

East Multnomah Soil & Water Conservation District 2024-25 Hearing Minutes

Tuesday, May 21, 2024

4:00 pm

East Multnomah SWCD Headquarters

5211 N Williams Avenue

Portland, Oregon

Present:

TSCC:

Chair Harmony Quiroz, Vice-Chair Mark Wubbold, Commissioner Matt Donahue, Commissioner Allison Lugo Knapp, Commissioner Tod Burton, Executive Director Allegra Willhite, and Budget Analyst Tunie Betschart.

Absent: None

East Multnomah Soil and Water Conservation District:

Board Members: Board Chair Jasmine Zimmer-Stucky, Board Member Joe Rossi

Staff: Executive Director Kelley Beamer 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 received no written comments.

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

Ms. Kelly Beamer said as the new executive director she has a new perspective and new set of eyes on the organization. She stated it's been an absolute honor to listen and learn about the community they serve and see the district engage with their constituents while working with them. She said she hopes the commissioners and the public will see the district's values living out through the budget and how they show up for the community, the budget narrative, the programs, and the district's work.

TSCC Questions:

Commissioner Allison Lugo Napp asked the following questions:

Welcome, Ms. Beamer, to your first TSCC Budget Hearing as Executive Director of EMSWCD! What have been the biggest surprises in your first few months? And what are your priorities for the coming year?

Ms. Kelley Beamer said it was a huge honor to step in and work moving over from the nonprofit sector into the public sector and being able to serve the community. It wasn't until she entered the leadership role that she understood and felt how deeply this district is carrying out its equity goals.

As for surprises, EMSWCD is the most culturally diverse district in the state, serving Oregon's most significant urban population. There are 45 districts. It was really profound when she came in and learned about how staff think about equity and applying it internally in the organization and externally in the programs. The team has worked on an internal Equity Action Plan resulting from the district's ten-year equity commitment. The Equity Plan has over 70 action items; staff self-elect, and teams carry out those actions.

She shared a few examples:

- The district created a prerecruitment and contracting commitment. These contracts are accessible and prioritize individuals from diverse background. For example, the contracted renovations completed recently in the board room, which went to a black woman-owned business.
- They provide compensation when constituents participate in the district's surveys for community information gathering. When they are asking to receive feedback, they make sure individuals are compensated accordingly.
- They worked with a third party to complete the equity audit this past month to help ensure staff think holistically of the district's programs.
- The enormous native plant sale, with 10,000 native bare root plants, goes out into the district through this plant sale. What is impressive is the intentionality of the staff who target the areas for sale to those with the least number of trees, which are more impacted communities experiencing excessive heat.

Priorities in this budget include:

- Build a field office in rural parts of the district. A parcel adjacent to Headwaters Farm will be the future site of the EMSWCD field office. It is essential for a few reasons:
 - A presence with rural constituents
 - Being in the farming community the district is actively serving and providing services to
 - Practicality is essential since the EMSWCD staff team has a woodshed to store the heavy equipment and needs a dedicated meeting space. That's a big priority to accomplish this budget year.
- They are launching the district's website. They have put much effort into communication to ensure the website is current and bring in what staff is learning from the listening sessions.
- Customer Relationship Management (CRM) which will give the district the ability to track and communicate more with the district's constituents

Those are like the big "to-dos" overall, leaning into the three pillars of the Strategic Plan.

Commissioner Mark Wubbold asked this follow-up question:

Are your plant sales affected by the changes in the severe weather we have experienced in the past couple of years?

Ms. Beamer said yes, and the leader of the urban program said the plant selection is changing in response to changing conditions. The district is bringing redwoods into the tree selection process.

Staff is thinking about climate-responsive plant selections that will endure hotter temperatures, drier spells, and survive ice storms.

Commissioner Wubbold asked the following question:

This question is for the board members in attendance: Last year, you passed your strategic plan, which is an exciting accomplishment. How have you executed strategic plan objectives and priorities during this first year of the plan?

Ms. Jasmine Zimmer-Stucky said there is still progress to be made, and time and attention were slowed on these objectives and priorities when Ms. Nancy Hamilton announced her retirement and the board embarked on another executive director search. It takes time and effort, but in the interim, staff and the board continued to move forward with many initiatives of the plan. Much of this was done with Nancy's help as she off-boarded and onboarded Kelley seamlessly. The district is now moving forward intentionally focused on those priorities.

