SHERBURNE SOIL AND WATER CONSERVATION DISTRICT

Strategic Plan

2025

Prepared by

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STRATEGIC PLANNING OVERVIEW

Strategic planning is the process through which an organization's board, staff, and partners review its purpose for being within the current political, social, and physical environment, assesses internal and external opportunities and barriers, and identifies strategic issues that either assist or hinder the organization from carrying out its mission and achieving its organizational mandates. At the end of the process, a strategic plan is developed that identifies possible ways for the organization to maintain or strengthen its ability to deliver the desired services to customers and other stakeholders. The recommendations and directions contained within a strategic plan provide the governing board and staff with a framework from which to set policy direction and establish benchmark goals for organizational change to be achieved within a mid-term (three to five year) time frame.

The strategic plan document should be viewed as a transitional point between planning and implementation and not the goal of the planning process. One of the most beneficial stages of the strategic planning process is the dialogue that takes place between the planning assessment attendees. This semi-formalized discussion allows for a more comprehensive analysis of mid-term challenges and opportunities facing the organization. This dialogue typically takes place outside of the normal daily operations and the monthly meetings of the board during which attention tends to be focused on addressing immediate needs and solving short-term problems, often in a semi-crisis mode, due to external partner or customer expectations for immediate service.

Following the strategic planning process and the plan development, the members of the organization should commit to addressing key issues. Some of these issues can be delegated to staff, but the board should ensure the staff have the resources (policy framework, time, and expected benchmark goals) to reasonably accomplish these strategic objectives. The board should also explicitly identify periods during which they will formally review progress toward the identified strategic goals and be willing to make the appropriate adjustments to continue working toward the expected completion of the identified organizational goals.

Minnesota's Soil and Water Conservation Districts operate in an environment with many planning opportunities. This strategic plan can augment other required planning efforts but is not a replacement for those plans. The strategic plan is not a substitute for annual planning like the SWCD Annual Work Plan nor is it a resource-based assessment for the management of the region's soil or water resources as can be found in a Comprehensive Watershed Management Plan.

This strategic plan is broken into the following sections that provide an analysis of the social and environmental system in which the Sherburne Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) operates. These sections include:

Organizational Background: Describes the nature of the Sherburne SWCD as a special purpose unit of government and identifies the attendees who participated in the strategic planning process.

Organizational Mandates: Conservation districts are constrained by a variety of mandates that come from statute, grants and policy guidelines, county mandates, and mandates the board places upon the district. These mandates will outline the general operational environment in which the district operates.

Mission and Vision: Mission and vision statements are components that outline how a district should operate and where the district hopes to be in the future. Achieving consensus on these statements will ensure board and staff are working with a common understanding regarding who they are and where they want to go.

Strategic Issues: There are many potential issues that influence how a district can fulfill its mission and achieve its vision. Strategic issues are those items that will facilitate or hinder the district from achieving its vision during the mid-term time horizon.

Assessing the Environment: The Sherburne SWCD operates within two social environmental systems. The external system are those entities and forces outside of the organization that create opportunities and challenges. The internal systems area those policies and procedures within the organization that can serve as a strength or weakness.

Recommendations: There are several potential tasks the board and staff can perform to address the strategic issues within the current operational environment. These recommendations are nested and structured in a way to streamline the implementation of any item.

ORGANIZATIONAL BACKGROUND

The **Sherburne Soil and Water Conservation District** (SWCD) is a Special Purpose Government organized under Minnesota Statute 103C: Soil and Water Conservation Districts. Conservation districts are charged with implementing the State Soil and Water Conservation Policy (MS 103C.005). As a result, conservation districts are focused on a specific segment of the local government environment, which allows for greater focus to be paid to natural resource management but limits the scope of organizational operations.

Special Purpose Governments:

Authorized by state law to provide only one or a limited number of designated functions, and with sufficient administrative and fiscal autonomy to qualify as separate governments. Examples include water districts, cemetery districts, fire districts, and mosquito abatement districts.

US Census Bureau Definition

Minnesota's Soil and Water Conservation Districts are governed by an elected board of supervisors. These supervisors must be eligible voters residing within the district. Supervisors are nominated from specific districts but can be elected either at large, by all the district's voters, or by the voters within their districts. The Sherburne SWCD supervisors have chosen to continue with the at-large voting system for the election of supervisors.

The key duties of a district board are to provide policy direction, oversight of the finances, and general organizational governance. To assist with carrying out the policies and organizational aims of the district board, statute has authorized boards to employ staff as they may require (MS 321.subd. 2).

The Sherburne SWCD board members who participated in the strategic planning sessions were:

- Shelly Binsfeld
- Chris Jurek
- Larry Goenner
- Jason Selvog
- Josh Krenz

The district staff who participated were:

- Francine Larson, District Manager
- Miranda Wagner, Agricultural Conservationist
- Dan Cibulka, Sr. Water Resource Specialist
- Franny Gerde, Urban Conservationist
- Andie Bumgarner, Marketing/Administration Assistant
- David Wick, Resource Conservationist
- Lilly Bowman, District Technician*
- Griffin Northrup, District Technician*

* No longer with district at time of plan completion

ORGANIZATIONAL MANDATES

An organizational mandate is something that an organization is required to do. These requirements can by codified in state statute, provided through grants and contracts to which the conservation district is a party, or through expectations the board places upon themselves or the staff. The Sherburne Soil and Water Conservation District board and staff explored four mandate areas: Minnesota's State Soil and Water Conservation Policy, Minnesota statutory and grant requirements, Sherburne County mandates placed upon the conservation district, and mandates the conservation district board places upon the organization.

STATE SOIL AND WATER CONSERVATION POLICY

Soil and Water Conservation Districts are organized under Minnesota Statute 103C. Within this statute, the state has codified a Soil and Water Conservation Policy (MS 103C.005). This soil and water conservation policy serves as the framework within which conservation districts should deliver their services to the district's clientele. The statute is broad enough that it allows conservation districts great latitude in organizing and delivering services. However, the statute is not all encompassing and, if a district operation is not tied to this conservation policy, the district should not be pursuing it.

> **103C.005 SOIL AND WATER CONSERVATION POLICY.**
>
> *Maintaining and enhancing the quality of soil and water for the environmental and economic benefits they produce, preventing degradation, and restoring degraded soil and water resources of this state contribute greatly to the health, safety, economic well-being, and general welfare of this state and its citizens. Land occupiers have the responsibility to implement practices that conserve the soil and water resources of the state. Soil and water conservation measures implemented on private lands in this state provide benefits to the general public by reducing erosion, sedimentation, siltation, water pollution, and damages caused by floods. The soil and water conservation policy of the state is to encourage land occupiers to conserve soil, water, and the natural resources they support through the implementation of practices that:*

1) *control or prevent erosion, sedimentation, siltation, and related pollution in order to preserve natural resources;*
2) *ensure continued soil productivity;*
3) *protect water quality;*
4) *prevent impairment of dams and reservoirs;*
5) *reduce damages caused by floods;*

6) *preserve wildlife;*
7) *protect the tax base; and*
8) *protect public lands and waters.*

BOARD AND STAFF CONNECTIONS WITH THE SOIL AND WATER CONSERVATION POLICY

While the Minnesota State Soil and Water Conservation Policy is broad, encompassing many potential areas of conservation, not all portions of the policy resonated equally with the Sherburne SWCD board and staff. Attendees were asked to identify areas of the conservation policy which felt positive to them as board members and employees and to identify areas that were not quite right. These connections between the conservation policy and the lived experience of the board and staff highlight how the State policy directly influences the district's policy and management decisions.

FAVORABLE IMPRESSIONS

contribute greatly to the health, safety, economic well-being, and general welfare of this state and its citizens

With the inclusion of concepts of economic well-being and the general welfare of the state and its citizens, the board and staff were appreciative of the expansive perspective on the benefits of wise management of the state's soil and water resources. Rather than focusing on the environmental and ecological benefits that come from effective management, the policy encourages us to think about how soil and water conservation affects real people, both those that are living on the landscape and those who are distant but impacted by management decisions of land occupiers. This linkage between effective soil and water conservation and economics is directly contained within the implementation section that specifically calls out the protection of the tax base. When the crafters of the policy included protecting the tax base, they realized that land is a valuable resource that serves as a revenue generation tool for local governments. Degraded soil and impaired water resources can reduce the taxable value of the land, negatively impacting the ability of local governments to fund their operations.

While the policy references general welfare, it also includes the words health and safety, which have become ever more important as we have learned about the potential harmful outcomes of degraded soil and impaired water. As society has modernized since the initial conception of the policy, more pollutants have been introduced into many realms of our daily lives and several of these pollutants can accumulate within surface and groundwater, which are then returned to larger society in drinking water. The increasing use of agricultural chemicals have been a benefit to the production of food, fuel, and fiber but have had some harmful consequences. The board and staff recognized that is the role of everyone, both those who live

on a specific piece of land and those who are distant, to understand the role of soil and water in creating a healthy environment.

Safety is also called out, which is a factor that is often downplayed. However, in Sherburne County, effective soil and water management plays an important role in the safety of the residents. There are many areas within the county that have sandy flat soils. Removing surface vegetation and residue can expose these soils to wind erosion, which can blow dust across the landscape. When this erosion becomes severe enough, it can lead to impaired driving conditions, particularly along Highway 10, which is a primary connector between the Twin Cities and western parts of the state. Another safety consideration around the management of water resources is the outcomes from the short and long-term changes to the region's hydrology. Immediate actions such as drainage of fields and long-term actions such as the changing climate can change flooding regimes, putting infrastructure and housing at risk. Effective soil and water manage can mitigate the damages associated with these changes.

Land occupiers have the responsibility to implement practices that conserve the soil and water resources of the state.

The board and staff appreciated the identification that land occupiers have the responsibility to implement practices that conserve the state's soil and water resources. This acknowledgement that soil and water management is not driven by the state or local governments but is fundamentally the responsibility of the land occupier is a key feature in defining the role between those who are involved and interested in soil and water management. As implied in the policy, land occupiers are not passive agents who have no role in the outcomes of soil and water management. Rather, land occupiers are active and critical partners in ensuring the state meets the larger objectives of soil and water management.

While the policy calls out land occupiers as having the responsibility, the board and staff also identified that this is not a mandated responsibility. Rather, the statute goes on to state "…policy of the state is to encourage land occupiers to conserve soil, water, and the natural resources…" This concept of encouragement seems to imply that the state will use its resources to provide landowners with the tools to implement the appropriate best management practices. This concept of encouragement ties in directly with the role of conservation districts in being the local entity that provides education and incentives to assist landowners with understanding the potential outcomes of their current management strategies, identifying alternatives, and providing tools to help land occupiers make the recommended changes.

Vagueness of the Policy

While the Soil and Water Conservation Policy has language that is related to the many benefits of soil and water conservation and provides some specific language around the kinds of projects that should be implemented to protect the state's resources, the board and staff found the vagueness of the language to be useful. Rather than prescribing specific actions or kinds of management activities, the policy language is broad enough to be inclusive of many kinds of potential management strategies. This vagueness allows the board and staff to adapt their management recommendations and program development to existing conditions and be responsive to land occupier needs and interests. The policy seems to recognize that, while there are general management opportunities, the state is diverse. Calling out specific activities would not be appropriate for Minnesota's range of landscapes. This is also relevant to the many landscapes that occur within Sherburne County and the policy allows the flexibility to work across the district in a manner that is locally appropriate.

NOT QUITE RIGHT IMPRESSIONS

Lack of Definition for Land Occupier

The policy uses the specific phrase "land occupiers" as the individuals who are responsible for the conservation of the state's soil and water resources. While this language may have been appropriate in the original act, the board and staff highlighted that conservation implementation and responsibility have spread far beyond land occupiers as envisioned by the drafters of the policy. Soil and water conservation has moved from the realm of working with those who own and operate agricultural land and has come to encompass those who live and own land in urban areas and lake shore communities. In addition, while there were absentee landowners during the original drafting of the policy, this segment of the property ownership has increased. While the term land occupier is more inclusive than landowner, the definition may lack specificity that reflects the diversity of landowners and land occupiers who own and manage soil and water resources today.

As with the focus on land occupiers, the board and staff were critical of the focus on private lands. While most of the land within Minnesota is held by private landowners, there is a significant percentage of land that is in public ownership. These public landowners should also be engaged in the proper management of their resources. While there is a linkage to the public lands and waters within the specific conservation practices, the lack of language in the larger policy leaves a substantial portion of the state outside of the policy. While the board and staff felt it was not a requirement to identify specific actions that should take place on public lands, they indicated there should be recognition that public lands are not just beneficiaries of good management but also areas in which good management should be applied.

With the increasing understanding on the diversity of those who own and manage the land resources, the board and staff identified that the policy does not embrace the diversity of those who may be engaged in soil and water management. While there is a recognition that effective soil and water management provide benefits to the state, interest groups will define and appreciate different benefits. Broadening the definition of benefits to be more inclusive of the diversity of individuals who are now engaged in conservation could bring more individuals into the conservation world and convey the inclusivity of the conservation message.

What is the State Responsibility

The attendees identified that a specific omission in a State Soil and Water Conservation Policy is the lack of action or resources identified as coming from the state. While there has been a long-term commitment of state resources through grants such as the Conservation Delivery grant and the State Cost Share program (now Conservation Contracts) and the dedication of staff resources through the Board of Water and Soil Resources, this state level of commitment is not identified within the Policy. The lack of identification of a state commitment beyond annunciating the policy was seen as a lacking component.

Elements Lacking from the Policy

While the board and staff appreciated the vagueness of the policy, there was a recognition that the policy left out some critical connections between soil and water management and the larger world within which these actions take place. The attendees identified these specific omissions as:

- Education
- Studies and Research
- Groundwater and Drinking Water
- Wildlife Management
- Forestry

As the science of soil and water management has advanced since the development of the policy, these omissions have become more obvious. While these specific items are included in others areas of the larger state statute framework, the board and staff felt that excluding these items from the soil and water policy potentially weakens the ability to manage soil and water on a more comprehensive ecosystem framework.

Beyond specific items lacking within the policy, the state, through the Board of Water and Soil Resources Comprehensive Watershed Management Program, has shifted to a focus on being strategic in the implementation of soil and water resources. Including the concepts of Prioritize, Target, and Measure within the policy would be a powerful tool for indicating that

effective soil and water management should be performed through a strategic focus to provide an optimum public benefit. The inclusion of language around the benefits of strategically focusing on conservation implementation would encourage the recognition of the diversity of the state's landscape and the local resources available for the implementation of practices. Without a recognition that the state is diverse, the policy undermines the unique aspects of the people and places found throughout the region.

LANDOWNER AND LAND OCCUPIERS

The board and staff spent a bit of time exploring the concept and roles around the idea of landowner and land occupier responsibility and encouraging action. By stating landowner responsibility and encouraging action, the policy provides different expectations for those who own and manage the land. When one is identified as being responsible for a resource, there is an expectation that one is liable for one's actions. However, the soil and water conservation policy does not provide any language around regulation or liability. While there is language within state statute that encourages local government entities with land management authority (city, town, counties) to adopt a soil loss ordinance[1], this language is not found within the Soil and Water Conservation Policy nor in MS 103C.

In addition to the lack of liability associated with land occupiers being responsible for the management of their soil and water resources, there is a lack of discussion around awareness or knowledge associated with this responsibility. While there is a general concept that individuals should be aware of and follow all the rules and statutes that guide one's behavior, there is not a clear connection between having a responsibility and being aware that one has the responsibility. The board and staff felt that lack of awareness around the responsibility of land occupiers to effectively manage their soil and water resources could be a barrier to greater conservation implementation. If land occupiers understood they had an expected responsibility, they might be more engaged in active conservation.

KEY PRACTICES OF THE STATE SOIL AND WATER CONSERVATION POLICY AS DEFINED BY SHERBURNE SWCD BOARD AND STAFF

The Sherburne SWCD board and staff reviewed the State Soil and Water Conservation Policy's practices. In their analysis of the practices, the board added two items and a clarification to practice three. The full list of focus areas is:

1) control or prevent erosion, sedimentation, siltation, and related pollution in order to preserve natural resources;
2) ensure continued soil **health and** productivity;

[1] https://www.revisor.mn.gov/statutes/cite/103F.405

3) protect **surface, groundwater, and drinking** water quality;
4) prevent impairment of dams and reservoirs;
5) reduce damages caused by floods;
6) preserve wildlife;
7) protect the tax base;
8) protect public lands and waters;
9) **promote soil and water conservation education, (+)**
10) **manage water quantity (+)**
11) **manage vegetation, including forests (+)**
12) **manage soil and water resources to optimize economic impacts (+)**

Bolded sections indicate additional language added to existing items

(+) reflects additional items to the state's practice list for Sherburne County

Priority Practices for the Sherburne SWCD

The board and staff were tasked with identifying which of these categories were priority practices. Each board and staff member indicated if they felt a specific practice was a priority or not a priority. In some cases, attendees were split on if a practice was a priority or not. In these cases, the practice was identified in both categories. Following the categorization exercise, each attendee voted on two priority practices that were of importance to them. (See **Appendix B** for the raw data regarding priority and vote totals.) The following practice priorities are in ranked order:

1. promote soil and water conservation education
2. protect surface, groundwater, and drinking water quality
3. ensure continued soil health and productivity
4. preserve wildlife by managing habitats
5. manage vegetation, including forests

Practices Benefitted by Implementing Other Practices:

While the Sherburne SWCD board and staff identified five priority areas for local conservation efforts, they acknowledged the value of the other practice focus areas. While many areas were not identified as specific priorities, attendees identified the following activities as ones that would have secondary benefits from the implementation of the three primary practices.

- control or prevent erosion, sedimentation, siltation, and related pollution in order to preserve natural resources
- reduce damages caused by floods
- protect the tax base

- protect public ~~lands and~~ waters
- manage water quantity
- manage soil and water resources to optimize economic impacts

The practice of protecting public lands and waters was clarified to indicate that protecting public waters would be a secondary benefit of the installation of the priority practices.

Practices Overseen by Other Authorities

There were four items within the policy that the board and staff felt would be best led by other authorities. This was:

- prevent impairment of dams and reservoirs
- reduce damages caused by floods through wetland restoration and water storage
- protect public lands ~~and waters~~
- manage water quantity

The practice of protecting public lands and waters was clarified to indicate that protecting public lands (including state, county, federal, and city property) would be managed by other authorities.

While these practices were identified as being led by other authorities, the board and staff acknowledged that, when appropriate, they would consider providing resources to assist with the implementation of these activities.

While the attendees indicated that the role of wetland oversight would be under the statutory authority of other entities, the district will play an important as the primary agency conducting outreach to landowners and providing technical and financial support for project implementation. As wetland restoration has also been identified in the comprehensive watershed management plans, this is an important linkage to ensure the district works within the planning framework to meet the overall plan goals.

Practices that were not a Priority

The attendees identified that preventing the impairment of dams and reservoirs would not be a district priority. The attendees clarified that the maintenance of the structure associated with dams and reservoirs would not be a priority for the district. Those who owned and operated the dams were the parties best aligned to understanding the needs and raising the funds to keep their systems operational. However, the district staff and board indicated that managing the upland resources to minimize the contribution to sediment and other pollutants that might

impair the pool would be associated with the secondary priority of controlling erosion to prevent sedimentation and siltation.

STATUTORY AND GRANT MANDATES

Minnesota Statute 103C.331 identifies the Powers of District Boards. Within this statute (103C.331 subd. 1), conservation districts are identified as "a governmental and political subdivision of this state". As a subdivision of the state, there are a variety of mandates, which are defined in statute, as to the specific duties required of conservation districts. In addition to statutory mandates, state agencies that provide grant funds to conservation districts often do so through grant agreements. Within these grant agreements, there are specific requirements that serve as mandates.

STATUTORY MANDATES

Within Minnesota Statute 103C, Conservation Districts are required to either have or perform specific actions. These include:

- **MS 103C.331 subd. 11**. Have a local conservation district comprehensive plan to be eligible for many grant programs. This can be accomplished through several mechanisms.
    - Develop a conservation district comprehensive plan that is approved by the Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR).
    - Adopt the County Local Comprehensive Water Management Plan that is approved by BWSR.
    - Adopt the appropriate Comprehensive Watershed Management Plans that are approved by BWSR.
- **MS 103C.325, subd. 2.** Provide annual financial reports to the State Auditor
- **MS 103C.331 subd. 16.** Provide an annual budget to the County Board of Commissioners

Action Item: The Sherburne Soil and Water Conservation District Board and Staff will continue utilizing the Comprehensive Watershed Management Plans that lie within their jurisdiction and
Action Item: The Sherburne Soil and Water Conservation District Board and Staff will provide the required reporting to the state auditor and the county board to remain in compliance with statutory requirements.

In addition to the above referenced mandates, MS 103C.332 documents the many duties that are to be performed by conservation districts related to other areas of state government. These duties are listed for review in **Appendix C.**

Beyond the MS 103C mandates, there are other statutes and rules that task conservation districts with certain duties. These include:

- Wetland Conservation Act (WCA)
    - Serve on the Technical Evaluation Panel.
    - Develop restoration plans for those who are identified as not complying with WCA.
    - Approve the activities performed under a restoration plan to bring the parcel back into compliance with WCA.
- Minnesota Buffer Law
    - Provide BWSR with a map of buffer compliance within the conservation district.
    - Provide landowners with notification of compliance.
    - Assess parcels as being out of compliance when the landowners fail to meet program requirements.
    - Provide approval of alternative practices.
    - Identify when parcels are brought back into compliance.

Action Item:

The Sherburne Soil and Water Conservation District Board and Staff will continue working with the county to meet its statutory obligations to administer the Wetland Conservation Act and the Minnesota Buffer Law.

In 2023, conservation districts were to be provided with financial aid provided by the Department of Revenue. To receive this aid, conservation districts must provide certain information to the Department of Revenue.

Action Item:

The Sherburne Soil and Water Conservation District Board and Staff will provide the required information to the MN Department of Revenue in a timely fashion to ensure the prompt delivery of SWCD local aid as provided by law.

Beyond the mandates that are specific to conservation districts, there are a variety of laws and statutes dictating the operational and governing environment in which all governments operate. Two specific examples of statutory operational mandates are the Open Meeting Law and the requirement of a records retention schedule. Each year, the Minnesota Legislature may pass laws that change the management requirements throughout the range of existing and new statutes. It is incumbent upon the manager and the board to stay current with these statutory updates. Working with the Minnesota Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts (MASWCD), Minnesota Counties Intergovernmental Trust (MCIT), the county attorney, and the appropriate departments within the county government (i.e. Sherburne County Human Resources) can ensure the district's policies and procedures are updated to be current with the most recent changes at the state and federal level.

The ***Open Meeting Law*** requirements are found within MS 13D (https://www.revisor.mn.gov/statutes/cite/13D). Should questions arise about open meeting law requirements, the district board and/or staff should contact the MN Department of Administration or the county attorney for clarification.

Minnesota Statutes also specify the requirements for how a local government should maintain records. A description of the relevant statutes can be found at the Department of Administration website (https://mn.gov/admin/data-practices/data/rules/records-management/). The following actions are governing by statute or law:

- Official Records Act (MS 15.17)
- Records Management (MS 138.17)
- Data Practices (MS Chapter 13)

Action Item:

The Sherburne Soil and Water Conservation District Board and Staff will continue to work with the appropriate organizations and entities to stay current with state and federal law and adjust policies and procedures as required to remain compliant with all relevant laws.

GRANT MANDATES

Many conservation districts fund their operations through a combination of state grant funds, county intergovernmental funds transfer, and locally generated funds. When a conservation district chooses to accept state funds, they are generally provided through a grant agreement. Each grant agreement contains the requirements for both the grantor and the grantee, which are enforceable mandates agreed to by both parties as part of their expectation for completing the actions found within the agreement. Grant agreements are voluntary and conservation

districts are not required to accept the funding provided through a grant agreement. However, by signing the grant agreement and accepting the funding, the district agrees to abide by the agreement requirements. While the board may delegate certain responsibilities to the staff in the administration of the grant agreement, the final responsibility for ensuring the district remains compliant with grant agreement provisions remains with the board.

The Sherburne Soil and Water Conservation District board has a consensus position that state grants are an important component of the district's financial structure and create opportunities to carry out the district's role in providing soil and water conservation assistance to the district's residents. Therefore, the SWCD will continue to apply for state grants and accept the responsibility of working within the requirements as set forth by the grant agreements.

The following provisions are typical of those found within the standard Minnesota Board of Water and Resources grant agreement, although each grant agreement may have unique provisions that should be reviewed by the board and staff before agreeing to accept the funds.

- Grant funds shall be spent within the executed term of the grant.
- The conservation district shall provide BWSR with an annual plan.
- The conservation district shall complete required reporting.
- The conservation district shall have a website with the required documentation posted in an accessible fashion.
- The conservation district shall follow the procedures as identified within the BWSR Grants Administration Manual (GAM).

Appendix E is a copy of the FY 26-27 SWCD Program and Operations Grant that was signed by the district board and executed by BWSR. While much of the documentation within the grant is boiler plate language, the board should work with the manager and financial staff to ensure there is a functional understanding of the specific requirements for each grant. In instances where the board is not clear on specific language, they should reach out to the grantor for clarification on the specific requirements.

Action Item:

The Sherburne SWCD Board and Staff will continue to apply for BWSR grants that help to fulfill the district's mission and achieve board objectives. When grants are received, the SWCD will follow grant policy. This may necessitate having the board and staff attend trainings on grant program administration and general financial management.

Other state agencies and/or funding partners may have different language within their grant agreements and this language should be recognized as a mandate that will be placed on the district operations.

WATERSHED BASED IMPLEMENTATION FUNDING

There are two watersheds that are partially within the jurisdiction of the Sherburne SWCD: the Rum River and the Mississippi-Saint Cloud Watershed Unit. As each partnership consists of local government entities who have priority items contained within the larger comprehensive watershed management plans, the entities need to work cooperatively to identify how to achieve the goals within each watershed and to allocate funding in such a way as to meet those goals. These watershed partnership funding discussions should involve both the board and staff member of each participating local government units. Without adequate representation at these funding discussions, local governments may be at risk of not receiving funding for plan priorities that occur within their jurisdictions.

Action Item:

The Sherburne SWCD Board and Staff will continue to participate in the comprehensive watershed management partnerships that lie within the district's jurisdiction at the staff and policy committee level to ensure that the county's identified high priorities are included in the funding allocation discussion around the distribution of Watershed Based Implementation Funding.

MS4 AND TMDL EFFORT

Minnesota has a **M**unicipal **S**eparate **S**tormwater **S**ewer **S**ystem (MS4) requirement that places mandates on government entities that meet certain size standards to acquire a permit. The MS4 program contains language for how cities and towns manage rainwater that runs off streets, parking lots, and other hard surfaces. Instead of soaking into the ground, that water flows into storm drains and pipes and then into rivers and lakes, often without being cleaned. The program requires communities to take steps to keep pollution like trash, oil, fertilizers, and chemicals out of that runoff, so it doesn't harm local waterways, fish, or drinking water. The program must incorporate six core minimum control measures: public education and outreach, public participation, illicit discharge detection and elimination, construction site runoff controls, post-construction runoff controls, and pollution prevention/good housekeeping practices like street sweeping and infrastructure maintenance. During the input session, staff indicated the MS4 program was a state mandate that was of concern to the Sherburne SWCD. While these programs are largely implemented between the permitted entity and the Minnesota Pollution

Control Agency, the district is well positioned to be aware of this effort and work with those permitted entities on an as requested basis. Historically, the Sherburne SWCD has been involved in carrying out education programming and helping with pollution reduction projects to meet clean water goals while supporting the MS-4 permit requirements. This effort will continue with the district in a supportive role to those operating under a permit.

The TMDL (Total Maximum Daily Load) program is about figuring out how much of a pollutant, like sediment, bacteria, or nutrients, a river, lake, or stream can handle and still be healthy. If a waterbody has too much pollution, the program sets a "pollution budget" and then works with communities, landowners, and industries to reduce pollutants so the water can meet standards. While the TMDL program is administered by the MPCA, the conservation district is using data derived from the monitoring and planning efforts to develop their Comprehensive Watershed Management Plans. The goal of meeting clean water standards within the TMDL program is in alignment with one of the purposes of the conservation district and the district will continue efforts to achieve clean water standards for those waterbodies within the district's jurisdiction.

COUNTY MANDATES

The Sherburne County Commissioners provide annual funding to the Sherburne Soil and Water Conservation District to assist with program operations and facilitate the delivery of projects and services to the county's residents. The following county intergovernmental transfer information was collected from the annual financial reports provided to the Board of Water and Soil Resources:

2012	$237,941
2013	$256,768
2014	$284,484
2015	$318,993
2016	$381,668
2017	$430,895
2018	$387,654
2019	$400,754
2020	$485,581
2021	$403,736
2022	$420,784
2023	$436,678

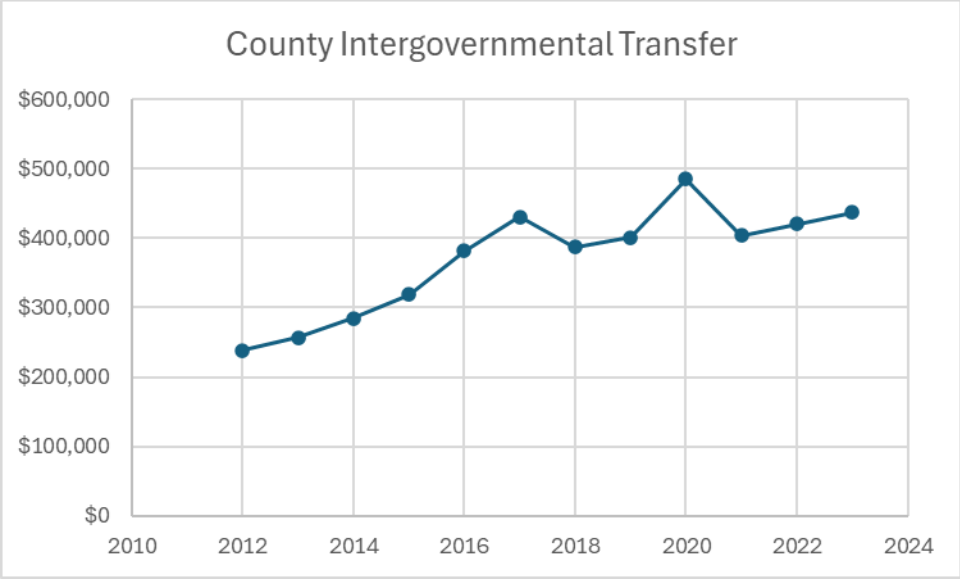


Figure 1: County Funding of Sherburne SWCD

The SWCD board and staff recognize that in return for this transfer, the district will perform several actions. One of the critical components of the county transfer is that the Sherburne SWCD has been delegated the authority to serve as the local government unit responsible for administering the County Local Water Management obligations that come with the annual Natural Resource Block Grant allocation. The county has also delegated the implementation for the Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS) program to the district.

Action Item:

The Sherburne SWCD will continue to serve as the Local Government authority for administering the County Local Water Management (LWM) program and the Aquatic Invasive Species program as delegated by the county.

Beyond administering the state programs, the district board and staff also intend to continue helping county departments in the administration of programs related to the conservation of the county's soil and water resources. The district will work with the Parks Department through a service agreement to provide technical assistance. In addition to the required SWCD duties associated with the Wetland Conservation Act, the district will provide the county Public Works Department with help on wetland delineations as requested. As the county receives state funding through the Natural Resources Block Grant program, SWCD will continue to assist with ensuring they are compliant with deadlines and the required content associated with this funding.

