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Running on Water

Environmentalist Debra Shore is raising serious cash to run for an office many people have never even heard of.



CHICAGO READER CHICAGO'S FREE WEEKLY | THIS ISSUE IN FOUR SECTIONS FRIDAY, OCT 28, 2005 | VOLUME 34, NUMBER 5



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ON THE COVER: LLOYD DEGRANE (SHORE), MEGAN HOLMES (FIERY FURNACES)

Running on Water

Debra Shore thinks the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District could be key to the future of the region and the environment. That's why she's raising real money to win an office most candidates barely campaign for.



Debra Shore

LLOYD DEGRANE

By Christopher Hayes

Candidates for commissioner of the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District usually don't have Web sites, don't march in the Gay Pride Parade, and don't receive endorsements from Democracy for America meetups. The board of commissioners is typically filled by Democratic organization veterans and longtime district employees, and campaigning typically means buttering up the committeemen who do the slating, passing out yard signs, and hoping your name comes first on the ballot.

But Debra Shore isn't typical. A 53-year-old conservationist, she's the Howard Dean of this year's race, a dark horse outsider who's lining up heavyweight endorsements (including congresswoman Jan

Schakowsky, state representative Julie Hamos, and Cook County Board commissioner Larry Suffredin), firing up young progressives, and raising some serious cash, over \$80,000 in the last four months.

One steamy evening this summer, Ben Helphand, a community activist with the Center for Neighborhood Technology (and a friend of mine), hosted a small fund-raiser where he passed out Debra Shore-branded water bottles and solicited donations. In Helphand's front yard, between a turquoise apiary and a plot of sunflowers, about 40 milling twenty-and-thirtysomethings drank Stella Artois and snacked on guacamole, cheese, and crackers.

"I think some people may

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Shore

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wonder—why throw a garden party for someone who's running for Water Reclamation District?" Helphand said as he introduced Shore. "I think that no matter how far down the ticket a campaign is it deserves all of our attention, especially MWRD, because the more I learn about it the more I realize how darn important it is."

Shore stood on a porch step and began her stump speech. Petite, with close-cropped hair and almond eyes, she speaks in precise sentences and with just a hint of a Texas drawl. Her speech was a somewhat strange mix of boilerplate—who she is and why she'd do a good job—and a crash course in what the MWRD does and why the assembled should care. "Over the next 20 or 25 years we are going to find substitutes for oil—there are substitutes for fossil fuels," she said. "There are no substitutes for fresh drinking water. It's an irreplaceable resource. And I think the eyes of the country and the eyes of the world are going to turn to those Great Lakes communities that sit on 20 percent of the world's freshwater."

Before 1889, water in Chicago pretty much managed itself. The lake provided a virtually infinite supply of drinking water, and the river, doubling as a sewer system, flowed back into the lake. For years no one seemed to see this as a problem, but in 1885 a massive storm flooded the river and swept its waters so far out into the lake that they passed the intake valves that captured drinking water. By luck the city escaped an epidemic of cholera or typhoid fever, but the close call convinced politicians that something had to be done.