Some examples of executing initiatives related to the Strategic Plan priorities and how they relate to those three pillars are:

Soil & Water Health:

- The number of workshops and public attendance has increased significantly. The district responded to 27 technical assistance requests concerning stormwater, including rain gardens, stormwater, downspout planters, pervious pavement, soil improvement after de-paving, and communicating with Marion County SWCD on setting up Urban stormwater offerings demonstration project at Mt Hood Community College. This multi-year effort resulted in removing over 6,800 square feet of asphalt down the center of four parking lots, installation of "tree trenches" and planting 38 trees.
- Limited the Ross Island lagoon algae bloom by funding research on the Willamette River water quality and structure solutions.
- On the Rural side, the district continues to work directly with farmers to provide free technical assistance to help comply with agricultural water quality laws. The focus and intention are to prevent water pollution and monitor temperature, bacteria, and sediment. There have been 26 technical assistance site visits to farms completed as of the end of March of this year.

Climate Action:

- Headwaters Farm is a demonstration farm for climate-friendly farming, from renewable energy creation to soil health. Over the years, the district has committed significant dollars and efforts to making Headwaters Farm a shining example of sustainable and environmentally friendly farming practices and conservation, all rolled up into one. The solar array at the farm is impressive. It generates around 88 MWh (Mega-watt hour) each year, offsetting the vast majority of electricity needed to run the farm, including an irrigation system, residence, and all farm facilities. Any excess energy generated by the solar array is donated back to PGE to assist customers struggling to pay their electric bills.
- Most recently, the district purchased an electric tractor. This ensures the district trains new farmers in sustainable and evolving climate-friendly farming practices.
- EMSWCD also runs a pilot initiative to integrate tree planting into weed removal work for carbon sequestration.

Equity:

- Equity runs across all the programs and is embedded in all the district's work. As noted, a powerful example is how the Grants Fund distributes to community organizations to execute the mission of helping people care for land and water in culturally specific ways that EMSWCD could not do alone. These efforts ensure the resources are being distributed across all demographics.

Mr. Joe Rossi added that there was a conversation about the Strategic Plan at the hearing last year. This Strategic Plan is a 70-page document, a listening session where everybody's voice is heard. The Board didn't set up criteria because the projects were to deliver soil-healthy benefits to the area and how to affect the most people.

Usually, a Strategic Plan shows how you "grow the tree." How do you make room for new growth, supporting the things that are working and rolling out things that aren't working?

He said he hoped they had those conversations because one of the surprises for him coming into the district was how little they talk about soil and water health. When looking at the minutes of the meetings, very little time is spent in those conversations. When he ran for the position on the Board, his platform was to execute the most soil and water development possible for the district based on the budget and how to benefit the most people.

He said the district's pillars are:

- Helping people care for soil and water
- Partnering with people in programs to multiply the effect on soil and water through the lens of climate action and social activity

These are all things the district should do, and they are doing an excellent job at them. But there is still work to be done because it was a staff-heavy process with many viewpoints that were not expressed as everyone couldn't speak. He said he was excited about Kelley, who is doing a great job of listening, coming into the program, and doing a lot of hard work.

Commissioner Wubbold responded: These are key performance indicators that you're talking about, where the rubber meets the road and the work's outcome. Next year, there may be a question about key performance indicators, such as how it is going, what you have achieved, and what you have learned. The commissioners will likely check back many times to see how the plan is progressing.

Chair Harmony Quiroz asked these follow-up questions:

The district has added this plan, and you've laid it out nicely. What processes are in place to ensure that you're looking to those pillars to guide your decision-making? Do you have an excellent example of how the Strategic Plans inform your process? Are there new processes to ensure those pillars are at the forefront of the decision-making process?

Ms. Beamer said a strategic plan is a blueprint, a road map. It's how one is tracking success. If you change something, you need to track it. One of the pieces of the plan is the 72 individual vital goals. That's a lot to grasp. The exercise of this program structure is rural and urban land. It forced the leadership team to break down that silo effect and think about how the district works together across the urban lands, rural lands, and the natural areas that span the entire district. The district is about prioritization.

