

East Multnomah Soil & Water Conservation District 2025-26 Hearing Minutes

Tuesday, May 20, 2025

4:00 pm

5211 N Williams Avenue

Portland, Oregon

Present:

TSCC:

Chair Harmony Quiroz,
Vice Chair Matt Donahue,
Commissioner Tod Burton,
Commissioner Allison Lugo Knapp
Commissioner Dr. Rita Moore,
Allegra Willhite, Executive Director
Brittanie Abayare, Budget Analyst

Absent: None

East Multnomah Soil and Water Conservation District:

Jasmine Zimmer-Stucky, Board Chair
Joe Rossi, Board Member
Mary Colombo, Board Member
Ramona DeNies, Board Member
Kelley Beamer, Executive Director
Dan Mitten, Chief Financial Officer

Opening Remarks

- Chair Harmony Quiroz officially called the annual East Multnomah Soil and Water Conservation District budget hearing to order. She reminded attendees that the TSCC is a community oversight commission established over 100 years ago by the Oregon legislature. The commission oversees the budget of all TSCC member taxing districts, conducts an annual thorough budget review and purchase, and holds public budget hearings to engage with district leadership and offer public comment opportunities before budget adoption.
- Following introductions by TSCC members who confirmed no business relationships with the district that could be perceived as conflicts of interest, Kelly Beamer, Executive Director, welcomed everyone and emphasized the honor of having new board members present. She expressed excitement about moving beyond the learning phase into the "doing phase" after a year and a half in her role. Beamer highlighted that the District's work is anchored in three strategic pillars: soil and water health, climate action, and equity, which would be recurring themes throughout the discussion.

Public Comment

- The floor was opened for public comment, with each speaker limited to three minutes.
- It was noted that no one had signed up to testify in person or online.
- Allegra Willhite confirmed that written public comment was received from Tom Busse for the hearing. Due to time constraints, the comment was not read in its entirety. In summary, it provided suggestions for the commission to consider the region's cumulative tax burden and proposed community meetings to discuss coordinating and consolidating functions between soil and water districts and the urban flood safety and water quality district. The commissioners had received the full written comment, which was also posted on the TSCC website and would be included in the meeting minutes. [Tom Busse's Public Comment](#).

Questions and Answers

- Question from Commissioner Moore: This year marks the District's 75th anniversary. Reflecting on 75 years, what do you consider some of the organization's most important achievements?
 - Answer from Kelly Beamer: She highlighted the District's founding by farmers seeking help with erosion and on-farm plans when East County was primarily agricultural. The District has maintained this service, offering technical assistance and cost-share for irrigation efficiency and soil health. Key achievements include:
 - Creating permanent "forever farms" by working with landowners to protect agricultural land from conversion. Approximately 250 acres of forever farms have been protected across 13 projects, ensuring this asset for the future.
 - Work on riparian areas, particularly in the Sandy River Basin and Johnson Creek, which are vital salmon arteries. They collaborate with private landowners to reestablish native vegetation, providing shade to lower water temperatures. Over 26 miles of stream care have been completed through this approach.
 - The Headwaters Farm program, which has graduated 22 farm businesses and worked with 45 over the past 12 years.
 - The Partners in Conservation grants, described as a crucial way to distribute tax investment dollars to culturally and community-specific organizations implementing soil and water conservation.
 - Contribution from Jasmine Zimmer-Stucky: She expressed gratitude for seeing the East Multnomah Conservation Partner plaques in East County, indicating implemented erosion control, irrigation efficiency, or stream care on properties. She also acknowledged the less visible but significant impact of the grant program in urban areas.
- Question from Commissioner Burton: Last year, the District discussed plans to develop performance measures related to its strategic plan. What progress has been made on that, what has been measured, and what accomplishments from last year can be shared based on those measures?
 - Answer from Jasmine Zimmer-Stucky: She praised the staff and Executive Director Kelly Beamer's leadership in putting numbers to the large strategic plan. Accomplishments include:
 - Exceeding the goal of three permanent farmland easements by completing five easements and five real estate transactions in a year with only one staff member dedicated to the program. This led to a decision to adjust future Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) upwards.