Beyond the direct technical assistance the county expects of the district in return for the annual allocation, the district recognizes the county's interest in maintaining certain services for the residents. There is an implied expectation that the district will continue to provide forestry assistance to landowners to meet local goals and ensure there is a healthy forested ecosystem within the larger land use matrix. The county is also interested in ensuring there is safe and adequate drinking water for residents who use groundwater. The district will continue to implement a drinking water program to meet these expectations. Beyond general technical assistance to landowners for natural resource management, the district and the Sherburne County Parks department has a service agreement where the district will provide natural resource management within the county park system.

Beyond these delegated mandates, departmental partnerships, and desired program delivery, the district attendees indicated two more critical expectations that come with the annual county allocation. The district board and staff understand the county board wants to be kept informed of district activities. A key component of this information linkage is to maintain the current county board liaison who attends district board meetings. The attendance by a county board member allows for a detailed understanding of district engagement and operations, which can be brought back to the other commissioners. The district also provides regular updates to the county through meetings with the county board and participation in the county department heads meeting.

The Sherburne SWCD board and staff are mindful that the county allocation is a distribution of scarce county resources that are generated from taxes levied on the residents. As such, the board and staff are committed to using these funds in a wise and efficient manner.

Presenting the SWCD Budget to the County Board

Minnesota Statute (MS 103C.331) requires conservation districts to annually present their budget before the county board. The text of this statute is:

> **Subd. 16.Budget.**
>
> The district board shall annually present a budget consisting of an itemized statement of district expenses for the ensuing calendar year to the boards of county commissioners of the counties in which the district is located. The county boards may levy an annual tax on all taxable real property in the district for the amount that the boards determine is necessary to meet the requirements of the district. The amount levied shall be collected and distributed to the district as prescribed by chapter 276. The amount may be spent by the district board for a district purpose authorized by law.

While the statute does not provide a specific method through which this information should be provided to the County Board, the SWCD Board anticipates continuing the practice of meeting with the county commissioners during a county board meeting to present their budget and review the district's past performance and future goals. One component of this presentation includes providing the commissioners with the district's annual report. While this annual report is comprehensive, the Sherburne Soil and Water Conservation District staff may want to consider adding the following sections to their annual report to provide additional information:

1. Pollution Reduction Impacts

The district installs many practices every year. These practices reduce sediment, phosphorous, and nitrogen that leaves the county's lands, which can then degrade the local water resources. The annual report provides a summary of the grant funds that come into the district and the total number of projects. The district staff may want to add a section that highlights the annual reductions of pollutants, which can be a powerful tool for demonstrating the good work performed by the conservation district and its landowner partners. A value-added section could also provide an example of the benefits from reducing the base pollutants, such as the amount of algae prevented by reducing phosphorous. Other potential areas that could be included in this section would be information related to the amount of water that is infiltrated or stored through the implementation of conservation practices. In addition, while not directly tied to pollution reductions, the district creates wildlife habitat and a measurement of the amount and kind of habitat that is annually created could also be of interest to the commissioners.

2. Economic Development

Many county commissioners are interested in seeing economic development within the county and their commissioner district. While cost-share is paid in reimbursement for the installation of conservation activities, commissioners may not immediately make the connection between the installation of conservation

Action Item:

The Sherburne SWCD Board and Staff should consider adding a section on the county/community benefit from pollution reduction along with an economic development section within the annual budget and report that are presented to county as required by MS 103C.331 subd. 16.

practices and economic development. Adding a section on the kinds of direct economic benefit (i.e., hours of paid contractor work, goods and materials purchased within the county) would directly connect conservation implementation and local economic development.

Board Member to Member Engagement

With five elected SWCD board members and five elected county commissioners, there is a natural connection between the governing structure of both entities. As elected officials, they share similar concerns relating to serving the people, providing governance to their organization, and seeking reelection. Making specific and intentional connections between county commissioners and SWCD board members can allow for the informal interaction in which both parties share local concerns, identify shared interests, and develop a personal relation. By holding regular informal meetings between one commissioner and one SWCD supervisor, these individuals can develop a solid understanding of each other's organization and bring this information back to their respective boards to add more context to governing decisions and potential partnerships.

As this interest in enhanced communication between the two organizations will be initiated by the Sherburne SWCD, the first contact should be made by the district. It will be important to work with the county administrator to make these connections so that he is aware the district is interested in scheduling these meetings. The county administrator may also be the preferred venue for scheduling these meetings between county commissioner and district supervisor as he will be best informed about the commissioners' schedules.

Prior to these meetings, the district manager should work with the SWCD board members to ensure there is a common understanding on the role of the district within the county. This includes a foundational understanding for what a conservation district is, how the district operates, funding structures, recent project installations, and near-future district priorities. In addition to this foundational information, the district manager should work with each supervisor to highlight projects that are taking place or will take place within each commissioner's district.

During the informal meetings, it is important for the supervisors to remember this is a dialogue. Not only are supervisors seeking to provide information to the county commissioner, but the district supervisor should also be listening for concerns of the commissioner and potential future county board actions that may influence the district such as program changes, significant county investments, funding shortfalls, and any other areas of potential concern or cooperation. Some potential topics of discussion include:

<u>District Information</u>

- Upcoming and projects under construction
- District priorities
- Use of county funding
- Areas in which the district worked with a county department

County Information

- Areas of county resident concerns
- Upcoming county projects
- County funding changes
- Potential new partnerships

Beyond these informal meetings, there are several formal opportunities in which the district supervisors can engage with specific county commissioners. Sherburne County is involved in two watershed Joint Power Entities established to facilitate the implementation of the comprehensive watershed management plans. These partnerships have a governing structure in which the elected officials generally participate to make critical decisions around the implementation of the plan, frequently called a joint powers board. Prior to these policy committee meetings, the SWCD supervisor can meet with the appropriate county commissioner to discuss the agenda and prepare to best represent the county interests within the policy committee structure. This will allow the county commissioner to better understand the watershed partnership and its benefits to the county while the SWCD supervisor can ensure both county representatives are speaking with a common voice.

Action Item:

The Sherburne SWCD Board and Staff should work to enhance connections between the conservation district and the county.

SWCD Board Activities

- Begin having regularly scheduled informal discussions with county board members to discuss areas of common interest.
- Coordinate with the appropriate county commissioner to share information prior to attendance at watershed policy committee meetings.
- Create a district summary that the county commissioner who attends the SWCD can bring back to the county board highlight board meeting actions.
- Provide staff with guidance and establish expectations around enhancing county board and department knowledge of district operations.

SHERBURNE SWCD INTERNAL MANDATES

State statutes, grant program requirements, and county mandates are imposed by outside organizations upon the district. However, there are things the conservation district board sees as important enough to be internally defined mandates, which the district board imposes itself.

These internal mandates often speak to how the board views itself and its provision of services to district residents. The board and staff identified the following internal mandates:

General District Operations

As the district is a unit of government that engages with the public through a voluntary incentive-based approach, the board finds it important to ensure that the staff operates in a professional manner. While it is an unstated assumption that the district board and staff would follow the law and behave in an ethical manner, the board and staff felt it was important to clearly state this expectation. This includes following local district policies and upholding the high standards expected of a public servant.

Ethical behavior is characterized by honesty, fairness, and equity in interpersonal and professional relationships and in administrative and conservation implementation activities. Ethical behavior respects the dignity, diversity and rights of individuals and groups of people.

Beyond legal and ethical behavior, the district has adopted a set of core values that express the way the board and staff interact with each other and the larger public. These core values provide a larger framework within the daily operations occur.

Board Member Expectations

The Sherburne SWCD has a set of bylaws that provide a framework for the organization's internal structure and operations. These bylaws outline how the organization functions, including how members are governed, meetings are conducted, and decisions are made. During the planning session, the board members indicated they intended to follow the district bylaws as they engage in their role of providing leadership and guidance to the manager and staff. This internal mandate will require the board members to review the bylaws and adjust them as the organization and the environment in which it operates evolves.

Action Item:

The Sherburne SWCD Board members will regularly review and adjust the district's bylaws to ensure the operational framework of the district matches the environment in which the organization is operating.

Staff Expectations

The district staff is composed of a manager and six staff. During the planning discussion, the board members highlighted the different roles of staff between management and frontline staff.

One of the primary roles of the district manager is to oversee the staff and ensure they are working to achieve the goals and vision of the board. Some of the key aspects involved in overseeing staff are:

- Ensuring the team meets organizational goals.
- Providing direction and guidance to employees.
- Resolving conflicts and fostering a positive workplace culture.
- Tracking performance and continuous team development.
- Facilitating communication and feedback loops.
- Motivating employees and building morale.
- Developing and supporting employees.
- Managing resources effectively.

The front-line staff are the individuals who administer district programs and ensure the successful daily operations. The district has an employee handbook that lays out the expectations and processes that employees should follow when performing their duties. As this handbook is critical to ensuring the employees are following board expectations, the manager should regularly review this material with the staff to ensure there is mutual understanding on each section within the handbook.

The board recognizes that the key to effective local conservation delivery is having highly trained staff who are experts in their field. This will require pursuing continuing education to ensure the staff are continuing to improve their skills. This internal mandate to have staff maintain their expertise will require the district to allocate appropriate resources including funding and time for the pursuit of these efforts. The district should work with the manager to ensure there is an adequate budget to allow staff to continue their professional development and any required certifications. The manager should work with staff to develop an annual training plan and ensure staff understand they have the support to complete the activities identified within this plan. As part of this training plan, the district staff should annually complete their BWSR Technical Training Individual Development Plans (IDPs). These IDPs allows BWSR to identify training needs and ensure appropriate trainings are scheduling in areas of interest.

Action Item:

The Sherburne SWCD Board establishes the following internal mandates for the staff:

- Manager oversees the staff in such a way as to optimize the ability of the staff to meet district goals and achieve the organizational vision.
- The staff will follow the employee handbook and work with the manager to ensure a mutual understanding on the contents of the document.
- The board will allocate resources and the manager will work with staff to ensure they continue to maintain the expertise in their fields.

Public Outreach and Customer Service

The land and water within the district is managed by people. The board and staff understand that to implement the appropriate conservation activities, they will need to work with the people to achieve mutually desired outcomes. The attendees identified two aspects to their public engagement. First, the staff need to be responsive to the needs of the public. This includes responding to the needs of those who come to the district for assistance. While the district staff can meet many requests for assistance, the district is not an all-purpose unit of government. In being responsive to the range of customer requests, district staff should work to identify other organizations that can provide services not directly provided by the district.

While a core component of customer engagement is being responsive to those who come the district, the attendees also expressed a desire to be proactive and identify potential resident needs. This effort at being proactive will require the staff to regularly scan the horizon, looking for issues of local concern and determine those that will rise to needing greater district attention. This scanning will require the staff and board to actively listen to the public dialogue around soil and water conservation, be aware of regional and state trends, and actively predict what will rise in importance.

The board and staff indicated they would approach a servant driven model of customer services. This model is defined as:

> *…an approach to serving customers that draws from the principles of servant leadership. Instead of focusing first on transactions, policies, or efficiency, this mindset puts the customer's needs, dignity, and well-being at the center of every interaction.*

In adopting this approach, the district is stating their interest in moving from a transactional approach to a relationship approach. The staff will strive to understand the needs of the

customer and deliver district programming in a way that supports those needs. This model is different from what has been a traditional approach of many government organizations in which the client is seen as a tool for accomplishing or achieving programmatic goals and outcomes. It focuses on the role of ensuring that those with whom the district works maintain their dignity when engaging with staff. Many people who come to government for service can be overwhelmed and disempowered by the bureaucracy that is designed to ensure public accountability. By empowering individuals to act as agents on their own behalf, the district staff will ensure they are caring for those who come for assistance and general information.

Implementing a Prioritized, Targeted, and Measurable Approach

With the development of comprehensive watershed management programming, the concept of implementing conservation on a Prioritized, Targeted, and Measurable (PTM) approach was reinforced as a tool to achieve watershed plan outcomes. The staff and board identified this approach as one that is useful in creating a lens through which the district can approach conservation implementation. With the recognition that funding is a limited resource, it can be easy for conservation districts to disperse their efforts throughout the district in a reactive pattern. While this can address immediate local needs, it may fail to result in significant changes. The PTM approach allows for a systems level thinking in which significant problems are identified, root causes are assessed, and solutions are implemented in a process to manage the problem. While the PTM approach is mandated when using Watershed Based Implementation Funding (WBIF) for achieving the goals of a comprehensive watershed management plan, the district wide use of this model can be a tool for greater accountability.

While the PTM approach is identified as a district level mandate, there is still the understanding that the district will continue to be based upon a voluntary incentives driven approach. Landowners and others interested in conservation will continue to come through the door seeking assistance. These individuals will continue to receive the expected high level of service mandated in the earlier sections on customer relations.

The Servant Driven model and the PTM framework could come into conflict as the district is planning for and implementing conservation outreach and implementation and this is an area for the board and staff to consider and prioritize as they consider their approach to customer service. With PTM focusing on the natural resource base and the Servant Driven model focusing on the person, there are two systems that are engaging in a bit of a clunky fashion. The Social Ecological System (SES) framework is tool for understanding how the social system and the ecological system interact (see figure x). While SES provides a framework for understanding how the two systems engage and recognizes the potential conflict between drivers within the social system (BWSR WBIF grants, Sherburne resident needs), there is not a clean fix to addressing this challenge.

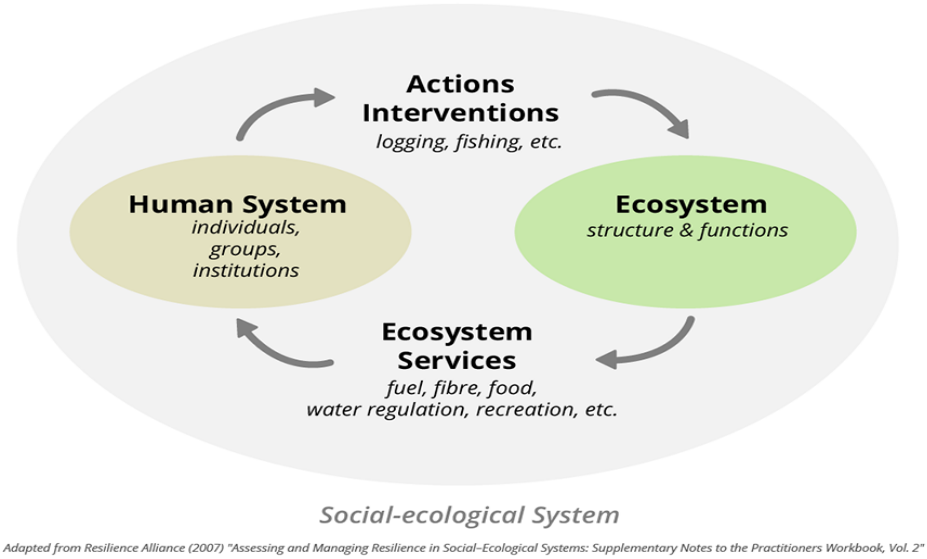


Figure 2: Social Ecological Systems Framework

Systems Approach:

A systems approach is a way of looking at a problem, process, or organization as part of a larger, interconnected whole rather than as isolated parts.

Key elements of a systems approach:

- Holistic perspective – It considers how different parts (people, processes, resources, policies, environment) interact and influence each other.
- Interconnections – Recognizes that changes in one part of the system can create ripple effects throughout the rest.
- Feedback loops – Pays attention to how outcomes cycle back into the system to reinforce or change future behavior.
- Focus on relationships – Prioritizes understanding linkages and dynamics instead of just individual components.
- Problem-solving – Seeks root causes and sustainable solutions by addressing the structure of the system, not just surface symptoms.

Seeking Additional Funding

While the district receives funding from the state and county, the district is still fiscally constrained by the limited amount of funding for programming, conservation implementation, and staff recruitment and retention. As the district lacks an independent means of directly taxing the district's residents, the board encourages staff to continue finding additional financial resources. This mandate may be more aspirational than actionable and will require considerable discussion among staff and the board for appropriate ways to generate additional revenues. Care needs to be taken when exploring new funding sources to ensure that the return on the investment of staff time in locating, acquiring, and managing additional funding is positive.

SHERBURNE SWCD MISSION AND VISION

During the strategic planning process, an organization should look at its internal structure and how that structure creates opportunities and challenges within the existing social, political, and economic environment. As the Sherburne Soil and Water Conservation District is a local government unit, its operations are laid out in state statute. However, as the statute provides broad latitude for the implementation of the state's soil and water conservation policy, SWCDs can define their mission and vision statements in a way that is most appropriate to the local environment.

MISSION STATEMENT

An organizational mission "clarifies an organization's purpose, or *why* it should be doing what it does"[2]. In general, when an organization develops a statement that clarifies the organizations mission, it should answer the following questions:

- Who are we?
- What are the basic social and political needs we exist to meet or what are the basic social or political problems we exist to address?
- In general, what do we do to recognize, anticipate, and respond to these needs or problems?
- How should we respond to key stakeholders?
- What is our philosophy, values, and culture?
- What makes us distinctive or unique?

The current Sherburne SWCD mission statement is:

> Partnering with the community to preserve and enhance our natural resources and native habitats for present and future generations.

The SWCD approved this mission statement three years ago. Therefore, there is no need for the board to perform any further work on the mission statement in the short-term. However, toward the out years (2029-2030), the district board may want to include a review and amendment of the mission statement during a regular board meeting. If the board wants to spend more time on this review, they could hold a facilitated special meeting to provide adequate time to go into depth on the review process.

VISION STATEMENT

[2] Bryson, 2011. Strategic Planning for public and nonprofit organizations. p. 127

If a mission statement clarifies what an organization does, a vision statement "clarifies what the organization should look like and how it should behave in fulfilling its mission".[3] As with the mission statement, the district staff and board had developed a vision statement within the past three years, therefore, there is no need for a review of this statement in the short-term. However, as with the mission statement, the board should consider reviewing and revising the vision statement in the outyears of this strategic plan (2029-2030). This effort could be done in conjunction with the mission statement review.

The current vision statement of the Sherburne Soil and Water Conservation District is:

> The Sherburne Soil and Water Conservation District will strive to be a respected and visible leader in addressing the community's natural resource needs in a fiscally responsible and adaptive manner.

[3] Bryson, 2011. Strategic Planning for public and nonprofit organizations. p. 127

STRATEGIC ISSUES

As defined by Bryson (2011), a strategic issue is a fundamental policy question or critical challenge affecting the organization's mandates, mission and values, product or service level and mix, clients, users, or payers, costs, financing, organization, or management.[4] As such, identifying and finding ways to work through these issues will be critical to ensure the continued success of the district and allow for the adoption of new programming.

During the strategic planning process, the board and staff identified a range of strategic issues. Once the brainstorming of strategic issues was completed, the attendees reviewed the list and then consolidated the range of issues into issue areas (see **Appendix D**). These aggregated issue areas were identified as the strategic issues that were affecting the conservation district's ability to carry out their mission and achieve their vision. In addition to the specific strategic issues, the attendees identified issues that influenced the larger strategic issues.

The Board and staff ranked the following strategic issues as the top four priorities. The remaining issues were found to be of interest but did not rank as a critical priority when assessed by all attendees at the planning meeting.

- **Funding**
- **Customer Base**
- **Staffing**
- **Partnerships**

Issue categories that influenced the strategic issues include:

- Politics
- Future and Emerging Issues

FUNDING

The Sherburne SWCD is a local government whose primary mission is to provide conservation assistance to private landowners. One of the primary forms of this conservation assistance is through the provision of cost-share that provides reimbursement to landowners following the implementation of a specific practice. However, the conservation district has limited capacity to self-generate funds, either for cost share or for operational expenses. This interest in providing cost share for the installation of conservation practices is limited by the inability of the district

[4] Bryson, 2011. Strategic Planning for public and nonprofit organizations. p. 185.

to independently raise funds creating a strategic issue related to the achievement of the district's mission and vision.

REVENUE

Conservation districts have specific tools through which they can raise revenue. They can receive grants from other entities, such as the state and county. They can generate funds through the sales of equipment and supplies (i.e. the district tree sales program). Or they can charge for their services. MS 103C does have a provision through which the district can tax the residents (MS 103C subd 16). However, this taxing authority is at the discretion of the county and would be included within the larger county tax levy. Currently, counties do not have the ability to separate out what would be a SWCD levy as an independent line item, which creates a disincentive for counties to implement this statutory provision. MS 103C. Subd 16 states:

> *Subd. 16.**Budget**. The district shall annually present a budget consisting of an itemized statement of district expenses for the ensuing calendar year to the boards of county commissioners of the counties in which the district is located. The county boards may levy an annual tax on all taxable real property in the district for the amount that the boards determine is necessary to meet the requirements of the district. The amount levied shall be collected and distributed to the district as prescribed by chapter 276. The amount may be spent by the district for a district purpose authorized by law.*

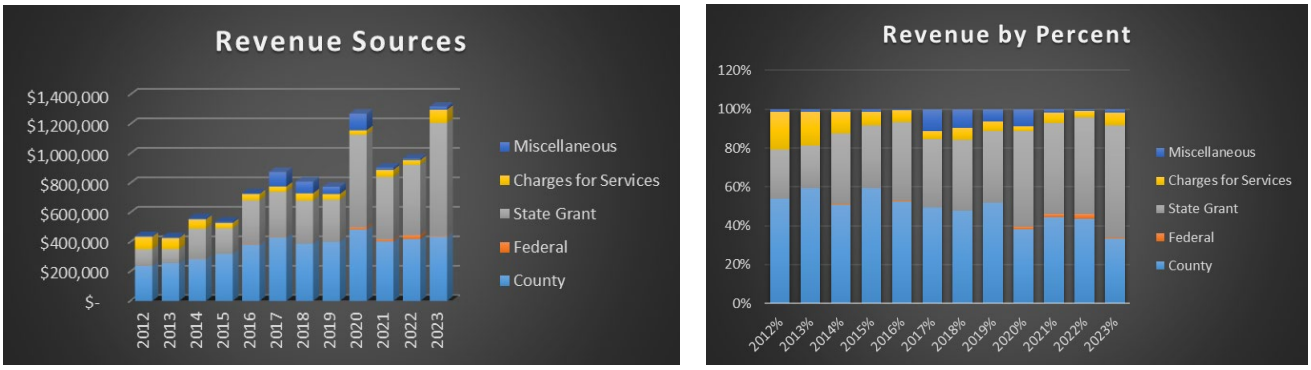


Figure 3: District Revenue from All Sources

The most substantial portion of funding comes from intergovernmental transfers from the county and state government. The district also derives revenue from charging for services although this appears to be trending downwards. From 2012 to 2023, the overall revenue of the district increased from $440,577 to $1,318,631, which was an increase of just under 300%. Most of this increase came from additional funding from state grants.

	County	Federal	State Grant	Total
2012	$ 237,941	$0	$ 111,720	$ 349,661
2013	$ 256,768	$0	$ 93,755	$ 350,523
2014	$ 284,484	$1,500	$ 203,509	$ 489,493
2015	$ 318,993	$0.	$ 173,095	$ 492,088
2016	$ 381,668	$2,000	$ 297,753	$ 681,421
2017	$ 430,895	$2,000	$ 306,552	$ 739,447
2018	$ 387,654	$0	$ 292,556	$ 680,210
2019	$ 400,754	$0	$ 285,343	$ 686,097
2020	$ 485,581	$14,480	$ 626,596	$ 1,126,657
2021	$ 403,736	$12,935	$ 424,587	$ 841,258
2022	$ 420,784	$25,302	$ 477,519	$ 923,605
2023	$ 436,678	$5,427	$ 765,701	$ 1,207,806

Table 1: Intergovernmental Revenues in Dollars

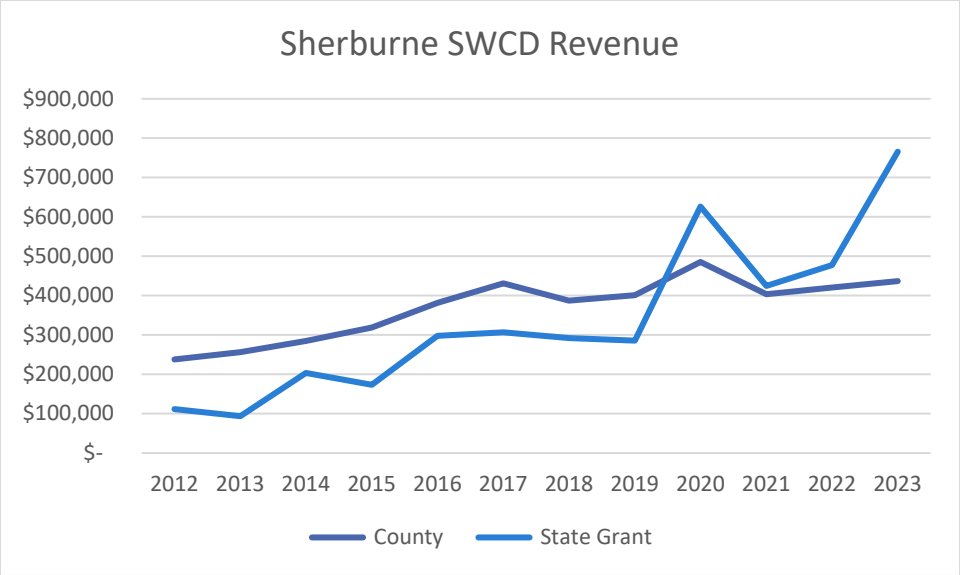


Figure 4: County and State Grant Revenue

The county intergovernmental transfer to the district has increased from $237,941 to $436,678 from 2012 to 2023, which is an increase of 184% over the twelve years with an annual average increase of $18,685 per year. Much of this increase appears to have occurred in the earlier years of the period with a decline followed by a leveling starting in 2021.

The district's funding that comes from state sources has seen the largest change over the observed period. The funding increased from $111,720 to $765,701 from 2012 to 2023, which is an increase in 685% with an average annual increase of $50,390. While there was a modest increase from 2012 to 2019, the district has seen substantial increases in state funding beginning in 2019 with substantial yearly gains from 2019 to 2020 and 2022 to 2023.

While there is an increasing amount of state-based funding coming to conservation districts, these funding sources are not block grants that are able to be used at the district's discretion. Each of these funding programs comes with associated rules and requirements that dictate how the funding can be spent and on what priorities. In addition, there are administrative requirements placed upon the district to ensure these funds are spent appropriately such as that state-based funding grants are delivered on a time frame that is determined by the state. For competitive grants, there is an application period and then a lag while the state evaluates and awards grants. This is followed by the need to develop a grant work plan. For non-competitive grants, the state needs to develop and review policies, determine allocations, and release the funding. This is often followed by work plan development and execution of grant agreements. Each of these steps takes time, which means the district faces difficulty in responding to local conservation needs in a timely fashion, which can result in a landowner losing interest in the implementation of a project due to delays that are beyond their control.

In addition to the funds that come directly to the Sherburne SWCD from state grants and county intergovernmental transfers, there are also funding opportunities through watershed partnerships. With the district participating in the implementation of two watershed management plans, there are multiple opportunities to engage in the discussion and distribution of Watershed Based Implementation Funding (WBIF). While these funds come through the Clean Water Fund and are allocated by the legislature every two years, BWSR intends to continue advocating for these funds throughout the remaining period of the Clean Water Land and Legacy Amendment. The program guidelines for these grants are broad and there is the option for the district to engage in each partnership to aggressively seek funding for both project implementation and the support of staffing resources that can provide initial project development and the design and oversight of practice installation.

EXPENDITURES

Conservation districts provide information on their expenditures to the State Auditor in two broad categories, project expenditures and operational budgets. As the Sherburne SWCD is focused on providing conservation implementation to improve and protect the district's soil and water resources, project funding is a key driver of the district expenditures, as this is the expenditure stream through which conservation projects are funded and implemented. While conservation implementation is a key driver of the district's expenditures, having the appropriate staffing and operation expenditures ensures there is enough capacity to provide the project funding in a timely fashion, which means that personnel costs are a driver of the operational budget.

The total district expenditures increased from $448,358 in 2012 to $1,211,161 in 2023 for a 270% increase of the period, which is an annual average increase of $62,287 per year. The

expenditures associated with project funding were the most significant part of that increase showing that there is an increasing focus with finding funding sources that can support conservation implementation.

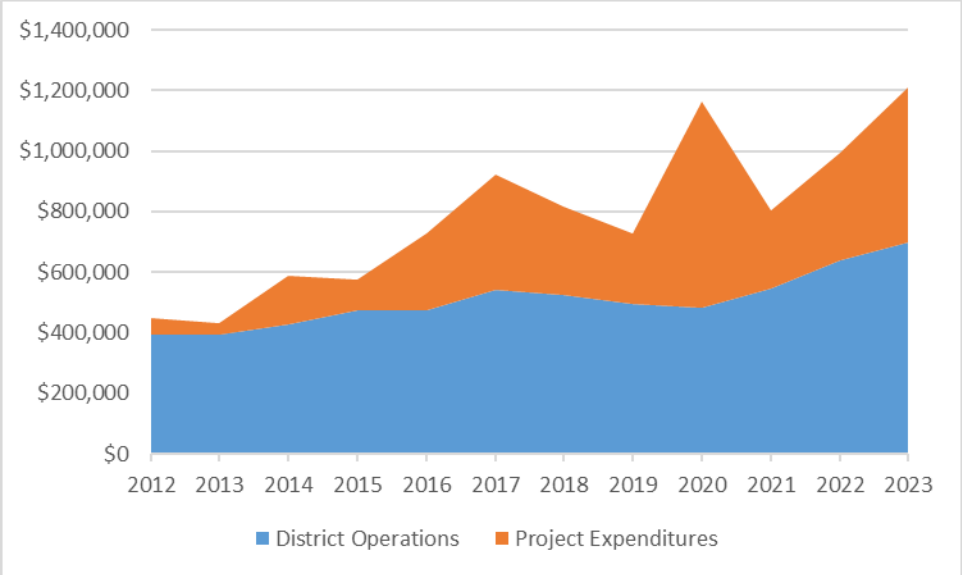


Figure 5: District Expenditures by Category

Project Funding

One of the principal drivers of Minnesota's conservation districts is implementing voluntary conservation using financial incentives, often in the form of cost share to assist landowners with installing a desired practice. Unfortunately, due to local, state, and federal constraints, the amount of cost share available to any district, and by extension, to any landowner is limited. Due to the limited nature of cost-share, there are several challenges that arise from the district's focus on providing cost share for the purpose of installing conservation practices.

Cost Share

Financial assistance provided to a land occupier to share the cost to install or adopt a conservation practice.

https://bwsr.state.mn.us/about-bwsr-grants-administration-manual

Historically, conservation districts had a small allocation of state-based cost share that was delivered through the state cost-share program (now called Conservation Contracts). However, with the passage of the Clean Water Land and Legacy Amendment, local governments within the water resources world had access to significantly more funding through a competitive grant process.

The funding the district has been able to apply to practice implementation has varied during the period reviewed. District funding sources matched state funding in the early part of the period.

The annual audit did not provide information from where this district funding was derived. However, this funding for practices peaked in 2018 at $96,816 before tapering off to $30,678 in 2021 and then rebounding to $63,421 in 2023. In contrast to the district supplied funding, state funding for the implementation of practices became the largest funding source for practice implementation expenditures. While this funding has been erratic, there has been a substantial increasing trend over time, showing the district has been able to secure state grants to assist with local practice implementation. County derived expenditures for conservation practices began in 2020 and have fluctuated between $70,640 (2020) and $51,631 (2023). As with the district funds that went to conservation implementation, the source of these county funds was not defined in the audit report and could use clarification.

