



Title: Citizens Advisory Committee Assessment: Phase 1

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Purpose: In this first of two OPC discussions on defining the strategic role of the CAC in MCWD's work, staff will summarize and seek the committee's reflection on the first phase of work: findings and insights drawn from discovery research and conversations with CAC, staff, and outside experts. This will help form the basis of the next round of discussions with OPC, CAC, and staff, focused on evaluating options and operational considerations.

Background:

In February 2017, the MCWD Board of Managers approved Resolution #17-007, setting a comprehensive strategic direction for the organization as outlined in the 2017 Strategic Alignment Report. Since then, MCWD has systematically evaluated and realigned each of its programs to best support the organization's goals laid out in the plan. The result of this wholesale shift in MCWD's work has been a more focused, aligned, and successful suite of programs working toward the vision outlined in MCWD's In Pursuit of a Balanced Urban Ecology policy.

The CAC is the only program within the organization that has not yet undergone this reassessment since 2016. As a result, the Executive Team has expressed a desire to clarify the role of the committee to ensure it is providing maximal value for the District and for its members. At the Q3 CAC Executive Team meeting, the committee noted that MCWD must define the strategic value of the CAC and adjust the structure, schedule, and meeting formats accordingly.

At the December 17, 2020 Board meeting the MCWD Board of Managers approved Resolution #20-094, authorizing District staff to assess the CAC with the same evaluative process used to assess all District programs. This multi-step assessment process, which is based off Bardach's Path for Policy Analysis, is further outlined in the attached document.

Assessment Goals:

To ensure the strategic alignment and focus of the CAC in 2021 and beyond, the District is undertaking an assessment process with the following goals:

1. The CAC is focused on work which provides value to the organization and its value is proportional to its organizational cost. MCWD is currently at a strategic juncture where is it moving from planning various strategic and change management initiatives to implementing those initiatives. During this process, the CAC has played the role of strategic advisor by vetting ideas, providing insight and flagging considerations. This work has been supported by a District staff liaison, Board liaisons and additional staff as needed. Now that the focus of the District has changed, the focus and role of the CAC will need to change accordingly. As the District's focus for 2021 and beyond is clarified, it is important to clarify how the CAC supports the District's future work and the level of organizational supported needed to do so.
2. The committee's structure and operations are determined by the needs of the CAC's new scope of work. The committee's structure and operations have been determined by historic past practices rather than being driven by the needs of the committee's work. Future operational considerations such as agenda focus, meeting structure, frequency and other logistics, will need to flow from a clearly refined strategic picture.

3. The work of the CAC is satisfying to committee members. Advisory committees are most effective when they feel they are providing value to the organization they advise and the work is satisfying to its members. This dynamic increases member engagement in the work of the committee by drawing on the skills, experiences and knowledge of its members.

Next Steps:

Staff will synthesize the discussion with the OPC and a similar discussion with the CAC scheduled for February 17 into recommendations on the strategic orientation of the CAC, committee structure and operations.

These recommendations will be reviewed and discussed by District staff, OPC, and CAC throughout April.

After this phase of discussions, staff will refine the recommendations into a draft final report and seek Board approval in May.

Supporting documents (list attachments):

- Citizen Advisory Committee Assessment: Phase 1

Executive Summary:

MCWD has systematically evaluated and realigned each of its programs to best support organizational goals outlined in the 2017 Strategic Plan and the District's vision captured in MCWD's *In Pursuit of a Balanced Urban Ecology* policy. This process has unlocked the strategic potential of each program, resulting in better outcomes for the organization and greater satisfaction for team members.

The Citizen Advisory Committee (CAC) is the only program that has not yet undergone a strategic evaluation. Like many District programs before intentional realignment, the role and focus of the committee has drifted and evolved organically over time, without clear definition or consensus. While the committee has provided value in a variety of forms over the years, this lack of a clear and agreed-upon purpose has created challenges for committee members, staff, and the organization as a whole:

