



POPE SOIL AND WATER CONSERVATION DISTRICT



Strategic Plan
2025

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CONTENTS

Strategic Planning Overview	1
Organizational Background.....	3
Organizational Mandates.....	4
State Soil and Water Conservation Policy	4
Board and Staff Connections with the Soil and Water Conservation Policy	5
Key Practices of the State Soil and Water Conservation Policy as defined by Pope SWCD	
Board and Staff	7
Statutory and Grant Mandates	9
Statutory Mandates	9
Grant Mandates	10
County Mandates.....	11
Pope SWCD Internal Mandates	14
Pope SWCD Mission and Vision	19
Mission Statement	19
Vision Statement.....	20
Strategic Issues.....	23
Increase Staffing.....	23
Dependence of Others for Funding	24
Retaining Trained Staff	25
Financial Soundness.....	26
Remain Flexible and Responsive to Public Concerns.....	27
Assessing the Environment.....	28
External Environmental Assessment	28
External Opportunities.....	28
External Barriers.....	31
Internal Environmental Assessment.....	33
Organizational Strengths	33
Organizational weaknesses.....	37

Recommendations	41
Staff Retention and Recruitment.....	41
Retaining Trained Staff	41
Increasing Staffing.....	43
District Operational Funding and Financial Soundness	43
Dependence on Others for Funding	43
Remaining Financially Sound	46
Remaining Flexible and Responsive to Public Concerns.....	47
Remaining Flexible	48
Responsive to Public Concerns	49
Strategic Planning Implementation	53
Appendix A: 2017 Pope County Census of Agriculture.....	65
Appendix B: Strategic Issue Full List.....	68

STRATEGIC PLANNING OVERVIEW

Strategic planning is the process through which an organization's board and staff reviews 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 its customers and stakeholders. The recommendations and directions contained within a strategic plan provide the governing board 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.

This strategic plan should be viewed as a transitional point between planning and implementation and not the goal of the planning process. One of the most beneficial parts of the strategic planning process is the dialogue that takes place between the employees and board members. The semi-formalized discussion that takes place within the strategic planning environment 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 of the staff 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 or response.

Following the strategic planning process and the development of the plan, the members of the organization should commit to addressing key issues. Some of these issues can be delegated to specific staff members within the organization, 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 completion of the identified organizational goals.

Minnesota's Soil and Water Conservation Districts operate in an environment with many planning opportunities. A strategic plan can augment other required planning efforts but is not a replacement for those plans. This strategic plan is not a substitute for required 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 five sections that each provide an analysis of the system in which the Pope SWCD operates. These sections include:

Organizational Background: Describes the nature of the Pope SWCD as a special purpose unit of government and 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 of the district.

Mission and Vision: Mission and vision statements are components that outline how a district should operate and what the district hopes to be in the future. Achieving consensus on these statements will ensure board and staff are working from a common understanding on 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 in the mid-term (three to five year) time horizon.

Assessing the Environment: The Pope SWCD operates within two environmental systems. The external system are those entities and forces outside of the organization that create opportunities and challenges. The internal systems are 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 **Pope 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.

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 Pope Soil and Water Conservation District 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 Pope SWCD board members who participated in the strategic planning sessions were:

- Keith Nygaard, President, District 1
- Tom Talle, Vice President, District 3
- Randy Pederson, Secretary, District 2
- D. Gary Reents, Treasurer, District 5
- Randy Mitteness, Public Relations, District 4

The district staff who participated were:

- Holly Kovarik, District Manager
- Kimberly DeMorett, Resource & Outreach Technician
- Nicole Brede, Habitat Resource Specialist
- Christopher Borash, Conservation Technician

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

ORGANIZATIONAL MANDATES

An organizational mandate is something that an organization is required to do. These requirements can be 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 Pope 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, Pope 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. 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, there were several key points that connected with the Pope SWCD board and staff. 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.

“Land occupiers have the responsibility”

The board and staff had a lot of discussion around the concept of “land occupiers (hereinafter referred to as landowners) having a responsibility”. There was a recognition that, while the policy indicated landowners have a responsibility, the landowners themselves may not be aware of this responsibility for the stewardship of their resources. This lack of knowledge on the part of landowners could reflect an unawareness about the state’s soil and water conservation policy and the specific reference to landowner responsibility. This lack of understanding can show up in landowners having different priorities for their land management and seeing land as a commodity from which revenue can be extracted. Related to seeing the land as a commodity, there are many economic factors that drive land management decisions, sometimes in a detrimental direction.

Pope County is also seeing a change in the landowner base with many producers getting older. As landowners age or their life conditions change, they may sell their land, which has resulted in a long-term trend of land being consolidated within larger single entity ownerships meaning individual landowners have less time per acre to do the necessary conservation work. Finally, there is an increasing number of absentee landowners who may not have a direct connection to the land and are unaware of some of the environmental challenges, such as wind and water erosion, that may be degrading their land.

Land Ethic:

A land ethic is a philosophy or theoretical framework about how, ethically, humans should regard the land.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Land_ethic

The Pope SWCD Board and staff also discussed how the policy, by indicating that landowners have a responsibility, provides an implied understanding that landowners should also treat the

land in an ethical fashion. This perspective of landowners having a responsibility to treat the land ethically also encourages landowners and land occupiers to take a long-term perspective, managing the land not only for the benefit of today's citizens, but for future generations. While landowners and occupiers are responsible for the ethical land management today, they should strive to leave it better for the next generation.

“health, safety, economic well-being, and general welfare”

The board and staff saw a direct connection between the economic well-being found within the policy and the financial outcomes within the county. Having healthy water and productive soils allows for economic development throughout the county. In addition, many of these financial benefits accrue to the larger public rather than staying with the landowners who are implementing conservation activities. Some of the economic benefits are related to the general welfare such as reduction of flooding, protecting aquifers, and ensuring a stable tax base while others are more difficult to quantify such as clean water and recreational opportunities.

Humans are part of a larger system

While not explicitly identified in the Soil and Water Conservation Policy, the board and staff recognized that the policy places people within a larger ecological system. Through the recognition of the potential for flooding and damage to the land, the policy identifies that ‘nature is in control’. While landowners and occupiers have a responsibility to ethically manage the land, they can do so only within the ecological constraints found within the systems in which people are operating. Therefore, landowners need to understand and respect the natural system and work within the ecological systems to achieve their desired goals rather than trying to force modifications to the underlying environmental system.

Areas of Disagreement

While the board and staff generally supported the Soil and Water Conservation Policy, there were a few areas with which the board was not in full agreement with the language or focus of the policy. The board felt it was important to clarify that the policy was an aspirational statement regarding landowners' responsibilities. While the board supported the conceptual framing around landowner responsibilities, there was consensus that the policy should not be read as a regulatory framework.

The board did not fully support the idea that public lands and public waters should be included as part of the policy. When it comes to the management of both public lands and public waters, these resources are frequently managed by other entities. With the Soil and Water Conservation Policy focused on landowner engagement, the inclusion of resources that are under public control did not seem to fit with the other items.

There was a bit of confusion around the language regarding the idea of protecting the tax base. While effective soil and water management can produce an incidental benefit related to the local property tax base, the specific reference to property tax protection seemed odd to the board and staff and did not clearly align with the other priorities found within the policy.

There was a recognition by the board and staff that incentives are a powerful tool for encouraging the behavioral changes that are called for in the soil and water conservation policy. Even with the addition of Watershed Based Implementation Funding (WBIF), there will still be significant financial needs to provide adequate incentives to achieve the desired soil protection and water quality improvement goals.

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

The Pope SWCD board and staff reviewed the practices identified in the State Soil and Water Conservation Policy and identified several key points or concepts that were important to reiterate in terms of the district's role and future directions.

Priority # 1: 3) protect water quality;

The Pope Soil and Water Conservation District has expended considerable effort to protect or improve the county's water resources. As the board worked through identifying this practice as of primary importance, there was a recognition that the water resources included in this item include surface water, groundwater, and public waters. One of the primary drivers around the discussion for having this as a key practice was the economic importance of lakes and other water resources.

Priority #2:

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

The board and staff placed equal importance on the practices of controlling and preventing erosion and ensuring continued soil productivity. This secondary priority relates to the continued work to ensure that soil stays in place and that it remains productive. There was also discussion around the potential for new funding related to soil health, which could be a significant driver for new efforts related to soil management. As these two items are a secondary priority, they should serve as a refinement tool for the board and staff as they

consider future program options that may arise from the implementation of the priority of protecting water quality.

Priority #3: reduce damages caused by floods;

The board and staff recognized that protection of the county's water resources was not only related to water quality. Water quantity is also a concern. Land use changes, drainage, and the potential increase in high intensity rain fall events could overwhelm the county's natural and constructed channels, resulting in flooding. With increases in flooding events, there could be substantial damage to rural and urban landscapes. In addition, increased flooding may degrade downstream water bodies as material is eroded from upland areas. As this is the third priority, it should be used as a further refining tool when the board and staff consider programming around improving and protecting water quality, reducing soil erosion, and enhancing soil health.

Practices Benefitted by Implementing Other Practices:

6) preserve wildlife;

7) protect the tax base;

The Soil and Water Conservation Policy identifies eight implementation practices. However, the Pope SWCD board and staff identified that several of the components would not be a priority for implementation by the district. It was felt that preserving wildlife and protecting the tax base would be benefits of implementing the other priorities. Having a direct focus on these items would serve as a distraction from the focus on higher priority activities.