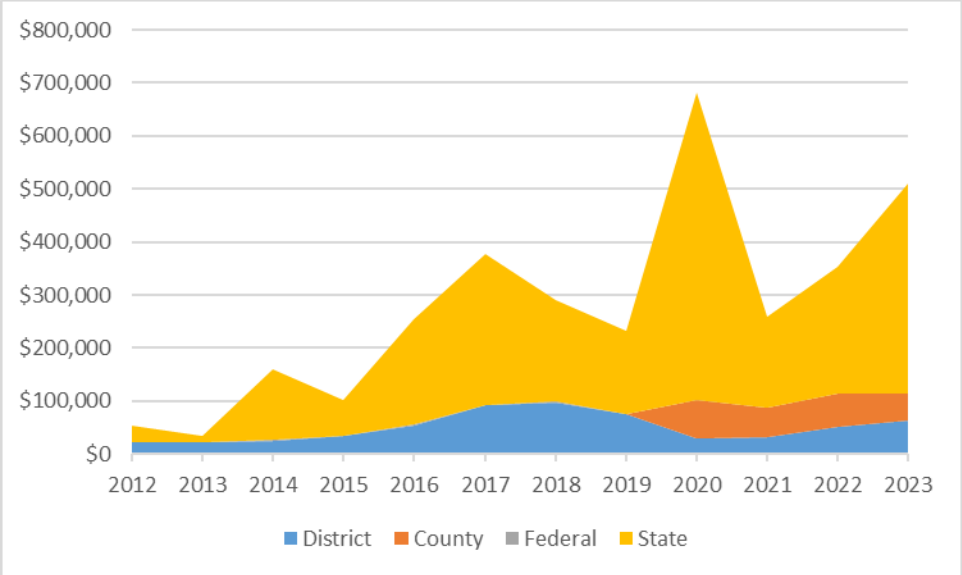


Figure 6: Funding Expenditures on Projects

District Operational Expenditures

This district operational expenditures have increased over time, largely driven by increases in personnel costs. The operational expenditures have grown from $394,305 in 2012 to $699,864 in 2023 for an increase of 177% and an average of $22,614 per year. This increase in expenditures on operational costs have largely remained consistent with a brief dip in 2018-2020. As indicated in Figure 6, these increases in operational expenditures are almost completely driven by increases in personnel costs.

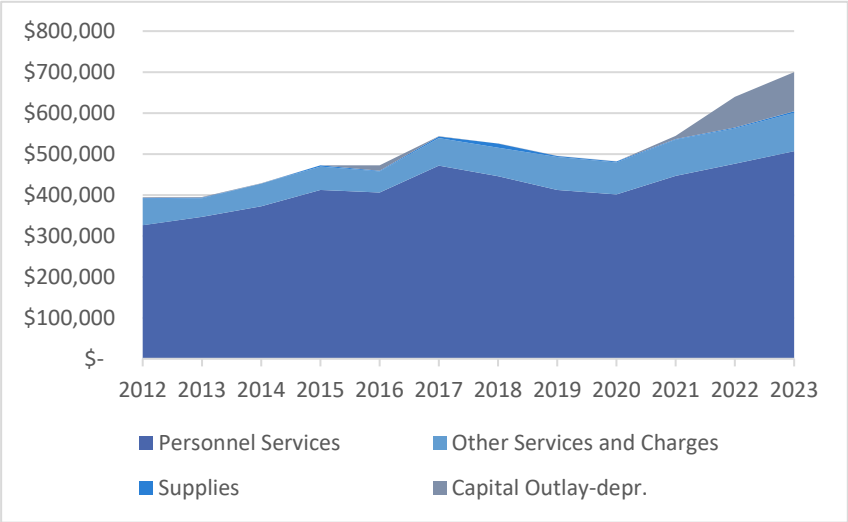


Figure 7: Operational Costs by Category

Using basic forecasting tools and the personnel costs from 2012 to 2023, without any substantial changes (including hiring or terminating staff), the district can expect to see personnel costs to increase to $589,948 (within a confidence interval of 95% between $469,348 and $710,549). Based upon this forecast, the personnel costs would grow by 16% at the end of 2030 over the current expenditure.

Timeline	Personnel Services	Forecast	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
2012	$325,984			
2013	$346,593			
2014	$372,389			
2015	$412,065			
2016	$405,906			
2017	$471,413			
2018	$445,709			
2019	$412,144			
2020	$401,313			
2021	$446,738			
2022	$476,388			
2023	$506,955	$506,955	$506,955	$506,955
2024		$513,750	$456,299	$571,202
2025		$526,450	$454,602	$598,299
2026		$539,150	$455,312	$622,987
2027		$551,849	$457,509	$646,190
2028		$564,549	$460,738	$668,360
2029		$577,249	$464,741	$689,757
2030		$589,948	$469,348	$710,549

FUNDING STABILITY

As conservation districts lack the independent ability to raise revenue through sources beyond the sale of goods or charging fees for service, they are highly dependent upon external funding sources to support their operations and their personnel. As the Sherburne SWCD does not have an extensive fee for service or sale of goods operation, the bulk of the revenue comes from intergovernmental sources such as the county allocation and state grants. Over the period assessed, the county allocation has shown a consistent increasing trend of funding going to the district. Based upon a statistical analysis, unless there are substantial unexpected changes in the county operations that would result in a change in the allocation, the district can reasonably expect this funding to increase at a similar rate.

State grants have shown much more inconsistency. From 2012 to 2017, there was a general increase in state funding to the district. However, this in 2019 there was much more variability in the state funding coming to the conservation district. Some of this variation is likely related to the district's ability to apply for and receive competitive grants. While there is no guarantee that a district will receive a competitive grant each year, the annual increase in state revenue would imply the district has done well in receiving competitive grants in the past. However, as BWSR is transitioning toward more funding being dedicated to the Watershed Based Implementation Program, it is likely that less funding will go to competitive grants, making them more competitive and offered less frequently.

While the state is transitioning away from competitive grant funding in relation to the Clean Water Fund grant program, there is more funding being allocated toward the WBIF program, which should create more stable funding for watershed partnerships. This stable funding will allow for partners to be more effective in looking out to the future and planning how to allocate financial resources to best implement the plan. This mid-term stable funding perspective should allow watershed partnerships to think beyond the biennial allocation. Thinking beyond the two-year grant cycle will allow watershed partners to have discussions around providing stable funding to the partners to ensure consistent program delivery. With this stable funding dedicated toward consistent program delivery, districts can better plan for future staffing needs and conservation partners can have a greater expectation of program opportunities in out years.

CUSTOMER BASE

The board and staff identified their customer base as a strategic issue. As the delivery of conservation districts leans toward the voluntary implementation of practices, having an awareness of the existing and changing customer needs and desires is critical to ensure the district remains relevant and able to adapt to changes. Within the strategic issue of

understanding the customer base were items related to knowing the end user, being aware of changing demographics, and client land use and values.

The End User

The attendees at the strategic assessment session identified the end user as a component of the larger Customer Base strategic issue. By identifying this component, the attendees demonstrated a willingness to explore a very complex issue, particularly based upon the environment in which conservation districts operate. For many organizations, the end user is the client who receives the service. For conservation districts, this would imply the end user is the landowner who receives technical or financial assistance or the purchaser of the district's goods or services. However, because districts operate in the intersection of land use, stewardship, and public benefit, their end users are much broader. As the Sherburne SWCD staff work in watershed environments, their end users are effectively everyone within the watershed who benefits from water quality that is enhanced and protected, which can also include everyone living downstream of the affected watershed including shrimpers in the Gulf. When the district staff are implementing soil health practices, they are not only benefiting the individual farmer, but end users are also those who are downwind and protected from blowing soil and the people who purchase the food from those farmers. Beyond individuals being end users, the Sherburne SWCD also provides services directly and indirectly to a significant span of government agencies. While they directly assist the county in implementing specific programs, they also have indirect benefits by protecting infrastructure and reducing negative health outcomes to those living below the poverty lines. Protecting county highways from flood related washouts and sealing abandoned wells can provide benefits to the county highway department and those working in health and human services. With the district operating within the land and water world, their end users are also the state governments who work in this world including the Board of Water and Soil Resources, the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, the Department of Natural Resources, the Department of Health, and the Department of Agriculture. The district services also benefit end users at the federal level such as the US Fish and Wildlife Service when they protect and enhance resources around the Sherburne National Wildlife Refuge.

With the breadth of potential end users, it will be critically important for the district staff and board to be strategic in defining primary end users to whom they will focus their service delivery and outreach. In addition to primary end users, the board and staff should be aware of those secondary end users who will be benefitted or harmed by the implementation of conservation activities. Finally, tertiary and further removed end users may also enter the discussion as the district seeks to identify the range of impacted parties.

Values

Historically, land use and management in the United States was focused on the interests of the individual to make the decision about the best use of their land. With this focus on benefit, often profit maximization, there were instances of land management decisions that may have resulted in individual benefits but larger social losses. For example, harvesting of much of the forests in the northeast and the Great Lakes region, the conversion of the Great Plains to crop production, and the use of rivers as sewage transportation systems may have resulted in substantial wealth being derived for those engaging in these activities but also created negative externalities that were paid for by the larger society. The concept of land being used for extractive purposes served as the basis for much of the value placed on land management. If one was not using the land to produce the maximum financial gain, the surrounding community and larger society may have seen that person as not having the right 'values' relating to land management.

Negative Externality

In economics, the imposition of a cost on a party as an indirect effect of the actions of another party. Negative externalities arise when one party, such as a business, makes another party worse off, yet does not bear the costs from doing so.
https://www.britannica.com/topic/negative-externality

As the damages from the intensive management of the land for production began to affect surrounding communities, the larger social values related to their perspective on land management began to change and there was more interest in offsetting the negative impact on surrounding parties. In recognition of these negative externalities, the government stepped in and created structures that were designed to reduce the harms to the larger society and to help individuals make better decisions around their land management practices. Soil and Water Conservation Districts were one of the tools through which the government established a system to provide technical and financial decisions that would reduce negative externalities and work to address some of the negative outcomes from previous management decisions. This idea can be found in the State Soil and Water Conservation Policy with the recognition that the maintenance of healthy soil and the prevention of soil degradation led to improved social health and wellbeing and led to economic development.

As society has become more aware of the value that the environment has on the health and well-being of the larger community, there have been a variety of philosophical and ethical developments related to views of how humans should interact with the lands in which they live and work. One of these ethical developments was the creation of the concept of a land ethic written by Aldo Leopold.

A land ethic expands the definition of "community" to include not only humans, but all of the other parts of the Earth, as well: soils, waters, plants, and animals – "the land". In a land ethic, the relationships between people and land are intertwined; care for people cannot be separated from care for the land. Thus, a land ethic is a moral code of conduct that stems from these interconnected caring relationships.[5]

While a land ethic is one perspective on managing the district's natural resource base, individuals have different ethical positions and perspectives. These ethical perspectives are developed through their relation to the land, their need for resource based economic sustenance, personal history, and many other factors. These different ethical positions will result in different perspectives on the role of conservation in land management. Even words like conservation and stewardship can have very different meanings for individuals. This variety of land management perspectives and frameworks is a critical strategic issue for the district in that it will determine how landowners and others will react to the conservation message of the district.

The district board and staff identified the role of ethics and values as a component of working with the customer base. As ethics are not fixed, the district can take a strategic focus on influencing the conservation ethic around the protection and improvement of the land base. This focus would align with the state soil and water policy that identifies landowners as having a responsibility for the proper management of their land. By working to define and promote a conservation ethic, the district will also change the values of landowners, which is the applied perspective of an ethical vision.

Landowner Awareness, Willingness, and Capacity

While the Sherburne SWCD board and staff are deeply immersed in the world of conservation implementation, their customer base may not have the same investment, which can create barriers to outreach and implementation. Some of the potential challenges that landowners may face in relation to properly managing their natural resources is a lack of awareness, a lack of willingness to implement, and a lack of capacity. Each of these are separate barriers that create strategic issues for the conservation district that hinder outreach and implementation.

Landowner awareness has two facets in relation to the ability of the conservation district to work with partners to implement effective conservation. While landowners are the key drivers of voluntary conservation, many landowners may not be aware of the natural resources over which they have a responsibility to properly manage. Most people have limited understanding

[5] https://www.aldoleopold.org/about/the-land-ethic

of basic ecological processes because these systems are largely invisible in daily life and are not covered in depth through general education. As a result, conservation programs often require not just technical solutions, but clear, relatable communication that connects ecological functions to landowner values and real-world outcomes. Without that translation, awareness, participation, and support for conservation efforts are harder to achieve. In addition to a lack of information, there are many information sources that are incorrect and may be providing recommendations that are not appropriate for the specific site. Therefore, when a change occurs that creates a conservation challenge, a landowner may not be aware that a problem has occurred or that one can fix it. For example, they may view shoreland erosion as the cost of living next to a water body rather than being a condition that can be managed.

In addition to lacking information about the basic ecological processes, landowners may not be aware of the larger governmental system that could assist them with conservation implementation. Conservation districts play a critical but often low-visibility role in local natural resource management. While well known among agricultural producers and partner agencies, they remain largely unfamiliar to the broader public, limiting awareness of their services, impact, and value to the community. Strengthening public recognition and engagement is essential to expanding support, participation, and long-term program effectiveness. While the Sherburne SWCD has a broad outreach and engagement program, there will always be new people to reach when it comes to jurisdiction-wide conservation implementation.

Once landowners become aware of the ecosystem in which they are operating and of the potential for government assistance, willingness to implement conservation practices may become the next barrier. Landowner willingness is a critical driver of successful conservation implementation. When landowners understand the benefits, trust the process, and feel supported through technical assistance and financial incentives, they are far more likely to adopt and sustain conservation practices that advance local and regional resource goals. However, willingness is not automatic; it is shaped by factors such as economic risk, program complexity, social norms, and awareness of available options. Strengthening relationships, reducing barriers, and clearly connecting conservation outcomes to landowner values are essential strategies for increasing adoption and achieving meaningful, lasting impact. Landowner willingness is not a yes/no proposition. Landowners will exist on a continuum from highly willing to unwilling and understanding and developing a system through which the district can quickly identify a landowner's level of willingness can determine how much effort should be expended on individual landowners and if there are some generally tested strategies to move individuals to the more willing side of the spectrum.

Once landowners become aware of their conservation challenge and the ability of the district to assist with future management and reach a level of willingness where they want to implement

a conservation activity, there is still the potential barrier for capacity. Conservation districts tend to focus on two aspects of potential weakness in the ability of a landowner to implement a conservation practice: cost share and technical assistance. While these two areas of landowner assistance are important to a segment of the Sherburne County population, these are not the only factors. Other significant factors influence a landowner's ability to adopt conservation practices, including time and labor constraints, limited access to specialized equipment, and the long-term maintenance required for certain practices. Additional challenges include navigating complex program requirements, uncertainty around land tenure or succession, potential disruption to existing operations, and limited peer or community support. Addressing these capacity-related barriers alongside financial incentives is essential to increasing adoption and sustaining conservation efforts across Sherburne County.

Demographics

As the Sherburne SWCD works in both rural and residential/urban settings, it is useful to explore these two populations separately. Sherburne County's population has grown steadily, from about 88,499 in 2010 to approximately 97,183 in 2020, representing nearly a 10 % increase. The county remains relatively young compared to the state average: the median age is about 36.9 years, lower than Minnesota's median of 38.6 years. In 2020, around 26.2 % of the population was under 18 years of age and approximately 11.7 % was 65 or older. On the racial/ethnic and socioeconomic side, Sherburne County is becoming modestly more diverse: in 2010 the non-Hispanic White population was about 92.6 % of the total, while by 2020 it had declined to about 87.2 %. Economically, median household income in recent years has been above the state average (for example about $90,638 in 2021) although it also shows sensitivity to broader economic cycles.

Regarding land use, Sherburne County has experienced a noticeable shift, moving from primarily agricultural and rural uses toward increased residential, suburban-fringe, and industrial development. Zoning map amendments show parcels being rezoned from agricultural to industrial or residential uses, such as changes in Livonia Township and Big Lake Township. These trends signal that conservation outreach and practices must adapt not just to cropland owners, but also to a growing number of residential and transition-land parcels where capacity, awareness, and land-owner objectives may differ from traditional farm operations.

Agricultural Demographics

According to the National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) Censuses of Agricultural, there was a surge in the number of farms in Sherburne County between 2012 (455 farms) to 2017 (501 farms) followed by a reduction in 2022 (494 farms). However, between the same time, the

size of farms decreased from an average of 247 acres per farm in 2012 to 172 acres per farm in 2022 (see Table 2).

	2012	2017	2022
Number of Farms	455	501	494
Land in farms (acres)	112,358	102,544	85,044
Average size of farms (acres)	247	205	172

Table 2: Farm Changes

The economics of farming in Sherburne County saw an increasing percentage of the county's farms making less than $2,500 per year in farm sales. The percentages of farms making more than $2,500 largely remain unchanged between 2012 and 2022. (See Figure 7).

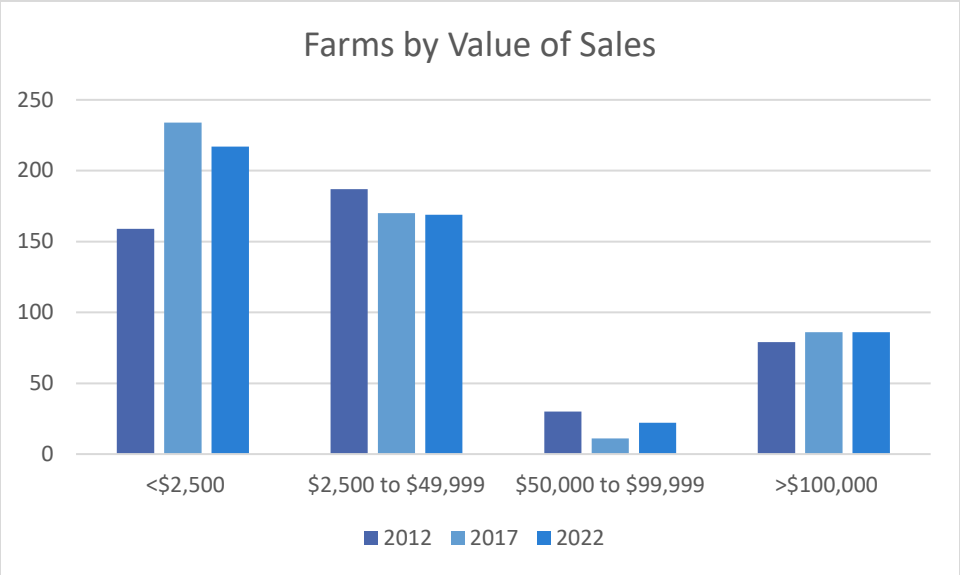


Figure 8: Number of Farms by Value of Sales

The breakdown of the size of the farms within the county show an interesting trend. There was a lot of growth in the number of farms within the 1-9 acre category. There was a modest increase in the number of farms in the 10-49 acre category. Then declines in the number farms in the categories between 50 and 1,000 acres. The number of farms over 1,000 acres remained relatively stable (See Figure 8).

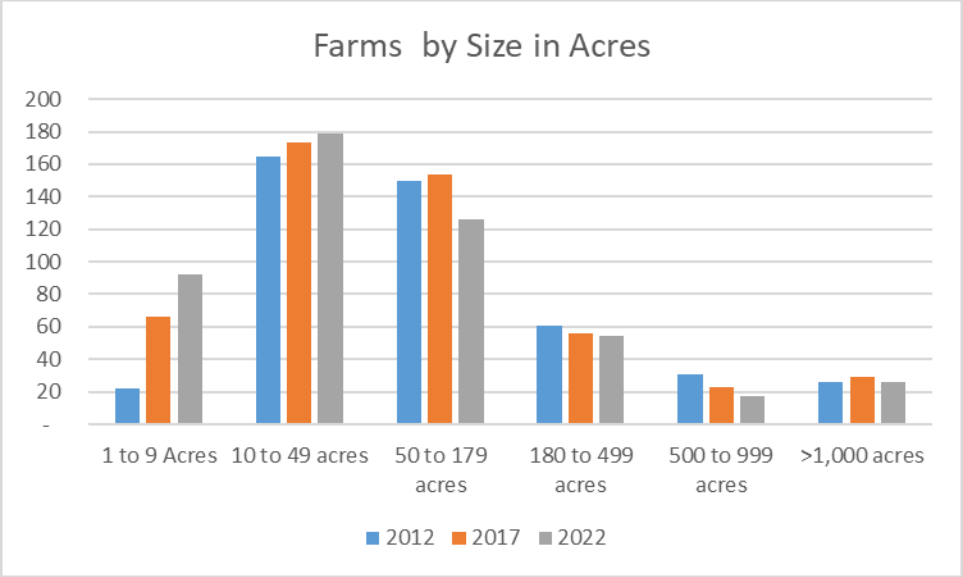


Figure 8: Number of Farms per Acre Class

The demographics of farm producers saw substantial changes between 2017 and 2022. The 2017 Census data calculated gender by a different standard and was not included in this analysis. While the number of women producers stayed roughly the same between 2017 and 2022, the number of male producers increased substantially (Figure 9). While the producer gender showed substantial change, the age cohort of the producers stayed roughly the same between the two time periods (Figure 10).

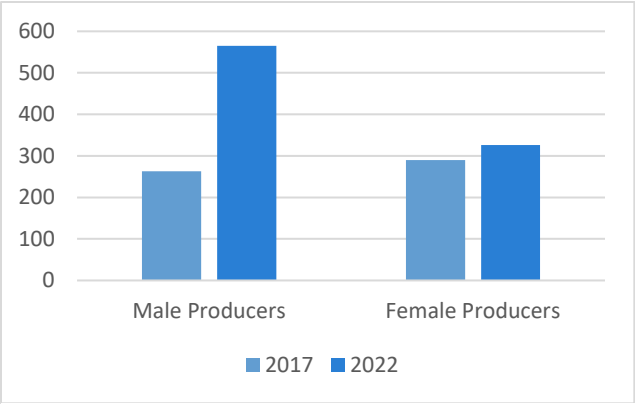


Figure 9: Producer Gender

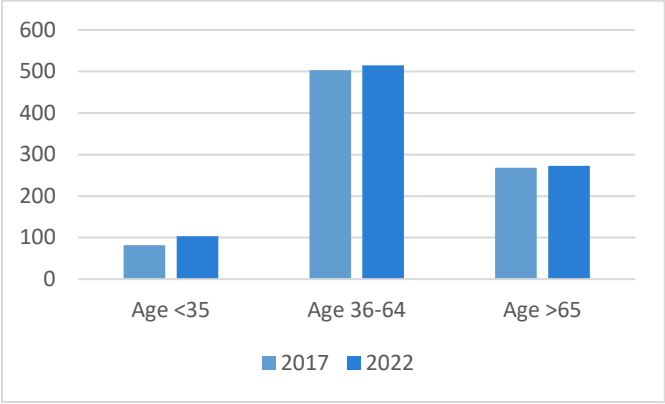


Figure 10: Producer Age

STAFFING

As a conservation implementation entity, one of the core components of an effective soil and water conservation district is having enough staff with the appropriate skills to provide the timely delivery of technical assistance to landowners that is partially (or fully) supported by an

administrative staff who can manage contracts with landowners and the financial administration of the district's budget. These staff duties should be overseen by a district manager who can provide a connection between the board and staff to ensure the board's directions are being followed and that the board is receiving the appropriate information from the field and administrative staff to make the informed choices relating to board directions.

In addition to the staff that are directly employed by the Sherburne Soil and Water Conservation District, there are strong local partnerships with the Natural Resources Conservation Service that are important to directing federal resources to conservation implementation. Beyond this close relationship with the NRCS, the Sherburne SWCD is also engaged with many regional partnerships to share services and work jointly with adjacent conservation districts and counties. However, the staff in these partner agencies lie outside of the direct control of the Sherburne SWCD board and manager, which places them beyond the ability of the district to influence them in such a way as to meet the district's strategic needs.

STAFF CAPACITY

The environment in which conservation districts are working is becoming increasingly complicated with new programming from the state, more interested partners at the local level, and changes in the work environment such as improvements in technology and new natural resource management techniques and processes. This changing environment is creating a strategic issue around having enough staff capacity to meet the challenges and exploit the opportunities in the current conservation environment.

New opportunities such as the state's focus on Soil Health and Climate Change and the maturing of initiatives such as the Comprehensive Watershed Management Plan implementation partnerships are new areas into which the district can choose to take more ownership and expand their service offering to residents. The increased flexibility of existing programs such as the Conservation Contracts (formerly the State Cost Share program) allow for greater discretion at the local level, which can allow for expansion that includes working with underserved audiences. While these new programs create opportunities, the district may not have enough staff to exploit the programs fully and effectively.

While new programs may require the district to bring on new staff, existing staff also need to stay current with program and technology changes to ensure they are staying at the leading edge of their field. The state frequently updates program requirements, which means that district staff need to receive regular training to avoid compliance issues. Computer-based technology such as resource models, geographic information system (GIS) advances, drone and other autonomous remote sensing devices, and regular software updates can also require refresher training or the development of skills to match new competencies. The requirement

of staff to stay current on their jobs is a strategic issue that will require the manager and board to invest resources such as training funds and ensure there is adequate time scheduled for individual employee training.

Another area in which staffing capacity is seeing some changes is the nature of the work environment. With the required movement to a remote environment due to the COVID pandemic, local governments have gained experience with managing a remotely working workforce. The ability of staff to work remotely has opened new opportunities for more flexible scheduling. This flexible scheduling can create opportunities for more flexible working with local landowners who may not be available during regular district business hours. This awareness of the possibilities of flexible scheduling options is a sub-issue within the larger staffing capacity issue that can create potential incentives, increasing staff retention.

RETENTION OF EXISTING STAFF

The hiring and training of a new employee is an expensive and time-consuming process. This stage of the employment process can take up to a year. During this time, the employee gains experience that allows them to understand the clientele, learn about the constraints of the natural environment, and develop relationships that are critical to the successful completion of their duties. When an employee leaves the organization, the organization loses that experience, and it can take years for a new employee to develop the experience that will allow them to reach their full potential. Therefore, retention of existing employees was identified as a critical strategic issue to ensure the district continues to operate at its full potential.

Retention of existing staff is becoming even more of a strategic issue with the amount of new funding and the development of new programming designed to meet critical state natural resource needs. While many districts will look to meet this need by hiring individuals who are new to their careers, some districts are looking at neighboring district employees as a potential pool from which they can recruit an experienced person who can begin immediate program implementation. This recruitment of neighboring district employees can create opportunities for professional development that may not be available in their current positions, which can make moving to another organization attractive. This inter-district competition for staff is a new strategic issue that has not often been experienced by conservation districts.

RECRUITING, HIRING, ON-BOARDING, AND TRAINING FOR INCREASED WORKLOAD

While retaining existing staff and ensuring they are trained to effectively do their jobs in the face of a rapidly changing environment, there may be a need to hire new employees to just stay current with the many new opportunities that are being presented to districts. The process of

finding and bringing new employees into the organization was identified as a sub-component of the larger staffing strategic issue.

The increase in new statewide programs that support conservation district programming means that there is a need across the state for individuals with a very specific skill set. This is creating an environment in which conservation districts are looking for employees in a very limited potential applicant pool. In addition, districts may find their existing employees being sought out for these positions due to their high levels of experience and the potential for professional development growth.

Finding employees who meet existing requirements can be challenging, particularly if the district is looking to fill positions with individuals with no or limited work experience beyond a college degree. The current competitive environment for finding employees may require districts to look far beyond their current recruitment pool. In addition, there is an increasing effort to ensure that districts are recruiting from a pool of individuals with a diverse background who may come with experiences that are not in alignment with those of the landowners who live and work within Sherburne County.

Once satisfactory employees are found and recruited, effectively working through the hiring process to ensure the individual moves from a candidate to an employee is an important process to ensure there are no barriers.

The final component of an effective hiring strategy is ensuring that a new employee is appropriately brought into the organization and made to feel as if they have come to a place where they belong. This on-boarding process includes completing all required paperwork and processes required by federal and state law and local district policies. It also includes informing the employee of optional benefits and ensuring they are aware of their enrollment options, which can include explaining long-term consequences of the decisions they will make during the hiring process. Another important component of the staffing strategic issue is considering how new employees learn about and are brought into the culture of the Sherburne SWCD. This will require the Sherburne SWCD evaluate ways to ensure the organization can adapt to the new employee to ensure they come to feel they belong to organization.

While on-boarding is the first part of bringing an individual up to the minimal required standards for a Sherburne SWCD employee, most individuals are going to require some level of training to ensure they achieve minimal required professional standards relating to fulfilling their job duties. While many traditional conservation district employee training programs focus on the technical capacity of staff, it can be useful for the district to think about providing training in social marketing to ensure they have the capacity to work with people as well as the

land. The board and staff have identified training as an important sub-component of the staffing strategic issue.

Acculturation	Belonging
is a process through which a person or group from one culture comes to adopt the practices and values of another culture, while still retaining their own distinct culture. https://www.thoughtco.com/acculturation-definition-3026039	is the feeling of security and support when there is a sense of acceptance, inclusion, and identity for a member of a certain group. It is when an individual can bring their authentic self to work. https://diversity.cornell.edu/belonging/sense-belonging

While adding new staff to address existing and future workloads is often a preferred route for many conservation districts, there are other ways of increasing workload while not adding additional staff. Increasing partnerships with other organizations that lead to shared service agreements are a potential consideration. There is an increasing opportunity to work with consultants to expand capacity on a temporary or long-term basis. As the district works through the process of meeting workload as a strategic issue, the board and staff should be mindful of other opportunities that may present themselves and take a broad perspective on different tools for increasing workload.

TECHNOLOGY

Within the past few years, there are several new technologies that have become relevant in relation to staffing. Artificial intelligence tools like ChatGPT and Microsoft Co-Pilot have allowed for the rapid automation and processing of many staff actions. What used to take hours of staff time can often be outsourced to an AI engine that can do the same, if not better, work in minutes. The wise use of AI technology can allow existing staff to be more efficient by offloading those activities that are routine and follow a standard process. While much of the effort on incorporating AI has taken place outside of the conservation realm, the Sherburne SWCD board and staff may want to look at some of the AI opportunities to find efficiencies.

The SWCD staff have effectively adopted social media technologies like podcasting and having an active Facebook page. Social media is a tool that can enhance the outreach of the district to new clients. One of the challenges with social media is the rapidly evolving environment and the need to keep fresh with the new resources and content. As the staff continues to grow into this market, care should be taken to ensure that there is an adequate and measurable return on the investment of time to develop these tools.

While advancements in technology can make work easier and open new venues for engaging with different partner groups, the district board and staff will need to be mindful of the existing

venues upon which the past success has been laid. Implementing conservation activities is a personal activity that often requires the building of trust with a landowner, who is taking a risk in a world about which they may not be familiar, and the conservation district staff. While technology advances, the board and staff should be careful about ensuring what has been successful is not forgotten. Accidentally abandoning something that works in favor of adopting something new may create another strategic issue.

PARTNERSHIPS

The landscape of conservation implementation is becoming ever more complex with many new entities wanting to become involved in managing the environment and improving the state's soil and water resources. With so many new entrants to the conservation effort, there are substantial opportunities available to the Sherburne SWCD in pursuing ways to enhance their conservation delivery structure. When effectively utilized, these new and existing organizations can spread the message far beyond what is capable within the existing structure of the conservation district. However, not all partners are equal with some partners being less able to effectively deliver an appropriate conservation message and becoming a barrier to conservation implementation. Therefore, partnership initiation and management is a critical strategic issue for the Sherburne SWCD.