- Members have differing expectations of what the CAC experience should entail, and as a result are unsure if they are providing value. MCWD has been fortunate to maintain an engaged and supportive CAC. However, without a clear and agreed-upon mission, members have varied understandings of their role on the committee and in the District's work. This can create tension, confusion, and questions among members about whether they are providing value.
- Staff do not know which type of work products to bring to the committee, and what balance to strike between providing information and facilitating discussion. The lack of a clear role within the organization, which aligns with the roles of staff and the Board, has resulted in misaligned expectation between staff and committee members about the type and level of work the CAC is engaged on. In particular, staff struggle to find the balance point between one-way briefings versus facilitating deeper two-way dialog.
- Board Managers do not know which types of counsel to solicit from the CAC. The Board of Managers, in consultation with staff, provide the long range, strategic visioning for the District. As the ultimate decision making body for the organization, the Board benefits from high-quality input from staff and professional advisors. Without a clearly-defined role, it is not clear what role the CAC should play in the Board's work.
- Applicants can't be evaluated or recruited with a particular criteria in mind. The District has enjoyed a CAC with a diverse background of qualifications that have provided organizational value. However, absent a clear and consistent focus for the CAC, the District has lacked criteria around which it can plan for recruitment and manage training.
- Committee operations, such as meeting frequency, are not tied to function. The efficiency of CAC operations has improved over time. However, as with other programs that have since been retooled, a lack of clear purpose and role has resulted in misaligned operations. Basic operational logistics such as meeting frequency, day and time, have been determined by historic precedent rather than aligning to best support a defined need.

To address the root cause of these symptoms – the lack of a clear and agreed-upon purpose for the committee – District staff, CAC, and Board members are engaged in a comprehensive process to evaluate potential roles the committee could play and how best to align the committee's structure and practices to serve that role in ways that maximally support the District's mission.

Process:

The process for evaluating the CAC follows the same approach used for other programs: (1) defining the issue or opportunity; (2) gathering data and information from which insights can be drawn; (3) framing and evaluating options for decision; (4) defining operational considerations based on strategic direction.

This document encompasses step (2) of the work by providing a summary of the discovery process, relevant findings, and insights drawn from those findings. Finally, it looks ahead to step (3) by outlining potential options and criteria for their review.

Staff completed a wide-ranging discovery process gathering information from inside and outside the organization to explore:

- What lessons or insights can be gleaned from the experience of staff and CAC members?
- What can we learn from how peer organizations use advisory committees?

The external and internal discovery process is briefly summarized below:

External scan: A review of how peer organizations – watershed districts, cities, regional park agencies – use citizen advisory committees in their work. This work included:

- A review of relevant state statutes
- Cataloguing information from six comparable CACs
- Two interviews with watershed district and watershed management organization staff
- One interview with a watershed district resident advisory committee member
- Two interviews with Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board planning staff
- One interview with city of Minneapolis staff
- Three interviews with individuals who work regularly with watershed districts: Louis Smith, Smith Partners; Emily Javens, MAWD; and Steve Christopher, BWSR.

A chart summarizing the work, structure and operations of peer watershed organizations is included as Attachment A. Information on the number of communities and scale of water resources is also included for additional context given these factors inform CAC structure and focus.

Internal scan: A facilitated discussion with staff members on past experiences with the CAC and other advisory groups, and preliminary ideas for improvement in context of MCWD's strategic alignment.

CAC discussion: A facilitated discussion with the CAC about why they initially volunteered to serve, their perceptions on the role of resident advisory committees, and the work they find most engaging, in context of MCWD's strategic alignment.

Findings

External Findings:

1. MCWD's committee far exceeds statutory requirements for size and frequency of meetings:

Minnesota statute §[103D.331](#) requires watershed district boards to maintain a citizen's advisory committee that:

- Meets at least **once per year**
- Consists of **five members** who are either residents or represent affiliated partner organizations
- Is **appointed annually** by the board of managers
- Reviews and provides **feedback on the work of the watershed** district

MCWD's CAC has typically consisted of 12-15 members, meeting monthly (12 times per year), with an additional 16 meetings of the CAC Executive Committee (monthly with staff and quarterly with staff leadership and Board President).

2. Citizen advisory committees of peer watershed districts principally focus on public education:

In addition to baseline oversight roles related to budgets and capital improvement plans, the primary focus of peer CAC's is on supporting the organization's broad-based education and stewardship programs, such as reviewing and recommending grants for small scale residential BMP projects, planning events, serving as volunteers at events, and providing overarching guidance on the focus of ongoing education programming. MCWD's recent strategic realignment of its outreach program has shifted the focus of its outreach programming away from this type of broad-based education, and toward more focused engagement around its key initiatives.