Practices Overseen by Other Authorities

There were two items within the policy that the board and staff felt would be best led by other authorities. These include:

- *the protection of public lands (8)*
- *prevent impairment of dams and reservoirs (4)*

The one exception to the interest in allowing other agencies to take a leadership role in dam management was in relation to the dam that was owned by the SWCD. Beyond the direct management of this district owned dam, while the district would be able to provide support to these other organizations taking leadership in pursuit of these practices, it would not be a priority for the mid-term future.

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 required 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:

- 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.
- Provide annual financial reports to the State Auditor
- Provide an annual budget to the County Board of Commissioners

Action Item:

The Pope Soil and Water Conservation District Board and Staff will enter implementation partnerships to meet the planning goals for those areas that are covered by comprehensive watershed management plans and lie within the jurisdictional boundary of the district.

Beyond the statutory mandates found within MS 103C, 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 following the 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 Pope 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.

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, these funds are generally provided through a grant agreement. Contained within each grant agreement are requirements placed upon both the grantor and the grantee, which are enforceable mandates agreed to by both parties as part of their expectation for completing the actions funded through the agreement. These grant agreements are voluntary and conservation districts are not required to accept the funding provided through a grant agreement. However, by accepting the funding and signing the grant agreement, the conservation district agrees to abide by the agreement requirements.

The Pope 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

land occupiers. 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).

Action Item:

The Pope SWCD Board and Staff will continue to apply for BWSR grants that work 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.

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

COUNTY MANDATES

The Pope County Commissioners provide annual funding to the Pope Soil and Water Conservation District to assist with program operations, previously to administer the Wetland Conservation Act, participate in the County Local Water Management Plan, and to facilitate the delivery of projects and services to the county's landowners. The following information was collected from the Pope Soil and Water Conservation District website¹.

¹ <https://popeswcd.org/grant-reporting/>

Budget Line Item	2021	2022	2023	2024
Pope-Stevens County Water Festival	\$4,000	\$4,000	\$4,000	\$4,300
Local Water Plan (NRBG)	\$6,548	\$6,547	\$6,547	\$10,304
Wetland Conservation Act (NRBG)	\$31,530	\$31,162	\$31,162	\$5,000
County Appropriation	\$62,100	\$68,310	\$75,141	\$105,405
Farm Bill Match	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0
County Other	\$22,750	\$22,750	\$22,750	INCLUDED IN COUNTY APPROPRIATION ABOVE
Budgeted Total	\$126,928	\$132,769	\$136,600	\$125,008
County Actual	\$123,928	\$129,769	\$136,600	Not Available

While the county does not provide any explicit mandates regarding these budgetary transfers, the Pope SWCD board and staff acknowledge that there is a responsibility associated with receiving these funds. The district board intends to use these funds efficiently and responsibly with the recognition that these are limited and valuable county resources. In addition, the SWCD board and staff intend to keep the county informed as to how these funds are spent to demonstrate the benefits provided to the county residents and resources.

Wetland Conservation Act Delegation

The Wetland Conservation Act (WCA) is a program designed to protect the remaining wetlands in the state. The legislature has authorized BWSR to delegate the authority for the implementation of WCA to local government units. The first level of delegation is to the county boards. While the state delegates substantial authority to the county, the WCA rule identifies specific duties that are to be performed by conservation districts. The county is provided with an annual appropriation for the Wetland Conservation Act, of which, a portion is to be provided to the district for the administration of their portion of the program.

Pope County has historically delegated the authority for the administration of WCA to the conservation district. In the latter part of 2023, the county chose to rescind this delegation and reclaim the authority of the administration of the program. The Pope SWCD has been working with staff through the end of 2023 to end the formal role of the district in administering the entirety of the program and complete all required reporting. Beginning in 2024, the SWCD will resume its role, as defined by rule, to conduct the required duties of a conservation district. This WCA rule requirement may still require substantial investment of district staff time, depending upon the annual workload related to WCA violations within the county.

County Comprehensive Local Water Plan Administration

The Pope SWCD shares the administration of the Pope County Comprehensive Local Water Management plan with county staff. The SWCD is tasked with having a staff person who is identified as the county water planner. With the completion of the Chippewa Comprehensive Watershed Management Plan, the entire county is now covered by watershed plans. With this transition, the county water plan has been completely replaced by Comprehensive Watershed Management Plans. However, there will still be effort needed to ensure there is a county-level coordination of the comprehensive watershed management plans.

Action Item:

The Pope SWCD will continue to serve as the county water planner and to work with county staff to ensure the local implementation of Comprehensive Watershed Management Plans

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.

The Pope Soil and Water Conservation District staff may want to consider adding the following sections to their annual report to provide additional information to the county board:

1. Pollution Reduction Impacts

The district installs many practices every year. These practices reduce sediment, phosphorous, and nitrogen from leaving the county's lands and degrading 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.

2. Economic Development

Many county commissioners are interested in seeing economic development within their county and 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 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.

Action Item:

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

POPE SWCD INTERNAL MANDATES

State statutes, grant program requirements, and county mandates are imposed by outside organizations upon the conservation district. However, there are some things the conservation district board sees as important enough to be internally defined mandates. These are mandates the district board imposes upon themselves and the staff. These internal mandates often speak to how the board views itself and its provision of services to district land occupiers.

Maintain Regular Staff Presence in the SWCD Office

The Pope SWCD Board is committed to ensuring there is a staff presence available to people who stop by the office for assistance. Part of this commitment is having the office staffed during working hours. This will necessitate the district manager working with staff to ensure

that schedules are aligned to maintain at least one person is present in the office during normal working hours.

Action Item:

The Pope SWCD manager should regularly reinforce the board's expectation regarding having the office staffed during working hours. Staff should seek to align work schedules to ensure this internal board mandate is met.

Apply for and Administer Grants

Competitive and base grants are important to the ability of the SWCD to effectively operate and provide services and incentives to landowners. Therefore, it is important for the SWCD staff to stay current on grant opportunities that would meet the needs of the residents, apply for appropriate grants that fulfill these needs while accomplishing the district's mission, and properly administer those grants that are received. To fulfill this internal mandate, the board and staff identified the following components:

- **Stay current on grant opportunities:** The Minnesota legislature provides funding to state agencies who pass on this funding to local governments through grants. While the Pope SWCD has been effective in applying for grants, the district staff should seek to stay abreast of current grant opportunities from state agencies. In addition, there are federal and non-profit organizations who provide funding that may help fulfill the district's mission. Keeping informed about these grants requires an investment of time. Therefore, keeping current with these grant opportunities should be at staff discretion to ensure time spent on searching and reviewing federal and non-profit grants does not interfere with the core functions of the district.
- **Apply for grants that further the district's mission:** The board would like staff to apply for grants that will further the district's mission and meet the resource needs of landowners. When the manager and staff are considering applying for grants, they should remain mindful of existing programming and current staffing limitations and not overextend the district or create a situation in which core programming is threatened by the delivery of a new grant program that is only marginally aligned with the mission.
- **Utilize grant funding to the maximum extent possible:** Grants have a deadline in which all the monies, both grant and match, need to be spent. Not spending all the monies within this timeframe will require the district to return funds to the

granting agency. Therefore, the board would like to see that grants are fully expended within the grant timeframe to the maximum extent possible.

- **Stay current with program requirements including reporting needs:** Different grants may have different reporting requirements depending upon statutory or agency language. The board would like to see that the staff stays current on all policy and guidance requirements for grants applied for and received. In addition, the board would like to ensure that staff follow all the requirements including timely reporting for all grants received.

Action Item:

The Pope SWCD Board and Staff receive grants training to ensure there is a foundational understanding for how grants are administered by the district. This training can be offered by BWSR staff with assistance from district financial staff.

The SWCD staff are well trained to fulfill the duties identified in their position descriptions and have the resources to grow into the future.

Well trained staff are critical to ensuring the district can meet its statutory, program, and mission requirements. Therefore, providing support to staff to attend trainings is a key role of the board. Maintaining adequate board support for staff requires providing both the funding to attend the appropriate training events *and* the appropriate time to attend training.

Action Item:

The Pope SWCD Board supports the manager and staff in developing annual training plans that can be incorporated into the district's budget.

- Manager works with each staff member to develop an individualized training plan on an annual basis.
- Staff annually updates their BWSR Technical Training Individual Development Plans.
- Staff works to achieve appropriate Job Approval Authority classifications to ensure the district can independently install high priority practices.
- Board works with manager to ensure appropriate technical and administrative trainings are pursued to allow for the optimal management of the district.

SWCD Board Members are Trained and Capable in Their Positions

The SWCD Board members highlighted the importance of their role in providing the appropriate leadership and guidance to ensure the district is fulfilling its mission and reaching the desired

vision. The role of a governing board member requires special skills that are not found within the normal course of daily life. Therefore, it is incumbent upon the board, both individually and as a group, to pursue appropriate trainings that would allow them to provide direction for the manager, ensure effective oversight of the district, and adequately represent the county's residents.

Training opportunities for board members takes place at District Area meetings and the Minnesota Association of Soil and Water Conservation District's (MASWCD) annual meeting. MASWCD also offers a SWCD leadership program that provides high quality leadership training over a one-year period. The MASWCD also offers occasional new supervisor orientation training that provides the understanding and tools for a district supervisor who is transitioning into their position. The Board of Water and Soil Resources holds periodic training aimed at specific skills that can be useful to supervisors. The manager should provide board members with regular updates on potential board training opportunities. The board may also want to consider establishing a district board training line item in their annual budget.