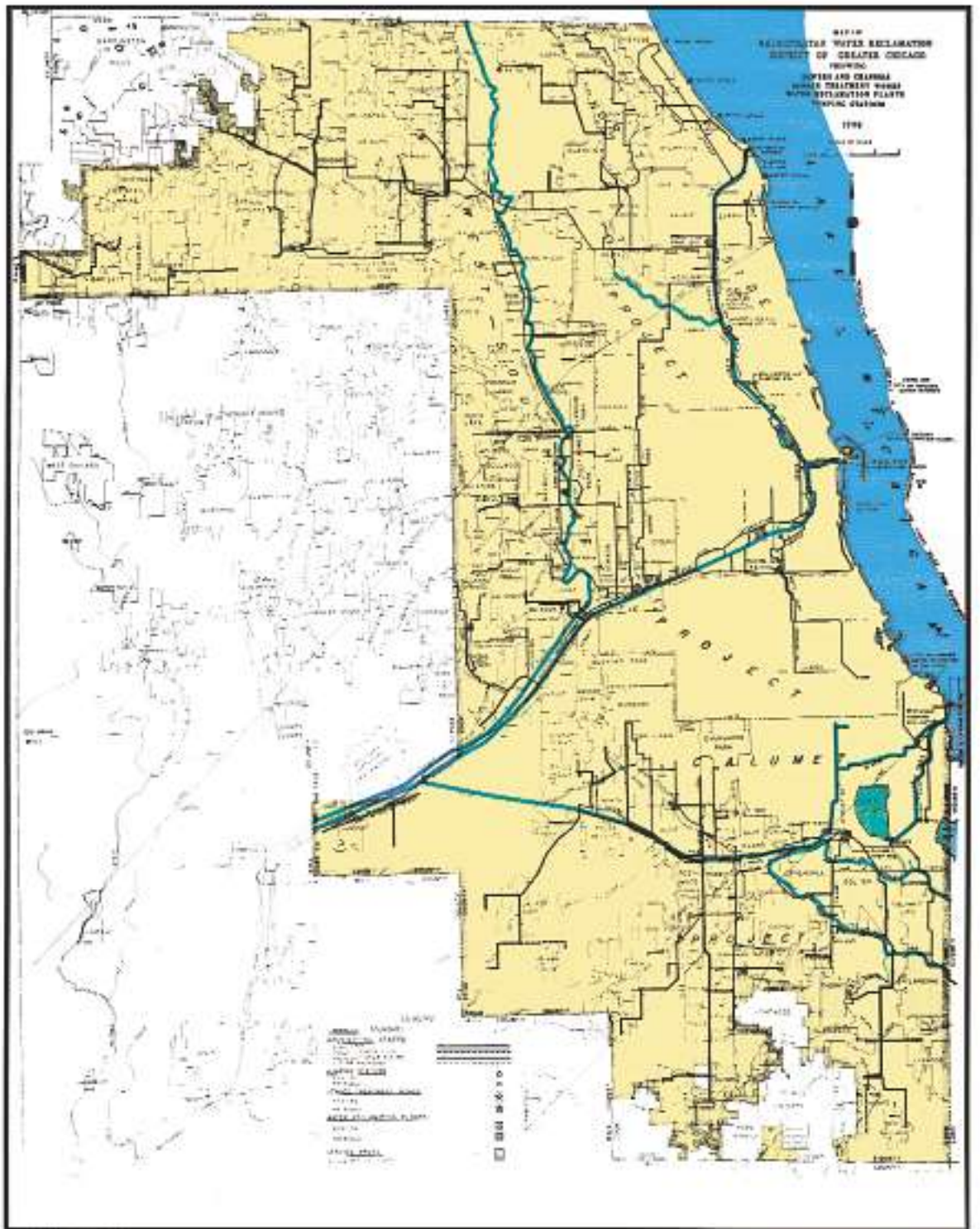
In 1889 the state legislature passed a bill creating the Chicago Metropolitan Sanitary District. (In 1988 commissioner James Kirie, frustrated by the public's lack of understanding of what the district did, pushed the board to change its name to the no less baffling Metropolitan Water Reclamation District.) The district's first task was to reverse the river so that it flowed away from the lake and into the Mississippi watershed, where the wastewater could become someone else's problem. The pathway

established in the late 19th century is essentially the one used today. Wastewater goes down the drain, through city pipes, and into the district's sewage system. It's pumped into treatment centers—there are seven, including the one in Stickney, the largest in the world—where it is, in the words of president Terry O'Brien, "made 99.99 percent pure" before being released. It flows through the Sanitary & Ship Canal to the Des Plaines to the Illinois and finally to the Mississippi River.

As regional development exploded in the 1950s and '60s, this system found itself frequently overwhelmed. Every square foot of asphalt and concrete prevented rainwater from seeping into the ground and instead diverted it to the sewer system. The more development there was, the more water entered the sewers, and when heavy rains exceeded the system's capacity wastewater had to be released untreated. By the mid-70s sewage was escaping into the river and North Shore Channel about one day in four.

For the civil engineers at the MWRD the solution was simple: massively scale up the holding capacity. They proposed the Tunnel and Reservoir Project (TARP), known commonly as Deep Tunnel, an enormous system of underground tunnels and reservoirs that would store excess storm water during even the heaviest rains until it could be processed.

To conservationists at community groups like the Center for Neighborhood Technology, the Lake Michigan Federation (now the Alliance for the Great Lakes), and the Community Renewal Society, this was madness. Instead of increased processing capacity, what they wanted was a reduction in the system's input. "The Sanitary District's main brochure was called 'How to Bottle Rainstorms,'" says CNT founder Scott Bernstein. "We said, isn't it better to catch raindrops where they fall instead of bottling rainstorms?" Conservationists pointed out that rainwater could be put to a variety of uses if captured where it landed or allowed to seep back into the ground, but once it entered the sewer system it became polluted and then had to be treated. The system, in other words, was set up to convert bil-



Metropolitan Water Reclamation District

lions of gallons of clean water into polluted water and then back into clean water. This was environmentally destructive, they argued, and economically wasteful.

