

East Multnomah Soil & Water Conservation District 2023-24 Hearing Minutes

Tuesday, May 16, 2023

4:00 pm

Present:

TSCC:

Chair Harmony Quiroz, Commissioner James Ofsink, Commissioner Mark Wubbold, Commissioner Margo Norton, Executive Director Allegra Willhite, and Budget Analyst Tunie Betschart

Absent: Commissioner Matt Donahue

East Multnomah Soil and Water Conservation District:

Board Members: Joe Rossi and Jim Carlson

Staff: Executive Director Nancy Hamilton and Chief Financial Officer Dan Mitten

Chair Harmony Quiroz opened the public hearing by welcoming everyone to the hearing and briefly describing the duties and responsibilities of the TSCC. She reviewed the hearing process and stated the hearing was to engage the district leadership and provide an opportunity for the public to comment before East Multnomah Soil and Water Conservation District adopts its budget. She asked the TSCC Commissioners and staff to introduce themselves and state if they have business relationships with the district that could be perceived as a conflict of interest. Each commissioner and staff member introduced themselves and said they had no conflict of interest with the district. She asked the EMSWCD to introduce the board members and staff present.

Following introductions, Chair Quiroz asked if any members of the public wished to speak at this time. Executive Director Willhite and EMSWCD Chief Financial Officer Dan Mitten reported that no community members had signed up to speak, and they had not received any written comments.

Then, Chair Quiroz asked East Multnomah Soil & Water Conservation District Executive Director Nancy Hamilton if she had any brief introductory remarks about the budget.

Ms. Hamilton suggested, in the interest of time, going directly to the public comment and the questions.

With that, the commissioners started their questions.

TSCC Questions:

Commissioner Norton asked the following questions:

This first question is for the Board: congratulations on completing your strategic plan, we know how much thought and work went into the process. We'll be asking about how the plan influenced changes in your budget or focus throughout our questions.

You actively sought community participation in the development and finalization of this plan. Can you tell us a bit about who participated, what you learned from them, and how the community influenced the plan? Perhaps you could give us a specific example of something

in the Strategic Plan that came directly from the community?

Mr. Joe Rossi applauded the group for their outreach to the community. He said they heard a wide variety of viewpoints from disadvantaged communities. The results were a very broad Strategic Plan. He said he hoped this is the first step. And that next year, the commissioners will ask how the district has executed the Strategic plan during the first year.

Mr. Jim Carlson added that the board is actively seeing more outreach to the various groups. They are partnering with various groups such as the Farm Bureau and Nursery Association, making them aware of the East Multnomah Soil and Water Conservation District, what they do, how they can assist, and the advantages of partnering with this district. He said the plan covers a broad area and is an evolving process.

Mr. Rossi added they need to get the word out about soil and water health and keep farmlands viable and the waterways free of topsoil from the farm. He emphasized the need to reach family farms that make their living farming. They need to know how they could benefit from conservation efforts and how this district could help them develop these techniques.

Can you give specific examples of how community input drove the decisions for the commitments in the final Strategic Plan?

Ms. Hamilton said they got information from various community engagement liaisons. They did outreach with the Farm Bureau, invited farmers to Headwaters Incubator Farm for a board meeting, and offered input. They also conducted several meetings working with the Coalition for Communities of Color. They did extensive work with the grant recipients to see what was working well and what needed improvement at the granting level to be more responsive to their needs. Workshop attendees also offered suggestions on how to improve programs. Workshops with staff were guided by the recommendations received from the various groups. She said the community engagement program came out of the strategic plan work. The district needs to better communicate to the public the benefits of soil and water conservation and how the district can assist in accomplishing this. Communication is the key. The district is building relationships with historically marginalized stakeholders and diverse local communities to do the work differently.

Commissioner Wubbold asked the following questions:

Another question related to the strategic plan – the plan mentions lenses of Climate Action and Equity and Inclusion. In practical terms, how do these inform policy-making for East Multnomah Soil & Water? Are there any specific budget decisions tied to these?

Ms. Hamilton said the federal dollars will help communities become more resilient against weather volatility. Climate impacts in the district show up in many ways. For example, the temperatures hit the 90-plus-degree mark at an unusually early time of the year. This increased weather volatility that comes with a warming planet impacts crops, ecological systems, and human health. EMSWCD's work helps create resiliency for the people who live here, the natural ecosystems in the district, and the farming community, which is central to the district's mission.