Action Item:

The Pope SWCD Board supports the supervisors in attending training that can enhance their ability to effectively govern the conservation district.

- Supervisors seek to attend appropriate training events such as:
 - Area meetings
 - MASWCD Annual Convention
- Supervisors work with the manager and BWSR Board Conservationist to identify training needs and participate in appropriate training events during regular board meetings.

Maintain Rosholt Farms Programming

The Pope SWCD owns and operates the Rosholt Farm in Westport. The district has cooperative agreements with the University of Minnesota, Minnesota Department of Agriculture, and other interested entities to conduct a variety of field trials. The SWCD Board would like to see this effort to continue. This will require maintaining the current level of staff support, including providing oversight to seasonal staff, and working to ensure that research projects are maintained and protected.

Action Item:

The Pope SWCD Board will continue to work with staff to support the efforts at Rosholt Farm.

- Manager works University of Minnesota researchers to continue the engagement in research activities.
- Staff will continue to work to provide site oversight and management of interns to ensure projects are maintained to the appropriate level for academic research.

Represent the SWCD with integrity and in ways that are lawful and ethical.

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 the expectation the board and staff would perform their duties in a way that is legal and ethical. 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.

POPE 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 Pope 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 for 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 SWCD revised their mission statement in 2019 to state:

Conservation, Protection, and Enhancement of Pope County’s Natural Resources

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

While the current mission statement for the Pope SWCD focuses on the natural resource management objectives within the county, there is a lack of discussion around the clientele whom the district serves. As conservation districts work with landowners on a voluntary basis to drive behavior change that meet the resource objectives, the board may want to consider including a statement that would be inclusive of the clientele of the district and how the district would work with these clientele.

Action Item:

The Pope SWCD Board may want to consider revising the mission statement.

- Within the mission statement, include a comment on the clientele with whom the district will work and how the district will work with that clientele.

VISION STATEMENT

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 During the strategic planning discussion, the Pope SWCD board and staff identified the following components of their vision for the district that would define success in 2030.

Landowner Engagement

Recognizing that landowners are the primary drivers of conservation within the district, proactive landowner engagement was a strong component of what success would look like in 2030. The district staff and board identified increasing communication with landowners through efforts at outreach, engagement, and marketing that would be driven by feedback from the district’s cooperators. This enhanced landowner engagement would allow the district to grow their influence over the conservation behavior among landowners with whom they directly worked and influence the larger conservation discussion among all landowners. One of the vital aspects of the district’s vision for engagement with their cooperators is to work with individuals in the field on their property. This ensure that staff understand the challenges faced by cooperators and that they are making recommendations based on the specific parcel of land and for the landowner with whom they are working.

Engagement and behavioral change are going to become increasingly important in the future. The district will continue to adapt to meet the needs of landowners and to address the conservation needs.

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

Staffing

With potential for new programming (Comprehensive Watershed Management implementation, soil health, etc.), there is not enough current staffing to meet all possible needs. These additional financial resources can enhance the ability of the district to serve as a trusted resource consultant and fund the installation of significantly more conservation practices. Having additional staff that is trained and knowledgeable in the design and implementation of conservation practices will be needed to ensure the district is positioned to make effective use of the increased financial resources.

One of the key drivers of the board is to ensure that district staff can be both responsive and proactive. This will require that staff be available to meet the needs of those who come to the door while also having the skills to identify and motivate those who may not yet know of the conservation opportunities found within the district. Again, the district will need to have enough staff to meet the daily needs of cooperators while also having staff who can work to generate interest among new cooperators. To meet these multiple needs, the district will need staff with a variety of skill sets, including additional support for identifying new conservation opportunities and generating local interest.

As was identified in the SWCD Mandates section, the board also envisions the district staff and board will continue to view themselves as public servants. They will aim for excellence in delivering customer service while operating in an ethical manner. As the district operates with public funding, effective financial management is critical and will be documented through continued clean audits.

Partnerships

With the recent development of the Comprehensive Watershed Management Program (One Watershed One Plan), conservation districts, counties, and watershed districts are having to develop and implement watershed management plans in a multi-jurisdictional partnership. This increase in the need to work across jurisdictional boundaries requires organizations to understand and find ways to work together. The Pope SWCD board and staff see these partnerships as important and need to be continued.

In addition to watershed-based partnerships, the district board and staff values the current partnerships that they have established within the district. The realization that conservation implementation works best when it is broadly based means that local partnerships can serve to broaden the audience and lighten the load for each partner. Therefore, the district board and staff envision the partnerships with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), the county, the cities, lake associations, and others will continue.

Natural Resource Improvements

As the primary role of conservation districts is the protection and enhancement of local natural resources, the board and staff believe that one of the measurements upon which the district should be judged for future performance is the state of these resources in the future. One of the drivers of conservation in the district has been water quality. By using water quality indicators as a metric for evaluating progress in managing the district's natural resources, the board envisions there being some level of progress toward the delisting of impaired waters and no significant degradation of those waters that are meeting standards. The district also strives for progress on meeting the goals and deliverables identified in our comprehensive watershed management plans.

SWCD Vision Statement

The vision statement below was drafted based upon the input from the board and staff at the planning meeting. The board and staff should remember that this is a proposed vision for how the organization should look in the future. This is not a natural resource-based vision statement. Many of the watershed management plans will have such a statement and the board and staff should explore ways to ensure synchrony between this vision statement and the resource-based vision statements.

Pope Soil and Water Conservation District

Organizational Vision Statement

The Pope Soil and Water Conservation District will be an organization that has staff who are actively engaged with partners to meet the needs of present and future conservation partners. These staff will directly engage with the landowners in the county to provide conservation advice and assist in the implementation of conservation practices that meet local, county, and watershed priorities. Recognizing that the district board and staff are public servants, the district will operate in an ethical manner to ensure public funds are spent wisely.

Action Item:

The Pope SWCD board and staff should review, modify, and affirm an organizational vision statement.

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 identified several potential strategic issues (see appendix B). Once the brainstorming of strategic issues was completed, each of the board and staff members in attendance selected the two issues that were most important to them.

The Board and staff identified the following strategic issues as the top five priorities:

- Grow staff to accomplished needed objectives (Tied for 1st, five votes)
- Dependence upon others for funding (Tied for 1st, five votes)
- Retain trained staff (2nd, four votes)
- Financial soundness (Tied for 3rd, three votes)
- Remain flexible to current public concerns, responsive (Tied for 3rd, three votes)

INCREASE STAFFING

As of the planning exercises, the Pope SWCD had four full-time employees in the following positions:

- Manager
- Outreach and Education
- Habitat Specialist
- Conservation Technician

The current workload of the conservation district keeps staff busy. However, the district board and manager recognize there is a substantial new workload that may require increasing the district staffing to meet new program needs. The SWCD is involved in several comprehensive watershed management partnerships. Participating in the advisory and policy committee for each of these partnerships requires a significant time commitment for the existing staff. Should the conservation district continue serving as the coordinator for one of these partnerships into the implementation phase, this burden will likely need to shift from the manager to another employee, which will allow the manager to return to focusing on critical management issues related to the general governance and operation of the district. As these partnerships mature

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

and begin to implement targeted practices through the Watershed Based Implementation Funding (WBIF) program, they will likely see an increasing need for technical capacity among district employees.

Beyond the known predictable efforts related to the comprehensive watershed management program, there are several programs that were enhanced during the 2023 legislative session. Programs related to soil health, climate change, water storage, and wildlife habitat enhancement saw increased funding. As these programs are still under development within the MN Board of Water and Soil Resources, the needs surrounding local implementation are not clear. However, regardless of how these program policies are finalized, it is likely that SWCDs will be seen as vital partners for the implementation of these programs. Pope SWCD has chosen to participate in these programs. There is an expectation that these state and federally funded efforts will be additive rather than supplanting existing programs.

DEPENDENCE OF OTHERS FOR FUNDING

Soil and Water Conservation Districts are special purpose units of government established under MS 103C. Within this statute, there are certain powers and duties that are assigned to conservation districts related to implementing the state soil and water conservation policy. MS 103C also empowers conservation districts to accept delegated authorities, which allows other local government entities to shift the responsibility for program delivery from the county to the district. However, MS 103C does not provide conservation districts with any independent authority to raise funds through levies. While the statute requires conservation districts to submit their budgets to the county on an annual basis, there is no requirement for the county to provide any direct funding to the district. In addition, while the statute provides the ability for conservation districts to generate funding through a local levy process, the actual approval of the levy and implementation of the levy must be approved and performed by the county. Therefore, while conservation districts can request a levy for special projects, they are reliant on the county to approve these projects and establish a levy (MS 103C section 600).

For the past several biennia, conservation districts were funded through the SWCD Local Capacity grant with an allocation from the Clean Water Fund. This funding source was reapproved during each legislative session and provided each conservation district with a base amount of \$100,000. This base grant was supplemented through a formula that accounted for specific natural resource characteristics of the county. Added to this formula driven funding, conservation districts could also increase their Local Capacity allocation when they received an increase in their county funds general transfer. While the Local Capacity grant was not competitive, it was not a dedicated allocation and conservation districts lacked any significant ability to increase the funding allocation, which was controlled by BWSR and the legislature.