- For Headwaters Farm, recruitment efforts were expanded, resulting in 10 applicants this year. The program aims to attract farmers nationally.
- Follow-up Question from Commissioner Burton: Do you have a target for the number of recruitments for the Headwaters Farm?
 - Answer from Jasmine Zimmer-Stucky: The target was 10 applicants, and they accepted two into the competitive program. She also highlighted additional accomplishments such as:
 - Implementation of bilingual workshops with partners like Growing Gardens.
 - Increased board engagement by getting them out in the field to observe work on the ground and provide better guidance. Examples include touring Mt. Hood Community College, planning a tour of the Growing Gardens program at the Columbia River Correctional Institute (supported by a Partner in Conservation grant), and visiting Rooster Rock State Park for a stormwater retrofit project on a large parking lot.
 - She noted that program success, like the 10 Headwaters applications or the easements, is a result of staff collaboration and integration across programs, with communications and outreach playing a vital role.
- Follow-up Question from Commissioner Moore: Do you have any plans or hopes to expand participation in the Headwaters program?
 - Answer from Jasmine Zimmer-Stucky: Yes, Headwaters participants stay for up to four years, so they are always graduating people. Expansion depends on land availability. Currently, the land at Headwaters is undergoing intensive soil health programs to transition it from a former soil-intensive, chemical-intensive operation to healthy soil.
- Follow-up Question from Chair Quiroz: How many farmers are in the program at any given time?
 - Answer from Kelly Beamer: It has been as high as 14 farm businesses (which might include co-owned farms or farms with multiple farmers).
- Follow-up Question from Chair Quiroz: What is the distribution of graduates from the program – are they East County farmers, urban farmers, or farmers outside the county?
 - Answer from Mary Colombo: A lot of the graduates are still in East County. She noted that after her own graduation, two other graduates joined her on her land, and they later took on another applicant who didn't get into the program. The graduates remain a tightly woven, supportive community, farming in the region or supporting related businesses.
 - Kelly Beamer cited an example from a "ShareFair" where 12 to 17 current farmers feeding the community were Headwaters graduates, demonstrating the program's impact.
- Question from Commissioner Burton: What will you report as accomplishments for next year, based on current plans?
 - Answer from Kelly Beamer: Their strategic plan extends through 2027, so the next year and a half will be a significant push. Future accomplishments include:
 - Completion of their first-ever reforestation project, planting 50,000 trees on a private landowner site near Warrendale in the Gorge. This is a specific climate

action effort, expanding beyond weed suppression and riparian planting to reforestation.

- Resetting the Headwaters Farm by working with a consultant to invest in the return of biological properties to the soil. This is expected to aid carbon restoration, address weeds, and is the only incubator site teaching this cutting-edge farming. Progress is already visible with decreasing compaction and increasing organic organisms.
- Anticipated dam removal project, for which funding has been secured.
- Question from Chair Quiroz: The District is in a unique position regarding federal funding compared to other agencies. The budget carves out specific grant funds to mitigate anticipated federal funding cuts for climate change and equity projects. Can you give examples of work that might need this funding or projects already seeking it?
 - Answer from Kelly Beamer: Several grantees of their Partners in Conservation grant relied on federal support, particularly for equity and climate action projects. Due to executive orders freezing some of these federal funds, the District is stepping in. Examples include:
 - A land access grant for exploring shared land ownership models specifically for the refugee and immigrant community. The District is looking to support this research and model through a specific grant or contract.
 - Anything related to diversity, equity, and inclusion trainings. The District's first step is to listen and work with a consultant to understand and document the impact of cuts and determine where they can provide catalytic funding to plan for change or fill gaps.
 - Contribution from Ramona DeNies: She acknowledged the uncertainty regarding federal funds, noting similar discussions within her own organization. She stated the District is better positioned than many conservation organizations but the funding landscape is very unclear for the current and next fiscal years.
- Question from Chair Quiroz: Regarding the \$300,000 allocated for mitigating federal cuts, why that specific amount, and if need outpaces available funds, what are the criteria for those grants?
 - Answer from Kelly Beamer: The amount was decided during the budget process in January when they had additional funds, and it felt meaningful enough to provide capacity. While it cannot replace the higher levels of federal funding, it provides a start. They have ideas for community contractors with philanthropic backgrounds who can assist with analysis. The District can distribute money quickly through existing infrastructure, like their emerging grants which go out within a month.
 - Follow-up Question from Chair Quiroz: Who will lead this work, and is a consultant paid for within the \$300,000, and what is the distribution of money between grants and other uses?
 - Answer from Dan Mitten: The consultant's cost (\$30,000) comes from the general funds under the community outreach and engagement program, for assessment and surveying. The \$300,000 in special funds is solely for grants, and the award process and criteria matrix have not yet been set by the board. The goal is to be proactive and reactive to support community members.
- Question from Vice Chair Donahue: The budget shows an increased general fund transfer to the land conservation fund by \$300,000 year-over-year (from \$400,000 last year to \$700,000). Why was this amount increased, and how were pros and cons balanced?