A lot of the programs are responsive. EMSWCD provides services by showing up and visiting with land owners and farmers, listening to their needs, and responding. It's the responsive models, such as urban or rural programs, such as weed control, the Cooperative Landowner Partnership, and technical assistance. These are the district's bread and butter.

To Joe's point, in terms of acres, the district is not a one-size-fits-all, and staff must make strategic decisions about elevating priority areas in the district to focus on and projects with acres for income. EMSWCD can't say yes to everybody, so staff does use the strategic lens to make decisions.

Ms. Zimmer-Stuckey added that as a board member, she had seen the way the district developed the questions for the Partner in Conservation Grant, incorporating climate and presenting equity differently, getting applicants that responded to those, and providing funding aligned with those

values. Then, staff reflected on the changes to the questions, did the district get it 100% correct? And they will continue to evolve these questions until they feel right.

She said she observed the staff changing how they market the plant sale and getting the information about the sale to the zip codes in the county most impacted by the excessive heat.

Commissioner Matt Donahue asked the following questions:

Historically, the Land Conservation Fund has been funded by transfers from the General Fund at half a million annually. The FY 25 budget reduces the amount of the transfer to \$400,000. Why is the transfer reduced? Is your strategy for this fund changing? And if so, in what way?

Ms. Beamer said this was a robust conversation during the budget committee meetings this year, and the rationale for this reduction is two-fold:

- 1) Given the current LCF balance of \$6,289,317 (as of the FY23-24 audit) plus the proceeds of the Gordon Creek property sale as well as a healthy accrual of interest allocated to the Land Conservation Fund (budgeted to be \$300,000 in FY24-25), staff felt that the combination of those three factors gets the district to the same allocation as previous years. The FY24-25 budget demonstrates a healthy projected LCF account balance of resources to be \$8,651,707, including the previous account balance, interest, proceeds from anticipated property sales, and the transfer from the General Fund.
- 2) With this self-aggregating interest, EMSWCD can make strategic decisions to allocate additional funds to contingency so that the new executive director would have resources available to carry out priorities that could not be foreseen in the coming year. A lower allocation does not indicate a lower demand for the fund. The district currently has 11 projects underway, and as pressure on agricultural land grows (UGB expansion, shadow conversion, loss of agricultural infrastructure, increasing non-farm uses allowed on EFU land), the need for the Land Conservation Fund will only increase. The Land Legacy Program, which utilizes the Land Conservation Fund for these special fund efforts, creates "Forever Farms," which protect the local foodshed, provide low-carbon food access, and support smart growth. The strategy for this program and the utilization of this fund is a long game with relationship and trust building, showing up in the community and offering pathways to affordable land access.

We understand that the district plans to purchase two or three parcels yearly. Has that been happening?

Ms. Beamer said the district achieves the agricultural land protection goals in a few ways:

- EMSWCD places easements to restrict development and ensure forever farms and that the land continues in private ownership, not held by a government entity.
- The district also buys land outright. They then place an easement on it to protect conservation values, which also lowers the property value, and then they sell the land to a private landowner to farm. This three-phase transaction process is called Buy-Protect-Sell.

The district is currently working on three forever farms. The Gordon Creek sale this fiscal year mentioned previously fell under Buy-Protect-Sell, so including the three currently in the works, EMSWCD has surpassed that goal.

Is there a specific ratio you want to reach or a certain level of cash you always want to have available?

Ms. Zimmer-Stuckey said the program is there so the district can act quickly when there is a willing seller. That way, the district does not need the lead time to develop the capital necessary to purchase available property.

Chair Quiroz asked this follow-up question:

Have you considered repurposing some of these funds if they are not being spent?

Ms. Zimmer-Stuckey said part of the reason that the district put less in this year was because it was not necessary. It seems like a lot, but looking at the price of land, four transactions could bring that from \$8 million to \$3 or \$2 million, and as the district boosts its outreach, boost its name, boosts its trust in the community, and has broken down silos between the merchants, staff is working together with technical assistant with Land Conservation to help seed these future conversation efforts. That's just building more demand and seeing people who were technical assistants come into the Land Conservation Program.

Commissioner Donahue asked this follow-up question:

Would you ever consider financing the purchase of property?

Ms. Beamer said they are looking at all points of access and what the district's role can be to open the door for those not born into families with immediate access to land. EMSWCD is thinking about the next generation farmers because the next generation farmers are also the next generation to learn about soil and water health.