Bernstein and his allies advocated putting cisterns on buildings to trap rain and use it for such purposes as landscaping and cleaning, setting aside aerated green spaces that rainwater could easily penetrate, and increasing the use of permeable paving surfaces that would let water seep back into the earth. The groups estimated that these measures could reduce the amount of storm water entering

the sewer system by 50 to 90 percent. This was a radical rethinking of the role of the MWRD—from a centralized processing facility to what Bernstein called "an entrepreneurial broker" that would use its budget to encourage and subsidize local solutions.

The environmentalists succeeded in scaling back the Deep Tunnel project, but in the end the civil engineers won. Construction began in 1977 and Deep Tunnel's 109 miles of underground channels are now nearly complete. But last year the General Assembly passed legislation transferring authority for storm water manage-

ment for all of Cook County from the county board to the MWRD. This means that the MWRD is now the planning agency officially tasked with reducing flooding in the county's watershed regions. Bernstein and other environmentalists hope the change will give them a chance to dust off some of their ideas from the 70s.

This is where Shore comes in. She's firmly in the conservationist camp. On Helphand's front steps she tells the crowd about her asphalt driveway in Skokie, which she and her partner wanted to rip up and replace with

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YOUR GOVERNMENT, on the basis of outrageous lies, is waging a murderous and utterly illegitimate war in Iraq, with other countries in their sites.

YOUR GOVERNMENT is openly torturing people and justifying it.

YOUR GOVERNMENT puts people in jail on the merest suspicion, refusing them lawyers, and either holding them indefinitely or deporting them in the dead of night.

YOUR GOVERNMENT is moving each day closer to a theocracy, where a narrow and hateful brand of Christian fundamentalism will rule.

YOUR GOVERNMENT suppresses the science that doesn't fit its religious, political and economic agenda, forcing present and future generations to pay a terrible price.

YOUR GOVERNMENT is moving to deny women here, and all over the world, the right to birth control and abortion.

YOUR GOVERNMENT enforces a culture of greed, bigotry, intolerance and ignorance.

People look at all this and think of Hitler – and they are right to do so. The Bush regime is setting out to radically remake society very quickly, in a fascist way, and for generations to come. We must act now; the future is in the balance.

Millions and millions are deeply disturbed and outraged by this. They recognize the need for a vehicle to express this outrage, yet they cannot find it; politics as usual cannot meet the enormity of the challenge, and people sense this.

There is not going to be some magical "pendulum swing." People who steal elections and believe they're on a "mission from God" will not go without a fight.

There is not going to be some savior from the Democratic Party. This whole idea of putting our hopes and energies into "leaders" who tell us to seek common ground with fascists and religious fanatics is proving every day to be a disaster, and actually serves to demobilize people.

But silence and paralysis are NOT acceptable. That which you will not resist and mobilize to stop, you will learn – or be forced – to accept. There is no escaping it: the whole disastrous course of this Bush regime must be STOPPED. And we must take the responsibility to do it.

And there is a way. We are talking about something on a scale that can really make a huge change in this country and in the world. We need more than fighting Bush's outrages one at a time, constantly losing ground to the whole onslaught. We must, and can, aim to create a political situation where the Bush regime's program is repudiated, where Bush himself is driven from office, and where the whole direction he has been taking society is reversed. We, in our millions, must and can take responsibility to change the course of history.

To that end, on **November 2**, the first anniversary of Bush's "re-election," we will take the first major step in this by organizing a truly massive day of resistance all over this country. People everywhere will walk out of school, they will take off work, they will come to the downtowns and town squares and set out from there, going through the streets and calling on many more to JOIN US. They will repudiate this criminal regime, making a powerful statement: "NO! THIS REGIME DOES NOT REPRESENT US! AND WE WILL DRIVE IT OUT!"

November 2 must be a massive and public proclamation that WE REFUSE TO BE RULED IN THIS WAY. November 2 must call out to the tens of millions more who are now agonizing and disgusted. November 2 will be the beginning – a giant first step in forcing the Bush regime to step down, and a powerful announcement that we will not stop until he does so – and it will join with and give support and heart to people all over the globe who so urgently need and want this regime to be stopped.

This will not be easy. If we speak the truth, they will try to silence us. If we act, they will try to stop us. But we speak for the majority, here and around the world, and as we get this going we are going to reach out to the people who have been so badly fooled by Bush and we are NOT going to stop.