- Answer from Mary Colombo: They realized they had extra funds from the previous budget season. Increasing the transfer was driven by the goal of keeping land as "forever farms". The aim is to be flexible and capable of purchasing or placing easements on large parcels when they become available. There has been an uptick in community interest in easements, driven by building trust and understanding that the District helps landowners achieve their legacy goals rather than restricting them. The increase responds to this growing interest.
- Contribution from Jasmine Zimmer-Stucky: She added that while Forever Farms is a primary driver, the program also supports urban areas. Examples include helping establish Gresham's Nature Park and the Sholl (ed. note – Sholl may be an incorrect spelling) property in Gresham, and providing \$500,000 in seed money for the Native American Youth and Family Campus to purchase their property. This increased commitment signals their dedication to rural communities and ensures they don't have to choose between rural and urban opportunities as green spaces become more important.
- Follow-up Question from Chair Quiroz: The fund has a large balance (around \$9 million). Is the goal to maintain a hefty balance for big expenditures, or is it more about banking money now for foreseeable future expenditures?
 - Answer from Kelly Beamer: She described it as a "yes and" situation, acknowledging the ongoing strategic discussion. While for a long time the focus was holding funds for eventual needs, she feels passionate about getting tax dollars "out on the ground" for real-time projects. She noted that a few priority properties (based on public values) could significantly reduce the fund balance in one year. The fund provides capacity for intergenerational transfers, given that the average age of farmers in their community is 59.
 - Contribution from Mary Colombo: She added that as a new board member, she recognized that opportunities often arise without warning, requiring readiness to act quickly.
- Follow-up Question from Chair Quiroz: How much do these easements typically cost?
 - Answer from Kelly Beamer: Costs vary based on property size, development opportunities, and restrictions. They range from \$200,000 to \$600,000. One large property on their wish list could cost upwards of a million dollars for an easement, highlighting the need for a large and ready fund.
- Follow-up Question from Commissioner Burton: What is the size of the easements being acquired?
 - Answer from Kelly Beamer: They range from smaller 10-acre farms to a recently completed 50-acre project. In the highly urbanized context of Oregon, larger properties can be 100 acres.
- Follow-up Question from Commissioner Burton: Is "easement" a legal term for this acquisition?
 - Answer from Kelly Beamer: It is a legal term; they are acquiring a "conservation easement". This removes development rights from the property, ensuring that as urban growth pressure increases, the land will continue to provide agricultural value in perpetuity. It is a market transaction where the landowner sells the right to develop or subdivide, ensuring the primary use remains agriculture. The easement travels with the title and is registered with the county to protect the properties.