Force Multipliers

are tools that help you amplify your effort to produce more output.

https://personalmba.com/force-multiplier/

The district currently has a variety of local partners who help spread the word about the importance of conservation and are engaged in the implementation of soil and water best management practices. Within the county, there are several partners within county government that are directly engaged with the district in local conservation. These include the County Board that provides significant funding to the district and several county departments that partner with the district in implementing regulatory programs and other methods for facilitating local conservation implementation. The district also engages with adjacent conservation districts. One of the primary mechanisms for these cross-jurisdictional partnerships is the Comprehensive Watershed Management effort through which counties, watershed management organizations, and conservation districts cooperatively deliver watershed management. Outside local government partners, the district is involved with several other entities such as lake associations. Maintaining partnerships with existing organizations will be important to continuing the current level of service while expanding the partnership network can result in greater conservation at lesser effort.

The Sherburne SWCD also engages with many state government organizations. Agencies like the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources provide both funding and operational recommendations. State agencies including the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency and the Department of Natural Resources partner with the district on providing technical information and regulatory programs, such as issuing required permits for conservation projects. Other entities such as the Department of Agriculture and Health have programs and regulatory requirements that can be useful for protecting and enhancing the soil and water resources within Sherburne County. Others state partners such as the Department of Transportation can provide support around programs such as the Living Snow Fence program that uses trees to protect vital transportation corridors.

Within the federal government, the Sherburne SWCD has a close relationship with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) for the implementation of programs such as the Environmental Quality Incentives Program and the provision of technical assistance on the design and oversight of implementation of conservation practices. The Farm Services Agency works with the district through the delivery of the Conservation Reserve Program. However, recent changes within the political structure of the federal government may be creating stresses in these partnerships as reorganizations and staffing changes influence the ability of these organizations to deliver their primary programs. Beyond federal organizations that are collocated with the district, federal agencies such as the US Fish and Wildlife Service can also partner with the district on the implementation of conservation activities and the management of the Sherburne National Wildlife Refuge, or outside of the refuge and on privately owned land through the USFWS Private Lands program.

Outside of the government realm, there are a variety of potential partners that can be engaged with to enhance the delivery of local conservation. Not for profit groups like The Nature Conservancy can provide funding and serve as connectors between a larger audience and the district in relation to developing easements and encouraging the development of a larger conservation ethic. With the need for many landowners to hire private businesses to help with the installation of best management practices, the district can encourage the development of conservation implementation businesses that will support landowners in need. There are a variety of agricultural oriented businesses that support those within the farming community plan, plant, manage, harvest and sell their product. These companies can be encouraged to partner in conservation by becoming advocates for cost effective conservation implementation. Similar companies exist for the management of residential lots, and they can be leveraged to encourage the implementation of effective conservation to a larger audience.

While there is a breadth of potential partners that could be leveraged to increase the delivery of conservation in Sherburne County, partnerships come with a cost relating to the

establishment of a partnership and the future maintenance. In addition, the district will need to be aware of the potential for conflicting messages coming from partners that could confuse or distract from the effective implementation of local conservation.

ASSESSING THE ENVIRONMENT

Soil and Water Conservation Districts operate in a complex environment that consists of many forces, some within the control of the districts and others that are not. The external environment consists of those forces that are generally outside of the organization's direct control but can have significant influence over the ability of the district to meet its mission and fulfill its vision. These external forces provide both opportunities and challenges. The internal environment are those factors that are generally within the district's control. These internal forces are the strengths and weaknesses that define the district and serve to expand or constrain the ability of the organization to respond and adapt to changes in the external environment.

EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

During the strategic plan discussion, the board and staff assessed their external environment and identified areas that were opportunities and barriers to the achievement of the district's vision. The attendees made insightful connections such as identifying that, while there may be forces that are opportunities, these same forces may be barriers. While the following section on opportunities and challenges highlight many of the external factors that can influence the ability of the district to advance its mission and achieve its vision, the attendees provided specifics items related to the changing demographics that will be included at the end of this section.

EXTERNAL OPPORTUNITIES

The board and staff explored a range of opportunities looking at different features of the external environment that should serve to increase the ability of the district to achieve its strategic vision for the mid-term future. They identified forces related to the social, political, and economic environment that could provide exciting opportunities to expand the district's reach and allow for engaging with new partners and clients.

Funding

The Minnesota legislature and governor have shown increasing interest in supporting the implementation of voluntary conservation through the provision of enhanced funding for existing programs. Programs such as the comprehensive watershed management program have shifted the focus of conservation funding from competitive grants to more stable watershed-based implementation funding. This increase in stable funding allows for watershed partnerships to build lasting programs that can allow for the long-term

commitment to the implementation of water quality and quantity protection and restoration activities. In addition, the transfer of SWCD Local Capacity funding from the Clean Water Fund to the government aid funding source places this funding on more stable ground in that it does not need to be approved every year or compete with other Clean Water Fund programs of interest.

There are many new and enhanced programs that will allow conservation districts the ability to provide greater services to their landowners. Significant funding related to soil health, climate mitigation, and water storage provide opportunities to add depth to efforts that are already being undertaken by district staff, although currently on a limited basis. Additional support to programs like Lawns to Legumes give conservation districts a tool to allow landowners to directly engage with the state to address individual interests related to habitat conservation and pollinator protection.

Sherburne County Landowner Engagement

As the district's efforts at soil and water conservation is driven primarily through the voluntary implementation of activities by landowners, the county's landowners provide many opportunities through which additional conservation can be implemented. As the farm community changes, opportunities for continuing and new engagement will open and close. The current farming community appears to be more accepting of adopting a variety of conservation practices that improve soil health and reduce runoff to adjacent water resources.

The work of the conservation district appears to have reached a tipping point in which there are enough conservation practices installed throughout the county that residents are beginning to take notice and see the benefits. This leads to an increasing awareness about the role of private land conservation among landowners and residents. As the awareness of potential conservation activities increases, more potential projects come to light, which can increase the need for district services to meet an increasing need.

Beyond the traditional customer base of agricultural producers, there is also a shift in the perception of urban residents and local government leaders around the management of land for many natural resource activities. Those living and working within urban areas are embracing more active management related to stormwater issues and habitat concerns such as providing space for pollinators. There is also increasing acceptance regarding the management of landscapes for climate adaptation and mitigation. State programs such as Climate Smart are

supporting these efforts to modify landscapes in such a way as to capture more carbon and be resilient in the face of more extreme weather events.

Landowners within the district's jurisdiction seem to be moving away from a transactional relationship toward a partnership and collaboration relationship. Rather than working on one-off projects, landowners are seeking and engaging in deeper relationships around redefining their stewardship vision and looking at conservation throughout their properties. This allows for a more comprehensive approach based upon a long-term vision of benefits that could be multi-generational.

Conservation Partners

Within the system in which the Sherburne Soil and Water Conservation District operates, there are several organizations and entities who are also involved in assisting individuals with the protection of the district's soil and water resources. At the local government level, there are partnerships with the county and several cities working to protect public resources and to install conservation activities on public lands. While the conservation district staff and board have many existing partnerships with local units of government, there is the recognition that these efforts could be expanded as the district and new local government partners find places where their visions align in relation to the protection of land and water resources.

Within the local government structure, the Sherburne SWCD maintains a strong relationship with the Sherburne County Board of Commissioners. The county board has a standing commitment to have a commissioner attend the SWCD board meetings to ensure there is an effective level of communication between the two entities. In addition, the county board provides a consistent level of funding to the district, which has slowly grown over the years. The county also trusts the district enough to delegate the implementation of programs such as local water planning.

Within the county government organizational structure, the district has strong partnerships with many of the county departments. These partnerships allow for advancing the awareness of the district within the larger county government structure and enhances collaboration on projects that can benefit the county and residents. The county also has many ordinances that dictate scope within which many land management activities can occur. Through the effective

management of the ordinance administrative process, the county serves as a regulatory management partner around land use decisions.

The Sherburne SWCD partners with adjacent counties, conservation districts, and other entities to share services and collaborate on projects. This sharing allows the district to expand its service offerings and allows for an exchange of best administrative and organizational practices to allow for continual adaptive management.

Outside of the government sector, the not-for-profit sector is becoming more interested and involved in the delivery of conservation services and the protection of the district's resources. These non-governmental organizations are another potential set of partners for expanded local conservation delivery. Working with these entities allows for the sharing of the burden involved with delivering needed conservation assistance. The for-profit business sector is a growing opportunity as there are more entities who recognize the potential customer opportunity among those who are interested in conservation and can provide services that are beyond the current capacity of the district.

Technology

The technology surrounding conservation planning and implementation is consistently changing as new models are developed, computer programs are written, and machinery is invented and improved. This technology allows staff the ability to gather and process unprecedented amounts of information to develop a better understanding of the landscapes in which they are working and craft management activities that are more likely to achieve the desired conservation objective. These changes are creating a force multiplier effect where the existing skills of staff are magnified by supportive technologies. In addition, many technology resources are coming down in price with some tools being offered at no cost through cellphone applications.

An area of technology change is the potential role of artificial intelligence in the implementation of conservation activities. The improvements in processing speed and the ability to access and use massive amounts of memory allow for increases in speed in the development of concepts and the potential for assistance in a decision-making process. The use of real-time data in ever more powerful models enhances the ability of local governments to be more accurate in their predictions of the outcomes of practice implementation at different scales.

Research and Data

While technology advances create substantial opportunities, there is an ever-increasing amount of research and data related to the natural resource environment in which the district's staff are operating. Information from water quality monitoring, soil health testing, and ground water extraction data are just some of the increasing sources around which conservation decisions can be made at scales ranging from the individual parcel to the district to entire watersheds.

In addition to the ecological data, there is ever more available social data that is generated from public and private sources. Community demographics, county revenue and expenditure reporting, and surveys about attitudes and opinions provide tools that can help with targeting the conservation message to the right audience and allocating scarce resources to different projects in a way that is most useful.

The district also generates a lot of data related to its engagement with individuals and the larger community. Landowner project files contain information on landowner management trends around specific project types that can be aggregated into data sets that allow for better understanding of the kinds of projects installed and allow for management assistance for projects that appear to suffer from higher rates of out-year failures. The district can also use the information from their social media activities to identify and target their outreach to broaden the audience for the district's services.

EXTERNAL BARRIERS

While the external environment presents several opportunities that can be exploited by the district to grow and expand their conservation capabilities to fulfill their vision, there are some substantial barriers. As the board identified, many barriers are tied to opportunities. By using this insight as the board pursues opportunities, they should be well placed to identify, understand, and mitigate potential barriers.

State and Federal Funding Sources

While there have been substantial increases in state and federal funding opportunities, these funding sources come with barriers that make them difficult to implement at the local level. State funding is providing to the Sherburne SWCD through grant agreements that have specific timelines and requirements. While working with a landowner to design and implement a specific

conservation practice can take several years, grant agreements generally have a duration of three years. This creates an inconsistency between the interest of the landowner and the interest of the state in relation to the ability to provide funding to a project. In addition to grant agreement timelines, there are many process barriers (bureaucratic red tape) that both conservation districts and landowners need to go through before a project can have funding allocated to it and for the landowner to receive a final payment. While much of these bureaucratic barriers are set in place to ensure funds are spent in an ethical manner, they create obstacles to working with landowners.

The addition of Watershed Based Implementation Funding (WBIF) creates a more stable funding source for the district, but it constrains the district's ability to work with willing landowners. The interests and challenges faced by individual landowners is driven by personal interest and environmental conditions, not plan priorities. This can create an obstacle to effective conservation implementation because a highly motivated landowner with a substantial conservation problem that lies outside of the comprehensive plan priorities or a grant work plan may not be able to access state funding.

The recent increases in state funding have created substantial opportunities for increased conservation implementation within Sherburne County. However, these funding sources are delivered through a political process where funding allocations are determined every two years. While many of these funding sources are fairly stable, there is an inherent risk to state funding. In addition, many of the new programs are funded through allocations tied to one biennium. Without continuations of this funding, the district may ramp up for program delivery and find the funding source disappears the next biennium.

This surge in recent funding has also created a bottleneck in the ability of the district to effectively deliver the associated project implementation. With so many new programs, there is simply not enough time or capacity for the staff to ramp up their delivery to meet the expectations of the funding sources. There is also a challenge with staff having to learn ever more policies related to new funding sources. While there is an abundance of riches in terms of recent funding for the implementation of many conservation activities, there is a limit to how much the district staff can deliver through their current capacity. With the uncertainty of the continuation of the state-based funding, there is a risk associated with increasing staffing to meet the current needs without a high degree of assurance for the continuance into the future.

County Funding

With the potential shifts of funding for programs moving from the federal government to the state government and from the state government to the local government, there is the potential for both an increase in a need for local revenue (derived from additions to the property tax) and a reduction in services. During these periods of fiscal retrenchment, the county board of commissioners may seek to protect internal programs at the expense of external partners to whom they have traditionally transferred funds. While the county does transfer many state grant funds to the district for program administration, it is not outside the realm of possibility for the county to rescind the delegation of these programs and return the responsibilities and associated funding to a county department. There may also be potential budget reductions as the county seeks to offset losses to core programs by sacrificing the needs of what are perceived as non-essential county services.

Fiscal Retrenchment

refers to a government's efforts to reduce spending and/or increase taxes to address a budget crisis or reduce public debt. It essentially involves a shift towards austerity measures to stabilize the government's finances.

Cost of Labor and Materials

Inflation poses a significant challenge to conservation implementation by increasing the cost of both labor and materials, making it more expensive to carry out restoration, construction, and land management projects. Rising wages driven by broader labor market pressures can strain already limited program budgets, while the cost of essential supplies (native seed, rock, lumber, fuel, and specialized equipment) can escalate unpredictably, reducing the number of projects that can be completed with existing funds. These cost pressures can delay implementation timelines, force scope reductions, or require additional funding and partner contributions, ultimately slowing progress toward conservation goals and reducing the long-term impact of investments.

County Government Relations

The district has effective relations with the county government across many levels. However, there is a potential risk to these relationships that are outside of the district's control. Elections can change the county board. When a new

county commissioner is elected, that person is likely to have limited exposure to the conservation district and will need to be informed about the depth of the relationship between the two organizations. Even when the new commissioner is exposed to the positive outcomes of the relationship, they may not see the value in the relationship and take an adversarial position in terms of district engagement.

The county staff may also create challenges to the district's ability to meet its vision. Department heads are focused on their internal staff, processes, and structures. This can result in department heads not seeing the benefits the district can provide to the department and view the district as competition for limited funds. There may be department heads who are pricklier and not interested in working with the district staff due to personality misalignment. In addition, department heads change, which can result in the same situation as would occur when a county commissioner changes. With change, the district-county relationship would need to reviewed and refreshed.

Landowner Cooperation

With the conservation district working with voluntary and willing landowners for conservation implementation, there needs to be a pool of willing landowners. However, not every landowner in Sherburne County may be willing or able to work with the conservation district. There are landowners within the county who have a negative view towards government engagement and do not want to enter any relationship with a government entity. The following table provides some of the reasons a landowner may choose not to engage with the Sherburne SWCD.

Personal Reason / Concern	Description	Possible Strategies for Conservation Districts
Privacy Concerns	Hesitation to allow staff on property; fear of public scrutiny	Emphasize confidentiality, explain site visit purposes, offer remote consultations where possible
Autonomy / Control	Desire to manage land independently; worry about restrictions	Present projects as voluntary, highlight flexibility, involve landowner in decision-making
Time and Effort	Perception of bureaucratic processes; busy schedule	Simplify paperwork, provide clear timelines, offer assistance with forms or planning
Financial Concerns	Fear of hidden costs or long-term obligations	Clearly outline funding, cost-share programs, and maintenance responsibilities; provide examples of completed projects
Distrust / Past Negative Experiences	Previous bad experiences with agencies	Build trust through transparent communication, provide references or testimonials from other landowners
Philosophical / Cultural Beliefs	Preference for traditional practices or skepticism about conservation	Respect existing practices, frame conservation as complementary, provide evidence of benefits
Fear of Regulation / Legal Implications	Concern about triggering oversight or losing land-use options	Clarify that participation is voluntary, explain legal protections, provide written assurances where possible
Social / Peer Pressure	Worry about neighbors' opinions	Share success stories, emphasize individual choice, encourage community workshops or peer networking
Uncertainty About Benefits	Doubt that the project will improve soil, water, or habitat	Offer demonstrations, site visits, or data showing project outcomes
Emotional Attachment	Strong attachment to historic land use	Approach with sensitivity, highlight ways to integrate new practices without losing heritage

DEMOGRAPHICS AND LAND USE

During the assessment discussion around external barriers, the attendees kept returning to demographic issues. The decision was made to review demographic and land use factors as a separate section. Within each item identified, there are both opportunities and barriers that will influence the district's ability to achieve its conservation and organizational vision. However, being aware of these factors will help the district better understand the larger social environment within which conservation decisions are being made.

Changing Demographics

According to the Minnesota Department of Employee and Economic Development, Sherburne County had 103,059 people in 2024, which was a 6% increase since 2024 placing the county as the fourth fastest growing county

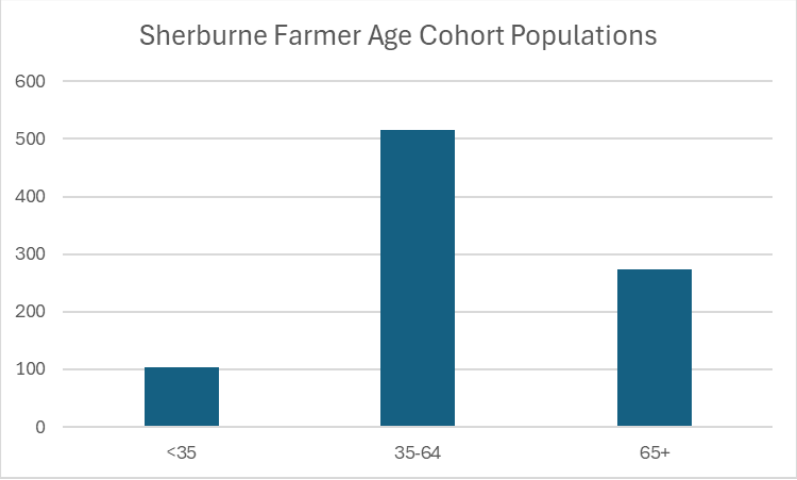
within the state. This population growth is driven by both the number of births and people moving into the county. The county's population is younger than average within the state, although there is a significant number of baby boomers who are moving through the age pyramid. The county is also becoming more racially diverse.

The population of Sherburne County is expected to increase by 14% over the 2020 population. The age cohorts of those between 25 and 34 and those between 65 and 74 are expected to continue increasing as a share of the county's population. Much of this population growth is driven by the proximity of the county to the Minneapolis/St Paul Metropolitan Area and the Highway 10 and Interstate 94 transportation corridors.

Farm Demographics

The National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) conducts a Census of Agriculture (CoA) every five years, with the most recent one being done in 2025 (See Appendix A). The CoA indicated there were 494 farms in 2022 with 891 producers on those farms. This would indicate that many farms had at least two people who were identified as a producer associated with a specific farm. This has implications for how the Sherburne Conservation District may want to consider its relationship with farms and the producers on those farms. Care should be taken to ensure that the district is working with all the producers involved in decision making when engaging with landowners.

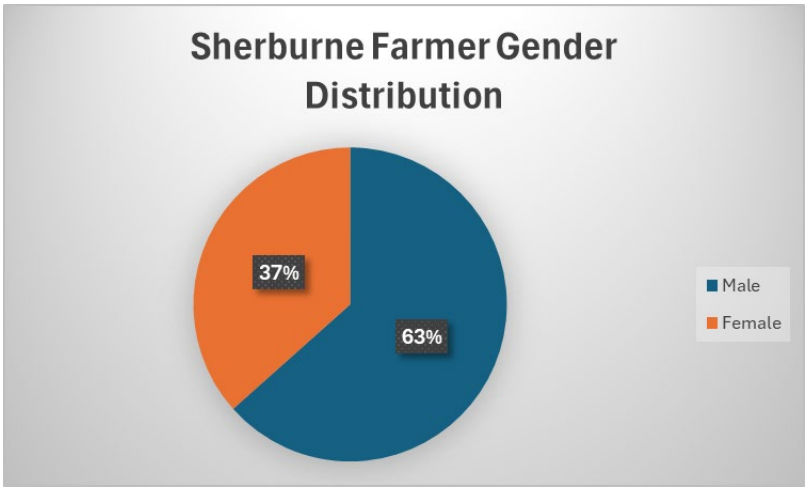
According to this census, the more than half of the agricultural producers in the county were between 35 and 64 in the 2022 Census.



The following table is a comparison of how age can influence an agriculture producer's decision-making process when it comes to installing conservation practices.

Influence / Factor	Farmers <34 (Young)	Farmers 35–64 (Mid-Career)	Farmers 65+ (Older)
Time Horizon / Planning	Long-term perspective; willing to invest in projects with delayed benefits	Balanced: can consider both short-term and long-term benefits	Shorter horizon; prefer immediate or near-term benefits
Physical Capacity / Labor	Generally physically capable; open to labor-intensive practices	Adequate capacity; may hire labor for intensive tasks	May avoid physically demanding practices; rely on hired help
Financial Risk Tolerance	Higher risk tolerance; more willing to experiment	Moderate risk tolerance; weigh cost-benefit	Risk-averse; cautious about upfront costs and uncertain payoffs
Knowledge / Attitudes	Open to new technologies, innovative conservation methods	Mix of traditional and modern practices; adaptive	Prefer familiar, proven methods; may be skeptical of new approaches
Program Participation	Likely to participate in long-term or experimental programs; value incentives	Participate in both short-term and long-term programs	Prefer short-term, low-effort programs; less likely in multi-year initiatives
Legacy / Estate Considerations	Less of a factor; may focus on personal farm growth	Consider succession planning; maintain land value for heirs	Strong influence; motivated to leave land in good condition for heirs
Peer / Social Influence	Influenced by peers, mentors, and online networks	Mix of peer, family, and community influence	Primarily influenced by local networks, family, and long-term community relationships
Environmental / Conservation Attitude	High awareness of sustainability; environmentally motivated	Balance productivity and conservation; pragmatic	May support conservation for legacy or compliance reasons; practical orientation

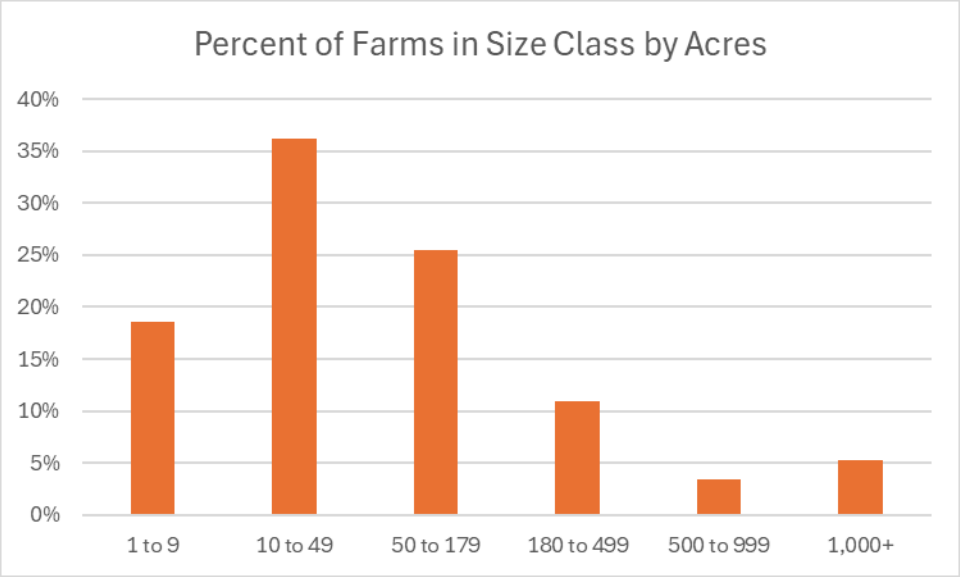
The Sherburne Census of Agriculture also provides a gender distribution with 565 of the 891 producers being men. As with age cohorts, gender may influence the decision-making process of the producer.



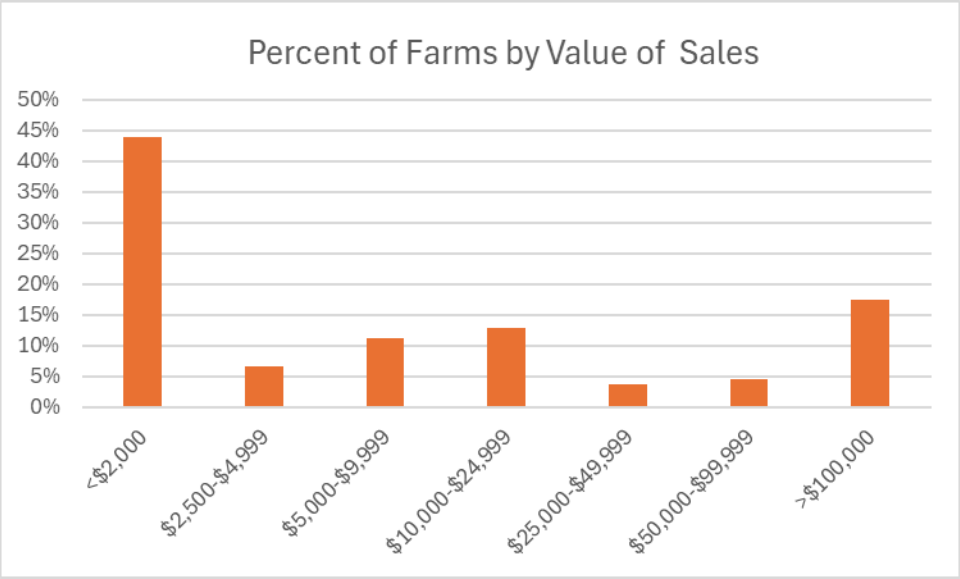
Influence / Factor	Male Producers	Female Producers
Decision-Making Style	Often more individualistic; may take more independent decisions on crop choice, inputs, or investments	Often collaborative; may involve family members, peers, or community in decision-making
Risk Tolerance	Typically higher risk tolerance; more willing to adopt new or experimental practices	Typically more risk-averse; cautious with investments and experimental practices
Adoption of Technology / Innovation	More likely to adopt new machinery, chemicals, or large-scale practices	May adopt new practices more gradually; emphasize labor efficiency, resource optimization, and knowledge-based tools
Conservation Practices	May focus on economically-driven conservation decisions (profit, yield, efficiency)	Often motivated by environmental, social, or sustainability considerations in addition to economic benefits
Program Participation	Participate in programs that maximize production or profit; may respond to incentives	Participate in programs emphasizing environmental, educational, or community outcomes; may value technical support and training
Information Sources	More likely to rely on extension agents, suppliers, peers, or agribusiness	Often rely on peer networks, women's farming groups, cooperatives, and formal training or community programs
Labor and Management	May prioritize mechanization and labor efficiency	May balance labor between farm and household responsibilities; consider practical ease of implementation
Risk Management / Finance	May focus on market-based strategies and investment returns	May focus on diversification, household impact, and multi-dimensional benefits of practices
Community / Social Influence	Influenced by peer networks, neighbors, and economic peers	Influenced by family, community networks, cooperatives, and local social groups

The CoA provides information on the number of farms in a series of size classes. The 'average' size farm in Sherburne County is 172 acres with more than half of the farms are less than 200 acres. There are only 97 farms that are larger 180 acres. This creates a potential challenge in terms of district programming that is targeting agricultural producers. While there are many more farmers in the lower acreage ownership categories, those who own larger farms will have more area with which to work and may have more influence over the conservation landscape.

Unlike the information on age and gender, the research around conservation attitudes and size of farm is mixed. There are too many confounding variables that relate to farm size to provide a useful assessment for landowner willingness to adopt conservation practices.



The Census of Ag also breaks down farms by the annual value of sales. Within the county, 44% of the farms are making less than $2,000 in annual sales. Seventeen percent of the farms are making over $1,000,000 in annual sales. Based upon this information, a significant number of famers in the county are likely to be hobby farmers that are farming for the joy of farming rather than to provide an income for the family. This division of farms into sales value per year can be a strong tool in developing outreach to these landowners who are not making significant money from their farming enterprises.



Farmer Customer Profiles

Based upon the demographic information contained within the county Census of Agriculture, there are customer profiles that can be developed based upon the

grouping of specific features with each category. These customer profiles can be used in targeting outreach to specific demographic groups. As these are aggregates of the underlying data, the profiles are not meant to represent any specific individual but to be representative of a larger class. Should the district choose to utilize these customer profiles, they will want to test them for accuracy and validity with the actual landowners in the county.

The following are narrative summaries based upon the data from the customer profiles.

The Small-Acreage Part-Time Producer: Emily's Patchwork Farm

Emily is 42 and lives just outside the small town where she teaches high school science. Five years ago, she bought a 12-acre property, mostly pasture and a small wooded area, because she wanted space, quiet, and a place to grow her own food. She sells the occasional bundle of garlic or a few dozen eggs at the farmers' market, but her annual farm income is well under $2,000.

Most evenings, after school, she walks her fence lines and checks on her small flock of hens. Farming is not her livelihood; it's more a piece of her identity. She's curious about improving her soil and planting pollinator habitat, but she's intimidated by anything that seems like it's meant for "real farmers." Conservation program paperwork, cost-share contracts, and detailed management plans all feel a little beyond her comfort zone.

When she meets conservation staff at a community event, she asks simple, practical questions:

"Is there something small I can start with? Do I have enough acreage to qualify? I don't want something that will take a lot of time."

Emily is open-minded and enthusiastic, but she needs low-barrier, low-cost, easy-to-understand steps. A small native planting, a soil test, or a short workshop fits her pace. If someone helps guide her through the process, she's willing, but she won't seek out complexity on her own.

The Mid-Scale Commercial Family Farmer: Dan and the Middle 80 Acres

Dan, 57, farms about 120 acres that his parents once ran. He and his wife manage a mix of hay and row crops, balancing the work with a small cow-calf operation. Their farm earns somewhere between $10,000 and $25,000 a year,

enough to matter, but not enough to live on without Dan's off-farm job at the local co-op.

Dan knows his soil pretty well. He can read the fields by sight: the clay spot that never dries out, the knoll that burns up in July. He's heard about cover crops, reduced tillage, and nutrient management workshops, and he's interested, especially if they'll help him stretch fertilizer dollars and keep yields stable.

But Dan is cautious. Programs sometimes feel like commitments that might box him in. Cash-flow is tight enough that any new practice has to work and has to work soon. A bad year hurts.

When a conservation technician visits, Dan listens closely:

"If I try this, what's the risk? What'll it save me? And who's going to help me get it right?"

He's not resistant, just practical. He'll take on a conservation practice when he sees a clear path, real numbers, and support he can count on.

The Large-Scale Commercial Operator: Robert's Thousand-Acre Commitment

Robert is 63 and manages close to 1,000 acres split between rented ground and land that's been in his family for three generations. His operation brings in over $100,000 annually, and he treats it as a full business; equipment schedules, cost tracking, precision yield mapping, and winter planning meetings all come standard.

He's seen the landscape change over the years: wetter springs, tighter margins, more variable yields. Conservation isn't something he opposes, but it needs to fit logically into the operation. He's tried a few new practices, strip-till on one block, cover crops after soybeans on another, and he's evaluated them the way he evaluates everything:

Did they pencil out? Did they affect efficiency? Did they reduce risk?

