

**East Multnomah Soil & Water Conservation
District
2022-23 Hearing Minutes**

Tuesday, May 17, 2022

4:00 pm

Via Go-to-Meeting

Present:

TSCC:

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

Absent: None

East Multnomah Soil and Water Conservation District:

Board Member: Jasmin Zimmer-Stucky

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 reason for 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 stated they had no conflict of interest with the district. She asked the EMSWCD to introduce the board members and staff present. Then she asked East Multnomah Soil & Water Conservation District Executive Director Nancy Hamilton to make brief introductory remarks about the budget. She stated that following Ms. Hamilton's introductory remarks, testimony from the public would be taken.

After introductions, Ms. Hamilton briefly recapped the district's activities, saying this was an interesting time for them. The Strategic Planning process has allowed them to rethink the agency's position as an urban soil and water conservation district. She mentioned climate changes, the district's demographics, and how all of this relates to their constituents and the role of EMSWCD.

Chair Quiroz asked if there was anyone signed up to give public comment. Executive Director Willhite and EMSWCD Chief Financial Officer Dan Mitten reported that no citizens had signed up to speak at this hearing, and they had not received any written comments.

With that, the commissioners started their questions.

TSCC Questions:

Chair Quiroz asked the following questions:

Ms. Hamilton, you are two years into your work here. Can you tell us what you have learned about the district and its needs?

She said during her first year as Executive Director, many changes were happening within the district. It was unsettled with turnover happening within the board and the leadership. COVID changed the way the district performed daily tasks. So that year was spent right-sizing the district.

In the current year, she has spent time building relationships with colleagues around the state, attending conferences and seminars, and learning how other conservation organizations function, how to infuse strategic thinking, and how to accomplish tasks using more conservation concepts. Funding from the district's Permanent Tax Rate has created opportunities for EMSWCD. Still, she hopes to discover ways to encourage the district to leverage all resources when working on projects and to apply various conservation techniques.

She added that they had revised the Human Resources Handbook. It is now current and is all in one document, and they are working on the Strategic Plan.

Commissioner Norton asked the following questions:

In last year's budget, staffing and contractual services were added for the current year to advance the long-awaited update of the strategic plan. The budget message indicates that the plan will be completed midway through the coming year, with potential impacts on the FY 24 budget. What progress has been made, how is the data analyst position working out, and has the board given any guidance about potential new directions? Are you confident the plan will be completed this year?

Ms. Hamilton said they decided not to hire a data analyst. They will use internal staff to complete the project to ensure the strategic plan is primarily staff-led.

Before starting the Strategic Planning process, they focused on getting the management team working together. They partnered with a consulting team *New Theory Consulting* to work toward a cultural team structure. In January, they created the Strategic Plan Team of staff members representing the various work groups. They meet every week and are working to develop the mission statement, priorities, and categories of work. They meet with the board and management team every month. She described the progress, saying they are considering their resources to reach across the departments to leverage skill sets and remove barriers. Although it is a slow process, they feel they will have a plan representing the entire district. They want to improve their communications with the public, letting them know what the district does with the dollars they receive. The next step is to reach out to stakeholders they partner with to get their opinions on what the district is doing well and where improvements are needed.

Ms. Hamilton concluded by saying they hope to be through the plotting process by September and have a plan to determine what they do next. Climate issues, equity, and inclusion will undoubtedly be a part of the plan. Once critical milestones are identified in the process, the district will plan an all-staff in-person retreat with the board. And finally, craft everything into a comprehensive, finalized plan.

Ms. Jasmin Zimmer-Stucky added that the board had been involved in the process since January. Now that the three new board members and the director have had a year's experience, they have a better idea of the district's needs, structure, and the best course of action. She said she is looking forward to the day they have a fully implemented Strategic Plan. Even though the process seems a little slow, she feels this is the best way to gain trust between the board, management, and the entire staff.

Next year when we meet, the commissioners will be interested to hear how the board monitors the agency's accountability.

Ms. Hamilton said measuring dollars and head counts may or may not get the district to the desired place of success. But they are looking at projects such as the Headwaters Farm, touching the essential things that lead to conservation, educating farmers, modeling sustainability, acting as a trend-setter for things like the electric tractor and the education provided to students. Measured against these goals, the district will be meeting the goals set for them. The merging priorities will be what determines the success of the district.