3. Topical advice is typically provided by specialized technical advisory committees:

Watershed districts routinely use technical advisory committees and expert panels—as opposed to CAC's—to provide topic-specific advice on major strategic initiatives such as permitting rule revisions or evaluating capital projects. MCWD has assembled content expert advisory panels to guide strategic initiatives in recent years, including for remote sensing and machine learning, outreach and communications, permitting, information technology and real estate.

4. To build a skilled volunteer base, peer watersheds often support the ongoing education of the CAC

Peer organizations support continuing education of watershed advisory committee members. This includes providing or financially supporting attendance of CAC members at conferences, learning presentations and tours. Several current MCWD CAC members noted that learning about water issues was among their primary reasons for serving on the committee.

5. Non-watershed agencies use advisory committees as an extension of their community engagement

In contrast to most watershed organizations, other government agencies examined for this report form advisory committees on a limited basis to engage the local community around its planning, capital projects or other work which directly impacts the community. Work of the committee is focused on a specific task, such as reviewing a master plan for a certain geographic area and making recommendations related to the plan. Once the work is complete, the committee is disbanded.

Internal Findings:

1. The focus of MCWD's CAC has continually evolved without clear intent:

The focus of MCWD's CAC has shifted several times since the early 2000s, from:

- Baseline oversight such as reviewing the annual budget and watershed management plan; to
- Receiving routine updates from District programs on a rotational basis; to
- Supporting educational programming and reviewing now-defunct residential grant programs; to
- Providing broad feedback in the early phases of scoping strategic initiatives to realign

2. There is a limited and inconsistent supply of strategic initiatives on which the CAC can engage:

Over the last three years the CAC's primary role has been to provide input during the early phases of scoping strategic initiatives to realign all of MCWD's work, such as permitting and rule revisions, outreach, the responsive model, and website redesign. As MCWD transitions away from wholesale organizational change, the volume and focus of such initiatives will likely narrow. This narrowing of focus, and cycling or between organizational planning and implementation, may reduce the ability to consistently and substantively engage the CAC on such topics.

3. Startup, switching and maintenance costs are significant, and haven't always been accounted:

Engaging the diverse background of the CAC in reviewing MCWD's strategic initiatives has added organizational value, allowing staff to refine preliminary ideas before advancing for Board discussion. However, absent a shared expertise and generally being less "plugged in" than the Board, an intensive education and preparatory period is typically required to facilitate productive work sessions. Moving between strategic initiatives without continuity incurs switching costs. Annual appointments has resulted in a regular cycle of onboarding and a need to familiarize new members with strategic initiatives underway. Given the history of monthly CAC meetings, mimicking the Board meeting schedule which exists to facilitate routine organizational business, ongoing maintenance costs are required across the organization to support meeting preparation, administration, debrief, minutes, and monthly and quarterly executive team meetings. These costs have not historically been accounted for within the organization, were not assessed through the strategic evaluations of the former Education and Communications Program, and have grown over time in an effort to organically improve the quality of the CAC experience.

By comparison, outside expert panels used on the same strategic initiatives provide topic-specific advice on an as-needed basis, with minimal startup or maintenance overhead, and are disbanded once the work is complete.

4. The CAC reports its highest engagement when meaningfully integrated into strategic priorities:

Members of the CAC bring a diversity of skill sets, experience and relationships to the committee and report that they are most engaged when they are using this background to contribute directly to District's strategic priorities. In addition to being residents of the watershed with connections to various local groups and networks, CAC members also bring professional skills from current or former work or skills gained in other volunteer service, while others bring historical perspectives from many years of service on the CAC or as long term residents of their communities.

Insights:

1. MCWD's CAC will necessarily be different than its education-oriented peers:

Most peer watershed districts in the metro operate a broad-based education program, and orient their CAC to support these broad-based education programs. In contrast, to best support MCWD's focus on delivering high impact capital improvements, MCWD's Outreach program has de-emphasized this type of broad-based education in favor of highly targeted, context-specific outreach to audiences surrounding the District's key initiatives. Therefore, while there are valuable lessons to learn from how peer organizations operate their CAC's, there is limited utility in modeling MCWD's CAC on those of its peers.

2. A lack of particular technical expertise can be a strength:

Bringing important work products for review by a non-technical committee can strengthen MCWD's work in a number of ways. Expert panels and technical advisory committees provide value because of their shared expertise in the topic at hand. Conversely, members of a resident advisory group have fewer overlapping areas of expertise and interest, which can provide a fresh and diverse perspective that those more closely involved in the work may miss.

