the board and we are really happy with the connections she is making in terms of building a community of caring around the lake," Beckstrom said.

Public perception is crucial in delivering the right message.

"We used to do a Watershed Management Lake Health Conference each year. ... We did not realize that people saw this as a conference focused on personal health," Maslowski said. "Once we learned about what the people were thinking, we quickly adjusted and renamed the conference."

A landowner who has since become a Compass Program participant suggested the new name — Healthy Land, Healthy Lake Conference — after brainstorming and getting feedback from the Mille Lacs Lake Watershed Management Group. The group formed in 1997 to manage the surrounding resources. It developed Compass to promote lakeshore property owners' active role in lake protection.

SWCD Manager Susan Shaw encourages staff members to reflect on how they deal with the public.

"The staff is making great efforts to ensure they are thinking in terms of people with whom we are speaking," Shaw said.

Nearly 2,900 lakeshore properties encircle Mille Lacs, making it difficult to contact every landowner. However, the Compass Program is building a strong foundation.