Commissioner Wubbold asked the following questions:

Last year the budget message emphasized diversity, equity, and inclusion. We spent considerable time talking about it at the hearing. This year the budget message is quiet on this topic. How is that work progressing, and how will you measure achievements in this area?

Ms. Hamilton replied, saying they wanted the diversity, equity, and inclusion work to be more than just a plan. They wanted it to be an interwoven component of all of their work. The Equity Action Plan identified 70 efforts, ideas, and areas they want to implement. They worked with their equity and management teams and identified 40 priorities that could be assigned to staff directly. These are now underway.

Ms. Hamilton concluded by saying she is excited that the DEI program has moved from lists showing what the district should or could do to actually the way the agency does everything. This is why it is not mentioned in the budget message as a separate item but is included in what each district employee does all day.

Commented [TT1]: I wasn't sure what this meant...

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The farm's solar panels generate more power than needed to maintain the farm. Excess energy is returned to the power company. This could be an equity piece. How much energy is going to folks who need the break in their power bills? How do you determine who receives this excess power?

Ms. Hamilton said this was a way for the district to reduce the cost of power while demonstrating sound stewardship of public dollars. Currently, they aren't seeing a great deal of excess energy.

Mr. Dan Mitten added that in the first year, this paid for about 90% of the farm activity. They have an agreement with the supplier that any excess energy goes back to the grid and the power company distributes it to folks struggling to pay their power bills. So any extra power goes to the supplier and then is distributed to needy customers as they see fit. The district has no say in who will receive it.

Commissioner Donahue asked the following questions:

You formed a Farm Equity Committee. Is that work completed, or is it still underway? What insights came from that, and how will it impact the farm's budget, mission, and goals?

Ms. Hamilton explained that the district has the Gordon Creek Farm Access Equity Advisory Council, overseen by the Legacy Manager and not related to the Headwaters Farm. She explained this committee, saying the group comprises members of the BIPOC community with extensive experience in farming. They will be getting recommendations from them in the coming weeks on how to utilize the Gordon Creek property based on the needs or wants of the BIPOC community. When the district receives the recommendations from its partners, the board will decide the best actions to take to utilize this piece of property in July or August.

The district has tried diversifying the farmers' profile at the Headwaters Farm. Some speak different languages, some have different needs and wants, and some grow first food and do not do standard traditional farming. There is a diversity of needs and wants and how they communicate with each other. The district has revised the Farmers Manual that presents the farm's rules, making the language accessible for folks that English is not their first language. They are also looking at translating the manual into several other languages.

The district has also developed a series of community agreements that were co-created with the farmers to help address some of the difficulties in the farming community. They have recently been adopted by the farmers and added to their manual. This is an example of using the equity lens to improve the way the agency improves procedures.

Commissioner Ofsink asked the following questions:

The budget before us is also remarkably quiet about climate change efforts, something that was a key point of discussion the last two years. Besides energy improvements to the district's property, what other efforts are being made this year? Where is climate change fitting into the strategic plan and future efforts? How does the district see itself impacting greater conservation efforts throughout the community?

Ms. Hamilton gave examples of how the district is addressing various climate issues in a meaningful, impactful way to help educate others in the area about how to mitigate the impact of climate change. She mentioned partnering with Mt. Hood Community College on adding patches of rain gardens and drywells where the water can safely and slowly flow in, get absorbed, cleaned, and filtered by the soil and plants, and continue into the creeks as clean water. This process at MHCC treats eight million gallons of dirty stormwater and keeps eight thousand pounds of pollutants out of the creeks yearly. These actions had such a significant effect on the streams that the salmon are returning to these watersheds for the first time in many years.

She also described the StreamCare Program, which resulted in 500,000 trees planted last year, and is an essential part of the climate resiliency work. These trees will assist in restoring natural habitat and cooling the water, which has become an increasingly difficult challenge in the Pacific Northwest.

Ms. Hamilton said the district needs to partner with others to develop a robust urban forest canopy to provide the much-needed natural cooling in the lower-income communities as summer

temperatures continue to rise. She explained that it is not the planting of the trees but the maintenance that causes the lower-income communities to remove them.

Ms. Hamilton reported that she is meeting with regional colleagues to see if they can identify some common climate-related goals so that the regional impact is more significant than what they could accomplish alone.

