



**Tax Supervising
and Conservation
Commission**

East Multnomah Soil & Water Conservation District

2026-27 Hearing Minutes

Tuesday, May 19, 2026

4:00 pm

5211 N Williams Avenue

Portland, Oregon

Present:

TSCC:

Chair Matt Donahue,
Vice Chair Dr. Rita Moore,
Commissioner Tod Burton,
Commissioner Dr. Will Terry,
Commissioner Erik Kvarsten,
Executive Director Allegra Willhite,
Budget Analyst Brittanie Abayare

Absent: None

East Multnomah Soil and Water Conservation District:

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

Opening Remarks and Introductions

Chair Matt Donahue called the TSCC budget hearing to order and explained that the TSCC is a community oversight commission established by the Oregon Legislature over 100 years ago that oversees member taxing district budgets, conducts reviews, and holds public hearings prior to budget adoption.

The TSCC commissioners and staff introduced themselves, confirming they had no conflicts of interest regarding the district. The EMSWCD board members and staff then introduced themselves. Chair Donahue asked if the district had prepared any introductory remarks, and the district representatives stated they had not and were ready to dive right into questions.

Public Comment

No members of the public had signed up for testimony.

Commissioner Questions and District Responses

Question 1: Asked by Chair Matt Donahue: In FY 2026-27 you will begin the process of updating your strategic plan. What lessons learned from your last strategic planning process do you hope to apply to this next iteration?

- **Kelley Beamer** deferred the question to the board.
- **Jasmine Zimmer-Stucky** answered that the previous strategic plan was a foundational plan that yielded their three current pillars: soil and water health, equity, and climate action. She noted that a lot of attention was spent building that foundation, and they are very pleased with the direction and capacity it gave staff and the board. The next round of strategic planning will just build upon that foundation rather than dismantling it or turning it into something different.
- **Dan Mitten** added that the last process was a longer iterative process, whereas this next iteration will have a more definitive timeline and dialed-in project management so they can work collaboratively and efficiently to get it done in a reasonable timeline. He also reiterated the three pillars.
- **Kelley Beamer** added that they have an incredible board with four out of five members currently present. Because they are always working with election and budget cycles, they want to dive in together in unity and make the most of the front end of the new planning cycle using the expertise and cohesion they currently have.

Commissioner Erik Kvarsten asked a follow-up question: What are some of your thoughts about involving your stakeholders in a new strategic plan?

- **Kelley Beamer** answered that they don't imagine going out and asking "what's possible" because they want to work earnestly from the programs they are already good at delivering. However, they are always listening and learning from their constituents in East Multnomah County, which informs their work. As an example, she noted their urban program focuses heavily east of 82nd Avenue because it is an under-resourced area, and their work acts as a complement to Portland Clean Energy Fund investments. She stated the board and staff will likely develop concepts of where services can be scaled up or have the most impact, and then they will vet those ideas with community members that share that expertise.

Question 2: Asked by Commissioner Will Terry: The budget message mentions staff and board interest in "scaling up" urban programs in the coming years. I'm wondering if this is motivated by feedback you've been getting from the public about the use of your expenditures. Have you done outreach with the public and your constituents about this potential strategic direction? What input have you received about this goal?

- **Kelley Beamer** answered that they have not received specific budget-related feedback on where resources are going, but rather they are responding to opportunities in front of them, such as work on the Columbia Slough and Ross Island. She noted the district has a big team with nine rural staff and five urban staff, and they are lucky to straddle both urban and rural areas, tailoring services to meet those unique needs.

- **Ramona DeNies** added that she is in her second year on the board and is possibly the first director of a large soil and water conservation district who lives in an urban neighborhood (Montavilla) and does not manage or own 10 acres of land. She noted that her competitive election victory against an incumbent demonstrated that voters actively responded to an urban-focused platform, bringing that energy to the district.

Commissioner Tod Burton asked a follow-up question: Can you give some examples of what you've been working on in that regard in the urban space?

- **Ramona DeNies** answered that they will be working heavily with the flood safety district in the Columbia Slough, which is primarily if not entirely urban areas.
- **Mary Colombo** added that the Mount Hood Community College dam removal is a big urban investment. She noted her motivation comes from the fact that while the district was largely rural when established, it is now much more urban. Her elected zone is fully urban, and she is excited to see the district scale up and actually serve these constituents more.

Commissioner Will Terry asked a follow-up question: Have you done any specific outreach?

- **Mary Colombo** answered that they see significant need through their Partners in Conservation (PIC) grant program. The program shows where the asks are, and as a board, they visit the funded sites and talk to the people running the programs, who express gratitude for the investments in urban farms and community gardens that would not exist without district funding.
- **Kelley Beamer** added they employ a Community Connection Liaison in the urban department whose specific job is to build relationships, table at events, and bring feedback back to the district. She noted they also gather organic feedback through participants in their many urban-specific workshops and through collaborative efforts with other regional governments.
- **Dan Mitten** added that they do a lot of urban specific workshops and get a lot of feedback from the participants in the community. They also connect with other regional governments and collaborate with federal government entities.