- Follow-up Question from Commissioner Burton: Is it difficult to compete with the development value of land?
 - Answer from Jasmine Zimmer-Stucky: Yes, factors like views or the size of a house can drive up property value, making it difficult for some farmland to return to agricultural production. She described a recent transaction with "Dancing Farm" where the owners chose to sell to the District to preserve their legacy, despite knowing they could have sold to an amenity buyer for more.
- Question from Commissioner Lugo Knapp: This budget year, you plan to close out the equity-focused strategic opportunity grant pilot program. Why is this pilot ending, and where will the previously set-aside funds go?
 - Answer from Kelly Beamer: The program was designed to allow staff in the community to respond to and fund grant opportunities based on relationships. However, staff were not all skilled in grant-making or comfortable with the transactional conversations around funding. Only one or two grants were successfully distributed. The decision to end the pilot was a healthy assessment of what was working versus what was not. They determined that better ways exist to do this work through a transparent process on their website, where community members can see available grants and apply. There are no new funds for this pilot, except to finish an existing commitment with VA Northwest. These funds will be transferred to the larger "Partners in Conservation" grant fund.
 - Follow-up Question from Chair Quiroz: Is work being done to educate staff about grants and how to discuss them, given the overlap with other programs?
 - Answer from Kelly Beamer: Yes, they had a debrief with all staff to remind them of the program's intent. They confirmed that their two existing programs are tried and true and that staff can serve as ambassadors to spread the word. A partnership development position within their urban lands program invests in relationships, and many grants originate from staff interactions with community members.
- Question from Commissioner Burton: How is the website update progressing, with a planned launch next month?
 - Answer from Kelly Beamer: The launch is now targeted for the end of June.
 - Follow-up Question from Commissioner Burton: What was the intent of the refresh, and how will success be determined?
 - Answer from Dan Mitten: The main objectives were user-friendly experience and accessibility. The previous site had accessibility issues and made it difficult to find information like reports, budgets, and grant opportunities. The new website aims to be a better user experience. It's also a tool for community outreach, leveraged with their new Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system. The CRM and website are being used to get information to the community and receive information about who the District is, what they do, and their services. This technology helps them be better stewards of community members by tracking plant sale participants, workshop attendees, and those interested in more information.
 - Contribution from Kelly Beamer: She noted the previous website was "encyclopedic". Success will be determined by how responsive they are as an organization when people seek services. The goal is for users in rural communities to find information with three clicks. She mentioned their most popular website page by analytics is "manure connection," connecting livestock owners with

excess manure to gardeners in need.

- Question from Commissioner Lugo Knapp: The budget includes funding for the Mt. Hood Community College dam removal project. Can you provide more details, the District's role, and long-term benefits?
 - Answer from Kelly Beamer: This project involves the removal of an earthen dam that created a pedestrian overpass connecting two parts of the campus. The dam is on Beaver Creek, a historic and vital artery of the Sandy River watershed system. This watershed has seen 20 years of investment to improve conditions for salmon and native plants. [LINK TO DAM EXAMPLE](#)
 - Long-term benefits include:
 - Lowering water temperatures as the river becomes free-flowing.
 - Revegetating and restoring the riparian area, connecting to existing healthy conditions downstream.
 - Creating new gravel areas for salmon spawning.
 - Bringing salmon through a community college campus, which is used for public meetings and sports events, creating an emotional connection to an iconic species for underserved parts of the district. This is part of an "Imagine Salmon" campaign.
 - Contribution from Ramona DeNies: She added that Mt. Hood Community College has a fisheries program, making this project a living laboratory for students.
 - Follow-up Question from Commissioner Lugo Knapp: Is the college a financial participant?
 - Answer from Kelly Beamer: Yes, they couldn't do it without them.
 - Follow-up Question from Commissioner Lugo Knapp: Is this part of a bond measure the college is considering?
 - Answer from Kelly Beamer: No, not directly for dam removal, but the dam removal is baked into the college's master plan for the campus's long-term vision. The District is fundraising for dam removal and has private support for the design phase.
 - Follow-up Question from Commissioner Lugo Knapp: What is the timeline for design to full completion?
 - Answer from Kelly Beamer: They aim to finish design within the next year, with deconstruction starting by 2027 or 2028.
 - Follow-up Question from Chair Quiroz: How big is the dam?
 - Answer from Kelly Beamer: About 70 feet high, though it doesn't appear so in the picture provided. It's several feet wide.
 - Follow-up Question from Chair Quiroz: What is the timeline for acquiring funding, especially given the uncertain funding landscape?
 - Answer from Kelly Beamer: They have a contract project manager experienced in other dam removal projects (like Kellogg Dam) who is tracking funding. They are currently performing due diligence to secure design funding. She acknowledged the unknowns in federal funding but noted some federal funds are required under mitigation commitments. There is also significant philanthropic interest in such projects, especially given recent successes like the Klamath River dam removals.