Commissioner Norton asked the following questions:

The FY 23 budget shows a transfer of over \$1 million, an increase of 40%, and expenditure authorization for \$1.5 million. We understand that you budget opportunistically to take advantage of unexpected opportunities. But after two years of depressed activity due to the pandemic, what can we realistically expect in the grant and project program? How much of the \$1.5 million budgeted in the current year do you have committed? Does the district have the capacity to re-energize the grant projects, both this year and next?

Ms. Hamilton explained that cash flow is part of the issue. The Partners in Conservation (PIC) Program is the most extensive program in the district. They paused the PIC program while grantees got back on their feet. This pause allowed the district to look at the framework of this program and consider it through an equity lens. The agency renewed the grants from the previous year, so most of the grantees are fully operational. She said they had twice the number of grant applications they could accommodate this year, and many new potential grantees, including many from BIPOC-led organizations. She concluded by saying the agency is excited about the number of applications they received and that the dollars are being used as intended, helping partners get back on their feet.

Chair Quiroz asked the following questions:

We have a similar question about the Land Conservation Fund, which receives over a half-million dollars from the General Fund. What kind of activity have you had this year, and do you have any acquisitions in the pipeline? Will the strategic plan set a target for the fund above the current \$7 million?

Ms. Hamilton said to purchase property in this area, the district must be able to access the funds quickly because most properties are selling so fast. Some years, the district finds opportunities that fit its mission, and the fund balance decreases; some years, nothing works, so the fund balance increases.

She gave some examples of land purchases, such as Nestwood Natural Area and access to Nature opportunity at the eastern edge of the district that they expect to close on soon. They closed on the purchase of the Big Creek Property this year, and they have provided funding toward the purchase of the Shaul Property by the City of Gresham.

Ms. Hamilton reported that they currently have no purchases in the pipeline, and there are no current discussions at the board level for any funding of the Land Conservation Fund above \$7 million.

Ms. Zimmer-Stucky added that the money for the Nestwood Natural Area has not come out of the budget yet but will be coming out soon, causing a significant reduction in the fund balance.

Commissioner Ofsink asked the following questions:

We are delighted to hear about the energy conservation going on at the Headwaters Farm, but we'd like to know more about the farm's utilization during the pandemic and what you are projecting for the next two years. How close will you be to nearing capacity?

Ms. Hamilton explained that they are at capacity at the Headwaters Farm. They have been operating as if there was no pandemic. They did have different protocols during the pandemic, but the applications that came in exceeded the farm's capacity. During the first year, finding food sources locally became more urgent. So the Headwaters Farm did well, stepping in to supply the needs in the region.

Commissioner Wubbold asked the following questions:

We are hearing about staffing issues across many industries. Is your organization being impacted? Are you having any challenges with recruitment and retention? If so, how are you addressing these challenges? What's working well?

Ms. Hamilton said they had had a minimal turnover. One employee was moving out of the area due to retirement, and one took a different position at another firm, but not many people left the organization. East Multnomah Soil & Water Conservation District is a preferred place to work. The district has added two new positions and recruited for the two vacated positions. They had numerous applications. The HR consultant who worked with the district on recruitment noted that the response to the recruitment was significantly higher than most of the clients she had worked with recently.

Ms. Hamilton said she is rotating through staff doing what they call "Stay Interviews," asking what each employee likes about their job, what they don't like, what would make them leave, what would make the job better, and what excites them about the job. This process has helped with retention. The employees say they like making a difference, and these jobs align with that concept. Even though there may not be room for a promotion, there is room for personal and professional growth. The agency offers generous benefits and has recommended salary adjustments for many positions. They have added an Employee Assistance Program to help employees weather the changing environment. All of these have added to the retention of employees at the district.

Chair Quiroz thanked the district staff and the board member 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 2022-23 Approved budget. She asked if the commissioners had any questions or comments to make 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 that Executive Director Allegra Willhite give staff recommendations for the certification letter.

Ms. Willhite said 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 22-23 budget. She thanked East Multnomah Soil and Water Conservation District for their quick responses. They have been great partners during the preparation for this hearing. When questions arise about the district, EMSWCD staff quickly respond and give TSCC staff thorough answers. This responsiveness is greatly appreciated.

Chair Quiroz called for a motion.

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

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