Robert has worked with federal programs before, but he dislikes red tape:

"If you're going to put me in a contract, I need to know exactly what's expected. No surprises."

He's willing to make long-term commitments if they align with his business model. He wants data, performance, and clear ROI. When conservation staff come prepared with side-by-side comparisons, yield data, and streamlined processes, Robert engages. He sees conservation as a tool—not a mission—and he'll use the tools that help keep the farm resilient for the next generation.

Land Use Changes

While understanding the county demographics is a powerful tool for designing programs to meet conservation objectives, it is the behavior of these demographic groups that will generate conservation outcomes. While the past is not determinative of the future, it is a useful tool for predicting what is likely to happen in the near term. Several land use changes are occurring in the district that bear monitoring to ensure the district can mitigate those changes that are resulting in negative outcomes while seeking to enhance those changes that are resulting in positive outcomes.

The attendees at the assessment session identified that property turnovers are occurring where the original landowners are passing the property onto younger generations or to new residents in the county. Many of these new landowners may not have access to important information related to land management that were developed by the previous landowner over years of living on the property. While there is an abundance of information available to these new landowners, they may not be aware that it exists and are, therefore, unable to access it to assist in making land management decisions.

As these new landowners are developing their management strategy with their new property, they may be receptive to trying new things. Landowners often want to personalize their properties and adding conservation practices are one way to personalize the parcel and demonstrate a commitment to community enhancement that is visible to neighbors. However, social norms are a real pressure for landowners and there may be a divide in community interests with some wanting to see more manicured traditional landscapes. This can create conflict between different groups of landowners who have different visions for what it means to be a good neighbor. The district board and staff should be sensitive to these local community norms.

A related challenge related to community norms is the presence of Homeowner Associations (HOA). According to the Minnesota Attorney General's office, a HOA is a common interest community (CIC). CICs can impose requirements on

members that limit certain abilities and impose fees. These can include standards for property maintenance, including yard and lawn care. While Minnesota Statute 412.925 requires cities to allow homeowners to install and maintain managed natural landscapes, the law is silent on CICs, including HOAs. Therefore, until a court weighs in on the interpretation of the statute as it applies to HOA, they can still impose yard maintenance requirements on members. Depending upon the membership of the HOA board and the interests of the community, this can have significant impact on the ability to residents in a HOA to implement conservation practices. However, HOAs can also be an opportunity as they can share the costs of a conservation practice installed for the benefit of the larger community across the members.

There are a growing number of short-term vacation properties in the county. While there are a variety of laws and ordinances that impose conditions of a short-term vacation rental, there are no conservation requirements. The implementation of conservation practices is at the discretion of the landowner. Therefore, the role of conservation implementation is only one factor that goes into the property management decisions. Other factors that could be related to the property management decisions are catering to the expectations of renters and the need for additional property maintenance. With short-term vacation rentals being a new addition to the conservation community, their impact on the larger conservation environment is unclear.

Another land use change that is happening within the county is the development of larger residential lots. There is a trend of property owners subdividing their parcels into lots of five and ten acres. These larger residential lots create a conservation implementation challenge. They are difficult to maintain as a large residential lot, but they are small in terms of conservation management and implementation. In addition, the landowners of these lots may not see themselves as conservation stewards. While they are a growing segment of the conservation community, more work needs to be done to develop an understanding of their motivations and barriers to understand their interest and ability to become conservation stewards.

A final land use change that was discussed by the attendees was the development of solar farms. In central Minnesota, there has been increasing interest in the installation of solar farms at different scales. The conservation implications of solar farms are mixed and will depend upon the land use that was in place before the farm was installed. Some farms are being installed on

farmland that was conventionally tilled. As many of these farms will have perennial vegetation planted under the panels, there will be more permanent ground cover and potentially less vegetation. However, there is a loss of valuable farmland in the county. In lesser disturbed areas, solar farms can result in habitat degradation and fragmentation. Like many of the previously listed environmental challenges, this is an emerging issue about which more needs to be learned.

INTERNAL ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

While there are many external influences on the direction and capacity of the Sherburne SWCD, the ability of the district to respond to and influence this external environment is critical to its ability to meet its statutory mandates and fulfill its vision. Therefore, an internal assessment of the district's strengths and weaknesses is critical to understand areas in which the district excels and to find potential barriers that could hinder the ability of the district to operate effectively.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRENGTHS

Organizational strengths are those core competencies that allow the district to fulfill its mandates and effectively pursue its vision. The strengths are the internal factors relating to how the district operates internally and the ability of the district staff and board to engage effectively with others in relation to achieving desired objectives.

Staff

The current district staff are a strength in that most of the staff have been with the district for several years. This has allowed them to become familiar with the natural resources of the county and the opportunities and challenges associated with those resources. In addition, the staff has developed strong connections with the partners ranging from state and local government entities to local community groups, such as lake associations, and those individuals who are highly motivated to implement conservation activities on their lands.

The Sherburne SWCD staff, at all levels, were identified as being effective in developing and maintaining an attitude that embraces teamwork. While each member has their own strengths related to the delivery of conservation within the district, there is a willingness to work across position lines to ensure the larger needs of the district are met. This willingness to internally partner on critical issues is further enhanced by the skills of each member. While no one has a comprehensive set of skills that would make them a singular location of conservation assistance, the staff has a combination of skills to meet the immediate needs of the district's clients.

When it comes to new areas, the staff is willing to step in and take, or accept, leadership roles. Each of the staff members demonstrate leadership skills related to knowing how to plan and coordinate but also how to work within a team environment including delegating appropriate roles. There is also an awareness

that there are new issues about which the staff may lack knowledge but there is a willingness to learn new things and apply them within the local context.

The overall staffing picture within the district is highlighted by the tenure of the existing staff. When staff are actively engaged with the organization and feel valued, they enjoy coming to work and stay with an organization. Staff retention results in deeper institutional knowledge that increases productivity and improves relationships with the community. While there have likely been opportunities for staff to see new experiences with other organizations, they are choosing to stay with the Sherburne SWCD because it is the right place for them to work and they are committed to the larger organizational vision.

The attendees indicated that the larger community has developed a high level of trust on the skills and abilities of the district staff. This trust and the capability of the staff has resulted in clientele that appear to be 'happy' with the district's results in relation to local conservation. Happy and trustworthy can be seen as a benchmark indicative of a district that understands and fulfills the needs of the community in which they operate.

Engaged SWCD Board

While SWCD staff are the delivery structure for the conservation district, it is the board who provides governance and leadership. The Sherburne SWCD Board members are actively engaged in all aspects of district governance and maintain effective communication with the manager and staff to ensure they are responsive to important issues. The board members stay current with state and regional programs through participation in MASWCD Area IV meetings and state events like the MASWCD Annual Convention. The district board members also participate in trainings, such as the Treasurer's Training and SWCD Governance, which was recently attended by ⅗ of the Board,to remain current with the expectations of each of their roles as a board member.

While the previously stated strength of staff teamwork was a sign of a high functioning district, the district board is viewed as part of the team. The board has a cohesive strategy that, while there may be individual differences, once a decision is made, the board stands as a unified entity. This cohesion among the board flows between the board and staff in that all members of the Sherburne SWCD view themselves as part of a larger team that serves the residents to promote the conservation of district's natural resources.

As conservation districts are special purpose local government entities, they are focusing on a very specific area of state policy. This narrow focus on a specific area allows the district board and staff to maintain a flat hierarchy with minimal bureaucratic process related to the basic operational structure. Staff appear to feel comfortable discussing items with the manager and other members of the organization without encountering significant barriers to communication. The staff also appear to engage well with the board members and are not reluctant to discuss issues of relevance to any aspect of the district's management.

Recently Updated Program Structure

As a governmental organization, having an effective structure and process is critically important to demonstrate the effective delivery of programs according to grant policies and to remain transparent to members of the public who may be interested. Program and project documentation provides board members and staff with a tool for assessing the effectiveness of the district. The staff identified that there has been a recent update to the focus of the staffing of the structure of the organization to enhance the implementation of local conservation activities.

Social Media Presence

Civic outreach and engagement are important to the effective delivery of conservation activities. The Sherburne SWCD staff have embraced social media and become an active presence on a variety of platforms. While many districts have websites and Facebook pages, the district has developed a regular podcast to share information with local citizens. This kind of format allows people to better 'meet' the staff as people rather than as posters of messages on social media platforms.

Awareness of the Policy Environment

Conservation districts are uniquely susceptible to changes in the local and state political environment. The Sherburne SWCD staff and board maintain a high level of awareness to how changes in the local and state political environment can change their ability to implement conservation practices. When there are changes at the local level, the district reacts by working with new commissioners and legislators to highlight the role and value of the district. The district is also a close collaborator with the Minnesota Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts in working on issues of importance to conservation in central Minnesota and the state.

ORGANIZATIONAL WEAKNESSES

No organization is perfect. While the board and staff work to design an organization to meet current and future needs, they operate in a resource constrained environment. This means that there are actions that are a lower priority. In addition, due to resource constraints there are internal barriers that will prevent the district from implementing its mission and achieving its vision. For this plan, the board and staff should not look at barriers as negative aspects of the district structure and operations. Barriers should be seen as the realities of district operations in which the achievement of certain objectives will be harder than others. The board and staff have identified several weaknesses that correlate with some of the items found in the strengths section. This understanding that each strength likely has a corresponding weakness represents a high level of maturity regarding how the board and staff understand the peculiarities of their organization.

Staff Communication

Within any organization that has staff in highly specialized positions, communication between staff can break down because of the development of silos. The staff identified this as a challenge within the district. With the staff being highly engaged with their specific areas of focus, it is difficult to know what to share with whom when. While there is a degree of cross-training and cooperation, having an awareness of the potential development of communication silos is important to ensure that everyone remains engaged with the overall mission of the organization.

Continuing Education Needs

The board envisions staff who are experts in their fields. With conservation implementation being an ever-evolving profession, new techniques and concepts are regularly introduced. This requires staff to seek out regular education events to keep current. However, they also need to perform their core job duties around engaging with the public and overseeing conservation implementation. This is a balancing act of ensuring there is enough time parceled off from the core job duties to allow staff to attend training. The manager and staff are doing a good job of this currently but should be mindful of the competing pressures.

Competition for Staff Benefits

With conservation districts operating in a severely constrained fiscal environment, it can be difficult to compete with other organizations for wage and benefit packages. Wages and benefits are an important consideration when

it comes to staff retention. The manager and Board are aware of these challenges and work together to monitor the situation. As there has not been a significant loss of staff, wage and benefits do not appear to be a large enough push factor for staff to leave.

Office Process

The attendees identified that there was a lot of process that seemed stale. Within government operations, processes and procedures are often developed in response to historic events. In many cases, these historic policies remain in the system long after their expiration date, which can hinder the ability of the organization to react to current needs. This accumulation of processes and procedures in a bureaucratic system has acquired the name of **sludge** and can hinder the ability of an organization to operate effectively and for landowners to engage in programs.

> *Sludge is the amorphous accumulation of daily frictions that separate people from the things that can make their lives easier or better.*

Measures of Success

Many conservation professionals are driven by a desire to see meaningful changes on the landscape. However, working with private landowners to implement voluntary conservation means that positive outcomes often occur after the practice has been implemented and the positive benefits are seen by the landowner. This creates a disconnect between the work of the conservation professional and the on-the-ground results. In addition, there are very few conservation activities that are going to result in immediate observable landscape level outcomes. Each practice that is installed will have a modest impact, but the cumulative results can lead to significant changes. However, these changes can take years to observe visually. Many of the changes that will be seen in the short term will be numeric changes in water quality or soil improvement, which cannot be seen. This lack of a rubric for success can make it difficult for staff to understand when they are being successful and where they should prioritize their work.

The nature of working with individual landowners can result in a focus on details rather than having a strategic focus. While there may be significant benefits to an individual landowner, there may be less awareness or appreciation of how conservation implementation is achieving a larger resource management vision.

The tracking tools and procedures associated with comprehensive watershed management implementation provide one venue for measuring these benefits.

RECOMMENDATIONS

While there are many action items identified in earlier sections of this plan, the following recommendations are generated from the information identified within the strategic issues as refined through the lens of the external and internal assessments. Many of these recommendations will require extensive development by the board and staff to determine how best to gather information and implement potential options. The components within each recommendation are sequenced in a way that should allow the board and staff to work through them in a logical fashion so that the completion of one component naturally leads into the beginning of the next. As the board and staff review these recommendations, the BWSR Board Conservationist can assist in facilitating these discussions or the district can apply for funding to hire a private consultant through the Performance Review and Assistance Program (PRAP).

FUNDING

One of the strategic issues that was a constant thread through much of the discussion around the mid-term vision for success of the Sherburne SWCD was funding. As the district is primarily reliant on funding from external sources, the inability to raise significant funds independent of other factors places a significant constraint on the ability of the district to effectively administer current programs and grow new programs. While limited revenue sources place a constraint on the ability of the district to grow into new areas, existing and future expenditures will continue to place stress on the board and staff as they work to meet local needs with a limited pool of funds from which to expend financial resources.

REVENUE

> *Revenue is the money brought into a company from its business activities over a specified period of time, such as a quarter or year, before subtracting expenses.*[6]

The Sherburne SWCD revenue sources are constrained by state statute. Unlike other units of government, conservation districts are not provided with the independent statutory authority to raise funds through the direct taxation of individuals living within their jurisdiction. While there is some taxing authority provided in the SWCD statute (MS 103C.331 Subd. 16 **Budget)** and within the Water Planning and Implementation statute governing county water planning (MS 103B.335 **Taxing Authority**), both statutes require approval from the county board before

[6] https://www.investopedia.com/terms/r/revenue.asp

a levy could be approved. Therefore, district revenue sources tend to fall into three funding buckets: Intergovernmental Transfers, Charges for Services, and Miscellaneous (see Figure 2).

INTERGOVERNMENTAL TRANSER REVENUE

The district's balance of intergovernmental transfers has changed significantly over the past 10 years with an increasing portion of the revenue coming from state grants. In 2012, state grants composed 25% of the budget and county funding was 54% of the overall budget. In 2023, state grants composed 58% of the budget while county funding fell to 33%. The district staff and board should determine if this reallocation of funding from county to state sources is in line with the district's financial objectives and risk tolerance profile.

County Transfer

While the intergovernmental transfer between Sherburne County and the district has been a declining percentage of the district's funds, the overall amount of the transfer has been slowly growing at an average rate of $18,685 per year. This funding peaked in 2020 with a decline in 2021 and remaining largely flat since then. While this transfer is stable and predictable, it does not reflect the increasing workload of district and the significant additional benefits that district is providing to the county through the administration of state grant programs. In addition, county intergovernmental transfers tend to be more reliable than state grant programs in that they are derived from local funds and less subject to variations in state budgets and decisions of the state legislature.

The Sherburne SWCD should make it a priority to work with the county board of commissioners to enhance the county funding of the conservation district. While the district formally presents its budget request to the county board annually, the manager and the board members should consider having more informal discussions with the county administrator and other financial staff to facilitate a greater understanding on the economic and ecological benefits that county funding of the district brings to the residents.

While the district provides an annual report to the county board that highlights the implementation efforts the district has conducted in the county, this report is generally light on the economic benefits the district brings to the county. In relation to financial assistance provided to landowners, there may be a misunderstanding about how cost sharing the implementation of conservation practices serves as an engine for economic development. Highlighting that cost share dollars are paid on a reimbursement basis to landowners for the costs they incur in hiring local contractors can strengthen the connection between how cost share not only benefits local landowners but also strengthens the local economy by reimbursing local contractors for the labor and supplies.

The previous actions could be performed on an annual basis to increase the county commissioners' understanding on the value of county funds that support the conservation district. However, approaching the commissioners to ask for substantial increases in funding in the next year puts the commissioners in a difficult position. Often, county administrators and commissioners have an annual budget built for the next year and large changes can be disruptive. Working with the county administrator and commissioners to increase the county funding to the district three to five years out gives time for the commissioners and administrator to add these funds into the future county budget. This addition of increasing funds for the district within future the county budgets allows the board and administrator to be more proactive in that they can plan around an expected increase rather than reactive to an immediate request for funds.

Minnesota State 103C.331 subd. 16 discusses the role of the district presenting their budget to the county. It also empowers the county to levy funds on behalf of the district. However, statute does not allow the county to indicate this district levy as a separate line item, resulting in it being added to the overall levy amount. Therefore, most counties are hesitant to levy on behalf of the district. With the statutory language allowing for county levy, it would appear that there is an expectation of county support. Working with the county board to explore the idea of building in regular increases to the district transfer could strengthen this relationship.

> *Subd. 16.Budget.*
>
> *The district shall annually present a budget consisting of an itemized statement of district expenses for the ensuing calendar year to the boards of county commissioners of the counties in which the district is located. The county boards may levy an annual tax on all taxable real property in the district for the amount that the boards determine is necessary to meet the requirements of the district. The amount levied shall be collected and distributed to the district as prescribed by chapter 276. The amount may be spent by the district for a district purpose authorized by law.*

One recent change in the county funding system that may have an influence over the ability of the county to fund the conservation district is the recent changes in the federal provision of assistance to many state grants that are passed through to support county programs. As the federal allocation and distribution of funds to support many county programs has become less predictable, county boards and administrators may choose to shift more of their self-generated funds from programs that are supported by county allocations to those programs that are integral to the provision of core county programs. This need to reallocate self-generated funds may make county boards and administrators more conservative in their decision-making process as they need to support critical programs.

State Grants

There has been a substantial increase in state funding to conservation districts. Grants such as Water Storage and Soil Health Delivery have provided opportunities to increase conservation implementation and the staffing to promote and design conservation activities supported by those programs. Another shift has been the movement away from competitive Clean Water Fund grants to Watershed Based Implementation Funding. While there has been a substantial increase in funding, much of the funding is targeted toward specific activities. So, while there is the opportunity for increases in conservation implementation, much of this implementation is constrained by program requirements. This requires the board and staff to be nimbler in relation to the acquisition and implementation of future state grants to continue funding local conservation implementation and maintaining staff support.

While historic BWSR grants were designed for general district usage (Conservation Delivery, State Cost-Share (now Conservation Contracts), newer grants are often targeted at specific resource concerns. With this new targeting, staff who have any role in grant and program delivery will need to stay current with programs and policies through attendance in optional and required trainings and to develop an effective document management system to track electronic communications related to grant and program administration. To support these efforts, the Board and manager should identify budget resources to allow staff to attend grant management training as required.

While the staff will be in the frontline of grant implementation and administration, the district board, with the support of the manager, should commit to developing a deeper understanding on the specifics of grants that are presented to the district. With the more focused nature of many grants, it will be incumbent upon the board to analyze and assess how accepting a grant is going to influence district operations and how different grants will support activities that are of value to the district. The decision to accept or reject a grant is one that lies at the discretion of the board, which empowers them to have a discussion about the benefit of accepting each grant before they authorize approval of the signature accepting the grant dollars.

The district board and staff should work within the technical advisory committee and policy committee process of the watersheds in which they participate to explore ways to increase the allocation of funding coming from WBIF to district conservation implementation. While these grants are designed to protect, enhance, and restore the water quality within the state's rivers and streams, there is recognition within the grant programming that some of this funding will be needed to support staff in the promotion, development, and design of conservation activities. The Sherburne SWCD board and staff should work within their partnership frameworks to ensure there is adequate funding provided to support local implementation. Conducting a staffing workload requirement assessment for each watershed would be a useful

tool for determining a justifiable assessment of the potential hours needed to bring landowners into the program and then design and oversee the implementation of the conservation activities. The district should work to ensure they are adequately compensated for these efforts.

The district board and staff should perform a review of the trend in state grants to understand how these grants are influencing the overall revenue structure of the district. While there appears to be a significant shift toward a greater reliance on state grants, an analysis of the actual nature of the state grants shows a trend toward larger grants. For example, the district has received local capacity grants of more than $100,000. While these local capacity grants have ceased being funded, the district is now receiving district aid funding from the Department of Revenue. As many of the larger grants are highly targeted, this could reduce the ability to district staff to react to immediate landowner needs.

If the district manager and financial staff has not already done so, they should reach out to their BWSR Grants Compliance Specialist to ensure they are capturing all eligible costs through their employee billing rate. In addition, they should continue working with their Board Conservationist to ensure their grant workplans contain the appropriate language that would allow for the maximization of charging allowable expenses, including billable hours, to the appropriate state grants. By using state grants, to the maximum extent allowable for funding staff time, non-state funding can be used for other expenditures or placed in reserve.

Predicting state budget forecasts in the out years is a challenging exercise and the projected budget numbers are subject to frequent changes. With that being said, the Minnesota Management and Budget office predicts a deficit for fiscal years 2028-2029. If this deficit comes to pass, the legislature and governor will need to either find additional revenue or reduce program expenditures. While it is difficult to determine how the process will play out, preparing for potential reductions of state funds is prudent. The district finance committee, manager, and financial staff may want to conduct some forecasting exercises to determine how the district would respond to a reduction in state grants.

($ in millions)	Feb FY 2024-25	Feb FY 2026-27	Pling Est FY 2028-29
Beginning Balance	$ 16,516	$ 7,269	$ 3,983
Revenues	61,728	64,494	67,882
Spending	70,975	66,634	71,862
Estimated Inflation	0	1,145	2,471
Balance before Reserves	$ 7,269	$ 3,983	$ (2,468)
Budget Reserve	3,177	3,177	3,177
Cash Flow Account	350	350	350
Available Balance	$ 3,742	$ 456	$ (5,995)
Available Balance without Inflation	$ 3,742	$ 1,601	$ (2,379)

Figure 9: MMB Budget Forecasts

Self Generated Funding

In terms of the ability of the district to independently generate revenue, there are two areas in which the board could reduce their dependence on others for funding including the charging for the use of machinery and supplies and charging for district services.

Using Machinery and Supplies

MS 103C.331 Subd. 9.Using machinery and supplies states:

> *A district may make available, on terms it shall prescribe, to land occupiers within the district, agricultural and engineering machinery and equipment, fertilizer, seeds, and seedlings, and other material or equipment which will assist land occupiers to implement practices on their land specified in section 103C.005.*

This statutory authority is the tool through which districts can provide goods (such as conservation grade trees) and machinery (such as a no-till drill) to producers for the implementation of conservation activities. While the district currently charges a fee to cover the cost of owning and maintaining this equipment, the critical language within this statute relating to the generation of funds is:

on terms it shall prescribe

This phrasing provides the district not only with the ability to recover the costs of ownership and maintenance but also allows the flexibility to make a profit from sales and rentals. To optimize the sale of goods and the rental of machinery, the district board and manager should consider doing a program cost evaluation to ensure that sales and rental programs are at least recovering the true cost of the implementation of the program. Following this assessment of program cost, the district board and manager may conduct a market analysis to determine

what the local market would bear in terms of increasing costs for the sale of goods or the rental of equipment.

Should the board and manager consider increasing their prices for the sale of goods and the rental of equipment, there are two considerations that should be evaluated. First, there are conservation districts around the Sherburne SWCD that offer many of the same goods and rental equipment. If the district were to independently raise their prices, it would not be difficult for customers to go to the surrounding districts to find lower prices. Therefore, raising prices too much may drive customers to those neighboring districts.

Second, conservation districts are units of local government. While there has been a philosophical movement around the idea of governments acting more like private businesses, this is a discussion that should occur at the board level. There are conservation districts in Minnesota whose boards are in support of generating a significant amount of revenue from sales and the rental of equipment. However, there are other boards who view the provision of goods and equipment as part of their public mission and choose to consciously subsidize these services to keep the costs to the public as low as possible. Both ends of these spectrums lie within the statutory authorities of conservation districts and the board should have a conversation on their philosophical position around the role of generating revenue from the sale of goods and the rental of equipment.

Charging for Services

MS 103C.331 Subd. 14.Compensation for work or project states:

> *As a condition for extending benefits for the performance of work upon lands not owned or administered by a state agency or the district, the supervisors may require compensation or contributions in money, services, materials, or otherwise, commensurate with the cost or reasonable value of the operations or work conferring the benefits.*

As with MS 103C.331 subd. 9, subdivision 14 allows conservation to charge for the performance of work on land that is not owned or administered by the state. This could be another venue through which the Sherburne SWCD could generate revenue that reflects the direct cost of the provision of services to landowners within the county. Currently, much of the district staff time is funded through grants. These grants allow the district to provide services to everyone within the county regardless of ability to pay. However, there is not a requirement for conservation districts to fund their staff time through base and competitive grants. The district could charge landowners and others within the county for their services and could also charge neighboring districts if district staff work outside of the county. For services that are not charged to BWSR grants, the district has the flexibility to charge a higher rate than the BWSR billable rate.

As with the sale of goods or the rental of equipment, the district board and manager should have a discussion and come to consensus on the philosophical position of the board regarding charging for conservation district services. While there are districts who charge for much of the district's services, not many of them do. There is an unstated understanding that a conservation district is a public government entity whose mission involves providing technical assistance to landowners for the protection of the county's soil and water resources. Therefore, subsidizing this effort is something that is appropriate. However, it is useful to have this explicitly identified so that current and future board members, the manager, and the larger community understands the district's stance on charging for services.

EXPENSES

> *Expenses are any costs you incur to run your business, like buying office supplies and software subscriptions or paying employees.*[7]

While revenues are critical to ensuring there is the ability to provide services to the district's residents, the provision of these services are through district expenditures. The district spends money on actions like paying for rent, purchasing and using office supplies and equipment, paying employee salary and benefits, and providing cost share for project installation. These last two items, personnel expenses and cost share are the two dominant expenses of districts on any given year (Figures 4 and 6).

Practices

One of the priorities for the Sherburne SWCD is to continue with the installation of conservation practices to protect the county's soil and water resources. Figure 9 shows the annual number of projects installed by the conservation district as reported in E-link. The number of conservation projects ranges from 1 in 2013 to 43 in 2022. Appendix G highlights the different practices that were installed each year. One of the primary drivers of project installation is the availability of grant funds. Conservation districts have a small annual allocation of Conservation Contracts (formerly State Cost Share) funding that can be used for the implementation of a range of conservation activities. For additional funding conservation implementation, the district has relied upon BWSR competitive grant funds. As these grants were competitive, the district did not receive a regular allocation, which created challenges in relation to building long-term programs around specific program implementation. Changes in

[7] https://www.bill.com/learning/expense

BWSR funding sources provide new opportunities for the conservation district to develop mid-range programs that can focus on soil health and water quality improvements.

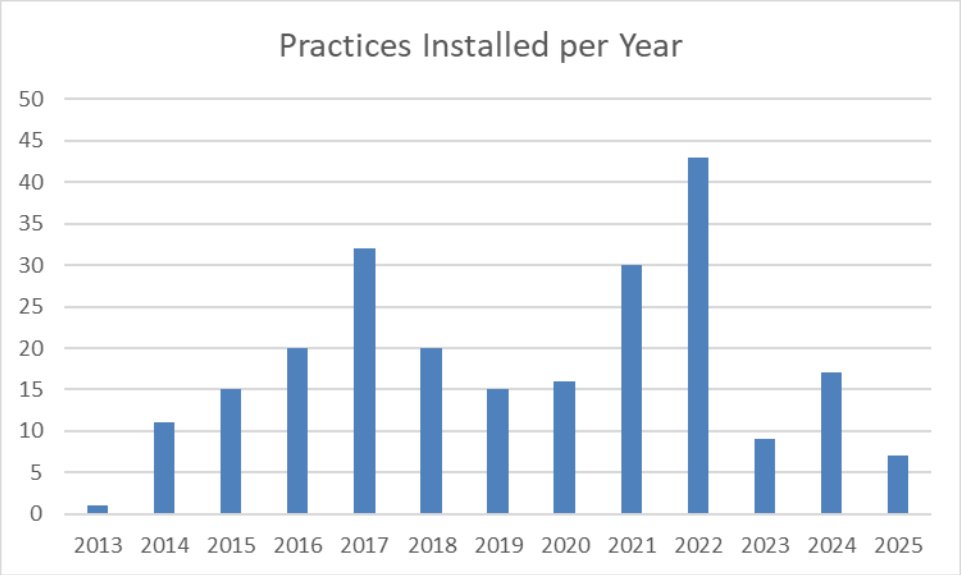


Figure 10: Practices Installed per Year

Watershed Based Implementation Funding (WBIF)

BWSR has moved from providing competitive grants to individual local governments to providing larger grants to watershed partnerships for the implementation of their comprehensive watershed management plan. The funding for the WBIF program is anticipated to continue through the end of the Clean Water Land and Legacy Amendment period, which gives watershed partnerships the ability to develop mid-term programs that can make significant improvements in water quality in targeted areas. One of the challenges with these WBIF grants is that the funding allocations are largely determined by the watershed partnerships. This will require the conservation district to advocate for their priorities as WBIF work plans are developed.

The Sherburne SWCD can take a leadership role within these watershed partnerships by working through the Technical Advisory Committees and the Policy Committee to think beyond the two-year grant cycle. As WBIF grants are anticipated to be delivered each biennium, the partnership can look to the future to develop a targeted outreach program that would allow for the focused engagement with landowners interested in implementation. This targeted outreach would then feed into the implementation process. By using a mid-term approach for conservation implementation, the district can work with their watershed partnerships to allocate funds within the current grant cycle and anticipate the ability to allocate funds for

future years. While the comprehensive watershed management plans do have long-term (10 year) implementation tables, there is often a lack of discussion for how to convert the implementation table into a long-term funding tool. Beginning these discussions and developing preliminary agreements that highlight mid-term expectations around program funding in specific project areas will create more certainty. With greater certainty in project funding, landowners can be fairly assured they will receive funding for project implementation if they engage with the district staff on discussions and designs.

Soil Health Practices

The state legislature has shown a significant interest in providing financial assistance to landowners for the improvement of soil health. BWSR has provided funding to increase soil health staffing and implement soil health conservation practices. In addition, BWSR has worked with the USDA-NRCS to acquire federal funding for the implementation of a variety of conservation activities. While much of this funding has come from the state general fund in single biennium allocations, there does appear to be continuing interest in this effort. This funding will allow the district to focus on the implementation of many soil health activities throughout the district's jurisdiction and increase the area over which these practices are being installed. As the district implements these soil health grants, the board and manager may want to consider how the delivery of these funds should be distributed across different parcels. Making an explicit decision on having more projects that are smaller in size per individual action or fewer projects but larger in size per individual action will be an important decision for how to expend the money throughout the district.

Special Project Grants

In recent years, the legislature has appropriated funding for grants targeting specific areas of interest including pollinator habitat and developing the capacity of community conservation partners. The district has been active in pursuing and receiving these grants. The staff should continue monitoring the BWSR website and working with their board conservationists to stay abreast of grant opportunities that are in alignment with district priorities. As was discussed in the revenue section related to state grants, the staff should work with the manager and the board to ensure that grants are in alignment with the larger district perspective and fall within current staff capacity.

PERSONNEL EXPENSES

Figure 6 highlights the close connection between district operational expenditures and personnel costs. **Figure 10** presents an Excel generated forecast of the potential growth of the district personnel expenditures with a forecast of personnel expenses in 2030 being $589,948 with an estimated 95% confidence interval between $469,348 and $710,549. This represents

an increase of $290,122 over the 2023 personnel costs or an increase of 16% not counting inflation. Accounting for these increasing personnel costs is something the district's manager and budget committee should include in their long-term district financial planning.