Question 3: Asked by Commissioner Tod Burton: Last year we discussed the large fund balance in the Land Conservation Fund with you. This year that balance grows again, with a projected beginning balance of over \$7.1 million. Your board has discussed the balance of getting tax dollars out the door and into the community, versus being able to make a transformational purchase when it becomes available. What has been the outcome of these discussions, and how would you describe your strategy currently?

- **Mary Colombo** answered that Matt Shipkey, who manages the land conservation fund, has done an excellent job stepping up outreach, helping protect five "forever farms" in a year, which represents a lot of transactions. The program is growing by word of mouth and seeing more interest, including from producers who were previously hesitant to work with the district.

- **Ramona DeNies** added they will continue to discuss the sweet spot for the fund balance versus getting funds out the door during their strategic planning sessions.
- **Kelley Beamer** added that the board utilized this fund balance to make a strategic \$381,000 investment toward the Mount Hood Community College dam removal, a project where they need to raise \$1 million. The timing allowed the district to apply for a 2-to-1 matching capital grant from Metro's Nature in Neighborhoods program, leveraging their local dollars.

Commissioner Tod Burton asked a follow-up question: Can you give a description of what the forever farm represents and the outcome that you achieve?

- **Brad Hunter** answered that the fund works in two ways. First, it purchases conservation easements on at-risk farmland that is suitable for production. Alternatively, when an easement isn't an option, the district purchases the land, holds it on their books, places a conservation easement on it to reduce the property value, and then resells it. This allows younger farmers or farmers with less wealth to enter the industry.

Commissioner Tod Burton asked a follow-up question: Are you finding a lot of competition for these land uses?

- **Jasmine Zimmer-Stucky** answered that there is high competition from "amenity buyers" who are looking for property with a view of Mount Hood but would not keep the land in farm production. America's farming economy historically excluded many groups from acquiring land. Because Multnomah County farmland sells at urban land prices, purchasing easements is a way to lower the sale price and course-correct historical inequities by allowing people to access land close to their consumer base at a price they can afford.

Commissioner Tod Burton asked a follow-up question: Is that preferable to subsidizing the land sale directly?

- **Kelley Beamer** answered that a conservation easement means the district is entrusted to protect the public rights in perpetuity. The district stewards the properties every year to ensure the land is not developed and that active farming continues. The easement travels with the property regardless of who subsequently owns the land.

Vice Chair Rita Moore asked a follow-up question: If somebody doesn't conform to the easement conditions, what happens?

- **Kelley Beamer** answered that easements are legally binding documents because the district paid fair market value for those rights. If violated, there is precedent across the country where courts have forced landowners to repay the easement holder or even tear down constructed houses.
- **Jasmine Zimmer-Stucky** clarified that if a landowner stops farming, the district has the right to place a different farmer on the property to farm the land and keep it in

compliance with the easement.

Chair Matt Donahue asked a follow-up question: Are all these properties outside the urban growth boundary?

- **Kelley Beamer** answered yes, the district's work to protect land is done in concert with statewide agricultural land use goals to keep resource lands protected as resource lands. They do not protect land inside the boundary, and if the boundary ever moves, the easement endures.
- **Dan Mitten** added that regarding the fund balance, the district has to have the funds available to act quickly on these transactions, otherwise the opportunity and the land could be lost forever. He also noted that grants and contributions to the conservation fund have gone up, allowing them to balance getting dollars into the community while being prepared.
- **Mary Colombo** noted that the farming community is aging (many are in their late 70s) and will be selling soon, so keeping the fund big prepares the district for these transitions.

Commissioner Tod Burton asked a follow-up question: How much does an easement cost?

- **Kelley Beamer** answered that it varies, ranging from as low as \$250,000 to as high as \$700,000. Their top priority large farm might cost a million or so.
- **Mary Colombo** clarified they are not buying the farmland itself, but giving the farmers the funds they would potentially lose by agreeing not to develop it.
- **Brad Hunter** added that the district has already ranked all the farm properties in the district with criteria around habitat and farm economics, so they know immediately if a property coming on the market is a priority, and the liquidity of the fund allows them to act quickly.

Question 4: Asked by Commissioner Rita Moore: As we understand it, Land Conservation funds are primarily for conservation easements – meaning you can't develop the land in the future, the primary use must be agricultural. Have you received any feedback from the community about land being needed for the development of affordable housing instead?

- **Jasmine Zimmer-Stucky** answered that they have not received this feedback because their land conservation fund strictly focuses outside the urban growth boundary. She noted that affordable housing should be developed inside city limits where access to services like sewers, upgraded roads, and school buses already exists. Attempting to develop affordable housing outside the boundary actually makes it unaffordable because of the lack of these existing complimentary services.