Conservation districts also received biennial appropriations through the general fund related to Conservation Delivery and State Cost Share (now called Conservation Contracts). Other grant funding was based upon programmatic implementation requirements such as the Wetland Conservation Act, which required transfer from the county, and the Buffer Law Implementation Grants. As with the Local Capacity allocation, these base grants are based upon legislative appropriation and BWSR formulas.

The 2023 Legislature approved a funding provision for Conservation District Aid, which is a direct transfer from the Department of Revenue to the conservation districts. This funding source provides a base level of funding to each conservation district with an additional allocation based upon a formula. As with the previously mentioned funding allocations, Conservation District Aid is derived from a legislative appropriation that cannot be modified to address the specific needs within any specific conservation district. Therefore, all direct and indirect allocations to the conservation districts lie outside of the control of conservation districts. This lack of control means that conservation districts are dependent upon other organizations for their financial resources. This places them in a weak budgetary position that reduces their ability to serve their district residents, even in the event the residents would approve a revenue source such as a property tax levy.

RETAINING TRAINED STAFF

While increasing staff was identified as one of the two concerns within the first tier of strategic issues, the board and staff recognized that retaining trained and knowledgeable staff is critical to ensuring the continuing success of existing programs.

One component of retaining trained staff is to ensure that they remain current in their duties and the knowledge required for their jobs. While the natural resources within the district's jurisdiction are unlikely to significantly change, there are constant advancements in the knowledge and technology related to implementing conservation activities. To stay current in their fields, staff will need to identify knowledge deficiencies, find and attend the appropriate trainings to address these deficiencies, and dedicate the time to using the knowledge locally to enhance their competency with the newly developed skills.

While staff are staying current on the skills related to their job duties, the board will need to act to ensure there are enough incentives to retain these employees. Some of the common strategies for addressing retention include:

- Increasing salaries
- Enhancing benefits
- Provide opportunities to enhance career skills such as training

- Demonstrate explicit support of the board for staff actions and outcomes
- Provide clear and achievable work expectations
- Work with employee to identify ways to improve retention through direct communication with the manager and the board
- Foster abilities of staff to build their professional network
- Demonstrate a value for the entire employee included non-work-related support⁵

Another benefit of retaining employees is the savings that accrue to the conservation district by not having to recruit, hire, and on-board new employees. As it can take new employee a year or more to gain the required experience and knowledge to perform their expected duties independently and efficiently, reducing the costs related to backfilling a position can be spent on other high priority needs.

FINANCIAL SOUNDNESS

While the staff and board identified that their dependence on others for funding was a top tier strategic issue, the financial soundness of the district was identified as another priority strategic issue. For this plan, financial soundness will be defined similarly to financial stability:

Financial stability is an organization's ability to facilitate and enhance its economic processes, manage risks, and absorb shocks. Moreover, financial stability is considered on a continuum being changeable over time and consistent with the budgetary directions of the board.⁶

The conservation district board and staff understand that implementing conservation activities to protect and enhance the county's soil and water resources require the expenditure of funds. These expenditures go to providing the required staff support to design and oversee the implementation of activities, the physical infrastructure including office space, materials, and vehicles that allow staff the resources with which to perform their duties, and the associated expenses with operating a staffed facility. Beyond providing financial support, the operation of a conservation district is driven by educational and informational programming and the provision of voluntary financial incentives. Efforts at engaging with landowners require stability to ensure a level of consistency in program delivery.

⁵ https://www.indeed.com/hire/c/info/9-effective-employee-retention-strategies?gclid=EAlaIqObChMlvrLkgcfvggMVayOtBh1pcwhvEAAYAiAAEgL5kfD_BwE&aceid=&gclsrc=aw.ds

⁶ https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwi8_obMye-CAXX2LzQIHOpDFoQFnoECCYQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.imf.org%2Fexternal%2Fpubs%2Fft%2Fwp%2F2004%2Fwp04187.pdf&usg=AOvVaw3M3Tosb-_9-Fn_e5JPaFBT&opi=89978449

Having a financially sound conservation district will require the board and staff have enough revenue to cover operational expenses. While revenue and expenditures are not directly linked (i.e. such as one might find a retail establishment), the board and staff understand that the management of the budget process and some basic financial forecasting are critical to ensuring the stable provision of service over time.

REMAIN FLEXIBLE AND RESPONSIVE TO PUBLIC CONCERNS

Conservation districts lie at the mid-point between state priorities and local concerns. While they need to be responsive to state concerns to ensure continued funding, district boards and staff need to remain connected to their local communities to ensure they are solving local conservation problems. With evolving state priorities that could change funding and programming on a biennial basis, district boards and staff need to be adaptable enough to adjust financial and staff resources in such a way as to capture the optimal level of state funding and ensure they are remaining current on competitive opportunities and responsive to state mandates. This requires the board and staff stay closely connected with state agencies to ensure they remain current on evolving programs and knowledgeable about new efforts that could bring benefit to their citizens.

On the other side of the conservation delivery system, district boards and staff need to stay connected to the local landowners and interest groups within their jurisdiction. As the majority of conservation implementation is driven through educational efforts and a voluntary incentive driven approach, district staff need to target their efforts within a framework that is acceptable to those with whom the district works. As local norms surrounding conservation and the use of land within the conservation district change in response to a variety of factors, it is incumbent upon the board and staff to remain connected to local landowners so they can understand evolving interests and needs.

To remain locally relevant, conservation district staff need to be responsive to landowner needs and concerns. When individuals come to the district for assistance, time is often in short supply. The individual has a problem that needs to be solved quickly. There are few examples of erosion and other water quality impairments that will heal themselves. Therefore, prompt response to a landowner identified issue will be necessary to ensure the problem is solved quickly before it has time to expand and become more complicated with the potential for having significantly larger negative outcomes.

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 create both opportunities and challenges. The internal environment are those factors that are generally within the districts 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

Conservation districts are the primary mechanism through which voluntary conservation measures are implemented with landowners. While conservation districts are local units of government, they (as of the writing of this plan) have no independent levy authority and rely on funding from the state and county government with some independent revenue coming from sales and services. In addition to having a funding structure that relies heavily on funding from other entities, conservation districts lack regulatory authority, which means they cannot compel the installation of conservation practices. This lack of independent revenue generation capability and weak regulatory powers results in conservation districts being particularly susceptible to changes in the external environment.

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. As the district relies heavily on partnerships with other entities to achieve their vision, the board and staff identified several features of working within partnerships that presented both opportunities and barriers. The district board and staff made insightful connections such as identifying that, while there may be forces that are opportunities, these same forces may also be barriers.

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.

Conservation Partners

Within the system in which the Pope 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 related to 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 public and private land and water resources.

The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and Farm Services Agency (FSA) operate within the county to provide financial and technical assistance from the federal level. Both organizations are heavily invested in providing the district's landowners with the resources to protect their private resources and to optimize the production of agricultural land. The conservation district has strong ties with both organizations through the alignment of their mission and in being colocated in the same building, which allows for the seamless integration of services. Recent increases in funding and additional programmatic focus contained within the US Inflation Reduction Act and other federally funded programs should see greater federal efforts involved in the implementation of conservation programs.

The development of the comprehensive watershed management program (1W1P) has allowed for the strengthening of the connection between conservation districts, counties, and watershed districts. These connections facilitate communication between these very different organizations and allows for a greater understanding about the roles that each of them plays within the larger local government water management effort. In addition, the process of developing a comprehensive watershed management plan and thinking about the implementation of this plan has provided additional resources to the Chippewa River Watershed Association, which increases the local value of this joint powers' entity.

Outside of the government sector, the business sector is becoming more interested and involved in the delivery of conservation services and the protection of the district's resources. Vendors such as seed sellers, farm consultants, and technical service providers are important partners involved in the delivery of conservation efforts. 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 the needed conservation assistance.

State Funding and Programs

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 and the establishment of new programs. Existing 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 stable funding allows for watershed partnerships to build lasting programs that can allow for the long-term commitment to the implementation of water conservation 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.

There are also 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.

Pope County Landowners

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. The local farming community is one that is constantly evolving with changing farm demographics and properties being sold, with many parcels being consolidated into larger operations. As the farm community changes, opportunities for continuing and new engagement will open and close. The board and staff recognize that, with the potential new stable funding sources, there is the opportunity to meet an untapped landowner interest in conservation. With the new financial and potential staff resources, landowner engagement can be deeper, which allows for a building of trust among both parties that will allow for the implementation of more intensive farm management activities.

In addition to an increasing ability to directly engage with individual landowners, the district board and staff have identified the potential to build a local land ethic that recognizes both the value of the land for agricultural production and personal financial gain but also the awareness that the land is a critical resource that provides many public benefits valued by the larger community within the district.

Changing demographics within the district allow for new opportunities to pursue conservation activities with those who are not engaged in agricultural production. Many people are purchasing land for recreational and tourism interests. The district has many high-quality lakes that attract people for their beauty, fishing resources, and swimming and boating interests. These landowners are an audience who may be interested in protecting and enhancing the district's land and water resources while bringing a different set of assets and interests to the conservation community.

EXTERNAL BARRIERS

While the external environment presents several opportunities that can be exploited by the Pope SWCD to grow and expand their conservation capabilities to fulfill their vision, the environment does pose 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 understand potential barriers that may arise.