The point is this: history is full of examples where people who had right on their side fought against tremendous odds and were victorious. And it is also full of examples of people passively hoping to wait it out, only to get swallowed up by a horror beyond what they ever imagined. The future is unwritten. WHICH ONE WE GET IS UP TO US.

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Shore

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gravel—an expensive conversion they'd pay for with money they'd made in the stock market. The village said its bylaws didn't permit gravel. "We calculated that if our driveway was converted to gravel it would save between nine and ten thousand gallons a year that today runs into the street, collects salt and oil and toxic chemicals, goes into the storm sewers, gets treated but eventually gets flushed down the river, collecting more runoff and agricultural pollution and creating a dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico. Now that's not right. It's not sustainable and it's not smart. So I think the district could use its taxing authority to give tax incentives to people and developers who use permeable surfaces, and ought to have penalties for developers who use impermeable."

Eventually Skokie gave Shore and her partner a variance to build their gravel driveway. But by then the stock market had gone back down and they couldn't afford it.

Shore's platform falls short of the radical reconstitution of the district that Bernstein advocates. Her proposals grow out of the

conservationist perspective but don't threaten the commissioners currently running the show. She doesn't want to alienate them before she joins them, and most of them are pretty squarely in the civil engineering camp. "The major civil works projects were necessary," she says. "They need to be finished. They're important and they do a good job. But at the end of the day they won't be enough. We will need to think about how do we keep more freshwater in our basin."

She'd like to see the MWRD become more proactive, educating residents and municipalities about ways to reduce the amount of water flowing into the storm sewers, simple ways like flipping downspouts so that the rainwater soaks people's lawns. She wants the district to use its contracting dollars to "drive the market" for environmentally friendly products like rain cisterns and permeable paving surfaces, and she believes the MWRD should look into seeding businesses that would manufacture green products such as cisterns and permeable brick.

Given the magnitude of the district's operation, these policies



At a fund-raiser this summer; Ben Helphand is at the far left.

won't make much of a dent, will they? "That's a good point," she says. "The gravel driveway—what's 10,000 gallons when you're talking about two billion a day? Well, the city is putting a green roof on part of McCormick Place. They will now capture and return to Lake Michigan 55 million gallons a year, and that's

from just part of the roof of McCormick Place. It's like Everett Dirksen said—'A million here, a million there, pretty soon you're talking real money.'"

Shore was born in Chicago but grew up in Dallas. After getting a BA from Goucher College in Maryland and an MA from

Johns Hopkins University, she found work writing articles for the Johns Hopkins and then Brown University alumni magazines, but eventually went back to Texas. In 1982 her then husband accepted an offer to trade on the Chicago Board Options Exchange, and they moved to

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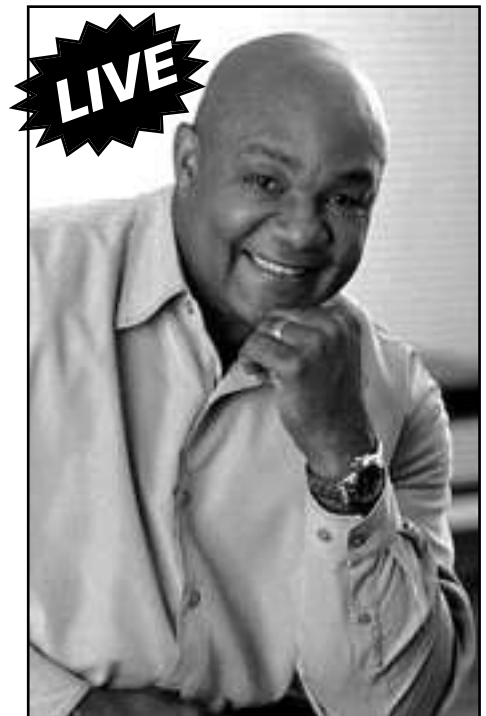
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Shore

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Lakeview.

Shore landed a gig at the Better Government Association, writing up their reports on corruption, waste, and inefficiency. It was, she says, "a terrific introduction to Chicago politics and investigative reporting." In the early 1990s Shore, who'd always enjoyed the outdoors (her Web site says she's "climbed 42 of the 54 mountains in Colorado over 14,000 feet high"), began volunteering for the Cook County Forest Preserve District. "I figured I ought to get to know more about nature right where I live." She and other volunteers would spend weekends clearing weeds, cutting brush, and collecting and planting seeds from native

plants. "I found that I liked the work and liked the people," she says. "In working to restore a particular natural area it restored me, my spirit, my body."