Commissioner Rita Moore asked a follow-up question: If there isn't pressure about affordable housing, is there pressure from developers for unaffordable housing or other uses?

- **Jasmine Zimmer-Stucky** answered yes, noting there are many pressures from solar

operators, and a Portland water filtration site development that created pressure on surrounding farms.

Commissioner Tod Burton asked a follow-up question: Have data centers come into conversation?

- **Kelley Beamer** answered that yes, it's all on the table. Senate Bill 1586 would convert 1,700 acres of prime farmland in Hillsboro to use for datacenters.
- **Jasmine Zimmer-Stucky** added that one local farmer was approached by a large-scale solar developer, but realized the property was under threat and chose to reach out to EMSWCD to place a working lands conservation easement on it instead, allowing them to extract financial gain to invest directly into sustaining their agricultural business.

Commissioner Rita Moore asked a follow-up question: When setting policies and future direction, how do you work with regional partners to make sure the dollars you are spending fit into the broader picture of regional needs, beyond just soil and water conservation?

- **Kelley Beamer** answered that they operate as an ecosystem and are always working in partnership with those sharing aligned missions regarding habitat, soil, and water quality. She shared an example of APANO reaching out regarding an undeveloped parcel east of 82nd Avenue that could be potential parkland, and the district was able to point them to a Partners in Conservation grant for planning. She also noted the Kelley Creek and Beaver Creek projects cross multiple jurisdictions, requiring partnerships with Metro, the City of Gresham, Multnomah County, and the community college.

Commissioner Rita Moore asked a follow-up question: Is there any mechanism for strategic forecasting collaboratively with other jurisdictions to be proactive instead of just being responsive?

- **Kelley Beamer and Jasmine Zimmer-Stucky** answered that the strategic plan sets the table for formalizing that. She noted they have nonprofit organizations and other jurisdictions regularly attend their board meetings. She stated it is an organizational ethos to support needs as they come in; while many government entities quickly try to find their way to "no," EMSWCD tries to find a way to "yes" if the project fits into their Venn diagram of soil and water health, climate action, and equity.
- **Dan Mitten** added that collaboration is highly relational, pointing to symbiotic relationships with the Multnomah County Farm Bureau and the Urban Flood Safety & Water Quality District, the latter of which specifically modeled their queries around EMSWCD's established grant opportunities.

Commissioner Rita Moore asked a follow-up question: Is there ever the opportunity to collaborate with private developers to incorporate conservation goals into their land-purchase projects? If so, can you share some examples of when you pursued this type of partnership and the results?

- **Kelley Beamer** answered yes, highlighting partnerships with nonprofits acting as developers, such as NAYA (Native American Youth and Family Center). EMSWCD helped them acquire their site on Columbia Boulevard and stayed on the team to build a first foods garden and a community-supported agriculture (CSA) garden. The Center for Tribal Nations also reached out early in their redevelopment district planning to collaborate on ideas for building in green infrastructure. She noted it would be a "dream scenario" to have more for-profit private developers knock on their door to embed green spaces and stormwater treatment into dense affordable housing units.

Commissioner Rita Moore asked a follow-up question: Is there any appetite to establish mandates for private, for-profit developers regarding green space?

- **Kelley Beamer** and **Jasmine Zimmer-Stucky** answered that establishing and enforcing regulatory mandates, like tree codes and setbacks, falls squarely under city planning jurisdictions. The district participates by submitting comments, but they do not play a regulatory role.

Question 5: Asked by Commissioner Erik Kvarsten: We see \$200,000 added in the Approved Budget for the Climate & Equity Rapid Response grants, funds that were not included in the Proposed Budget. This is a reduction of \$100,000 from last year's budget for this purpose. Tell us a bit more about this grant program - what has it funded in the current year, and what is your intent for FY 2026-27? And why the decision to fund these grants as opposed to one of the other grant programs?

- **Mary Colombo** answered that last year the district allocated \$300,000 to the Oregon Food Bank after a massive federal grant program (the Local Food Purchasing Assistance Cooperative Agreement Program) was cut. The district's funds stepped in to allow the food bank to buy fresh produce directly from local, small farms to redistribute to low-income families, creating a win-win that met the district's three pillars perfectly. For FY 2026-27, they decided to send a little less to the rapid response fund in order to prioritize additional investments in the dam removal project. The board has not fully decided where the rapid response funds will go this coming year, as they are discussing whether to continually prop up the food bank or keep the funds nimble for other emergencies going forward.
- **Dan Mitten** added that last year's \$300,000 funding to the Oregon Food Bank was allocated very quickly by the board, which is a testament to how flexible, nimble, and reactive the district can be to critical community needs.