State and Federal Funding Sources

While there were 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 provided to the Pope SWCD through grant agreements that have specific timelines. 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 the timelines related to grant agreements, 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 can create obstacles to working with landowners.

Federal funding from the NRCS and the FSA provide opportunities to install conservation practices, however, this funding also comes with strings. The federal funding is tied to programs of national interest, which can be misaligned with local interests. In addition, much of this federal funding will need to be implemented in partnership with federal agencies, which tend to be understaffed at the local level. While the intention behind the delivery of this funding is an opportunity, existing federal staff capacity may be a barrier that slows the delivery of federally funded conservation activities.

Vendors and Contractors

While state and federal programs can provide opportunities to support the implementation of desired conservation activities, the implementation and installation of the project is performed by the landowner, frequently using private contractors. Recent history has demonstrated that there is a lack of available contractors who have enough hours to do the desired conservation work, particularly for those landowners who wish to install smaller projects. So, while landowners might be very interested, if there are not contractors who can do the work, this is a need that will remain unfulfilled.

The private business sector was identified as a potential opportunity with whom the Pope SWCD can engage to increase the implementation of soil and water conservation projects. However, it is important to remember that these are profit seeking entities. This drive for profit can be a barrier to installing conservation projects.

Local Government Partnerships

While efforts such as the Comprehensive Watershed Management program encourage the development of inter-jurisdictional partnerships designed to improve water quality at the watershed level, these projects come with additional costs to the individual conservation district. Rather than being able to focus on problems within the district and prioritize local concerns, the Pope SWCD needs to work with partners on a watershed level to discuss watershed-based priorities. This inter-agency coordination requires a significant commitment of time by both the board and staff to maintain these partnerships and ensure the district's voice is included in the decision-making process.

As the Pope SWCD lacks the ability to independently generate revenue, partnerships with the county are critical to ensure the SWCD is seen as valuable to the county to maintain the flow of funds to the district. While the relationship between the district and the county board is positive, changes in the county board composition or within the county bureaucracy can alter this relationship and place this funding in jeopardy. Therefore, the district staff and board need to invest the proper amount of time to ensure this partnership remains stable over time.

Changing Farm Demographics

While the changing farm demographics present opportunities, such as when a new landowner takes over the management of a family farm, there is a trend toward larger farms within the district. This means that farms need to become more profitable to ensure their financial viability. In addition, as the farms are getting larger, there is less capacity to focus on smaller conservation challenges and install long-term practices that reduce erosion and other farm

issues. It can often be easier for the farm manager to put in short-term fix that corrects the problem for a season but does not deal with the underlying cause of the problem.

As demographics change within the farm community, the district needs to adapt to changing clientele.

Recreational and Tourism Land Ownership

While the purchase of land by those who are interested in the land for recreation and tourism can increase the interest in managing land for conservation, some of these landowners may be interested in enhancing the land for scenic or recreational enjoyment. The conversion of shoreland to manicured lawns that allows for the enjoyment of the lake or the modernization of a seasonal cabin to a four-season home can place added pressure on the environment and, inadvertently, reduce the recreational enjoyment of the specific parcel and the larger community.

INTERNAL ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

While there are many external influences on the decision of a landowner to install a conservation project, 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 internal 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 were identified as a strength in that half 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 also 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 office in which the Pope SWCD is housed has space for additional staff. This will allow the district to increase staff, to meet future needs related to soil health, comprehensive watershed plan administration and implementation.

Historic Achievements

One of the foundational features of a conservation district that will determine future success is past achievements. The Pope SWCD has a legacy of conservation achievement upon which to build into the future. The district staff members have been aggressive and successful in applying for and receiving competitive grants. These competitive grants serve to supplement the funding received from state base grants and the county transfer. District staff has looked at the resource environment through a wide lens in which there is a focus on activities that benefit the district but also with a perspective on including neighboring districts that can assist in larger watershed activities. This broad resource approach has led to successful partnerships that stretch across jurisdictional lines while addressing concerns of many local conservation districts.

Grants are only one plank of the historic achievement of the district. As was previously stated, the district staff have developed a rich network of relationships with interested stakeholders. With each landowner that installs a conservation project, this network expands to include more potential advocates for conservation. These advocates can be used to support the district in other aspects of operations such as seeking additional support from the county and as individuals who can provide testimonials to the media and other outreach sources to drive further conservation.

Area Two Respect

Technical Service Areas (TSAs) are collaborative organizations that expand the ability of conservation districts to design and install conservation practices through the provision of specialized services that might be unavailable to any single district, such as engineering services. The Pope SWCD is a member of the West Central Technical Service Area Two, which is governed by a joint powers board made up of a supervisor from each of the member districts who provide governing decisions to the Stearns SWCD who oversees the TSA staff members.

Job Approval Authority

Job Approval Authority (JAA) is a credentialing system for planning, design and installation of standard conservation practices. This system ensures that local staff who provide technical services in Minnesota are qualified to plan, design, and implement conservation practices. JAA is based on training, experience, and demonstrated competence for specific job classes and stages of conservation practices, including investigation/planning, design, and construction/application.

With the combination of highly qualified staff within the district and the interests of the district's landowners in apply local conservation projects, the Pope SWCD is viewed with respect by the other members of TSA-2. This respect is built upon the foundation of locally implemented conservation and an understanding that the effective use of the TSA-2 engineers requires the assistance of the local district in providing the appropriate locally derived technical skills and the necessary acquisition of Job Approval Authority (JAA) to minimize the district's reliance on the TSA for activities of lesser complexity.

White Hat Perspective

Natural resource management in Minnesota has a significant regulatory component. Programs such as the Buffer law, the Wetlands Conservation Act, and feedlot regulations as overseen by the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency that places constraints on the ability of landowners to manage their lands as they see fit. While the Pope SWCD is involved in several of these regulatory programs (Buffer Law, WCA), the district is still seen as an organization that encourages voluntary conservation driven by the landowner's goals and objectives. This voluntary approach to conservation allows the district to wear a **White Hat** as they approach landowners. This non-confrontational and supportive approach means that landowners do not fear being found in non-compliance for an unrelated issue when a SWCD staff member visits the property and makes a conservation recommendation. In addition, the district staff work to solve the landowner challenges rather than seeking to drive the implementation of state or other non-local priorities. This ensures the SWCD staff focused on landowner concerns, which further enhances the White Hat perspective.

High Functioning SWCD Board

While SWCD staff are the delivery structure for the conservation district, it is the board who provides governance for the district. The Pope SWCD Board members are actively engaged in all aspect of district governance from providing staff with a future vision for the implementation of conservation delivery in the county, a budgetary structure that combines providing adequate support for staff while ensuring funding for conservation implementation, and serving as a tool for accountability by monitoring the implementation of conservation programs monthly. The board members stay current with state and regional programs through regular participation in TSA-2 meetings and state events like the MASWCD Annual Convention. The district board members also participate in trainings, such as the Treasurer's Training, to remain current with the expectations of each of their roles as a board member.

Rosholt Research Farm

The Rosholt Research Farm is a unique effort among Minnesota's conservation districts. While there are districts that own farms donated by landowners, the Rosholt Research Farm is the

only one that provides cutting edge research on regionally important conservation activities and agricultural production. By engaging in a partnership with the University of Minnesota and the Minnesota Department of Agriculture, the district provides a regional site in which scientific grade research can be conducted and demonstrated to local landowners. While this site requires a significant commitment from district staff, the gains to the district's landowners are not duplicated by any of the state's other conservation districts.

Billable Rates Capture Overhead Costs

With conservation districts relying so heavily on funding from sources that are not directly under their control, the board and staff need to ensure that all appropriate expenditures are charged to specific eligible grants to allow for the maximum capture of grants funds to support district operations. The Pope SWCD manager works closely with the BWSR Grants Compliance Specialist (GCS) to ensure the district is capturing all the appropriate grant funding to support district staff. This active partnership with the GCS staff ensures there is no money 'left on the table' that can be used for district operations, which allows for the use of locally derived funds for other components of district support.

One Water One Plan

The Comprehensive Watershed Management Program is the newest iteration of local water planning in which local partners work on a hydrologically defined area to implement practices to improve or protect water resources. The Pope SWCD is engaged in the planning or implementation within three watersheds (Sauk River, Chippewa River, North Fork of the Crow River). The largest of these watersheds, the Chippewa River, which has just completed the planning phase and approved the comprehensive watershed management plan by the BWSR board in August 224, occupies the largest portion of the county. The newest iteration of water planning within Minnesota will allow the district to access funding dedicated to each of the watershed partnerships, which should reduce the need to apply for competitive grants.

With the active participation in the planning and implementation teams of each of the watersheds, the board and staff have ensured that the residents of Pope County have their interests included in the plan. While there may not be current high priority actions within the Sauk River and the North Fork Crow River watersheds, this does not mean that the Pope County areas of these watersheds will remain a low priority for the district. As the staff actively attends the technical advisory committee meetings for each partnership, the district will remain engaged and able to participate on an as available basis.

Local Government Aid

Over the past several years, conservation districts have received a biennial allocation from the Clean Water Fund through their SWCD Local Capacity grants. These grants were designed to provide districts with an additional base level of funding above and beyond what was found in their Conservation Delivery and State Cost Share (now Conservation Contracts) grants. The Local Capacity Funding grants were based on a biennial carve out from the Clean Water Fund that was not guaranteed every year. There were biennia where this funding was placed at serious jeopardy due to legislative deliberations about the appropriate source of SWCD general fund support.