There have been recent policy changes around Urban Growth Boundary expansion, and the reality is that this is the picture of farmland in the district. It's a climate solution, and having a local food shed to grow food in the community is essential. In Multnomah County, a farm costs \$27,000 an acre, as opposed to an average statewide cost of \$4,000. This county is in the top three most expensive counties for farms, and that's just because everyone wants a home between Mt. Hood and the Columbia River.

The district is entering a time where they want to have that reserve available for when three properties do come up, and they will be able to complete those strategic transactions.

Commissioner Tod Burton asked this follow-up question:

Is there more competition for this land now than you experienced previously?

Ms. Zimmer-Stuckey said they have had two farmers say they wanted to sell to EMSWCD because the district will ensure that his legacy is carried on. There is a dedication to preserving agriculture. These folks will move on and retire, and their grandkids do not want to carry on the farming tradition.

Commissioner Lugo Knapp asked the following questions:

We understand the Partners in Conservation (PIC) grant program could only fund about half of the projects that were reviewed/qualified. The largest increase in grant programs in this budget is for PIC. Will it be enough to fund all qualified projects in the coming year? If not, are you exploring other sources of funding for this program?

Ms. Beamer said the demand for PIC opportunities will likely continue growing. Over the past four years, the number of applicants has doubled, and the district doesn't see that going away anytime soon. EMSWCD is likely to have demands for the opportunities that outpace the need. This is also true for most responsive grant programs everywhere.

Regarding other funding sources, the district is open to these opportunities. It has a great example you're likely aware of, as it's in the current fiscal year budget and repeated for FY 25. It's called the People's Garden Initiative - NRCS program that aligns so closely with the PIC program (District goals achieve their goals) that EMSWCD and USDA-NRCS have entered into an agreement for them to fund us for \$200,000 over two years.

What about some of the other grant programs? We see that some programs, such as the Equity Focused Strategic Opportunity Grants, were not increased - how do you determine where to focus grant dollars?

Ms. Beamer said they intentionally prioritize PIC because it funds groups executing the district's mission in culturally specific ways. Equity Focused Strategic Opportunity Grants is still a pilot initiative that incorporates staff-identified grant opportunities that meet specific criteria on where to partner with under-resourced communities.

The district provides other grant programs that are tailored to the needs the district has heard over the years. Each type of grant opportunity EMSWCD makes available has a specific audience and recipient in mind, so each type has its requirements and evaluation process to determine the award and in what amounts.

Small Projects and Community Events grants (SPACE) allow applicants to come to the district to support projects and events that provide education on soil and water health, community building, and hands-on approaches to advance conservation. It provides easily accessible funding for local organizations and schools. Cooperative Landowner Incentive Program (CLIP) is designed to fix natural resource issues on private properties. This could be a grant to reduce soil erosion on the road, deal with invasive species, or increase water conservation.

Thirdly, EMSWCD has a Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) grant partnership with two watershed councils. This one is unique as it's not a competitive grant award but rather a partnership that protects the watershed health in a way that aligns with the district's goals.

Chair Quiroz asked the following questions:

Part of the district's goal is to make farmland accessible financially – what might a loan program look like? Could this arise to the level of a priority over other programs currently being done?

Ms. Beamer said the district is exploring loans and land access grants that could address a current barrier for the next generation of farmers who want to access land and are not born into families with land. The district acknowledges that a serious pinch-point for new farmers is affordability. A case in point is that Multnomah County farmland prices are the top three highest in the state at \$27,000 an acre. The question is, how can the district open up access to land and decrease those barriers? EMSWCD can't speak to prioritization regarding other grant programs. This is something the district will be researching in the coming fiscal year. It will depend on what staff discovers while analyzing and doing their due diligence on a potential loan or grant-forward program. Staff doesn't anticipate this taking over other programs or grant needs but rather the potential for an expanded program with other internal resources.

Commissioner Burton asked the following questions:

The 2023-2024 Adopted Budget created the Community Engagement and Outreach program. Now that you are nearly one year in, can you give us an update on how it is going so far? What would you say were your biggest successes in this area over the last year? What lessons did you learn that you will apply in the future?