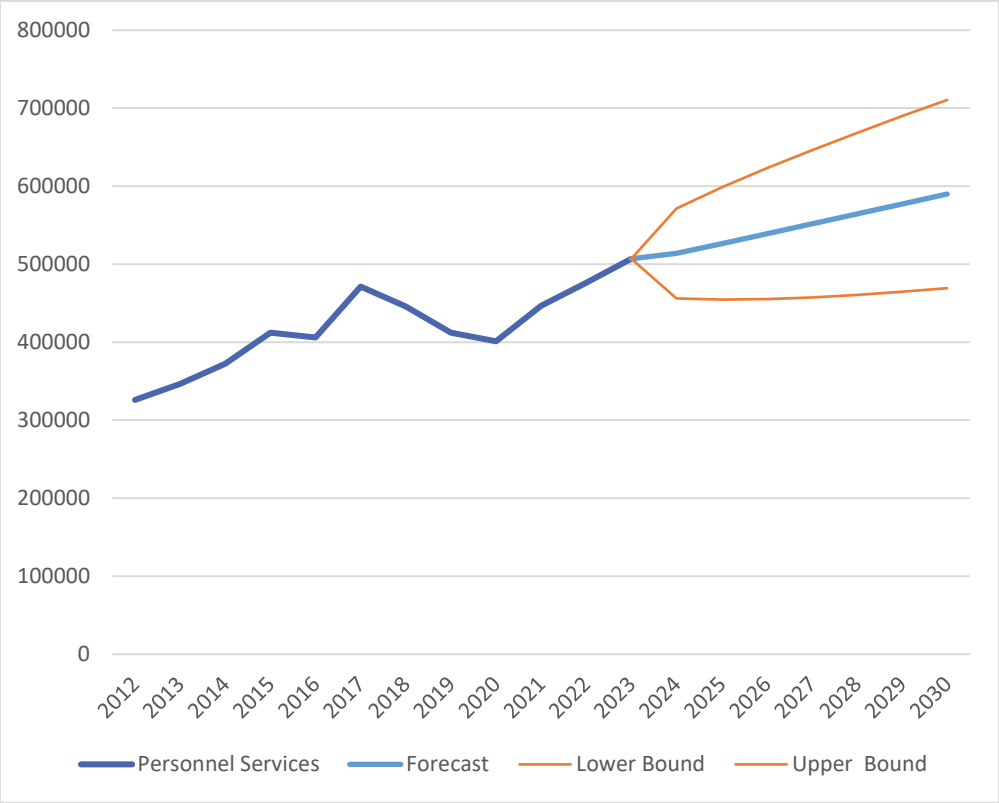


Figure 11: Personnel Costs Forecasted to 2030

Workforce Growth Management

As the Sherburne SWCD has seen most of its revenue growth coming from state grant funding, it is likely that new positions will also be reliant on state funds to support their salaries and benefits. As state grants are of limited duration, the district may want to consider aligning new hires to the specific grants under which they are funded. Should the grant under which the new hire is funded expire and not be renewed by BWSR or the legislature, the personnel who were supported by these grants would then be laid off. This shifts the risks of loss of funding for a position on to the employee rather than the district. While grant funded positions are not uncommon, hiring grant dependent employees will attract individuals who may be less focused on the long-term vision of the district and could add additional program delivery risk, as they may be looking for long-term funded positions with other organizations.

HR Consultation

As there were several items related to HR management identified in the strategic issues portion of the discussion, the district may want to hire an HR consultant to work through many of the items contained within the recommendations section. A consultant can provide an experienced and objective analysis of the district's current staffing portfolio, including personnel expenses, and identify strategic ways to address concerns and place the district on a firm ground for addressing the concerns around HR management. The BWSR Performance Review and Assistance Program (PRAP) grant can provide funding that can help offset the cost related to hiring a HR consultant to do this kind of HR planning.

CUSTOMER BASE

While the cornerstone of conservation district work is to maintain or enhance the soil and water resources within its jurisdiction, the key method by which this is performed is working with landowners. Therefore, it is important to understand the interests and needs of the landowners living within Sherburne County so that conservation district programming can be appropriately targeted. In addition to targeting programming at existing needs of the community, the district may want to explore ways to change the knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs of the residents so that they are individually empowered to make land management decisions that can maintain and improve the county's natural resource base.

IDENTIFYING THE END USER

The concept of an end user within conservation implementation is one that is deceptively complex. A traditional view of an end user is the landowner who completes a project. However, there are many other end users who benefit from the landowner's actions. There are those who live directly downwind or downstream and directly benefit from the reduction in blowing soil or sediment and other pollutants contributed to local streams and lakes. Further down the end user chain are those living within the Twin Cities who get a portion of their drinking water from the Mississippi River and benefit from conservation practices that keep this water as clean as possible. Final end users would be those who live and work in the Gulf of Mexico.

As the conservation district can implement projects that will affect end users at different scales, the board and staff may want to have a conversation around the end user that will be the primary beneficiary of the implementation of any grant or program. By identifying specific end users, the district can develop key performance indicators and outcomes that would be of benefit to the benefited party.

ASSESSING LOCAL VALUES

As a special purpose unit of government that is reactive to both state level concerns and locally derived public values, the Sherburne SWCD needs to be responsive to public values. On one side, the district board and staff should know the primary values of the citizens of Sherburne County and develop programming that addresses the conservation needs of the public within the county. On the other side, the district board and staff operate as a body that shapes the public interest in relation to soil and water conservation, identifying concerns and building programming to respond to challenges the public may not be aware of. Both aspects involve being responsive to the public and involve developing a comprehensive citizen engagement program.

Sherburne SWCD Board Assessment of Soil and Water Resource Values

While it is critically important that the board and staff engage with the public to both learn about local values and to shape a conservation ethic within the county, the board should first conduct an internal exercise to craft an internal land ethic statement. This internal vision of a land ethic will serve as the statement about how land occupiers and others who live and influence the soil and water resources within the county are expected to behave. The state soil and water conservation policy, identified in the **Organizational Mandate** section provides many elements that could be included in a local conservation district land ethic statement. As this land ethic should be inclusive of all people living and working within the district, it does not need to include prescriptive descriptions of specific practices that should be implemented within the district. Rather, the land ethic is a statement of how people are expected to treat the land with which they are engaging. Once the district board and staff develop an internal land ethic statement, they can begin to assess the way the district residents and land occupiers are behaving in relation to the new land ethic standard and frame an engagement program to move people toward adopting and internalizing the district's land ethic.

Land Ethic

Ethics direct all members of a community to treat one another with respect for the mutual benefit of all. A land ethic expands this definition of "community" to include not only humans, but all of the other parts of the Earth, as well: soils, water, plants, and animals.

Gathering Local Landowner Input About Conservation Priorities

Having developed a conservation district vision of a land ethic, the district should test this ethic statement by gathering input from local landowners who will be involved in behaving in a way that is congruent with the land ethic. While it will be difficult to roll out the land ethic right

away, by working with landowners to identify local concerns, the district can determine if the greater public has a similar view of the desired land condition and landowner behavior as that of the district. While the district holds several smaller meetings to engage with landowners it may be worth hosting an annual State of the Waters meeting in which they invite the public to learn about the district and to gather some general information, this annual meeting can be utilized to gather a general perspective from a larger audience. However, the audience targeting for this kind of event is tricky and could result in weak attendance.In addition to demonstrating the successful work of the district over the past year, the district board and staff should work to solicit input from the attendees as to what the specific conservation challenges and priorities should be for the district. When looking at assessing an interest in local priorities, the district should focus on both the specific landscape outcomes (i.e. reduced erosion, improved water quality) and on specific behaviors that district residents should consider implementing to achieve the desired outcomes. Focusing on both the landscape analysis and the desired behavior change gives information that can be useful for targeting specific program and outreach efforts.

The district board may want to consider creating a Sherburne SWCD Advisory Committee, similar to the former Water Plan Advisory Committee of residents who can provide information on the kinds of conservation work the district should focus on, identify those practices that are most likely to be locally implemented, and to serve as an outreach arm through which the district can spread the message to local interest groups. One of the challenges with local advisory committees is that they can be composed of individuals who are focused on their own concerns and will assign blame for undesirable conservation outcomes to other groups. Therefore, selection of the advisory committee members should involve consideration regarding the ability of members to put aside their own group's interest and be willing to engage with people who may represent other interests. It may also be useful to identify sub-advisory groups made of interest group members (farmers, lakeshore property owners, city dwellers) who can provide input to their representative on the advisory committee.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The Sherburne SWCD has an active community engagement program. With these efforts, the conservation district staff provide the district's residents with training and education on conservation activities that may be of interest and current programming offered by the district. While the existing workload keeps the staff busy, these efforts appear to be largely successful at meeting the current goals of the district. However, there may be members of the community who are not familiar with the district or its services but would be very interested should they become aware of the district. There may also be areas of natural resource

management that are under-represented within the larger conservation implementation of the district and the immediate conservation partner base.

The traditional path of communication through which conservation districts spread their message is to generate information related to the promotion of a program or a specific goal. This information is then broadcast to the intended audience, either county-wide or modestly targeted, through press releases, direct mailings, or public meetings, including workshops and field days. The expected outcome of this outreach is for members of the community to come into the office for program enrollment or other kinds of action. This form of communication tends to be one-way and provides for limited opportunity of meaningful engagement between the conservation district staff and the targeted community. The district has a good foundation in conducting these kinds of activities through the Coffee and Conservation events, the AIS task force, and the 1W1P citizen advisory committee. As one of the challenges identified by the conservation district board is the need to change social attitudes around conservation, this level of engagement may not produce the desired result. The board and manager may want to identify a specific number of events annually and identify a way to purposely solicit attendees perspectives at the events. Soliciting this kind of public input would be a way for the district to hold itself accountable to themselves. Should the district choose to explore this as an area for development, they could work with their Board Conservationist or the local Extension staff to design an effective tool for gathering the feedback and creating a tracking system that would enable later analysis.

The residents of Sherburne County are diverse, and it is beyond the scope of this plan to work through each potential segment of a community that can be targeted. However, the 2022 Census of Agriculture analysis of Sherburne County (See Appendix A) provides information that can allow for the segmentation of the agricultural community into smaller more manageable units to whom specific messages regarding soil health and conservation can be targeted. The following example will serve as a template for one way to consider how to segment the larger community and focus engagement in a way that is relevant to the individuals being targeted. The information from which this information is compiled can be found in the Agricultural Demographics Section in the Strategic Issues section.

Based upon that information, the district can segment the population along the lines of gender, age, or farm characteristics. Appendix H has three customer profiles that segment the agricultural community into larger population groups. While these profiles segment the community for prioritization, the Sherburne SWCD board and staff do not have to limit themselves to these profiles or even focus within the agricultural community. If there is a desire, staffing, and time to focus on more than one agricultural community segment, the

district board and staff can select multiple segments. However, with each additional community segment selected, the time and effort to do the analysis proportionally increases.

While about 1/3 of the land within Sherburne County is identified as farmland, another potential avenue through which the district can target a specific audience is to identify those who own the land and those who rent the land. There may be significant differences in the management objectives between these two demographic groups and focusing on those who are renting their land can empower individuals who may not live within the community to understand their land and make better land use decisions beyond the desire for rental income. In addition, there may be spouses who have become the primary owners of land upon the death of their partner. These surviving spouses may not have been actively involved in the decision-making process on the farm and are unaware of the management possibilities on their land and do not know the questions or lack the confidence to become more active in the rental relationship. The Wisconsin Farm Management Division of Extension provides tools that can enhance the communication between landlord and renter and ensure both parties can meet their land management interests (https://farms.extension.wisc.edu/topics/pricing-and-contracts/land-lease-and-rental/). The Sherburne SWCD may want to develop a program through which they can serve as a mediator between parties in terms of assisting in the long-term management of a piece of land that is the long-term interest of both parties.

Beyond the agricultural community, there are many other potential interest groups who the district can target for outreach to enhance the management of the district's resources. With 125 lakes in the county, the potential for the development of a formal lakeshore homeowner program could ensure that those who are living adjacent to one of the county's lakes are managing their lands in such a way as to minimize their impact to the water resources. Outside of the lake and farm environment, there are also seven incorporated cities within the county and there are likely to be many residents within these municipalities that are concerned about the management of their small residential lot. There are also several larger industrial and commercial businesses that own significant land upon which the district can assist to reduce the impact of impervious surfaces and explore innovative ways to improve the ecological value of these resources.

As there are many potential ways to segment the larger community within Sherburne County into smaller groups with similar interest, the district staff, manager, and board should review their existing programming and potential future programming to determine which community groups should be a priority in terms of engagement. This should be a formal process through which the board and manager provide direction to the staff regarding whom is seen as an engagement priority within the next five years. This will allow the staff to focus their efforts and develop long-term programs that can be designed and evaluated in such a way as to ensure

there are measurable changes in knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs that should lead to increased conservation implementation.

UNDERSTANDING THE SELECTED COMMUNITY SEGMENT AND CIVIC IN-REACH

One of the key components of identifying local interests and concerns is to reframe the process from having the conservation district use monitoring and modeling data to serve as the basis for informing the local land occupiers to having the local land occupiers inform the district of their concerns, through a process known as **Civic In-Reach**. This approach is different from the traditional government approach and may take some additional training with both the conservation district staff and the local landowners. Figure 11 shows the traditional direction of communication where the government or its partner agency monitors the natural resource of concern and models the information to determine specific trends or to assess the resource data against existing standards. This information is then interpreted by the government agency (or the conservation district personnel) to identify which resources are most in need of attention, either due to variance from the standard or being most at risk of falling below the standard. This information is then compiled into a resource at risk list, which is presented to the community members for confirmation. Within this framework, the community members are often passive recipients of information who are neither aware of how the information was generated nor what their role is in contributing to the problem or working toward a solution.

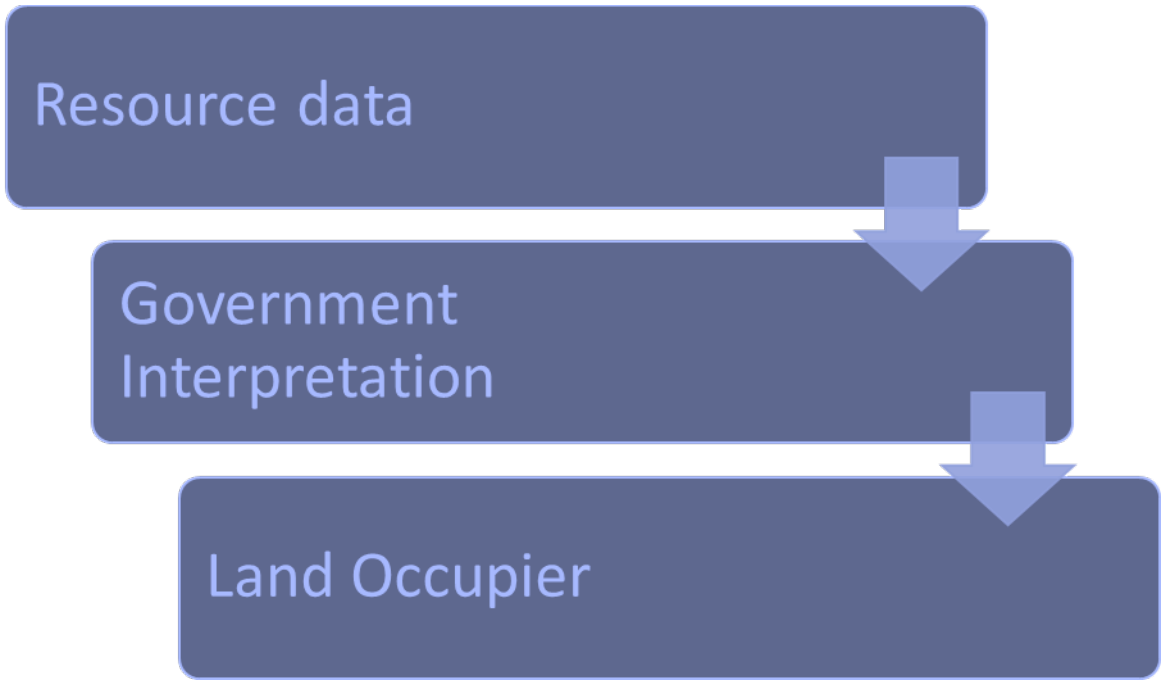


Figure 12: Traditional Community Engagement

While this process provides information to landowners, by treating landowners as passive recipients, conservation district outreach efforts may not address local concerns, create greater disengagement, and, in extreme cases, generate animosity as the community see themselves being accused of bad actions rather than being included as valued partners.

Having identified a priority segment of the community, the Sherburne SWCD board and staff should consider gathering information about the individuals within the community segment, much in the same way in which the district gathers information about the county's natural resources. When gathering information about the natural environment, resource professionals sample specific areas that are representative of the larger system and then extrapolate to the larger environment. In addition, resource professionals do assessments of the larger environment to get a general understanding of the system, often using tools like aerial imagery.

The Sherburne SWCD can use a similar process for identifying the interests and needs of a specific community segment. The following social assessment tools are useful for developing an understanding of the interests and needs of the local conservation partners.

Surveys

Surveys are tools that can be widely distributed to the priority community members to identify interests and concerns. Surveys are relatively cheap and can be widely distributed through traditional mail and electronic methods. The information can be quickly analyzed to determine general trends in community interests and needs. However, surveys are often limited in their ability to allow for respondents to answer outside of the question framework. The development of survey questions is also a highly technical process that should be done with an individual versed in the process of development and delivery of surveys to targeted audiences.

Focus Groups

Focus groups are structured interviews with specifically selected members of the priority community. Focus groups allow for more in-depth questioning that has greater flexibility in exploring participant responses. The interaction between the participants also allows for individuals to learn from each other and frame their response within the small group framework. However, focus groups will often require the use of a skilled facilitator to work effectively and generate information that would be of use to the conservation district in developing programming.

Interviews

Interviewing individuals can allow for great in-depth engagement with a small group of people that will allow for the most understanding of the interests and needs of the priority community segment. A semi-structured interview allows for digging deeper into areas of interest to find nuance and specific language that can optimize engagement. However, interview participants should be selected so they are representative of the specific priority segment to ensure the information developed is generalizable to the larger priority community.

While the conservation district staff is gathering information, they should remain neutral when evaluating the information. During the information gathering phase, it is likely participants will provide information that is wrong or in conflict with the larger conservation district message or established land ethic. Rather than providing immediate corrections, the district staff should use this information to identify information errors or gaps in relation to developing programming and future outreach.

The district board members can also become active participants in this process of civic in-reach by hosting input events within their supervisor districts. The five supervisor districts cover the county and could serve as tools where the district 'constituents' meet their SWCD supervisor. At the same time, the SWCD supervisor could listen to the district constituents to understand the local concerns and challenges. The key concept with these civic in-reach meetings is that they are meant to be listening sessions. The supervisors and staff who attend these meetings can ask clarifying questions to ensure they understand the constituent concerns, but they should allow attendees to identify the issues in a non-judgmental process. These district supervisor meetings would increase the visibility of the district and the supervisors and serve as a point of validation for the supervisors in their understanding of the natural resource needs within the district.

OUTREACH AND ENGAGEMENT PROGRAMMING DEVELOPMENT

Based upon the information gathered from the community segment understanding effort, the Sherburne SWCD board and staff should evaluate how the knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs of their targeted community align with the previously developed conservation values and land ethic. This evaluation will determine where the community members are in alignment with the district's conservation values and where there is a disjunction between the commonly accepted conservation values and the values held by the community members. Outreach and engagement should highlight areas in which there is common understanding and work towards reaching better alignment in areas where this is a lack of common values.

One of the best ways of developing and deepening a relationship is over shared values. It is likely that many members of the community share many of the commonly defined conservation

values. Highlighting these shared values and supporting landowners in living these values as they work the land will reinforce the self-belief of the producers that they are good land stewards who are working toward a common vision. Promoting this conservation stewardship strength will allow for having later challenging conversations around areas where there is a disjunction in conservation values.

For those areas in which the community's conservation values are not the same as those developed by the Sherburne SWCD and its partners, the district board and staff should identify priority conservation values and develop targeted outreach that strives to achieve measurable shifts in the conservation value of the specific community. This will involve specifically stating the current conservation value(s) of the community, the desired end point of the conservation value(s), and the specific steps and actions taken to move the community members from the start to the end point. This should be an intentional and deliberative process that includes mid-point assessments and benchmarks for analysis and evaluation.

STAFF RETENTION AND RECRUITMENT

Within the strategic issues section, the board identified concerns around staffing as a high priority. With the potential for increasing workload within existing programs related to additional funding and the opportunity to implement new programs, this is the appropriate time to engage in a strategic discussion around staffing at the district.

INCREASING CAPACITY

The existing programming that is expected of districts is growing as the legislature provides new funding and modifies existing programs. These additional efforts are putting strains on the district as the staff work to meet the new expectations. The board may want to explore options for increasing district capacity by hiring new staff or partnering with neighboring districts or other organizations.

One of the key components to understand the true staff capacity needs of the district is to conduct a current and predicted workload analysis. This involves working with the manager and the staff to identify their critical and supporting duties and identifying how many hours are being dedicated to each task critical to the operation of the organization. Many of these critical tasks will be statutorily mandated (WCA Enforcement, Buffer Law monitoring, financial reporting) while others are identified as critical through board definition. During this workload analysis, the board and manager can understand how existing staff are expending their resources and work to reallocate resources to the appropriate tasks. This assessment should also identify areas in which there are staffing gaps. Once these gaps are identified, the board and manager will have a comprehensive understanding for the needs and can develop a

strategy for filling the gaps. For large capacity gaps, the district may want to consider hiring staff. If there are gaps that do not require a full-time employee, the district can seek to fill the gaps by entering into partnerships with neighboring districts, the county, or with private vendors.

Should the board wish to pursue this workload analysis internally, a potential tool for working through the effort can be found in **Appendix F**. The district can also pursue a Performance Review and Assistance (PRAP) grant through BWSR. These grants typically include facilitation, mediation or consulting services related to organizational improvement activities such as reorganizations/mergers, strategic planning, organizational development, benchmarking, audits, and staff and board capacity assessments.

Another area in which the manager, staff, and the board can explore increasing the district's capacity is through program specific training and exploring ways that technology can assist with program implementation. By focusing on specific programmatic training, staff will develop higher levels of expertise, which can unlock nuances of programs and implementation that can reveal efficiencies. Adopting the appropriate technologies can also provide efficiencies. While there are many 'miracle' solutions offered by technology companies, the district staff and manager can work with similar government units, such as the county and neighboring districts, to see what has worked to increase local capacity. With many technologies, the district may also choose to be a pioneer in exploring technological efficiencies. However, care should be taken to critically evaluate any new opportunities and be willing to quickly abandon those that are not meeting their promised outcomes.

RETAINING TRAINED STAFF

The current complement of Sherburne SWCD employees consists of individuals with several years of experience. There are many benefits to retaining employees including reduced costs for on-boarding and training, increased productivity, the development of long-term relations with stakeholders, and a strong organizational culture based upon staff engagement.

However, the current natural resources employment environment in Minnesota offers tremendous opportunities for highly experienced local government staff. State agencies are seeing a significant number of retirements, which is opening positions in state government that allow for growth and promotion. The development and funding of new programs, such as the Soil Health Initiative, are creating opportunities within local government organizations to offer specialized technical positions at competitive salaries. The Watershed Based Implementation Funding is another potential source of funding for new positions that may be attractive to staff who are seeking new opportunities and challenges.

While many of these new opportunities are likely to be available to the Sherburne SWCD as additional funding is directed to conservation districts, there are some challenges that will be faced by most districts due to their organizational structure. Most districts operate in a financially constrained environment, which has limited their ability to hire staff. By staying small, districts have a flat hierarchy. The organizational bureaucracy consists of two levels:

- Administrative and Technical Staff
- Managerial Staff

Due to this flat bureaucratic structure, district staff often find promotional opportunities to be limited. For those staff who would like to explore career advancement, they will generally find the most potential by transferring to other organizations. This moving to a new organization for career advancement should not be seen as there being anything wrong with the Sherburne conservation district. When current staff is hired by a new organization, it is evidence that the staff person was well trained and seen as having substantial value by the hiring organization.

Without promotional opportunities within the organization, the Sherburne SWCD board and manager should explore alternative ways to increase the attractiveness of the Sherburne SWCD for existing employees. Some potential strategies for increasing employee retention are:

- Offer competitive wages
- Allow for flexible working locations
- Provide flexible work scheduling
- Reducing the length of workdays
- Find alternative rewards other than wage increases
- Ensure workload is appropriate for each position
- Provide and allow attendance at position related trainings

Each person will have their own interests in relation to staying in a current position. The board and manager may find it useful for the district's personnel committee to have a discussion with the staff to identify retention strategies that would be most appealing to current staff. These discussions can happen with all staff or with individual staff members to assess what would be the most attractive retention options. Upon learning of the interests of the current staff regarding retention strategies, the board and manager may want to review the policy handbook to see if there are any barriers to implementing desired retention strategies and make the appropriate adjustments proactively rather than reacting to the departure of a staff member.

Employee retention is not just a concern for the Sherburne SWCD. Many conservation districts are likely to be experiencing or having concerns around the potential for employees leaving for other positions. One of the best tools for understanding how to deal with employee retention

is to learn from others who have undergone or are undergoing challenges related to retention. The MASWCD Area IV holds regular meetings in which the supervisors and managers discuss topics of interest to the regional districts. Working with the hosting district to include an agenda item on employee retention could be a valuable tool for daylighting this issue and encouraging group learning for what has been useful and what has been less effective related to SWCD employee retention.

INCREASING STAFFING

Following the workload analysis and when the board reaches consensus on the prioritized workload needs, the recommendations should be forwarded to the budget committee to identify potential funding sources. For some program efforts, there is likely to be additional state funding, such as a future Soil Health grant. Other program efforts will require additional sources of financial support that may come from partner efforts, such as the Comprehensive Watershed Management program supported by Watershed Based Implementation funding. Other prioritized programs may need funding support from competitive grants, increased county funding, or other financial resources. The budget committee should seek to match the proposed additional workload needs with potential program sources. This may require an adjustment of the priority of program efforts based upon existing and potential funding sources.

Upon the completion of the matching of the budget requirements exercise with the desired program expansion report, the district manager can then be tasked with identifying ways to bring the recommendation to fruition. This may require applying for new grants, working within existing partnerships to seek additional funding, activating advocates to lobby the county board for increased funding, or identifying and applying for alternative grant funds. As much of this funding acquisition effort will be constrained by forces outside of the manager's control, accountability should be assessed by documentable efforts toward acquiring funding rather than an increase in actual funding that is brought to the district for the increased staffing.

When the budget is aligned to bring on the new person, the manager should begin the hiring process. Once a new employee is offered the position and an agreement is reached, the on-boarding process should begin. To make the transition easy for the new employee, the district will need to make a substantial investment in time and effort to ensure the person gets training around the organizational culture and the technical needs of their position. The board should work with the manager to ensure the appropriate resources are allocated to the training budget to maximize the return on investment during the on-boarding process.

PARTNERSHIPS

With the limited ability to directly generate revenue and the lack of regulatory actions, conservation districts can expand their ability to implement local conservation by engaging in partnerships. In addition, as many conservation challenges occur at a watershed level and cross political and jurisdictional boundaries, partnerships allow for the adoption of a holistic effort at conservation implementation that seeks to address root causes rather than the symptoms that occur on a single parcel.

When looking at the current district's engagement in partnerships, there are two specific areas of focus. First, as partnerships can be difficult to establish (or re-establish), it is important to ensure there is an effort to maintain existing partnerships. After having ensured that the appropriate partnerships are attended to and strengthened the district should consider expanding their partnership network to include others who are interested, willing, and able to assist with the implementation of efforts that are aligned with the district's vision and mission.

PARTNERSHIP MAINTENANCE CULTURE

The board and staff of the Sherburne SWCD have recognized the value of partnerships in implementing local conservation activities. There is an understanding throughout the organizations in the value and benefits that engaging with external groups in both formal and informal partnerships can be conservation effort multipliers and raise the broader community's awareness of the opportunities and challenges within the existing natural resource environment. One of the critical aspects of being a good partner is providing the appropriate level of investment to ensure the continuation of the effort. A core investment in partnership maintenance is being mindful of the components of an effective partnership culture and periodically reviewing those components to reinforce their importance to the district. These components include:

- Culture of Collaboration
    - Articulating the power of partnerships
    - Align incentive structures
    - Model the behavior
- Supportive Systems and Structures
    - Cut the red tape
    - Use a strategic systematic approach
    - Dedicate resources
    - Be accountable
- Avoiding Pitfalls
    - Don't treat the partnership as a sideshow
    - Don't overpromise and underdeliver

- Don’t treat partners like you are doing them a favor

By regularly reviewing and reinforcing the district’s commitment to these core ideas, the staff can proceed with the understanding that the board is behind their efforts and supportive of the work that is needed to enter into and maintain partnerships.

Having confirmed the components of a Partnership Culture, the district staff may want to specifically identify existing partners by conducting a partnership inventory. The components that would go into such an inventory can include:

1. Basic Partnership Information
   - Name of partnership / program
   - Type of partnership (formal agreement, informal collaboration, regional consortium, service contract, etc.)
   - Partner organizations involved (other local governments, nonprofits, state/federal agencies, businesses, universities, etc.)
   - Primary contact(s) (both internal and external)
2. Purpose and Scope
   - Purpose/mission of the partnership
   - Focus area(s): e.g., water quality, emergency response, housing, economic development, public health
   - Geographic scope (single city/town, county-wide, multi-county, watershed, etc.)
3. Structure and Governance
   - Formality (MOU, joint powers agreement, contract, handshake arrangement)
   - Decision-making process (steering committee, council resolutions, staff-level coordination)
   - Duration (ongoing, fixed term, ad hoc, pilot project)
4. Resources and Commitments
   - Funding sources (shared dues, grants, local tax revenues, in-kind support)
   - Staff time commitment (lead role, support role, occasional participation)
   - Other resources shared (equipment, facilities, data, expertise)
5. Outcomes and Benefits
   - Services delivered / functions performed
   - Community impact (who benefits, how it aligns with strategic goals)
   - Performance measures (if available: cost savings, service coverage, environmental outcomes, etc.)
6. Current Status
   - Active, dormant, or expired
   - Level of engagement (high priority, medium, low)
   - Challenges (barriers, redundancies, political or financial stressors)
   - Opportunities (scaling up, replicating elsewhere, strengthening links)
7. Strategic Alignment
   - How does the partnership connect to local government priorities or strategic plans?
   - Does it advance regional or state goals?

- Is it filling a gap or duplicating another effort?

8. Notes and Next Steps
   - Lessons learned
   - Opportunities for consolidation or expansion
   - Recommendations for leadership

It may be useful to develop a spreadsheet to capture the information developed through this inventory. The district can reach out their Board Conservationist for assistance in developing this spreadsheet and the fundamentals of conducting an existing partnership inventory.

DEVELOPING NEW PARTNERSHIPS

Having completed an inventory of the existing partnerships and conducted the required activities to strengthen those partnerships that are most closely tied to the mission and vision of the district, the board and manager should consider if they want to explore expanding their network of partnerships. When exploring the idea of expanding the partnership base, care should be taken to ensure there are appropriate resources for the establishment and maintenance of any particular partnership. While it is generally low risk to lose a partnership, those relationships that require the district to provide a necessary resource to a partner can lead to negative outcomes if the partnership fails.

When exploring the idea of developing new partnerships, the board and staff should adopt a strategic focus to ensure the potential partner is an asset to the district. Two areas in which the district should be particularly attentive are the gaps that could be filled by engaging in a partnership and strategic alignment between the two organizations.