Communicating with people who share a technical expertise and professional language can also be a crutch. Requiring staff to communicate their work to a broader audience that may not share their professional background ensures staff can tell a clear and compelling story about the District's work. Members' distance from the work can allow them to see gaps and connections that those closer to the work may not. Because a resident advisory committee brings a diversity of interests and backgrounds, they may draw valuable connections between District work and their own diverse personal and professional experiences.

3. Resident advisory groups can serve as a proxy for a "general public" perspective:

Resident advisors bring a diversity of experience, interest, and background to the committee, which mimics the "general public" audiences MCWD often must reach and communicate to. They also view the work of the District through the lens of a taxpaying resident. By looking at the District's work through these lenses resident advisors can vet MCWD's programs and communications as a proxy for a broader public audience. For example, committee members can provide input on how a resident experiences the permit application process, or participates in focus groups, and other work which supported the District's website redesign.

Next Steps:

Range of options

The discovery process yielded a number of findings and insights that provide grounding context to inform an evaluation of options for future focus and alignment of the MCWD's Citizen Advisory Committee.

After discussing the discovery findings and insights with Board and CAC, staff will synthesize the information into a range of options for the strategic orientation of MCWD's CAC to best support the organization in the future. These options will be the basis for another round of discussion with MCWD Board, CAC, and staff. Once the strategic direction is chosen, operational considerations will follow.

Preliminary options

Based on discovery work, a range of options have begun to emerge, which will be pursued in more depth in the next round of discussions. These fall along a spectrum of involvement:

- Administrative oversight: The committee's scope is highly targeted to the baseline functions of reviewing and commenting on the District's budget, watershed plan and capital improvement plan.
- Vetting: MCWD staff periodically presents a key initiative to CAC members, who leverage their fresh perspective to provide input, flag potential issues, and evaluate the clarity of the messaging. This review is typically limited to a single meeting per topic.
- Long-Range Strategic Counsel: The CAC is involved at distinct phases of key District policy and organizational initiatives, often over multiple meetings. Phases of involvement include at the beginning of initiatives to help shape and frame ideas, following Board input to provide further refinement to work products, and post implementation to identify measurements of success.

Evaluative Criteria:

In addition to assessing whether legal requirements have been met, the following criteria will be used to assess each option and determine a final recommended option.

1. How well does the proposed scope of CAC work align with the strategic needs of the District?
 - a. What is the unique value provided by the CAC's role?
2. How does this role of the CAC align with MCWD's governance structure?
 - a. Is the CAC's role one that can't be fulfilled by the Board, staff, or technical advisors?
3. Is the value provided to proportional to the overhead required to support the committee?
 - a. What will it take to run the CAC?
 - b. Will the District be able to engage the CAC in this manner long term?
4. Will the proposed scope of work be engaging to CAC members?

Attachment A: an overview of peer organization's citizen advisory committees

Organization	Communities	Water Bodies	Meetings per year	Term Length (Years)	Committee Size	Scope of work
Minnehaha Creek Watershed District	29	137	12	1	13	Stress test major district initiatives and plans Review budget, watershed plan
Captitol Region Watershed District	5	17	12	1	12	Lead various education and outreach initiatives e.g. award event, sponsor service learning student, speaker forums Volunteer at events Participate in meetings with external stakeholders e.g. commissions Serve on district committees with board members e.g. diversity, grant review Review budget, major programs and projects and watershed plan
Mississippi Watershed Management Organization	7	6	3	1	11	Residential cost share grant review Assist with volunteer activities - e.g. hold forums Review budget and assist with planning
Nine Mile Creek Watershed District	6	22	4	1	13	Residential cost share grant review Support development of education programming e.g. summer education program Assist with volunteer activities

Attachment A: an overview of peer organization's citizen advisory committees

Organization	Communities	Water Bodies	Meetings per year	Term Length (Years)	Committee Size	Scope of work
Rice Creek Watershed District	28	68	6 to 10	2	12	Cost share grant review Volunteer at district events Review watershed plan, workplans, budgets
Riley Purgatory Watershed District	7	22	10	2	12	Support development of education activities e.g. organize annual volunteer event Review watershed plan

*excludes wetlands