In the urban part of the district, at least 72 people died in Multnomah County alone from the heat dome in August of 2021 when temperatures hit 116 degrees. Forty-two died in neighborhoods identified as "heat islands," which typically sustain the highest temperatures because of several factors, including too much pavement and insufficient greenery. Helping to reduce impervious surfaces, planting more trees, and creating more green infrastructure are just a few things EMSWCD does to help mitigate these growing problems.

After completing the strategic plan, the district engaged in an intentional exercise of looking

at current work through climate change and equity lenses. She was happy to learn that many of the programs and the district's work are already responding strategically to these priorities. She gave the example of reducing impervious materials in parking lots, such as they did at the Mt. Hood Community College project. Stormwater runoff is completely mitigated, and salmon are back in one of the stream beds near one of the watersheds for the first time in decades. A more urban-focused program that the district is continuing to grow is reducing impervious materials and increasing green infrastructure, which directly addresses issues like the heat dome and reduces stormwater runoff that pollutes watersheds - both equity and climate issues - the two are often inextricably connected.

The StreamCare program, which, since its inception, has planted over half a million native plants along privately owned stream fronts. It mitigates increasingly warm stream temperatures and reduces the risk of erosion and flooding, which climate change impacts.

Ms. Hamilton concluded by saying there is a clear focus on responding to climate impacts and ensuring inclusivity in government programs at the federal level. So, as a district, they will look for these priorities in response to clear community feedback, intending to find significant opportunities to receive federal dollars for this work of creating more resiliency and stability for the community.

Commissioner Ofsink asked this follow-up question:

Is East Multnomah Soil & Water Conservation District the main organization doing work removal of pavement within your district, or are other nonprofits working with you?

Ms. Hamilton said they partner with other organizations. Depave is also doing this work.

Chair Quiroz asked the following questions:

Your budget message describes a new program focused on community outreach and engagement. What are the primary goals of this program? What convinced you of the need to add it? We are also interested in the CRM software, and how that is intended to track engagement and outreach. Can you give us some examples of how that is going to work within the scope of the new community engagement system?

During the District's Strategic Planning process, staff and board members identified a need for greater visibility, transparency, and accountability with public audiences and partners. EMSWCD was an obscure government entity that people did not know much about. As a result, the primary goals of this new program are to provide a districtwide resource for all the outreach efforts and a coordinated approach to getting community feedback in the future. It will track all programs and participants.

The district has used postcards at meet-and-greet sessions in places such as Corbett Grange. This program will identify and coordinate all participants. They plan to be more intentional about receiving feedback from the participants.

Community outreach and engagement are integral to EMSWCD's ability to build relationships and deepen trust with partners and constituencies. This new team will develop and implement communication and outreach strategies that increase public awareness of the district and ensure that people in the district connect with EMSWCD's mission, find the programs and resources accessible and relevant, and benefit from the district's investments. The team will work across all of the district's programs, supporting partnerships and engagement with residents, nonprofit organizations, landowners, and land managers to improve soil health and water quality, preserve farmland, reduce climate impacts, support more sustainable agriculture, provide outdoor and garden education programs, and restore fish and wildlife habitat.

Commissioner Ofsink asked the following questions:

Community outreach and engagement is a challenge for many government entities. What are the challenges you expect to face and what is your plan for addressing those challenges? How will you know if this new program is successful?

Ms. Hamilton said the biggest hurdle is that the district is an obscure government entity that most people have never heard of. EMSWCD provides a breadth of services for people in the district that they are unaware of. Considering these are funded by taxpayer dollars, at the very least, staff is responsible for informing the public how their tax dollars are being invested. It will take time to move the needle on these fronts. In response to this, staff has developed a multi-year implementation plan. Year one will be about inventory and planning; year two will be implementation; and finally, year three will refine the engagement plans and measure the impact, successes, and failures. Together, these will inform the program's work in the out years.

There are three core projects:

- Updating the website to make it more user-friendly
- Reaching out to farmer owners with ideas to improve operations
- Contacting rural landowners to determine their needs in terms of technical assistance

The measurement of success will be whether more people know about the district and what it does under the successful outreach and engagement efforts as gauged by community and partner feedback. The successes and failures will inform the roadmap to be used moving forward.

She concluded by saying they plan to do an inventory, learn what they can from that, identify core projects for year one, start to move forward, see what is working, and add more tasks to the queue as they move forward.

Commissioner Norton asked the following questions:

The addition of the community outreach and engagement program is paired with the dissolution of the Conservation Legacy program, pieces of which are moved into other General Fund programs. Can you tell us more about how the work formerly done by Conservation Legacy will be changed by the restructure? Is there anything you will no longer do going forward?