In the FY 24 legislative session, SWCD funding was included in the Tax Bill as SWCD Aid funding. Coming from the Tax Bill, this funding is more stable than a biennial expenditure from the Clean Water Fund. The greater stability of this SWCD Aid allows districts to have more certainty in planning over multiple biennia, which allows for the development of programming that can meet local needs on a longer-term basis.

ORGANIZATIONAL WEAKNESSES

While the board and staff work to design the 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 uniqueness of their organization.

Staff

While the district currently has staff who are skilled in implementing the core programs of the district, there is the recognition that there are more needs within the county than the staff can currently meet. Therefore, the staff is forced into a reactive mode in which they respond to the immediate needs of their conservation clientele without having the time or ability to proactively manage their time to address high priority needs and focus on the larger vision of the district. Current programs such as the Buffer Law Implementation and the three

comprehensive watershed management plan partnerships require additional staff time to participate in meetings, which takes away from on the ground conservation implementation.

The current staffing arrangement is resulting in existing staff being spread thin. With the potential increase in workload associated with the implementation of the Chippewa Watershed Management Plan and Soil Health, additional staffing stress will be placed on the district. Without additional staffing, we will not be able to meet these new obligations. The staff will need to increase and broaden their training to allow them to both implement new programs and to receive the appropriate technical training to ensure they can locally provide the technical assistance needed.

Aging Equipment

The Pope SWCD owns several pieces of equipment that are used by the staff to assist with the implementation of local conservation activities and provide to landowners on a rental basis to facilitate the implementation of conservation practices. As with much equipment involved in working in the agricultural landscape, this machinery receives a lot of wear during normal operations. While the district staff can maintain the equipment in an operational condition, several pieces are near or past their operational lifespan. As this equipment continues to age, staff time and district funds will continue to be needed to ensure this equipment stays operational.

Targeted Program Funding

Landowners within the district each have their own conservation challenges and needs. To assist these landowners, the district staff needs to acquire funding to support technical assistance and, when appropriate, financial assistance to ensure the successful installation of a conservation practice. However, much of the funding the district receives through state grants is targeted to specific actions. For example, Clean Water Fund grants (both competitive and Watershed Based Implementation Funding (WBIF)) are targeted specifically to those projects that protect or improve water quality. While this funding will meet the needs of a certain set of landowners, it leaves those who will implement solutions that are not directly tied to water quality improvement without a dedicated funding source. The targeting of state grants to specific programs and outcomes is a significant barrier to the implementation of conservation solutions that will be required to meet the broad needs of the district's residents.

Rosholt Research Farm

While the Rosholt Research Farm provides significant information related to the local implementation of conservation activities and the growth of new crops and use of specific agricultural practices, it is not without costs. To support the operation of the farm and gather

the required scientific peer-reviewed grade data, the district annually hires two seasonal interns and commits a portion of a full-time staff position to the effort. Without the farm, the funding and effort associated with these projects could be directed to other priorities.

One of the challenges with the effort at the research farm is to provide that information to local landowners in a way that is usable on their farms. The board shared what is needed is the conversion of information related to the agricultural theories that are tested on the farm, to the large-scale application in the field. To be useful, the information needs to be presented in a way that is applicable to the average producer.

Education and Outreach

One of the core roles of conservation districts is providing landowners and others interested in soil and water protection with the appropriate educational material at the appropriate time to facilitate the best land management practices that meet local objectives. While the Pope Soil and Water Conservation District provides many opportunities and activities throughout the year, the board is questioning if the district is doing enough to meet the need. This is recognized as a potential area of weakness in that the outcomes of educational programming tend to be delayed and difficult to evaluate in comparison to other programs. Developing a comprehensive educational and outreach program takes significant time. This would add more work onto a staff. The staff are working to add additional educational programming.

Grant and Program Administration

During the strategic assessment, the board identified that grant and program administration were a potential barrier to district operations. This discussion was not related to the lack of competence in staff involved in grant and program administration. Rather, the board realized that each grant and associated program has an administrative workload. While this workload is the requirement of managing grants and working within the local government structure, every hour spent on administration is an hour that cannot be spent on local conservation implementation.

Comprehensive Watershed Management Plan Coordination

While the staff and board see the current and future benefits of being involved in the Comprehensive Watershed Management Program (1W1P), the participation in these efforts takes significantly more time than was involved in the administration of the county local water management program. As the district staff take on administration and coordination roles, these additional responsibilities are added to an already high workload. While the staff are currently balancing the time to administer and coordinate the Chippewa River Watershed

planning partnership, as this effort moves into the implementation phase, this workload will change for current staff.

County Reduction in District Transfer for the Local Capacity Grant Match

Under the SWCD Local Capacity grant, SWCDs were provided with additional funding on an annual basis if the county increased their general fund transfer to the district. With the switch to SWCD Aid, this potential for increasing grant funds tied to county match is no longer an option. Therefore, the county lacks financial incentive to increase district funding. This may result in the county maintaining the district transfer at the current level or reducing it. Either option may create financial challenges for the SWCD going forward.

RECOMMENDATIONS

While there were 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 sector consultant through the Performance Review and Assistance Program (PRAP).

STAFF RETENTION AND RECRUITMENT

Within the strategic issues section, the board identified retaining trained staff and increasing staff levels as high priorities. 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.

RETAINING TRAINED STAFF

The current complement of Pope SWCD employees consists of half of the 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 Pope 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 current 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 new organization.

Without promotional opportunities within the organization, the Pope SWCD board and manager should explore alternative ways to increase the attractiveness of the Pope 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 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 the staff and/or with individual staff 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 Pope 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 Two 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

While the board and manager recognize the importance of staff retention, they are also aware that there is more existing workload than the current staff can effectively manage. The district has added new staff and are currently working on their individual training plans. The new staff are focusing on the new programs in which the district staffing has grown to meet the workload expectations.

Within the strategic issues section, the current staff and board identified the following program areas that could use additional staffing or training:

- Comprehensive Watershed Management Planning (1W1P)
- Soil Health
- Water Storage
- Wildlife Habitat

The district manager will work with the board and staff to secure funding sources for the priorities identified above. This work will be implemented based on the priorities identified in the comprehensive watershed management plans.

DISTRICT OPERATIONAL FUNDING AND FINANCIAL SOUNDNESS

Due to the lack of statutory authority that would allow the district to independently raise funds through a levy or other revenue generation tools, the board and staff recognize they are uniquely dependent upon the state legislature and county commissioners for their funding. The district board identified this dependence on others for funding as a high priority strategic issue. Related to this monetary challenge in being dependent on others, the board also prioritized the need to remain financially sound as a critical priority for achieving the district's mission of protecting and enhancing the local soil and water resources.

DEPENDENCE ON OTHERS FOR FUNDING

While there are several potential options for partnering with other organizations to receive grants, there are three areas in which the board could reduce their dependence on others for funding including: the acquisition and maintenance of property, the charging for the use of machinery and supplies, and charging for district services.

Acquisition and Maintenance of Property

MS 103C.331 Subd. 8. Acquiring and maintaining property states:

A district may acquire any rights or interests in real or personal property by option, purchase, exchange, lease, gift, grant, bequest, devise, or otherwise. It may maintain, operate, administer, and improve any properties acquired. It may receive income from the properties and expend the income to implement this chapter and sections 103F.401 to 103F.455. It may sell, lease, or otherwise dispose of any of its property or interests.

The Pope SWCD is already making use of this provision through its ownership and maintenance of the Rosholt Research farm. While this farm is currently used for conservation research and agriculturally related activities, there is no statutory mandate that these kinds of activities continue. The district board has committed to the long-term use of the farm for research.

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 statutory 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 could 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 explore the idea of increasing their prices for the sale of goods and the rental of equipment, there are two considerations that should be considered. First, there are conservation districts surrounding the Pope SWCD who offer many of the same goods and rental equipment. If the Pope SWCD were to independently raise their prices, it would not be difficult for customers to go to the surrounding districts to receive lower prices. Therefore, raising prices too much may drive customers to those who offer similar services outside of the district.

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 Pope SWCD could generate revenue that reflects the direct cost of the provision of services to landowners within the county. Now, 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.

While many districts fully fund their conservation staff time with competitive and base grant funding, there are districts who charge landowners for services that are more than the

traditional services of districts or to those who need the district services to come into compliance with a state rule or regulation. 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 philosophic 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 do. This is generally an unstated understanding among the board and the manager 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.

REMAINING FINANCIALLY SOUND

While there are some options for the district to increase its ability to generate revenue to support its operation, the board and staff also identified remaining financially sound as an important strategic issue going forward. The concept of financial soundness is a broad one but is generally related to risk management. Some of the key drivers of risk management are having the board understand the general financial status of the organization when they are making financial decisions, ensuring there are internal controls in place to identify and manage financial management risks, and adopting a formal position on reserves and fund balance.

Board Understanding of the Financial Condition of the District

One of the key roles of the board is to oversee the financial management of the district, which includes annual budgeting and monitoring the revenues and expenditures on a regular basis. Much of this work will fall on the treasurer who needs to work with the manager to develop a higher-level understanding of the board's financial position than other board members. With the complex nature of revenue streams coming into the district (base grants, competitive grants, county transfers, fees for services, etc.) and the reliance on external funding to support district expenditures, the board treasurer should have a solid understanding related to the risk associated with particular grants and how the loss of any one grant source can influence expenditures related to staff, district operations, and the provision of cost share.