- Follow-up Question from Commissioner Moore: Do you have an idea how much it will cost?
 - Answer from Jasmine Zimmer-Stucky: She emphasized that the current design phase investment is critical, as many projects never secure funding without it because the full cost isn't known.
- Follow-up Question from Commissioner Burton: Where does the water drain to now?
 - Answer from Kelly Beamer: It flows through a culvert (indicated as "head" on the map) at a steep angle into Kelly Creek, which then flows into a recently restored area of Beaver Creek and then into the Sandy River.
- Contribution from Kelly Beamer: She added that this project is part of a larger 10-year campus initiative to support stormwater, scaling up demonstration projects. The college's fisheries program trains students in the engineering and ongoing maintenance of such systems.
- Question from Commissioner Moore: What role does technology play in monitoring and sharing information with farmers?
 - Answer from Kelly Beamer: Technology introduces efficiencies, but the District's primary commitment is to conservation, so any investment must align with conserving and restoring soil and water resources. An example is the weather station installed at Headwaters Farm this year. This station provides vital information like precipitation and evapo-transpiration rates, helping farmers determine optimal irrigation times. It also provides "row days" data, helping predict when to apply pest treatments. This data is shared online with the National Weather Service through a partnership with the University of Utah, making it an asset for the entire Headwaters farming community.
 - Contribution from Mary Colombo: As a farmer, she noted the value of knowing temperatures for frost protection and planting decisions, as many farmers don't live on site.
 - Kelly Beamer continued: All Headwaters students have access to a proprietary app that syncs with the weather station, allowing them to access data for planning from home.
 - Follow-up Question from Commissioner Moore: Will this insulate the District from disruptions in federal funding for weather services?
 - Answer from Kelly Beamer: Perhaps, as it provides a localized resource.
- Question from Commissioner Moore: Do you do anything with "agrivoltaics"?
 - Answer from Kelly Beamer: They have voltaics on their farm for energy generation and offsetting grid use, but do not engage in agrivoltaics.
 - Agrivoltaics involves integrating solar panels with farming or grazing. OSU Extension has experiments in this area, and a statewide committee is looking at it. However, her priority is to put voltaics on existing developed areas like parking lots, schools, big box stores, malls, and rooftops in Multnomah County, rather than on farmland. She argued that even with agrivoltaics, it restricts the type of agriculture that can be done in perpetuity.
 - Contribution from Jasmine Zimmer-Stucky: She supports protecting the limited farmland for rotational agriculture, noting that agrivoltaics would restrict farming. She suggested it might be more beneficial in hotter climates like Phoenix, where shade from voltaics could be desired.

Closing Remarks

- Chair Quiroz thanked the District representatives, noting that she always learns something and finds "bold optimism" in their work. She highlighted the importance of the partnership between urban and rural areas in the region.
- She thanked the District for their openness and thoughtfulness in responding to questions. She then closed the hearing and opened the regular business meeting of the TSCC.

Staff Recommendations and Objections

- TSCC Executive Director, Allegra Willhite thanked the East Multnomah staff for their quick sharing of information and robust work throughout budget season.
- Staff found the budget estimates to be reasonable for the stated purposes and in substantial compliance with budget law.
- Staff suggested no recommendations or objections to the fiscal year 2025-2026 approved budget.

Vote to Certify

- A motion was made by Chair Quiroz to authorize the commission to sign the certification letter as recommended
- The motion was seconded Vice Chair Donahue seconded.
- All commissioners present voted "Aye".
- The East Multnomah Soil and Water Conservation District's budget was certified by the TSCC.

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