STRATEGIC PLAN IMPLEMENTATION

This strategic plan consists of two tracks for implementation. Contained within many sections of the plan are "Action Items". An action item is a single or limited activity for board consideration that could generally be handled in one meeting. Once the board acts on one of these tasks, it will be completed, needing no further action.

The recommendations section of the plan also includes larger tasks that will require some effort for the board and staff to accomplish. These recommendations are broken down into smaller tasks that will allow for progression toward the completion of the larger recommendation. Should the board and staff choose to work on these tasks, it may be helpful to assign the sub-task to a work team of the board, with staff participation, who would work through the task and then report their findings back to the full board for additional action. Many of these recommendations can be partially outsourced to private consultants who can assist in facilitating and documenting the findings that are generated at the end of task completion. Another route is to work with the BWSR Board Conservationist who can work with the board and staff to facilitate these discussions.

The following table is a summary of the individual action items and recommendations to allow the board to plan for implementation and document completion of each item.

Strategic Plan Action Items			
Action Items	Board and Staff Work Team	Start Date	Completion Date
The Sherburne Soil and Water Conservation District Board and Staff will continue utilizing the Comprehensive Watershed Management Plans that lie within their jurisdiction and ensure these plans are renewed as required. In the event where the district board decides to no longer continue with a comprehensive watershed management partnership, the district will work with the county to develop a local water management plan or a SWCD comprehensive plan for that part of the county that is no longer covered by a comprehensive watershed management plan.			
The Sherburne SWCD Board and staff will provide the required reporting to the state auditor and the county board to remain in compliance with statutory requirements.			
The Sherburne Soil and Water Conservation District Board and Staff will continue working			

with the county to meet its statutory obligations to administer the Wetland Conservation Act and the Minnesota Buffer Law.			
The Sherburne Soil and Water Conservation District Board and Staff will provide the required information to the MN Department of Revenue in a timely fashion to ensure the prompt delivery of SWCD local aid as provided by law.			
The Sherburne SWCD Board and staff will continue to work with the appropriate organizations and entities to stay current with state and federal law and adjust policies and procedures as required to remain compliant with all relevant laws.			
The Sherburne SWCD Board and Staff will continue to apply for BWSR grants that help to fulfill the district's mission and achieve board objectives. When grants are received, the SWCD will continue to follow grant policy. This may necessitate having the board and staff attend trainings on grant program administration and general financial management.			
The Sherburne SWCD Board and Staff will			

continue to participate in the comprehensive watershed management partnerships that pie within the district's jurisdiction at the staff and policy committee level to ensure that the county's identified high priorities are included in the funding allocation discussion around the distribution of Watershed Based Implementation Funding.			
The Sherburne SWCD will continue to serve as the local government authority for administering the County Local Water Management (LWM) program and the Aquatic Invasive Species Program as delegated by the county.			
The Sherburne SWCD Board and Staff should consider adding a section on the county/community benefit from pollution reduction along with an economic development section within the annual budget and report that are presented to county as required by MS 103C.331 subd. 16.			
The Sherburne SWCD Board and Staff should work to enhance connections between the conservation district and the county.			

SWCD Board Activities • Begin having regularly scheduled informal discussions with county board members to discuss areas of common interest • Coordinate with the appropriate county commissioner to share information prior to attendance at watershed policy committee meetings. • Create a district summary that the county commissioner who attends the SWCD can bring back to the county board highlight board meeting actions. • Provide staff with guidance and establish expectations around enhancing county board and department knowledge of district operations.			
The Sherburne SWCD Board members will regularly review and adjust the district's bylaws to ensure the operational framework of the district matches the environment in which the district is operating.			
The Sherburne SWCD Board establishes the following internal mandates for the staff:			

• Manager oversees the staff in such a way as to optimize the ability of the staff to meet district goals and achieve the organizational vision. • The staff will follow the employee handbook and work with the manager to ensure a mutual understanding on the contents of the document. • The board will allocate resources and the manager will work with staff to ensure they continue to maintain the expertise in their fields.			

Strategic Plan Recommendations			
Funding			
Revenue			
County Funding			
The Sherburne board and manager should establish informal connections with the county commissioners to create a personal forum for exploring the financial issues of each organization.			
The Sherburne SWCD manager and board should provide the county board with an analysis of the economic benefits provided to the county from the provision of conservation cost share such as hiring of local contractors and the purchase of goods and supplies.			
The district manager and budget committee should develop three to five year budget projections and work with the county administrator and financial staff to incorporate the future district transfers into the out year county budgets.			
The district should monitor larger state and federal trends, such as budget cuts and reallocations, that may influence the ability of the county board to fund non-critical operations.			
State Funding			

The district staff should stay current on all grant programs and policies to ensure compliance			
The manager will work with the board to ensure the board has an understanding of the requirements associated with each grant prior to board approval.			
The board and staff should work within the technical advisory committee framework and the policy committee of each watershed partnership to ensure adequate funding is provided to meet county needs.			
District board and manager review the funding balance allocation between state grants and other funding sources and explore ways to rebalance revenue sources to reflect district priorities.			
District manager should conduct some forecasting practices to explore how potential state deficits may influence the district budget.			
Self-Generated Funding			
District board should come to consensus on the district's position regarding the interest in making profit from the sale of goods or a fee for service program.			

The manager should conduct a cost of program exercise to ensure understands the financial impact of sale of good and fee for service programs.			
Expenses			
Practices			
The district board members and staff should advocate within the comprehensive watershed management partnerships to ensure adequate funds are allocated to the district to meet local needs and the staffing requirements to achieve district and plan objectives.			
The board may want to explore ways to focus the soil health implementation grant to focus on many smaller acreage practices or a few large practices based upon potential outcomes and efficiencies.			
The staff should continue to monitor BWSR and other state agency websites relating to grant funding announcements that will allow for increasing the cost-share to district residents who did not fit into the current funding structure.			
Personnel Expenses			
The manager and budget committee should			

develop a personnel expenses forecast and track the growth of personnel costs to predict future expenses and find additional funding to support staff growth.			
The board may want to explore developing a personnel policy related to grant funded limited positions to allow for the hiring of staff aligned to specific grants without a long-term funding stream.			
The district board may want to consider hiring an HR consultant to conduct a formal assessment of staffing expenditures and options to create a financial plan for the next three to five years.			
Customer Base			
The End User			
The district explores the different potential end users impacted by program implementation and identifies a target end user who will be the ultimate beneficiary of district actions.			
Assessing Local Values			
The district board and staff may consider coming to consensus on a position regarding the protection and enhancement of the local natural resources including the			

development of a land ethic.			
The staff works to test and promote the district land ethic through regular meetings with county residents to explore specific activities and local concerns that can help achieve the district's land ethic vision.			
The district may want to establish a local advisory committee to help understand district concerns and get a general understanding of local concerns and changes in attitudes.			
Community Engagement			
The staff should explore developing identified segments of the community that will be targeted for conservation engagement.			
The staff will work to identify the conservation competency of the chosen community segments through actions like civic in-reach events.			
The board will develop success metrics for engagement potentially including awareness of conservation and desired knowledge of responsible actions.			
The staff will develop an intentional program aimed at achieving the board's success metrics.			

Staff Retention and Recruitment			
Increasing Capacity			
Conduct an existing and predicted workload capacity analysis.			
Provide staff with resources to attend training and implement learned skills in office to achieve efficiencies.			
Explore potential technological resources to improve efficiency.			
Retaining Trained Staff			
Meet with staff to identify potential concerns around retention and find ways to add options to improve the internal attractiveness of employment with the district.			
Work with MASWCD Area IV to host a session on employee retention to explore ideas common within the area.			
Increasing Staffing			
Work with the budget committee to analyze the workload analysis and explore potential funding solutions for adding new staff.			
Explore ways to increase staff capacity through partnerships, contracting, and other methods that may not require direct hiring.			
Partnerships			
Develop a partnership matrix to identify			

characteristics and requirements of existing partners.			
Ensure the staff understands the requirements of a good partnership culture and perform actions to effectively maintain partnerships.			
Critically explore new partnerships that will help achieve the district's vision.			

APPENDIX A: 2022 SHERBURNE COUNTY CENSUS OF AGRICULTURE

2022 CENSUS OF AGRICULTURE *County Profile*

Sherburne County
Minnesota

Total and Per Farm Overview, 2022 and change since 2017

	2022	% change since 2017
Number of farms	494	-1
Land in farms (acres)	85,044	-17
Average size of farm (acres)	172	-16
Total	**($)**	
Market value of products sold	120,592,000	+35
Government payments	1,688,000	+58
Farm-related income	3,094,000	+51
Total farm production expenses	85,746,000	+22
Net cash farm income	39,628,000	+75
Per farm average	**($)**	
Market value of products sold	244,113	+37
Government payments *	15,207	+78
Farm-related income *	20,090	+103
Total farm production expenses	173,575	+24
Net cash farm income	80,219	+77

(Z) Percent of state agriculture sales

Share of Sales by Type (%)

Crops	80
Livestock, poultry, and products	20

Land in Farms by Use (acres)

Cropland	64,444
Pastureland	4,732
Woodland	8,422
Other	7,446

Acres irrigated: 37,673
44% of land in farms

Land Use Practices (% of farms)

No till	11
Reduced till	16
Intensive till	24
Cover crop	12

Farms by Value of Sales

	Number	Percent of Total [b]
Less than $2,500	217	44
$2,500 to $4,999	33	7
$5,000 to $9,999	55	11
$10,000 to $24,999	63	13
$25,000 to $49,999	18	4
$50,000 to $99,999	22	4
$100,000 or more	86	17

Farms by Size

	Number	Percent of Total [b]
1 to 9 acres	92	19
10 to 49 acres	179	36
50 to 179 acres	126	26
180 to 499 acres	54	11
500 to 999 acres	17	3
1,000+ acres	26	5

USDA
United States Department of Agriculture
National Agricultural Statistics Service
www.nass.usda.gov/AgCensus

2022 CENSUS OF AGRICULTURE *County Profile*

Market Value of Agricultural Products Sold

	Sales ($1,000)	Rank in State [c]	Counties Producing Item	Rank in U.S. [c]	Counties Producing Item
Total	**120,592**	**61**	**87**	**1,254**	**3,078**
Crops	**96,205**	**60**	**87**	**870**	**3,074**
Grains, oilseeds, dry beans, dry peas	34,162	65	86	1,097	2,917
Tobacco	-	-	-	-	267
Cotton and cottonseed	-	-	-	-	647
Vegetables, melons, potatoes, sweet potatoes	52,793	1	86	81	2,831
Fruits, tree nuts, berries	331	33	80	1,068	2,711
Nursery, greenhouse, floriculture, sod	7,657	10	79	363	2,660
Cultivated Christmas trees, short rotation woody crops	716	3	43	82	1,274
Other crops and hay	546	77	87	2,372	3,035
Livestock, poultry, and products	**24,387**	**60**	**87**	**1,606**	**3,076**
Poultry and eggs	(D)	41	86	(D)	3,027
Cattle and calves	15,838	36	86	979	3,047
Milk from cows	694	62	77	828	1,770
Hogs and pigs	1,436	54	85	568	2,814
Sheep, goats, wool, mohair, milk	110	51	83	1,367	2,967
Horses, ponies, mules, burros, donkeys	(D)	(D)	83	(D)	2,907
Aquaculture	-	-	36	-	1,190
Other animals and animal products	51	54	85	1,242	2,909

Producers [d]	**891**
Sex	
Male	565
Female	326
Age	
<35	103
35 – 64	515
65 and older	273
Race	
American Indian/Alaska Native	1
Asian	-
Black or African American	-
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	-
White	890
More than one race	-
Other characteristics	
Hispanic, Latino, Spanish origin	11
With military service	89
New and beginning farmers	371

Percent of farms that:

Have internet access	**80**
Farm organically	**1**
Sell directly to consumers	**12**
Hire farm labor	**20**
Are family farms	**96**

Top Crops in Acres *

Corn for grain	24,604
Soybeans for beans	13,826
Vegetables harvested, all	9,233
Potatoes	9,063
Forage (hay/haylage), all	4,555

Livestock Inventory (Dec 31, 2022)

Broilers and other meat-type chickens	(D)
Cattle and calves	11,468
Goats	479
Hogs and pigs	(D)
Horses and ponies	592
Layers	(D)
Pullets	498
Sheep and lambs	328
Turkeys	67

* Average per farm receiving. [b] May not add to 100% due to rounding. [c] Among counties whose rank can be displayed. [d] Data collected for a maximum of four producers per farm. * Crop commodity names may be shortened; see full names at www.nass.usda.gov/go/cropnames.pdf. [f] Position below the line does not indicate rank. (D) Withheld to avoid disclosing data for individual operations. (NA) Not available. (Z) Less than half of the unit shown. (-) Represents zero.

2017 CENSUS OF AGRICULTURE *County Profile*

Market Value of Agricultural Products Sold

	Sales ($1,000)	Rank in State [b]	Counties Producing Item	Rank in U.S. [b]	Counties Producing Item
Total	**52,838**	**69**	**87**	**1,712**	**3,077**
Crops	**39,429**	**67**	**87**	**1,246**	**3,073**
Grains, oilseeds, dry beans, dry peas	27,973	65	85	1,005	2,916
Tobacco	-	-	-	-	323
Cotton and cottonseed	-	-	-	-	647
Vegetables, melons, potatoes, sweet potatoes	4,859	29	86	348	2,821
Fruits, tree nuts, berries	553	12	84	629	2,748
Nursery, greenhouse, floriculture, sod	4,871	11	82	387	2,601
Cultivated Christmas trees, short rotation woody crops	85	10	54	294	1,384
Other crops and hay	1,087	62	87	1,798	3,040
Livestock, poultry, and products	**13,409**	**64**	**87**	**1,931**	**3,073**
Poultry and eggs	(D)	63	87	(D)	3,007
Cattle and calves	6,285	60	87	1,558	3,055
Milk from cows	5,853	45	80	565	1,892
Hogs and pigs	395	60	85	664	2,856
Sheep, goats, wool, mohair, milk	249	28	85	649	2,984
Horses, ponies, mules, burros, donkeys	120	30	84	1,328	2,970
Aquaculture	(D)	13	28	(D)	1,251
Other animals and animal products	219	29	85	498	2,878

Total Producers [c] 1,313

Sex	
Male	857
Female	456
Age	
<35	80
35 – 64	860
65 and older	373
Race	
American Indian/Alaska Native	1
Asian	19
Black or African American	1
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	1
White	1,277
More than one race	14
Other characteristics	
Hispanic, Latino, Spanish origin	11
With military service	167
New and beginning farmers	388

Percent of farms that:

Have internet access	83
Farm organically	1
Sell directly to consumers	15
Hire farm labor	18
Are family farms	99

Top Crops in Acres [d]

Soybeans for beans	31,368
Corn for grain	25,848
Forage (hay/haylage), all	11,798
Sod harvested	1,842
Corn for silage or greenchop	1,454

Livestock Inventory (Dec 31, 2017)

Broilers and other meat-type chickens	1,959
Cattle and calves	10,016
Goats	502
Hogs and pigs	1,056
Horses and ponies	800
Layers	4,202
Pullets	504
Sheep and lambs	1,282
Turkeys	138

See 2017 Census of Agriculture, U.S. Summary and State Data, for complete footnotes, explanations, definitions, commodity descriptions, and methodology.
* May not add to 100% due to rounding. [b] Among counties whose rank can be displayed. [c] Data collected for a maximum of four producers per farm. [d] Crop commodity names may be shortened; see full names at www.nass.usda.gov/go/cropnames.pdf. * Position below the line does not indicate rank.
(D) Withheld to avoid disclosing data for individual operations. (NA) Not available. (Z) Less than half of the unit shown. (-) Represents zero.

APPENDIX B: PRIORITY PRACTICE FOCUS RAW DATA

Soil and Water Conservation Policy Practices		
Yes	Votes	Someone Else is Lead but SWCD Will Support
9) promote soil and water conservation education	9	4) prevent impairment of dams and reservoirs;
3) protect surface, groundwater, and drinking water quality;	5	5) reduce damages caused by floods through wetland restoration and water storage
2) ensure continued soil health and productivity;	3	8) protect public lands ~~and waters~~;
6) preserve wildlife by managing habitats;	2	10) manage water quantity (managed by the DNR)
11) manage vegetation, including forests (+)	1	
Secondary Benefit		Not a Priority
1) control or prevent erosion, sedimentation, siltation, and related pollution in order to preserve natural resources;		4) prevent impairment of dams and reservoirs;
5) reduce damages caused by floods;		8) protect public lands ~~and waters~~;
7) protect the tax base;		
8) protect public ~~lands and~~ waters;		
10) manage water quantity		
12) manage soil and water resources to optimize economic impacts		

APPENDIX C: MS 103C.332 SWCD DUTIES AND SERVICES

103C.332 SOIL AND WATER CONSERVATION DISTRICTS; DUTIES AND SERVICES.

Subdivision 1.Duties.

In addition to any other duty prescribed by law, soil and water conservation districts must:

(1) respond to and provide technical and financial assistance to landowners to maintain and improve the quality, quantity, distribution, and sustainability of natural resources, including surface water, groundwater, soil, and ecological resources;

(2) provide technical assistance in implementing the soil erosion law under sections 103F.401 to 103F.48;

(3) arrange for employees to serve on technical evaluation panels to implement the wetland laws as required under section 103G.2242;

(4) locally administer the reinvest in Minnesota reserve program under section 103F.515 and rules adopted thereunder, using knowledge of local resources to manage each easement to maximize environmental benefits;

(5) participate in administering the Wetland Conservation Act as provided under sections 103G.221 to 103G.2375, either in an advisory capacity or as the designated local government unit administering the program;

(6) participate in the local water management program under chapter 103B, either in an advisory capacity or as the designated local government unit administering the program;

(7) participate, as appropriate, in the comprehensive watershed management planning program under section 103B.801;

(8) participate in disaster response efforts as provided in chapter 12A;

(9) provide technical recommendations to the Department of Natural Resources on general permit applications under section 103G.301;

(10) provide technical assistance and local administration of the agricultural water quality certification program under sections 17.9891 to 17.993;

(11) provide technical assistance for the agricultural land preservation program under chapter 40A, where applicable;

(12) maintain compliance with section 15.99 for deadlines for agency action;

(13) coordinate with appropriate county officials on matters related to electing soil and water conservation district supervisors; and

(14) cooperate to the extent possible with federal, state, and local agencies and with private organizations to avoid duplicating and to enhance implementing public and private conservation initiatives within the jurisdiction of the district

Subd. 2.Services provided.

To carry out the duties under subdivision 1 and implement the soil and water conservation policy of the state as stated in section 103A.206, soil and water conservation districts provide a range of services, including but not limited to:

(1) performing administrative services, including comprehensive and annual work planning, administering grants, leveraging outside funding, establishing fiscal accountability measures, reporting accomplishments, human resources management, and staff and supervisor development;

(2) entering into cooperative agreements with the United States Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service, and other United States Department of Agriculture agencies to leverage federal technical and financial assistance;

(3) providing technical expertise, including knowledge of local resources, performing technical evaluations and certifications, assessing concerns, and providing oversight in surveying, designing, and constructing conservation practices;

(4) providing information and education outreach, including increasing landowner awareness and knowledge of soil and water conservation program opportunities to protect soil and water resources and publicizing the benefits of soil and water conservation to the general public;

(5) facilitating regulatory processes for impacted landowners and providing technical review and comment on regulatory permits and development plans for regulations relating to soil and water conservation;

(6) administering projects and programs, including but not limited to the nonpoint source pollution abatement program; reinvest in Minnesota reserve conservation easements program; disaster response; local water management and comprehensive watershed management planning programs; and projects related to floodplains, lakes, streams and ditches, wetlands, upland resources, and groundwater resources, to maintain and improve the quality, quantity, distribution, and sustainability of natural resources, including surface water, groundwater, soil, and ecological resources;

(7) monitoring and inventorying to collect data that provide a baseline understanding of resource conditions and changes to the resources over time and analyzing and interpreting the data to support program implementation; and

(8) maintaining a modern technology infrastructure that facilitates planning and projects, including geographic information systems, modeling software, mobile workstations, survey and design equipment and software, and other technology for linking landowners with conservation plans.

APPENDIX D: STRATEGIC ISSUE FULL LIST

Strategic Issues (Full listing)	
Funding	Lack of community awareness of district
Adaptation to climate change and other challenges (adaptive management)	Currently federal and state political climate
Training opportunities • Specific topics • Locally relevant	Non government funding strategy • Diversifying portfolio
Are the county uses changing the district capacity? • Demographics	Nitrate issues
Loss of local control	Sustained funding • Staff and programs
Complexity of conservation implementation	Funding and bureaucracy
Role of Artificial intelligence • Technology changes	Development and Parcelization
Differing values between user groups	Landowner willingness • Buy-in
Leadership changes following elections	Building and maintaining relationships • Trust
Funding discussion around metrics of success	Accountability
Multiple funding sources	Disconnect between public perspective and funders desire
District capacity • Workload • Doing the right things	Partnerships • Two way relationships

Sorted Strategic Issues Table	
Funding • Diversity • Stability • Accountability • Staffing • Programs	Customer Base • End user • Awareness • Willingness • Demographics • Land use • Values
Staffing • Capacity • Workload • Training • Technology	Partnerships • Relationships • Trust • Complexity • Funding • Accountability

Strategic Issue Influencers	
Politics • State/Local/Federal • Leadership changes • Local control	Future and Emerging Issues • Success metrics • Climate change • Grants • Technology • Land use changes ○ Parcelization

APPENDIX E: STATE GRANT CONTRACT

BOARD OF WATER AND SOIL RESOURCES

FY 2026 & 2027 STATE OF MINNESOTA
BOARD OF WATER and SOIL RESOURCES
SWCD PROGRAMS & OPERATIONS GRANT PROGRAM
GRANT AGREEMENT

Vendor:	0000204502
PO#:	3000019342

This Grant Agreement is between the State of Minnesota, acting through its Board of Water and Soil Resources (Board) and Sherburne SWCD, 425 Jackson Ave NW, Elk River MN 55330 (Grantee).

Grant ID	Grant Title	Awarded Amt
P26-0281	2026/2027 - Conservation Delivery (Sherburne SWCD)	$43,270.00
P26-0371	2026/2027 - Conservation Contracts (Sherburne SWCD)	$20,564.00

Total Grant Awarded: $63,834.00

Recitals

1. The Laws of Minnesota 2025, First Special Session, Chapter 1, Section 4(a) and 4(b) appropriated funds to the Board for the FY 2026 and 2027 SWCD Programs and Operations Grant Program.
2. The Board adopted Board Order #25-40 to authorize and allocate funds for the FY 2026 and 2027 Programs and Operations Grant Program (Conservation Delivery and Conservation Contracts).
3. The Grantee represents that it is duly qualified and agrees to perform all services described in this Grant Agreement to the satisfaction of the Board.

Authorized Representative

The State's Authorized Representative is Adam Beilke, Land and Water Programs Supervisor, BWSR, 2118 Campus Drive SE, Suite 100, Rochester, MN 55904, (507) 766-9820, or his successor, and has the responsibility to monitor the Grantee's performance and the authority to accept the services and performance provided under this Grant Agreement.

The Grantee's Authorized Representative is:

TITLE District Manager
ADDRESS 425 Jackson Ave NW
CITY Elk River
TELEPHONE NUMBER 763-220-3434

If the Grantee's Authorized Representative changes at any time during this Grant Agreement, the Grantee must immediately notify the Board.

Grant Agreement

1. **Terms of the Grant Agreement.**
   1.1. ***Effective date:*** The date the Board obtains all required signatures under Minn. Stat. § 16B.98, Subd. 5. **The Board will notify the Grantee when this Grant Agreement has been executed. The Grantee must not begin work under this Grant Agreement until it is executed.**
   1.2. ***Expiration date:*** December 31, 2028 or until all obligations have been satisfactorily fulfilled, whichever comes first.
   1.3. ***Survival of Terms:*** The following clauses survive the expiration date or cancellation of this Grant Agreement: 9. Liability; 10. State Audits; 11. Government Data Practices; 14. Governing Law, Jurisdiction, and Venue; 16. Data Disclosure; and 17. Intellectual Property Rights.

2. **Grantee's Duties.**

The Grantee will comply with required grants management policies and procedures set forth through Minn. Stat. § 16B.97, Subd. 4(a)(1). The Grantee is responsible for the specific duties for the Program as follows:

2.1. ***Implementation:*** The Grantee will implement the grant according to the Program Requirements outlined in Exhibit A, which is attached and incorporated into this Grant Agreement.

2.2. ***Reporting:*** All data and information provided in a Grantee's report shall be considered public.

2.2.1. The Grantee will submit an annual progress report to the Board by February 1 of each year on the status of Program implementation by the Grantee. Information provided must conform to the requirements and formats set by the Board.

2.2.2. All individual grants over $500,000 require a reporting expenditure by July 15 of each year.

2.2.3. Final Progress Report: The Grantee will submit a final progress report to the Board by February 1, 2029, or within 30 days of fully expending funds, whichever occurs sooner. Information provided must conform to the requirements and formats set by the Board.

2.3. ***Match:*** The Grantee will provide minimum match required by Exhibit A.

2.4. ***Website:*** The Grantee must clearly post on the Grantee's website the names of, and contact information for, the Grantee's leadership and the employee or other person who directly manages and oversees this Grant Contract Agreement on behalf of the Grantee.

3. **Time.**

The Grantee must comply with all the time requirements described in this Grant Agreement. In the performance of this Grant Agreement, time is of the essence.

4. **Terms of Payment.**

4.1. All grant funds will be distributed in one installment promptly after the execution of the Grant Agreement.

4.2. All costs must be incurred within the grant period. All incurred costs should be calculated or determined before the final report is completed or returning funds.

4.3. Unspent grant funds must be returned within 30 days of the expiration date of the Grant Agreement.

4.4. Once final reporting has been completed funds may not be re-requested as funds may not be available.

4.5. The obligation of the State under this Grant Agreement will not exceed the amount listed above.

4.6. This grant is an advance payment. Advance payments allow the Grantee to have adequate operating capital for start-up costs, ensure their financial commitment to landowners and contractors, and to better schedule work into the future.

5. **Conditions of Payment.**

All services provided by the Grantee under this Grant Agreement must be performed to the Board's satisfaction, as set forth in this Grant Agreement. Compliance will be determined at the sole discretion of the Board's Authorized Representative and in accordance with all applicable federal, State, Board, and local laws, policies, procedures, ordinances, rules, and regulations. The Grantee will not receive payment, may be required to repay grant funds, or may have future payments withheld if work is found by the Board to be unsatisfactory or performed in violation of federal, State, or local law. Costs charged to the grant must be direct and necessary to produce the outcomes funded by the grant. Charges to the grant must be itemized and documented. Grantee administrative costs must be necessary and reasonable. Grantee is required to account for staff time charged to BWSR grants in order to track the expenditure of grant funds and match to ensure the use of the funds is consistent with applicable State and BWSR requirements.

6. **Contracting and Bidding Requirements.**

6.1. ***Municipalities***, as defined in Subd. 1 of Minnesota Statutes § 471.345, are required to comply with Minnesota Statutes § 471.345, Uniform Municipal Contracting Law and the following sub-clauses:

6.1.1. The Grantee and any subrecipients must comply with prevailing wage rules per Minnesota Statutes §§ 177.41 through 177.50, as applicable.

6.1.2. The Grantee and any subrecipients must not contract with vendors who are suspended or debarred by the State of Minnesota or the federal government: Suspended and Debarred Vendors, Minnesota Office of State Procurement.

6.1.3. The Grantee must maintain written standards of conduct covering conflicts of interest and governing the actions of its employees engaged in the selection, award and administration of contracts.

6.2. ***Non-governmental organizations,*** those that do not meet the definition of municipality in 6.1, are required to comply with the contracting and bidding requirements in the following sub-clauses:

6.2.1. Any services and/or materials that are expected to cost $100,000 or more must undergo a formal notice and bidding process.

6.2.2. Services and/or materials that are expected to cost between $25,000 and $99,999 must be competitively awarded based on a minimum of three (3) verbal quotes or bids or awarded to a targeted vendor.
6.2.3. Services and/or materials that are expected to cost between $10,000 and $24,999 must be competitively awarded based on a minimum of two (2) verbal quotes or bids or awarded to a targeted vendor.
6.2.4. The Grantee must take all necessary affirmative steps to assure that targeted vendors from businesses with active certifications through these entities are used when possible:
6.2.4.1. State Department of Administration's Certified Targeted Group, Economically Disadvantaged and Veteran-Owned Vendor List
6.2.4.2. Metropolitan Council Underutilized Business Program
6.2.4.3. Small Business Certification Program through Hennepin County, Ramsey County, and City of St. Paul: Central Certification Directory
6.2.5. The Grantee must maintain written standards of conduct covering conflicts of interest and governing the actions of its employees engaged in the selection, award and administration of contracts.
6.2.6. The Grantee must maintain support documentation of the purchasing or bidding process used to contract services in their financial records, including support documentation justifying a single source bid, if applicable.
6.2.7. Notwithstanding 6.2.1. – 6.2.4. above, the State may waive bidding process requirements when:
6.2.7.1. Vendors included in response to competitive grant request for proposal process were approved and incorporated as an approved work plan for the grant; or
6.2.7.2. It is determined there is only one reasonably able and available source for such materials or services and that grantee has established a fair and reasonable price.
6.2.8. The Grantee and any subrecipients must comply with prevailing wage rules per Minnesota Statutes §§ 177.41 through 177.50, as applicable.
6.2.9. The Grantee and any subrecipients must not contract with vendors who are suspended or debarred by the State of Minnesota or the federal government: Suspended and Debarred Vendors, Minnesota Office of State Procurement.

7. **Assignment, Amendments, Work Plan Revisions, Waiver, and Contract Complete.**
7.1. ***Assignment.*** The Grantee may neither assign nor transfer any rights or obligations under this Grant Agreement without the prior consent of the Board and a fully executed Assignment Agreement, executed and approved by the same parties who executed and approved this Grant Agreement, or their successors in office.
7.2. ***Amendments and Work Plan Revisions.*** Any amendments to this Grant Agreement must be in writing and will not be effective until approved and executed by the same parties who approved and executed the original Grant Agreement, or their successors in office. Amendments must be executed prior to the expiration of the original Grant Agreement or any amendments thereto. All work plan revisions must be documented. The Board reserves the right to require a work plan revision or grant agreement amendment for changes in the scope of the grant.
7.3. ***Waiver.*** If the Board fails to enforce any provision of this Grant Agreement, that failure does not waive the provision or its right to enforce it.
7.4. ***Contract Complete.*** This Grant Contract Agreement contains all negotiations and agreements between the Board and the Grantee. No other understanding regarding this Grant Contract Agreement, whether written or oral, may be used to bind either party.

8. **Subcontracting and Subcontract Payment.**
8.1. A subrecipient is a person or entity that has been awarded a portion of the work authorized by this Grant Contract Agreement by Grantee. The Grantee must document any subaward through a formal legal agreement. The Grantee must provide timely notice to the State of any subrecipient(s) prior to the subrecipient(s) performing work under this Grant Contract Agreement.
8.2. Activities identified in the sub-agreement must fit within the scope of the agreement between the Board and the recipient and include shared responsibilities for liability, fund distribution, implementation, and reporting.
8.3. The Grantee must monitor the activities of the subrecipient(s) to ensure the subaward is used for authorized purposes; is in compliance with the terms and conditions of the subaward, Minnesota Statutes § 16B.97, Subd.4 (a) (1) and other relevant statutes and regulations; and that subaward performance goals are achieved.
8.4. During this Grant Contract Agreement, if a subrecipient is determined to be performing unsatisfactorily by the State's Authorized Representative, the Grantee will receive written notification that the subrecipient can no longer be used for this Grant Contract Agreement.
8.5. No sub-agreement shall serve to terminate or in any way affect the primary legal responsibility of the Grantee for timely and satisfactory performances of the obligations contemplated by the Grant Contract Agreement.
8.6. The Grantee must pay any subrecipient in accordance with Minnesota Statutes § 16A.1245.