Ms. Beamer said during this last fiscal year, the Communications Plan was completed, the messaging framework was built, and strategies and training in the works are currently employed. The new team is building cohesion as intended by being a centralized communications hub and providing a suite of services that support the programs. This includes social media, marketing plans, event recruitment, advertising, outreach, and engagement planning and coordination. This last year was year one of the three-year plan for this program (highlighted in the FY23- 24 budget cycle), and the goal is listening and learning, which the district feels is the most essential part of communication. EMSWCD will also be engaging in community-informed message development moving forward. For example, one key takeaway from the recent listening sessions was the emotional and psychological benefits of the district's urban land work as opposed to the ecosystem services alone.

Time did not allow the following questions to be presented at the hearing. TSCC includes them and the district's answers, just as they were written and sent to TSCC staff for public information.

Commissioner Tod Burton was scheduled to ask the following question:

There are many ways you can meet the district's mission. When determining programming and projects, how do you choose the best projects to serve the community?

As you know, we have two main service areas (Rural and Urban) that are mostly responsive to landowner and community needs.

In the rural part of our service area, we spend time with farmers and landowners to understand ways our services can improve soil and water health. As part of our Rural Program team, we have staff dedicated to noxious weed removal, who partner with private landowners who want to address invasive weeds and improve ecosystem health. The 'weeds' team also coordinates with other regional government partners to respond to the spread of invasive weeds. Our Rural program also includes technical assistance staff that help farmers identify cost-share projects to decrease erosion and improve water quality. Lastly, we have a stream care program that works within our watersheds to partner with willing landowners who are committed to improving riparian areas through revegetation. These programs are great examples of the responsive nature of our programs. We have the expertise and capacity designed to support individual landowners as they contact the district. Clearly, we are not a one-size-fits-all organization, and our staff must prioritize the projects that give us access to strategically important areas, or areas with enough acreage to have an impact.

Within our Urban program, our staff prioritizes community-led projects in historically underserved communities predominantly east of 82nd Avenue. These projects include Planting with Partners, a way for the district to support community-led efforts to plant native plants and increase pollinator habitat and healthy communities, and a campuswide demonstration project at Mt. Hood Community College. Our Urban Program also runs the district's annual flagship plant sale when we sell at-cost native plants and trees to the constituents of our district. Through this event, over 10,000 native plants are distributed in our district. The native plant sale is a proven way, year after year, to connect with our constituents and to share our services with the urban community.

Now that we have a strategic plan that lays out three primary areas of focus (climate action, soil and water health, and equity) we will prioritize projects that deliver demonstrated success in each category.

Commissioner Wubbold was scheduled to ask the following questions:

Last year we talked about how you would know the Community Engagement and Outreach program was successful. You told us a measure of program success would be if more people knew more about the district and what it does. Have you been measuring increased engagement and community knowledge over the last year? If so, how, and what have been the results?

One key measurement of success has been how quickly both our workshops (urban and rural) are filling up and being attended. Another example was noted earlier with the increased engagement and applicant pool of our grant applications. Another key indicator of success is something that I've noticed in my first three months with EMSWCD, that we are a visible coalition and community partner. Community organizations are reaching out to us to include us in projects and coalitions. That feels different than before.

Commissioner Matt Donahue was scheduled to ask the following question:

During last year's restructure, in addition to the new outreach program, the Conservation Legacy program was dissolved. Some of the work was transferred to other programs. Have you heard any feedback from your stakeholders on the restructure?

As you're aware from last year, this was mostly a behind-the-scenes reorganization. The motivation for the change was thought through and planned strategically to not only align with our Strategic Plan goals and initiatives, but to enhance the programmatic efforts and staff resources to maximize impact to the community we serve. The reorganization was a key component of the FY23-24 budget message.

Overall, there was no material change to the program as community members experience them, with the exception of an increased visibility and understanding of the community by outreach and engagement. For the remainder of the components of the Conservation Legacy Program, they are the same people doing the same work, just simply moved under another existing program and supervised by a different person.

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 Tax Supervising and Conservation Commission meeting to certify East Multnomah Soil and Water Conservation District's 2024-25 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 2024-25 budget. 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 has no recommendations or objections to the fiscal year 2024-25 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 2024-25 Approved Budget with no recommendations or objections as recommended by staff. Commissioner Donahue seconded the motion, which passed with a unanimous vote of the commissioners.

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