To ensure there is an understanding of the risks associated with operating an organization on grant and transfer funding, the board should have an annual work session with the manager highlighting the current grant revenue structure, the operational periods of each grant with a focus on the expiration dates, and the restrictions associated with each grant. In addition, the

board and manager should have regular discussions on upcoming grants to determine which grants are appropriate to the district and how new grants and programs could influence district operations. While each grant provides new opportunities to the district, each grant has its own associated risks. These risks should be explored and understood by the manager, the treasurer, and the budget committee, if not the full board.

While developing an understanding of the risks and opportunities associated with operating an organization on grant funding will allow the board to understand the immediate financial condition of the district, the board and manager may want to consider developing a mid-term (three year) budget. While annual budgets are required of the district, they tend to be tactical with a short-term focus on the immediate future. Therefore, they tend to reflect the immediate past and tend to be responsive to funding partners. By developing a mid-term budget, the district board and manager can become more strategic in their budgeting process, which will allow for more control over the financial direction of the district. While longer term budgeting is, by its nature, less accurate than the annual budget, it does set a marker on where the board would like to see the district in the future. This can provide the manager with information about what funding sources to look for and to engage with partners who may be local funders. It is often easier for partners who understand the district's long term needs to include this desired information in their three-to-five-year budget projections rather than having to respond to an annual request when the funding for other departments is already included in the county budgeting formula.

Identifying a Target Fund Balance

The MN State Auditor recommends that local governments maintain an unassigned fund balance of between three and six months. However, this recommendation is aimed at those local government entities that have taxing authority. A three-to-six-month unassigned fund balance would allow this kind of organization to cover operational costs between periods of tax collection. As of this writing, Soil and Water Conservation Districts are funded through a combination of state, federal, county, and local sources. Each of these funding sources has their own limitations, which places the district at the mercy of funding sources over which they have no control. Therefore, BWSR recommends SWCDs generally maintain an unrestricted fund balance of between six and twelve months.

REMAINING FLEXIBLE AND RESPONSIVE TO PUBLIC CONCERNS

The Pope SWCD is a political subdivision of the state that is heavily reliant on state funding for operational funding and providing financial assistance to landowners. The SWCD is also a special purpose local government organized along county lines with district supervisors being

elected by the county voters on an at large voting process. The board and staff identified that Remaining Flexible and Responsive to Public Concerns was a strategic issue.

REMAINING FLEXIBLE

As the district is reliant on state funding, the board and staff need to remain attentive to changes in the political and financial position of the legislature and funding agencies. As state priorities can change based upon who is power at the legislature and the executive branch, district operations and programming need to remain flexible so that the board and staff can react appropriately to changes in state government.

A primary tool for ensuring the district remains flexible is staying in touch with state agencies, the Minnesota Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts (MASWCD), and local legislators. The district manager has played an important role by serving on a variety of committees and boards that include Clean Water Fund policies and appropriations. In addition, the board and staff are active within MASWCD Area Two through regular attendance at meetings and staying current on regionally important issues. The board and staff also attend the MASWCD annual convention where they take part in helping to position the state association to be responsive to local concerns and provide recommendations for changes in state policy and statute. These efforts at staying connected to state concerns should continue. In addition, the board may want to explore ways for members to become more involved in the MASWCD such as serving as chair for MASWCD Area Two, seeking a position on the MASWCD Board, or applying for a position on the BWSR Board. By seeking these positions, the district board members could become agents in moving policy forward and be able to learn about statewide changes that may influence the Pope SWCD. The board should also encourage the manager and other staff to serve on regional and state boards and entities that would allow them to bring back information to the district on upcoming regional and state priorities and be able to influence the development of these policies.

The near future holds many opportunities for conservation districts to grow and expand into new areas of conservation. BWSR programs such as the soil health initiative, climate adaptation, and water storage are a few of these opportunities. As each new program is introduced, the manager should stay in touch with the Board Conservationist and BWSR program leads to understand the opportunities associated with each program and to determine the applicability of the new programs to the landowners within Pope County. When these programs reach maturity, the district manager should work with staff and the board to discuss the contours of the new programs including potential benefits for the residents of the county and the district, potential costs for implementation, and the needed changes to existing operations in the event the board approves participating in the new program. With so many new programs, aligning or realigning staff time and roles will become an even larger challenge

and the board should take the appropriate time to ensure new programs are added in such a way as to preserve the ability of the staff to meet the district's mission.

While there are new legislative and state agency initiatives that can offer opportunities for change and growth, the district will also continue to implement existing programs. As these programs are implemented across the state, the Board of Water and Soil Resources often updates program policies and guidance documents to stay current with state mandates and to correct program deficiencies that have been identified by implementation partners. The manager and staff should remain current on all program policy and guidance changes to ensure the district is staying compliant with statute and rule. In some cases, program policies may make a program more difficult to operate. When this happens, the manager and the board should evaluate if the benefits of the program exceed the new costs of implementing the programs. Those programs that become too difficult to locally manage should be considered for termination.

Outside of state programs, the conservation district implements many locally driven programs. Some of these programs were initiated before current board members were elected to the board and have become legacy programs that run on autopilot without significant board review. The board and manager should consider doing regular periodic reviews of all locally based programs to ensure they are meeting the intent of the program, addressing a need of the county residents, and are not causing undue financial strain on the annual or long-term budget. This periodic program review could incorporate portions of a district engagement program discussed later.

One significant change that has occurred recently within the district operational structure is the county board's decision to rescind the delegation of the Wetland Conservation Act authorities. This change will remove much of the associated WCA workload, except for that required by statute and rule. However, it will also remove a significant portion of county-based funding in that the county is likely to reduce the WCA fund transfer to the district from the full amount to the minimal required amount, which will be \$5,000 from the FY 24 grant. The board, manager, and staff should continue to work together to assess the overall impacts of the true costs associated with the required SWCD participation in WCA, the reallocation of staff who had principal WCA responsibility to other duties, and change budget forecasting in such a way as to incorporate the potential loss of the county WCA fund full transfer.

RESPONSIVE TO PUBLIC CONCERNS

As a special purpose unit of government that is reactive to both state level concerns and locally derived public concerns, the Pope SWCD needs to be responsive to public concerns. On one side, the district board and staff should know the primary concerns of the citizens on Pope

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 will involve developing a comprehensive citizen engagement program.

Pope SWCD Board Assessment of Soil and Water Resource Concerns

While it is critically important that the board and staff engage with the public to both learn about local concerns 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 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 an annual 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. 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 in the future. 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 Pope SWCD 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.

Develop a Conservation District Engagement Plan

The best outreach and engagement activities that achieve meaningful change among the targeted group of landowners are those that are systematically planned and implemented in a way that can be assessed in terms of change in knowledge, attitude, or behavioral change. As the district manager and staff assess the information generated from the annual meeting and the SWCD advisory committee meetings, this data can be measured against the conservation district land ethic to see where there is alignment and where there are gaps. An outreach and engagement plan should focus on the gaps and develop specific actions that can be taken in the next three to five years to bring the local resident perspective in line with the conservation district land ethic.

The funding of the development of an outreach and engagement plan may be eligible for cost share through BWSR's Performance Review and Assessment Program (PRAP) grant. If this is something that would be of interest to the district manager and board, please work with your Board Conservationist and the PRAP Coordinator to ensure the listed activities are eligible for this grant opportunity.

If the district develops an outreach and engagement plan, the outcomes of the district's outreach and engagement activities should be evaluated in terms of activities implemented and documented changes in participant's knowledge, attitudes, or behaviors.

STRATEGIC PLANNING 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 duration 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 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 Pope County Soil and Water Conservation District Board and Staff will continue working within One Watershed One Plan framework to develop Comprehensive Watershed Management Plans in partnerships with adjacent counties, watershed districts, and conservation districts and to enter implementation partnerships to meet planning goals for those areas that lie within the jurisdictional boundary of the district.			
The Pope SWCD Board and Staff will continue to apply for BWSR grants that work 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 Pope SWCD Board and staff will continue working with the county to meet its statutory obligations to administer the Minnesota Buffer Law.			
The Pope SWCD Board and staff will continue working with the county to meet its statutory obligations to administer the Wetland Conservation Act.			
The Pope SWCD Board and Staff should consider adding a section on pollution reductions and their corresponding county/community benefit along with an economic development section with the annual budget and report that are presented to county as required by MS 103C.331 subd. 16.			
The Pope SWCD manager should regularly reinforce the board's expectation regarding having the office staffed during working hours. Staff should seek to align work schedules to ensure this internal board mandate is met.			

<p>The Pope SWCD Board and Staff receive grants training to ensure there is a foundational understanding for how grants are administered by the district. This training can be offered by BWSR staff with assistance from district financial staff.</p>			
<p>The Pope SWCD Board supports the manager and staff in developing annual training plans that can be incorporated into the district's budget.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manager works with each staff member to develop an individualized training plan on an annual basis. • Staff annually update their BWSR Technical Training Individual Development Plans • Board works with manager to ensure appropriate technical and administrative trainings are pursued to allow for the optimal management of the district. 			