8.7. The Grantee and any subrecipients must not contract with vendors who are suspended or debarred by the State of Minnesota or the federal government.

9. **Liability.**
The Grantee must indemnify, save, and hold the State, its agents, and employees harmless from any claims or causes of action, including attorney's fees incurred by the State, arising from the performance of this Grant Agreement by the Grantee or the Grantee's agents or employees. This clause will not be construed to bar any legal remedies the Grantee may have for the State's failure to fulfill its obligations under this Grant Agreement.

10. **State Audits.**
Under Minn. Stat. § 16B.98, Subd. 8, the Grantee's books, records, documents, and accounting procedures and practices of the Grantee or other party relevant to this Grant Agreement or transaction are subject to examination by the Board and/or the State Auditor, the Attorney General, or Legislative Auditor, as appropriate, for a minimum of six years from the end of this Grant Agreement, receipt and approval of all final reports, or the required period of time to satisfy all State and program retention requirements, whichever is later.
10.1. The books, records, documents, accounting procedures and practices of the Grantee and its designated local units of government and contractors relevant to this grant, may be examined at any time by the Board or Board's designee and are subject to verification. The Grantee or delegated local unit of government will maintain records relating to the receipt and expenditure of grant funds.

11. **Government Data Practices.**
The Grantee and State must comply with the Minnesota Government Data Practices Act, Minn. Stat. Ch. 13, as it applies to all data provided by the State under this Grant Agreement, and as it applies to all data created, collected, received, stored, used, maintained, or disseminated by the Grantee under this Grant Agreement. The civil remedies of Minn. Stat. § 13.08 apply to the release of the data referred to in this clause by either the Grantee or the State.

12. **Workers' Compensation.**
The Grantee certifies that it is in compliance with Minn. Stat. § 176.181, Subd. 2, pertaining to workers' compensation insurance coverage. The Grantee's employees and agents will not be considered State employees. Any claims that may arise under the Minnesota Workers' Compensation Act on behalf of these employees and any claims made by any third party as a consequence of any act or omission on the part of these employees are in no way the State's obligation or responsibility.

13. **Publicity and Endorsement.**
13.1. ***Publicity.*** Any publicity regarding the subject matter of this Grant Agreement must identify the Board as the sponsoring agency. For purposes of this provision, publicity includes notices, informational pamphlets, press releases, research, reports, signs, and similar public notices prepared by or for the Grantee individually or jointly with others, or any subcontractors, with respect to the Program, publications, or services provided resulting from this Grant Agreement.
13.2. ***Endorsement.*** The Grantee must not claim that the State endorses its products or services.

14. **Governing Law, Jurisdiction, and Venue.**
Minnesota law, without regard to its choice-of-law provisions, governs this Grant Agreement. Venue for all legal proceedings out of this Grant Agreement, or its breach, must be in the appropriate State or federal court with competent jurisdiction in Ramsey County, Minnesota.

15. **Termination.**
15.1. The Board may cancel this Grant Agreement at any time, with or without cause, upon 30 days' written notice to the Grantee. Upon termination, the Grantee will be entitled to payment, determined on a pro rata basis, for services satisfactorily performed.
15.2. The Board may immediately terminate this Grant Agreement if the Board finds that there has been a failure to comply with the provisions of this Grant Agreement, that reasonable progress has not been made or that the purposes for which the funds were granted have not been or will not be fulfilled. The Board may take action to protect the interests of the State of Minnesota, including the refusal to disburse additional funds and requiring the return of all or part of the funds already disbursed.
15.3. The Commissioner of Administration may immediately and unilaterally terminate this Grant Contract Agreement if further performance under the agreement would not serve agency purposes or performance under the Grant Contract Agreement is not in the best interest of the State.

15.4. The Board may immediately terminate this Grant Contract Agreement if it does not obtain funding from the Minnesota Legislature, or other funding source; or if funding cannot be continued at a level sufficient to allow for the payment of the services addressed within this Grant Contract Agreement. Termination must be by written notice to the Grantee. The Board is not obligated to pay for any services that are provided after notice and effective date of termination. However, the Grantee will be entitled to payment, determined on a pro rata basis, for services satisfactorily performed to the extent that dedicated funds are available.

In the event of temporary lack of funding or appropriation, the Board may pause its obligations under this Grant Contract Agreement without terminating it. This pause will be for the duration of the lack of funding or appropriation and shall not be considered a termination of the Grant Contract Agreement. The Grantee will be notified in writing of the temporary pause, and the Grantee's ability to provide services may be temporarily suspended during this period. The Board will provide reasonable notice to the Grantee of the lack of funding or appropriation and shall notify the Grantee once funding is restored or appropriated, at which point the provision of services under the Grant Contract Agreement may resume. The Board will not be assessed any penalty if the Grant Contract Agreement is terminated due to insufficient funding. The Board must provide the Grantee notice of the lack of funding within a reasonable time of the Board's receiving notice.

16. **Data Disclosure.**

Under Minn. Stat. § 270C.65, Subd. 3, and other applicable law, the Grantee consents to disclosure of its social security number, federal employer tax identification number, and/or Minnesota tax identification number, already provided to the State, to federal and State tax agencies and State personnel involved in the payment of State obligations. These identification numbers may be used in the enforcement of federal and State tax laws which could result in action requiring the Grantee to file State tax returns and pay delinquent State tax liabilities, if any.

17. **Intellectual Property Rights.**

The State owns all rights, title, and interest in all of the intellectual property rights, including copyrights, patents, trade secrets, trademarks, and service marks in the Works and Documents *created and paid for under this grant*. Works means all inventions, improvements, discoveries, (whether or not patentable), databases, computer programs, reports, notes, studies, photographs, negatives, designs, drawings, specifications, materials, tapes, and disks conceived, reduced to practice, created or originated by the Grantee, its employees, agents, and subcontractors, either individually or jointly with others in the performance of this grant. Work includes "Documents." Documents are the originals of any databases, computer programs, reports, notes, studies, photographs, negatives, designs, drawings, specifications, materials, tapes, disks, or other materials, whether in tangible or electronic forms, prepared by the Grantee, its employees, agents or subcontractors, in the performance of this grant. The Documents will be the exclusive property of the State and all such Documents must be immediately returned to the State by the Grantee upon completion or cancellation of this grant at the State's request. To the extent possible, those Works eligible for copyright protection under the United State Copyright Act will be deemed to be "works made for hire." The Grantee assigns all right, title, and interest it may have in the Works and the Documents to the State. The Grantee must, at the request of the State, execute all papers and perform all other acts necessary to transfer or record the State's ownership interest in the Works and Documents.

***IN WITNESS WHEREOF**, the parties have caused this Grant Agreement to be duly executed intending to be bound thereby.*

Approved:

Sherburne SWCD

By: Francine Larson
Signed by:
Francine Larson
D3F81C05C2584C3...
(signature)

Title: District Manager

Date: 10/11/2025

Board of Water and Soil Resources

By: Adam Beilke
Signed by:
Adam Beilke
54B6CB8AC3954FE...
(signature)

Title: Land and Water Programs Supervisor

Date: 10/13/2025

Exhibit A

Grant Program Requirements:
SWCD Programs and Operations Grants

1. **Match**
   No match is required.

2. **Grant Work Plan**
   A work plan is not required.

3. **Activity Eligibility**

   Conservation Contracts Grants:
   Eligible activities must:

   - Meet requirements of Minnesota Statutes (M.S.) Chapter 103C.501, Subd. 5 (a), and provide funds for practices and projects for:
     - Erosion or sedimentation control;
     - Improvements to water quality or water quantity;
     - Habitat enhancement;
     - Plant biodiversity;
     - Energy conservation; or
     - Climate adaptation, resiliency, or mitigation.

   - Meet requirements of M.S. Chapter 103C.501, Subd. 4, requiring funds to:
     - Be identified in a state-approved plan established under M.S. Chapter 103B, 103C, 103D, 103F, 103G, or 114D,
     - Leverage federal or other nonstate funds, or
     - Address high-priority needs identified by the district based on public input

   Eligible activities include:
   - Financial assistance
   - Technical assistance,
   - Project support,
   - Administration, and
   - Reporting.

   Ineligible Activities:
   - Per requirements of M.S. Chapter 103C.501, Subd. 5 (c):
     - Funds may not be used to provide any financial assistance for practices designed only to increase land productivity.

Conservation Delivery Grants:
Eligible activities must:

- Be used to accomplish the purposes of M.S. Chapter 103C.

Additional Requirements include:

- Maintaining a website that publishes, at a minimum, the District's:
  - Annual report,
  - Annual audit,
  - Annual budget, and
  - Meeting notices.

4. **Native Vegetation**

Projects that involve vegetation restoration or establishment must use native vegetation and seed and plant sources consistent with BWSR's Native Vegetation Establishment and Enhancement Guidelines, with the exceptions listed below. Use of plant species on the Minnesota Noxious Weed List is prohibited for all projects. Non-native species used for projects must not pose a risk to native plant communities. The maximum distance for sources of herbaceous species seed and plants is 200 miles; and for tree and shrubs seed and plants the distance is 300 miles.

Exceptions

- Non-native, non-invasive perennial crops, hay crops or forage crops may be used:
  - As part of a drinking water protection strategy in a vulnerable or highly vulnerable DWSMA as designated by the Department of Health or in a Township Well Testing high-priority area as determined by the Department of Agriculture;
  - In buffers, borders, grass waterways or other areas likely to be exposed to pesticides or part of agricultural production;
  - For soil stabilization, erosion prevention and carbon sequestration in an agricultural production setting;
  - On fields that will be hayed, grazed or harvested.
- For the exceptions above, if the project area is under 20 acres in size, the exception may be approved by local conservation staff. If the project area is 20 acres or larger, or for any exceptions not listed here, grantees must request approval from the BWSR Grant Manager.
- Cover crops used to improve soil health and/or water quality are allowed without a maximum acreage limit.
- Temporary cover is allowed without a maximum acreage limit when needed to stabilize project sites prior to the construction of structural conservation practices.
- Cultivars of native species may be used in urban stormwater plantings if they accomplish similar or greater ecological functions, help achieve aesthetic goals and do not pose an invasive or other environmental risk.

5. **Allowable and Unallowable Costs**

Allowable costs are costs solely incurred though project activities that are directly related to and necessary for producing the project outcomes described in the work plan. Grantee is required to account for the staff time charged to BWSR grants in order to track the expenditure of grant funds and match to ensure the use of the funds is consistent with applicable State and BWSR requirements.

Unallowable costs include but are not limited to:

- Bad debts, monetary settlements and judgements, late payment fees, and investment management fees
- Donations, fundraising, sponsorships, and acknowledgements
- Entertainment, gifts, prizes, and decorations
- Alcohol
- Interest on loans not authorized under state statute
- Loans of BWSR grant funds
- Lobbying, lobbyists, and political contributions
- Merit awards and bonuses

6. **Technical Quality Assurance**

Practices and projects must meet the following requirements to ensure long-term public benefit:

- **Technical Assistance Provider.** The recipient must designate technical assistance provider(s) that have appropriate credentials for investigation, design, and construction.
- **Practice Standards.** Practices and projects must use appropriate standards for design, construction, effective life, operation, and maintenance.
- **Practice Certification.** Technical assistance provider(s) must certify that the practice or project was installed or constructed in accordance with the applicable plans and specifications, including approved modifications, prior to authorization for payment.
- **Operation and Maintenance.** Technical Assistance Provider(s) must prepare an operation and maintenance (O&M) plan specific to the site and practice(s) implemented.
- **Periodic Practice/Project Inspection.** Inspections shall confirm that the operation and maintenance plan is being followed and the project has not been altered or removed.

7. **Project and Practice Assurances**

A written agreement is required to ensure program requirements are met when installing projects and practices or providing financial assistance to a land occupier. Project and Practice Assurances must include technical and financial obligations and requirements for the installation, operation, and maintenance of the practice or project, including a plan for failures or noncompliance.

8. **Providing Financial Assistance to Land Occupiers**

All BWSR funds used by a recipient to provide financial assistance to a landowner or land occupier requires adequate project assurances.

Project Application and Agreements

Work completed prior to the signing of the agreement is not eligible.

Conservation Practice Contract Noncompliance

Failure to complete, maintain, or repair a conservation practice or unauthorized alteration is considered non-compliance with an executed conservation practice agreement. If the organization discovers noncompliance, they must take action to resolve and notify BWSR.

9. **Grant Management and Reporting**

Eligible activities include local grant administration, management, and reporting that are directly related to and necessary for implementing the project or activity associated with the grant. Grantee is required to report on the outcomes, activities, and accomplishments.

APPENDIX F: WORKLOAD ANALYSIS EXAMPLE

The attendees identified that district staffing was both a strategic issue and an internal strength and weakness. In addition to the specific items identified by the board during the planning session, there are also questions around how the district will provide staff to meet the additional requirements as found within the multiple comprehensive watershed management plans and additional grants such as the soil health staffing grant and the climate mitigation grant. To address these concerns, the district should perform an assessment of their current staffing to identify where staff are committing their time. Based upon this assessment, the board and manager can determine if there are specific activities that should be de-prioritized to shift staff time to higher priority items. Once the current staff time is appropriately allocated to the optimal mix of service delivery, the board and manager can then focus on where to acquire new staff to meet near-term needs.

CURRENT WORKLOAD ANALYSIS AND PROGRAM ASSESSMENT

Each of the current programs that are implemented by the district staff requires a dedicated commitment of time and financial resources. While the Sherburne SWCD staff are dedicated to the mission and vision of the organization, there are only so many hours within the day, month, and year in which to implement programs. By acquiring an understanding of the amount of time and resources each programs requires, the board and manager can better understand how the staff is allocating their time and can assist in the prioritization of existing activities and the potential to reduce time dedicated to low return programs or consider ending programs, which would allow for dedicating resources to other, higher return, efforts.

Number of work hours per full-time staff per year:

2088

MANDATORY PROGRAM ASSESSMENT

When conducting a program assessment for all the district's services, the board and staff should identify those programs that are statutorily required or mandated by another organization or partner. These are programs that must be conducted by the conservation district outside of the discretion of the board. Once these mandatory programs have been identified, the board should develop an understanding of the specific tasks that are associated with the implementation of that program. After the board has developed this foundational understanding of the requirements of the program, they should work with the manager to document how much time each staff person is dedicating to the administration of these required programs. Following this assessment of staff time, the manager and fiscal staff can then put a number the hours required for the administration of these required programs.

Two examples of a statutorily program that are implemented by the conservation district are:

- Wetland Conservation Act
- Buffer Law Implementation

The following process provides one way for working through the Program Assessment and Workload Analysis for the administration of the Wetland Conservation Act. The numbers within this example are artificial and the district manager and staff should use accurate numbers for dedicated staff time.

Wetland Conservation Act Administration

Staff Duties as Required by Statute:

- Review applications: 40 hours/year
- Participate in monthly Technical Evaluation Panels: 4 hours/month
- Development of restoration orders: 24 hours/year
- Field reviews of restoration orders: 12 hours/year

Assigned staff to program: District Technical Coordinator

Staff time per year: 124 hours per year

Staff Salary: $86.72/hour

Annual cost for program implementation: $10,753.28

Program Funding to the SWCD: $5,000 (state transfer from county)

The district staff and board should conduct this kind of analysis for each mandated program and identify the staff time and financial impact of each program. Once this analysis has been completed for each mandated program, this information should be aggregated for each staff person and for the district. This will serve as the foundation upon which additional programs can be built to understand the current workload associated with the existing programs.

MANDATORY OPERATIONAL COMMITMENTS

While state statute requires conservation districts to conduct specific duties in relation to the implementation of regulatory programming, there are some basic operational duties that are required for the district to function effectively. Within their internal mandates section, the board identified that the staff should have the capacity to serve the board and the larger community to the best of their ability. This includes ensuring the district meets its basic operational needs and striving to meet the needs of the local community.

District Organizational Management

The management of the district's resources are critical to ensure the organization can meet its vision efficiently. When thinking about the role of management, the following definition can help guide the board's thinking:

> *Management is 'working with human, financial and physical resources to achieve organizational objectives by performing the planning, organizing, leading and controlling functions'.*[8]

As management involves working with the human, financial, and physical resources, there are five components generally associated with managing an organization. These are:

1. **Planning**: When you think of planning in a management role, think about it as the process of choosing appropriate goals and actions to pursue and then determining what strategies to use, what actions to take, and deciding what resources are needed to achieve the goals.
2. **Organizing**: This process of establishing worker relationships allows workers to work together to achieve their organizational goals.
3. **Leading**: This function involves articulating a vision, energizing employees, inspiring and motivating people using vision, influence, persuasion, and effective communication skills.
4. **Staffing**: Recruiting and selecting employees for positions within the company (within teams and departments).
5. **Controlling**: Evaluate how well you are achieving your goals, improving performance, taking actions. Put processes in place to help you establish standards, so you can measure, compare, and make decisions.[9]

While the district manager will not be doing all these tasks every day, the board should expect the district manager to conduct these tasks at appropriate times throughout the year. These management duties will occur internally as the manager works with the board to define objectives and with staff to fulfill the board's objectives. With the changing planning and partnership environment including participation in several Comprehensive Watershed Management partnerships, work planning and relationship building will become increasingly complex and require more time from the management level of the organization.

While the manager's position description likely has each of those components listed, the board and manager should quantify the hours per year that are dedicated to each task. These hours

[8] https://www.managementstudyhq.com/what-is-management.html
[9] https://www.uagc.edu/blog/5-principles-of-great-management

should be seen as a locally mandated activity that is part of the 2088 annual hours of work expected from the manager.

District Financial Management

As conservation districts are governmental entities, there is a high expectation of competence and accuracy related to financial management. The public wants to be able to see that the funds, raised through taxes and other public revenues, are expended in a way that meets the public intent. In addition, the comprehensive watershed management plan and associated watershed-based implementation funding adds an additional level of complexity in that local governments need to work cooperatively to administer grant funding, which will include sharing of financial information regarding expenditures between organizations. The district has also recently received funding that comes from a combination of federal and state sources (Soil Health and Climate Smart). These funding sources have different requirements, which will add further complexity to the financial tracking and management of the district.

District financial management is an internal partnership between the district board, the district treasurer, the manager, and the financial staff. As such, there are a variety of duties that are performed by each position within the organization to provide internal controls to ensure effective oversight of the district's financial resources. The following is a list of potential activities conducted as part of the financial management. This list is not exhaustive, and the board should work with the manager and office manager to identify missing duties and who completes those duties.

- Budgeting
    - Development
    - Monitoring
- Bill/Invoice receiving
- Payment of bills
- Payroll
- Billing for services
- Working with treasurer to ensure bills are paid
- Grants management
    - Reporting
    - Process monitoring
    - Closeout

District financial management typically involves both the manager and the office manager. Therefore, when assessing the hours spent on district financial management, both the manager and financial staff should deduct this time from their 2088 hours per year.

Landowner Engagement Activities

The board and staff identified proactively engaging with landowners as one of the internal mandates of the conservation district. Moving from a reactive approach where staff is responding to those who come in the door to actively going out and finding landowners who are willing to engage in voluntary conservation will require refocusing staff efforts, so they have the time to invest in this outreach and engagement. It may also require allowing the staff to attend training related to the development of skills around conservation marketing and conducting social assessments to determine social constraints that may hinder the implementation of conservation activities.

With this desire to have the staff be more proactive, the district board should work with the manager to determine how much time each staff member should allocate to these proactive outreach and engagement activities.

Staff Workload Assessment for Mandated Activities

As an aid to help the board and manager understand the workload associated with mandated activities, the following table will allow for the documentation associated with each mandated activity.

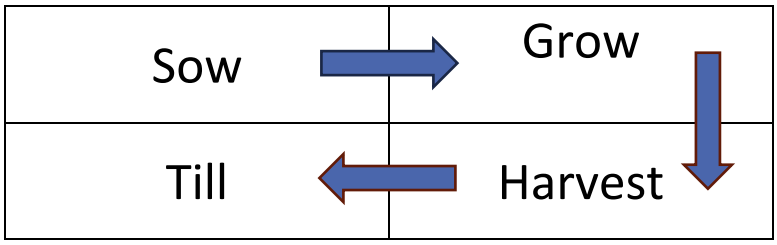
	Manager	Office Manager	District Technical Coordinator	Conservation Technician
Total Hours	2088	2088	2088	2088
Statutorily Mandated Activities				
Wetland Conservation Act				
Buffer Law Implementation				
Other				
Operationally Mandated Activities				
Management				
Finances				
Proactive Landowner Engagement				
Targeted Staff Time				
Staff Time Committed to Mandated Activities				
Total Staff Time				
Remaining Staff Time	(2088-Total Staff Committed)	(2088-Total Staff Committed)	(2088-Total Staff Committed)	(2088-Total Staff Committed)

CURRENT AND FUTURE PROGRAM WORKLOAD ASSESSMENT

Once the board and manager complete a staff workload analysis associated with mandatory activities, they can begin to assess other district programs to determine how valuable each program is, how much time should be expected of staff to work on each program, whether a program is generating enough value to continue, and identify programs that may be past their effective date. This analysis of current programs can be very difficult for boards and staff because many programs have a legacy and determining which programs to sunset can generate strong emotions. In addition, there may be cooperators who have grown used to the conservation district programs and would protest the discontinuance of their favorite programs. Having an external facilitator to lead this discussion can allow for a more inclusive dialogue where all participants can express their views.

One powerful tool for helping organizations to identify where their programs are in terms of organizational life cycle is the "Sow, Grow, Harvest, Plow" exercise. With this exercise, the district board and staff take each of the non-mandated programs offered by the district and identifies where those programs exist in one of four categories:

- **Sow:** What is missing for our organization's activity portfolio? Are their activities that we or our clients need that will allow us to achieve our objectives?
- **Grow:** What activities need more attention so that they can achieve their optimal level of contribution to reaching our objectives?
- **Harvest:** What programs have achieved their optimal level of output? Which activities have achieved a level of maturity in which they can largely operate on their own to generate the desired results?
- **Plow:** Which activities have passed their level of maturity and need more investment than is recovered through the return on effort? Which activities can be discontinued without significant long-term harm to the organization?



After each district program is classified in the appropriate status, the board and staff should complete the following table.

Program Evaluation									
Program/Activity	Sow/Grow/ Harvest/Till	Staff Time							
		Manager		Office Manager		District Technical Coordinator		Conservation Technician	
		Current	Desired	Current	Desired	Current	Desired	Current	Desired
Tree Sales									
Tree Planting									
Rain Gauge Monitoring									
Watershed Engagement									
Watershed Implementation									
Soil Health									

The first several items in this table are an example of some of the programs in which the district is involved or will be involved in the future. The board and staff will want to determine if these are correct and add additional programs. An additional sheet is provided in the next page that can be copied to add other programs as needed.

Program Evaluation									
Program/Activity	Sow/Grow/ Harvest/Till	Staff Time							
		Manager		Office Manager		District Technical Coordinator		Conservation Technician	
		Current	Desired	Current	Desired	Current	Desired	Current	Desired
Total Hours									

TRUE STAFFING NEEDS

Once the board and manager complete their assessment of workload needed to achieve the requirements of mandated programs and determined the requirements to complete other existing and developing programs, they should have a better understanding of current workload needs. While there are some areas in which there is future funding available for new staffing (Soil Health Programming), it is likely that there will be unmet needs. To better address these unmet needs, the board and manager can make an intentional decision about how to structure the organization in a way to achieve their vision. Two potential methods for addressing unmet needs are to reallocate existing staff to address higher priority programming and finding additional funding to increase staff.

Soon, the board and manager will likely need to reallocate existing staffing to address what have been identified as high priority activities. To highlight the expected new balance of staff activities, the board and manager should work with existing staff to explicitly document the new expectations and to indicate that it is acceptable to cut back on lower priority programs. As the Sherburne SWCD staff are truly dedicated to their outreach and engagement with all the citizens of the county, shifting focus away from lower priority projects, particularly ones that may be seen as legacy efforts, may be personally challenging. In addition, those who benefit from these programs may also complain if the district staff reduce their time commitment. It will be important for the board and manager to support the staff during this reprogramming of effort to ensure there is adequate leadership support during the transition.

As there are likely to be activities that are less supported by existing staff time, the board and manager may want to find alternative ways to address lower priority programming. These lower priority efforts can be supported through developing partnerships with other organizations, hiring consultants, or outsourcing the effort to another entity. With each of these efforts, the district will have less control over the implementation of the activity but will free up staff time for higher priority practices. As the board and manager develop alternative delivery strategies, care should be taken to avoid expending more financial resources on the effort to support a third party in implementing a district activity than was spent when that activity was managed in-house. Expending more financial resources on a lower priority activity would be going backwards in the long-term.

In the mid-term, if the district wants to expand its service and program delivery, it will likely need to find additional revenue to support additional staffing or to bring in contracted services. By conducting this activity, the district board and manager will have an explicit understanding of future desired staffing to support specific programs. This knowledge will provide the manager with the tools that will allow them to focus on specific funding sources. Please see the

later section on securing additional district resources for more information on some opportunities to increase the district's funding capacity.

APPENDIX G: PRACTICE INSTALLATION BY GRANT AND YEAR

APPENDIX H FARMER PROFILES

Farmer Profile: The Small-Acreage Part-Time Producer	
Demographic Indicators	Characteristics
• Age: Most likely 35–64 (the largest age group), but could also include younger producers. • Gender: Could be male or female, though county data leans slightly male. • Farm Size: 1–49 acres (represents 55% of all farms). • Value of Sales: <$2,000 (44% of farms).	• Often operates the farm as a hobby, lifestyle farm, or supplemental income source. • May hold off-farm employment and farm during evenings/weekends. • Likely grows specialty crops, keeps small livestock numbers, or maintains land for personal use. • Decision-making may emphasize cost minimization and low-risk conservation practices (e.g., cover cropping, pollinator habitat).
Motivators	Barriers
• Improving land aesthetics • Low-cost, low-labor conservation options • Programs with simple enrollment and small-scale financial assistance	• Limited revenue → low capacity to invest • Perception that conservation programs are designed for larger operators • Time constraints due to off-farm jobs

Farmer Profile: The Mid-Scale Commercial Family Farmer	
Demographic Indicators	Characteristics
• Age: Most likely 35–64 (majority of producers). • Gender: More often male, based on county demographics. • Farm Size: 50–179 acres (26% of farms). • Value of Sales: Most likely $5,000–$24,999 range (24% combined).	• A family-run operation with moderate production levels. • Typically grows row crops, hay, or manages modest livestock herds. • More focused on economic returns than hobby-scale farms. • Often already engaged with some technical assistance or conservation programs.
Motivators	Barriers
• Improving yields and reducing input costs • Soil health practices that provide medium-term payoff (no-till, crop rotation, nutrient management) • Programs that offer significant cost-share and clear economic benefits	• Concern about short-term yield impacts • Limited time for paperwork or program compliance • Must balance conservation with tight operational margins

Farmer Profile: The Large-Scale Commercial Operator	
Demographic Indicators	Characteristics
• Age: More likely in the 35–64 or 65+ categories (combined 80% of operators). • Gender: Skews male based on totals. • Farm Size: 180+ acres, with a subset at 500–1,000+ acres (about 19% of farms combined). • Value of Sales: Most likely >$100,000 (17% of farms).	• Full-time farm owner/operator managing larger fields, equipment, and multi-crop operations. • Business-oriented decision maker focused on efficiency, technology, and ROI. • May have participated in federal programs such as EQIP, CSP, or ARC/PLC.
Motivators	Barriers
• Practices with strong yield stabilizing or cost-saving potential • Precision agriculture and high-efficiency nutrient applications • Programs that offer large-scale payments and long-term contracts (e.g., CSP enhancements)	• Practices that require operational disruption • Perceived loss of flexibility due to program rules • Skepticism toward recommendations not backed by economic modeling

Last Appendix

Row Labels	Count of Year
2013	**1**
342 - Critical Area Planting	1
2014	**11**
342 - Critical Area Planting	9
362 - Diversion	1
712M - Bioretention Basin	1
2015	**15**
342 - Critical Area Planting	5
351 - Well Decommissioning	3
362 - Diversion	1
412 - Grassed Waterway and Swales	3
512 - Pasture and Hay Planting	1
804M - Permeable Surfaces	1
808M - Rotational Grazing	1
2016	**20**
317 - Composting Facility	2
327 - Conservation Cover	3
340 - Cover Crop	4
342 - Critical Area Planting	4
351 - Well Decommissioning	4
512 - Pasture and Hay Planting	1
580 - Streambank and Shoreline Protection	1
803M - Infiltration Practices	1
2017	**32**
313 - Waste Storage Facility	1
327 - Conservation Cover	5
340 - Cover Crop	9
342 - Critical Area Planting	1
351 - Well Decommissioning	3
393 - Filter Strip	1
580 - Streambank and Shoreline Protection	11
587 - Structure for Water Control	1
2018	**20**
340 - Cover Crop	5
342 - Critical Area Planting	7
351 - Well Decommissioning	1
580 - Streambank and Shoreline Protection	7
2019	**15**
327 - Conservation Cover	1

328 - Conservation Crop Rotation	1
340 - Cover Crop	1
342 - Critical Area Planting	6
351 - Well Decommissioning	1
449 - Irrigation Water Management	1
512 - Pasture and Hay Planting	1
580 - Streambank and Shoreline Protection	3
2020	**16**
340 - Cover Crop	1
342 - Critical Area Planting	2
351 - Well Decommissioning	2
449 - Irrigation Water Management	1
512 - Pasture and Hay Planting	5
643 - Restoration and Management of Declining Habitats	3
719M - Native Pocket Planting: Small Garden	1
725M - Pollinator Meadow	1
2021	**30**
313 - Waste Storage Facility	1
327 - Conservation Cover	9
340 - Cover Crop	2
351 - Well Decommissioning	6
512 - Pasture and Hay Planting	1
580 - Streambank and Shoreline Protection	1
643 - Restoration and Management of Declining Habitats	4
712M - Bioretention Basin	4
719M - Native Pocket Planting: Small Garden	1
725M - Pollinator Meadow	1
2022	**43**
327 - Conservation Cover	5
328 - Conservation Crop Rotation	1
340 - Cover Crop	4
351 - Well Decommissioning	1
449 - Irrigation Water Management	4
580 - Streambank and Shoreline Protection	2
643 - Restoration and Management of Declining Habitats	2
719M - Native Pocket Planting: Small Garden	4
723M - Beneficial Trees and/or Shrubs	4
724M - Pollinator Lawn	2
725M - Pollinator Meadow	14
2023	**9**
327 - Conservation Cover	4
340 - Cover Crop	1
351 - Well Decommissioning	3

643 - Restoration and Management of Declining Habitats	1
2024	**17**
327 - Conservation Cover	5
340 - Cover Crop	2
512 - Pasture and Hay Planting	1
533 - Pumping Plant	1
580 - Streambank and Shoreline Protection	3
712M - Bioretention Basin	5
2025	**7**
327 - Conservation Cover	1
329 - Residue & Tillage Management (no/strip-till)	1
340 - Cover Crop	1
449 - Irrigation Water Management	2
512 - Pasture and Hay Planting	1
657 - Wetland Restoration	1
Grand Total	**236**