Shore became more than a volunteer; she became one of the forest preserves' most committed advocates and defenders. She cofounded a group called Friends of the Forest Preserves and started attending committee meetings of the board of commissioners (which is the Cook County Board wearing different hats) and testifying at board hearings on forest restoration. "Anything you do at the forest preserves," says Commissioner Larry Suffredin, "there she is."

Through her work with the forest preserves, Shore became part

of the inner circle of Chicago conservationists. "I can't remember how I met Debra," says Cameron Davis, executive director of Alliance for the Great Lakes, "because she's just everywhere. Debra's probably one of the greatest voices for making the Chicago metro area livable of anybody out there doing work today."

In 1996 a group of conservationists launched a regional consortium dedicated to preserving and helping manage local wildlife habitats. The Chicago Region Biodiversity Council (better known as Chicago Wilderness) had 34 founding organizations, including the U.S. Forest Service, the Environmental Protection Agency, the National Park Service, the Chicago Park

District, the Sierra Club, and the Nature Conservancy. Shore was approached by Steve Packard, one of the consortium's leaders, about helping to put together a new magazine. She ended up the editor. Says Packard, "She was a little like Cheney helping Bush find a vice president."

Chicago Wilderness is now a stylish quarterly that the *Tribune* named one of the country's 50 best magazines. Shore has won a Lisagor Award for her editorials.

In 2002 Shore was accepted by the Illinois Women's Institute for Leadership, a training center (started by, among others, Dick Durbin's wife, Loretta) whose workshops prepare women to run for elected office. Shore says that at the time she didn't have an

office in mind, but as her interest in electoral politics grew she joined the board of IVI-IPO, joined the Democratic Party of Evanston, and attended some of the first Howard Dean meetings. Last January Jay Rowell, a fellow board member at IVI-IPO, raised the idea of her running for MWRD. "And the more I thought about it," Shore says, "the more I realized this is an agency with a conservation mission that is more pure and more central than any other."

Today's MWRD has an annual budget of over \$800 million, which is roughly the state budget of Vermont. Its revenue is generated by property taxes and user fees on industry, and it's managed

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Shore

continued from page 26
 by a general superintendent appointed by the board. Shore says that the district is generally well run, but she and her supporters think it lacks a green perspective. "Overall the place functions well," says Suffredin, "but it's more remote control than looking for dynamic ideas. I think with Debra on the board they would be more open to trying things." Says Cameron Davis, "Right now there's nobody on that board who's cut their teeth as an environmental stakeholder."

The commissioners' main job is to set policy for the district and approve all contracts over

\$10,000. They recently decided to process solid waste one step beyond the usual sludge (which is sold as fertilizer) and turn it into small pellets (which are sold, apparently, as slightly more expensive fertilizer). They're currently debating whether to purify Chicago River effluent with chlorine or infrared; Shore favors infrared.

Commissioners are elected to six-year terms, and every two years three of the nine are up for reelection. The three incumbents whose terms expire in 2006 are president Terry O'Brien and commissioners James Harris and Harry "Bus" Yourell. O'Brien says he'll definitely seek reelection,

and as he already has more than \$100,000 in two different campaign war chests, and as even Shore says he's "done a good job," he looks like a lock. Harris will be running again too. Yourell, who's 86, won't be on the ballot this year, which leaves one slot open for the Democrats to slate. The front-runners are Leyden Township attorney Barrett Pedersen, who touts his own environmental views, also talks about permeable surfaces, and is a vice chairman of the Cook County Democratic Party, and Dean Maragos, an attorney who ran unsuccessfully for 44th Ward alderman in 2003.

In addition to the three slated candidates there will probably be eight or so others competing in the Democratic primary this March. There's a Republican primary as well, but with very rare exceptions the candidates who win the Democratic primary go on to win the general election.

Only 8,000 signatures are required to get on the ballot, making MWRD a fairly low-overhead office to pursue. But to win a place in the general election, Shore will have to get approximately 150,000 votes—no small feat. Her strategy is to raise boatloads of money. She says she's aiming to raise several hundred thousand dollars to pay

for campaign staff, literature, direct mail, and possibly some radio ads, and to try to stitch together votes from the various constituencies she has a natural connection to: environmentalists, Dean supporters, lakefront liberals, and the gay community.

Despite Shore's focus on ideas and issues, the campaign isn't likely to be decided by them. "It is a challenge. It's kind of like running a judge race," says Shore's deputy campaign manager, Adam Gypalo. "Ballot position is a factor. Another factor is getting your people to the poll. We're hoping that with a name like Shore and water, people will get it." □



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