<p>The Pope SWCD Board supports the supervisors in training that can enhance their ability to effectively govern the conservation district.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supervisors seek to attend appropriate trainings. • Supervisors work with the manager and BWSR Board Conservationist to identify training needs and participate in appropriate training events during regular board meetings. 			
<p>The Pope SWCD will continue to work with staff to support the efforts at Rosholt Farm</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manager works with the University of Minnesota researchers to continue engagement in research activities. • Staff will continue to provide oversight and management of interns to ensure projects meet the appropriate requirements for academic research. 			

The Pope SWCD Board may want to consider revising the mission statement to include a comment on the clientele with whom the district will work and how the district will work with that clientele.			
The Pope SWCD board and staff should review, modify, and affirm an organizational vision statement.			

Strategic Plan Recommendations			
Staff Retention and Recruitment: Retaining Trained Staff			
The Personnel Committee and manager should explore ways to enhance employee retention.			
Staff Retention and Recruitment: Increasing Staffing			
The Board Personnel Committee and manager should prioritize workloads for existing and upcoming programs and achieve consensus on these priorities from the full board.			
The Budget Committee will work with the manager to identify existing and potential funding sources that will allow for the hiring of staff to identify gaps in the previously identified workload priorities.			

District Operational Funding and Financial Soundness: Dependence on Others for Funding*Using Machinery and Supplies*

The Board should find consensus on the district's position regarding charging for machinery and supplies as to the level of subsidy or profit that are expected.			
The Board and manager should conduct a market analysis to determine the price at which the local citizens would be willing to pay for machinery or supplies.			
The Board and manager should evaluate the current fee for service charges to determine if there are any needed updates to reflect current financial conditions.			

District Operational Funding and Financial Soundness: Dependence on Others for Funding			
<i>Charging for Services</i>			
The Board should find consensus on the district's position regarding charging for services in relation to subsidizing services, recovering the full cost of the services provided, or seeking a profit.			
The Board and manager should evaluate the current fee for service charges to determine if there are any needed updates to reflect current financial conditions.			
District Operational Funding and Financial Soundness: Remaining Financially Sound			
<i>Board Understanding of the Financial Condition of the District</i>			
The board should determine if the district treasurer position is one that is rotated through other board members or is held by one board member.			
The treasurer works to develop an understanding for the monthly, annual, and mid-term nature of district revenues and expenditures to ensure a firm awareness of grant periods and the nature of overall funding for the district.			

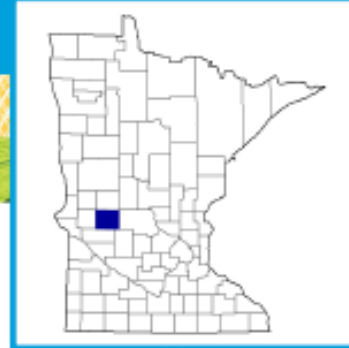
The Board should have an annual work session on the district budget and financial condition to ensure everyone has a base level awareness of the financial operations of the district.			
The Board should develop a three-to-five-year budget forecast to use as a tool for engaging in mid-term financial discussions with partners and to prepare for finding appropriate funding sources.			
District Operational Funding and Financial Soundness: Remaining Financially Sound			
<i>Identifying a Target Fund Balance</i>			
The board and manager should establish a target unrestricted fund policy detailing how many months of reserve the board feels are necessary for effective risk management.			
Remaining Flexible and Responsive to Public Concerns: Remaining Flexible			
The district board will attend regularly scheduled Area 2 meetings and the annual MASWCD convention to stay abreast of current and future opportunities.			
Board members should consider seeking election/appointment to the appropriate regional and state committees.			

The board and manager should critically evaluate new and proposed programs to ensure they meet an existing need within the district.			
The board should review existing programs when policy changes occur to ensure the programs are still locally relevant.			
Remaining Flexible and Responsive to Public Concerns: Response to Public Concerns			
<i>Pope SWCD Board Assessment of Soil and Water Conservation Concerns</i>			
The Pope SWCD Board, manager, and staff should consider developing a land ethic statement for the district relating to conservation management and behavioral expectations of those who are working on the landscape.			
Remaining Flexible and Responsive to Public Concerns: Responsive to Public Concerns			
<i>Gathering Local Landowner Input About Conservation Priorities</i>			
The Pope SWCD should use the annual information meeting to both provide information and to gather information from landowners about desired land conditions and the appropriate conservation behaviors.			

The Pope SWCD may consider establishing an advisory committee to seek regular input on district operations and to serve as a venue for disseminating information to critical audiences.			
Remaining Flexible and Responsive to Public Concerns: Responsive to Public Concerns <i>Develop a Conservation District Engagement Plan</i>			
The Pope SWCD should develop a three-to-five-year district engagement plans that identifies a measurable, systematic process for engaging with the county's landowners to achieve meaningful change in conservation behavior.			

APPENDIX A: 2017 POPE COUNTY CENSUS OF AGRICULTURE

2017 CENSUS OF AGRICULTURE County Profile



Pope County Minnesota

Total and Per Farm Overview, 2017 and change since 2012

	2017	% change since 2012
Number of farms	837	-10
Land in farms (acres)	333,009	(2)
Average size of farm (acres)	398	+11
Total	(\$)	
Market value of products sold	199,295,000	-16
Government payments	4,173,000	-39
Farm-related income	12,142,000	+33
Total farm production expenses	169,412,000	+4
Net cash farm income	46,198,000	-49
Per farm average	(\$)	
Market value of products sold	238,106	-7
Government payments (average per farm receiving)	6,668	-23
Farm-related income	23,716	+35
Total farm production expenses	202,404	+15
Net cash farm income	55,194	-43

1 Percent of state agriculture sales

Share of Sales by Type (%)

Crops	64
Livestock, poultry, and products	36

Land in Farms by Use (%) *

Cropland	84
Pastureland	6
Woodland	3
Other	7

Acres irrigated: 32,031
10% of land in farms

Land Use Practices (% of farms)

No till	8
Reduced till	26
Intensive till	28
Cover crop	8

Farms by Value of Sales

	Number	Percent of Total *
Less than \$2,500	354	42
\$2,500 to \$4,999	31	4
\$5,000 to \$9,999	49	6
\$10,000 to \$24,999	34	4
\$25,000 to \$49,999	29	3
\$50,000 to \$99,999	89	11
\$100,000 or more	251	30

Farms by Size

	Number	Percent of Total *
1 to 9 acres	27	3
10 to 49 acres	190	23
50 to 179 acres	228	27
180 to 499 acres	208	25
500 to 999 acres	83	10
1,000 + acres	101	12



United States Department of Agriculture
National Agricultural Statistics Service

www.nass.usda.gov/AgCensus

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	199,295	44	87	525	3,077
Crops	127,063	40	87	392	3,073
Grains, oilseeds, dry beans, dry peas	115,106	39	85	306	2,916
Tobacco	-	-	-	-	323
Cotton and cottonseed	-	-	-	-	647
Vegetables, melons, potatoes, sweet potatoes	8,339	14	86	246	2,821
Fruits, tree nuts, berries	28	57	84	1,669	2,748
Nursery, greenhouse, floriculture, sod	219	52	82	1,250	2,601
Cultivated Christmas trees, short rotation					
woody crops	20	23	54	487	1,384
Other crops and hay	3,350	35	87	764	3,040
Livestock, poultry, and products	72,232	41	87	706	3,073
Poultry and eggs	(D)	55	87	(D)	3,007
Cattle and calves	18,897	32	87	826	3,055
Milk from cows	13,651	33	80	389	1,892
Hogs and pigs	37,980	28	85	156	2,856
Sheep, goats, wool, mohair, milk	259	27	85	631	2,984
Horses, ponies, mules, burros, donkeys	83	38	84	1,548	2,970
Aquaculture	(D)	23	28	(D)	1,251
Other animals and animal products	775	14	85	214	2,878

Total Producers ^a	1,384	Percent of farms that:	Top Crops in Acres ^d
Sex			
Male	958	Have internet access	76
Female	428		
Age			
<35	111	Farm organically	1
35 – 64	822		
65 and older	451		
Race			
American Indian/Alaska Native	1	Sell directly to consumers	3
Asian	2		
Black or African American	-		
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	-		
White	1,381	Hire farm labor	31
More than one race	-		
Other characteristics			
Hispanic, Latino, Spanish origin	7	Are family farms	96
With military service	164		
New and beginning farmers	267		
			Livestock Inventory (Dec 31, 2017)
			Broilers and other meat-type chickens (D)
			Cattle and calves 27,195
			Goats 447
			Hogs and pigs 104,433
			Horses and ponies 354
			Layers 802
			Pullets (D)
			Sheep and lambs 867
			Turkeys (D)

See 2017 Census of Agriculture, U.S. Summary and State Data, for complete footnotes, explanations, definitions, commodity descriptions, and methodology.

^a 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.

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APPENDIX B: STRATEGIC ISSUE FULL LIST

Strategic Issue	Votes
Financial soundness	3
Save staff	
Preserve services	1
Remain a resource for the public	2
Maintain equipment	
Expand relevance of conservation to non-farm community	
Grow staff to accomplish needed objectives	5
Maintain good public relations	
Sell/Promote conservation programs (outreach)	3
Maintain local political/governmental partnerships	1
Dependence on others for funding	5
Remain flexible to current public concerns (responsive)	3
Lack of public knowledge of conservation	
Need for local funding to support conservation	
Expand partnerships with other entities (not for profits)	
Trained staff (and apply for retention)	4