Question 6: Asked by Commissioner Will Terry: The Partner Grants Management Fund has \$400,000 allocated for a five-year grant administration partnership with the Urban Flood Safety & Water Quality District (UFSWQD). We understand these are designated as pass-through funds with no net cost to the district, is that correct? And could you provide more detail on how this arrangement originated, and what the requirements will be for EMSWCD staff in managing these external grant awards?

- **Ramona DeNies** answered that UFSWQD admired EMSWCD's grant programs so much that they explicitly asked them to deploy a version of it for the flood district, which the board took as a massive compliment and a testament to their staff's hard work.

- **Kelley Beamer** added that the partnership grew organically after EMSWCD hosted a board meeting at the flood safety district's office to actively show up in the community they serve. UFSWQD wanted to fuel and build capacity in the community regarding flood risk awareness, emergency protocols, resilience planning, climate change preparedness, and cultural heritage connection (specifically regarding the Vanport flood). Both EMSWCD and the Oregon Community Foundation submitted proposals, and UFSWQD chose EMSWCD to run the program. She confirmed that the district will have full decision-making authority over the awardees without having to shuttle back to the flood district. They are currently building the program and considering offering two-year grants to allow bigger projects to come to fruition.
- **Dan Mitten** added that of the \$400,000 total, \$365,000 is allocated to special funds and \$35,000 is appropriated to the general fund to fully cover EMSWCD staff time for managing the program.

Question 7: Asked by Chair Matt Donahue: The budget includes \$175,000 for the final design and permitting of the Kelley Creek dam removal at Mt. Hood Community College. With federal funding at risk, what is the anticipated source of necessary construction funding once the project is shovel-ready, and what is East Multnomah Soil & Water's role in securing these funds?

- **Kelley Beamer** answered that they have shifted into an intense fundraising mode, which requires executive leadership and relationship building. She noted they recently hosted Metro councilors and staff from Congresswoman Maxine Dexter's office on campus, as the Congresswoman is advancing an appropriation request for a federal community project. The current phase is securing a design firm for final design and an engineering firm for construction. The goal is to spend 2027 securing final design and permitting, and then actively take the dam down in 2028.
- **Brad Hunter** added that it is a giant project being done with strong partners, and they have been building trust with the community college for over 10 years to reach this stage.
- **Kelley Beamer** noted the total construction cost will be an \$11 to \$12 million endeavor. Because there is very little federal funding, they rely on resources like Legacy funds, private funds, and Metro. The board's additional critical \$381,000 match allocation is vital to getting "wind in our sails" so they can go to Metro and maximize the funding ask.

Question 8: Asked by Commissioner Rita Moore: You are budgeting \$25,000 for an initiative to increase the tree canopy in East Multnomah County to combat "heat dome" effects. What will these funds be used for, and how will this program be coordinated with other existing efforts sponsored by other local governments?

- **Kelley Beamer** answered that they are currently in a "discovery phase" rather than funding a full initiative yet. While there are overlapping efforts from Portland Urban Forestry, The Nature Conservancy (who developed a "connected canopies" mapping tool), Friends of Trees, and the Intertwine Alliance (a regional organization convening quarterly conversations), there remains an incredible discrepancy in canopy equity. The west side has an average 56% canopy cover, while the east side has only 22%, with some specific zip codes as low as 7%.

The \$25,000 will be used as contract dollars to compile data and sort through the overlapping jurisdictions to help support the board's decision-making on where EMSWCD can find a meaningful opportunity to fund canopy growth.

Commissioner Tod Burton asked a follow-up question, referencing an earlier answer about solar farms: Is solar a desired use or a not desired use of farmland?

- **Brad Hunter** answered that as someone who invests in renewable energy for a living, he believes there is a clear role for solar development in Oregon, but high-value farmland is too precious a commodity and is not the appropriate place for it.

Closing Remarks

Chair Matt Donahue thanked the district for an open and robust discussion, noting he learns something new every time they meet. He then closed the EMSWCD budget hearing and opened a regular business meeting for the TSCC commissioners.

Staff Recommendations & Certification

Executive Director Allegra Willhite thanked the EMSWCD staff for being thoughtful and transparent partners, noting they often brainstorm together on budget law practices. She stated that TSCC staff found the budget estimates to be reasonable for the purposes stated and in substantial compliance with budget law.

She concluded by stating that the staff suggests no recommendations or objections to the fiscal year 2026-27 approved budget.

Vote to Certify

- A motion was made by **Chair Matt Donahue** to authorize the commission to sign the certification letter as recommended by staff.
- **Vice Chair Rita Moore** seconded the motion.
- All commissioners present voted "Aye".
- East Multnomah Soil & Water Conservation District's 2026-27 approved budget was certified by the TSCC.

There being no other business, Chair Matt Donahue closed the meeting.