Ms. Hamilton said it was about moving pieces elsewhere rather than removing work. This will help them get more done. Conservation Legacy was a bit of a hodge podge. This program worked on easements and succession planning and focused on rural lands. They moved under rural lands to be more closely collaborated. Vacant half-time FTE was focused on nursery people in the district, but interest was lacking. So, it wasn't the best use of the FTE. Contract dollars were added to this new rural lands program to bring in contractors to reach out to the community since EMSWCD does not have the staffing to cover all areas. If it is successful, staff will ask the board for an additional FTE.

Commissioner Wubbold asked the following questions:

We see additional dollars budgeted in grant programs this year. How much budgeted for this current year was awarded, and do you expect to spend all of the budgeted grant dollars next year?

Ms. Hamilton said there is \$1.9 million in grants budgeted across all areas in this current fiscal year, which includes the Conservation Legacy Incentive Program (CLIP), Equity Focused Strategic Opportunity Grant (EFSOG), and the Small Projects & Community Events (SPACE) program. All the grant funding has been awarded. In the FY23-24 budget, they identified key granting opportunities to fund at a higher level due to more interest from the community and larger application pools. This year, they received almost 42 applicants compared to 29 for the Partners in Conservation (PIC) grant opportunity the previous year. The district has received more applications than it can fund and must turn down some great projects. Staff is requesting more money in each of the categories next year.

Commissioner Norton asked this follow-up question:

Can the grantees do the work and meet their deliverables once awarded the grants?

Ms. Hamilton explained that they monitor this very closely. For the most part, yes. CLIP program has had some challenges because urban and rural applicants have very different needs. They heard that people needed more dollars to complete projects in this program, so they put more in next year's budget. (CLIP program is only for landowners). They will not be pursuing the urban projects as actively as they have in the past.

Chair Quiroz asked the following questions:

You are planning for year-one of a new five-year USDA grant to improve farm access and farm transition programs. If you receive the grant funds, what will you be doing differently from your current efforts? What does success look like?

Ms. Hamilton said they have submitted a robust grant application. The agency keeps pushing back the timeline for when they will hear if they get it. The district should listen to it by June. They would use the funds to do work that staff do not currently have the capacity for. Staff asked the new farmers what was stopping them and what kept them from getting property for farm use. They learned that these folks do not have the technical capacity – a CPA, a business lawyer who understands farmland. They do not have a lending facility that understands farmland acquisition. They are trying to do all this work on top of farming. District staff discovered it would take about \$9,000 to get over these achievable obstacles so they could keep farming. So, in the first year, Headwaters Farm would include a \$9,000 stipend to help new farm businesses with cash flow cover key start-up costs to assist farmers. These funds (\$45,000 total) would be dispersed in two equal sums: half upon program entry and half upon successful conclusion of their first season.

The district will set aside money for succession planning when farmers want to retire from farming but want their farms to continue. USDA grant is focused on marginalized communities and BIPOC farmers.

Buying land is an obstacle for all farmers right now. The district would do these things to leverage the grant, provided they receive it. They do not have the resources to do much in these areas currently. The funding would be \$2.5 million over five years. The district would hire someone in a limited-duration position to help manage the grant.

Chair Quiroz thanked the district staff and the board members for joining the discussion and contributing during the hearing. Then, she closed the hearing and opened a regular meeting of the Tax Supervising and Conservation Commission to certify East Multnomah Soil and Water Conservation District's 2023-24 Approved budget. She asked if the commissioners had any questions or comments concerning the budget. There were none. She checked again to see if anyone had signed up to comment. No one had signed up to give testimony.

She asked Executive Director Allegra Willhite to give staff recommendations for the certification letter.

Ms. Willhite thanked East Multnomah Soil and Water Conservation District for their quick responses. She said staff appreciated the great narratives provided in the fiscal year 23-24 budget, especially since there were some distinct program changes. The EMSWCD staff have been great partners with TSCC in preparation for this hearing. TSCC staff found the budget estimates reasonable for the purposes stated and the budget to comply with Local Budget Law. She said staff have no recommendations or objections to the fiscal year 23-24 budget. It was in complete compliance with local budget law.

Chair Quiroz called for a motion.

Commissioner Wubbold moved to certify the East Multnomah Soil and Water Conservation District's Approved Budget with no recommendations or objections as recommended by staff. Commissioner Norton seconded the motion, which passed with a unanimous vote of the commissioners.

There being no other business, Chair Quiroz closed the meeting.