



Title: Land & Water Partnership Initiative Outcomes

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Purpose:

For the past nine months, the Minnehaha Creek Watershed District (MCWD) has been convening a Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) as part of its [Land & Water Partnership Initiative](#). At the June 22, 2023 Policy and Planning Committee (PPC) Meeting, staff will provide a report to the Board of Managers on the outcomes of the TAC process and proposed next steps.

Background:

At the [December 16, 2021 Board Meeting](#), the MCWD Board of Managers authorized the initiation of a stakeholder engagement process for the Land & Water Partnership Initiative, which is centered on strengthening partnerships that support MCWD's focus on building impactful, collaborative projects that benefit the watershed and communities. The process included establishment of a TAC to advise the MCWD on program and policy changes designed to promote partnership.

Following a period of outreach to each of the cities and other public partners to introduce the initiative, MCWD sent a [kickoff publication](#) with a request for interest in serving on the TAC. In August 2022, the TAC was appointed by the MCWD Board of Managers and included 19 staff representatives from partner agencies, including cities, counties, soil and water conservation districts, and regional and park agencies from across the watershed.

Summary:

Process:

Since October 2022, the TAC has met monthly to explore how the MCWD and its partners can create better systems to support partnership. The TAC reviewed and provided input on three topic areas over eight meetings:

- Land & Water Partnership Program: Development of a new program to provide funding and technical support for partner projects that provide significant water resource benefit
- Permitting Program Improvements: Streamlining the MCWD's regulatory process and rules to improve customer service, align with state requirements, reduce duplication of efforts, and promote early coordination
- Coordination Improvements: Identifying and building sustainable connections for ongoing coordination

There was strong TAC participation throughout the process with feedback collected through facilitated meeting discussions and surveys, as well as some individual meetings. A [final synthesis](#) was prepared to summarize the key takeaways and next steps for each of the three topic areas to ensure that there is a clear and actionable plan for advancing this work. This synthesis was reviewed by the TAC ahead of the final meeting, and the TAC members agreed that it accurately captured the discussions. Staff also used the final meeting and a TAC survey to gather input on the TAC's satisfaction with the process and outcomes.

Outcomes:

Below is a summary of key outcomes across the three topic areas. Staff will provide a more detailed overview of the key takeaways and next steps at the PPC Meeting.

- Land & Water Partnership Program:
 - TAC members see value in the proposed program, believe it will be useful in promoting early coordination, and are interested in utilizing the program.
 - The TAC's feedback and questions helped increase clarity around program eligibility, project evaluation, and determination of funding levels. This information was incorporated into a draft program guidance document and reviewed by the TAC.

- Permitting Program Improvements:
 - There is strong support for MCWD's efforts to streamline, simplify, and align the rules. The TAC provided recommendations to further improve rule clarity and streamline process for low-risk projects. These recommendations are being integrated into the draft rules.
 - There is interest from cities in formalizing regulatory partnerships to reduce redundancy and improve coordination and role clarity in the areas of permit administration and enforcement. Staff will be developing a template agreement and working with interested cities to further define the terms of these partnerships for Board consideration.

- Coordination Improvements:
 - TAC members see value in early coordination with MCWD on private development review and are willing to engage MCWD by sharing sketch plans and inviting MCWD to pre-application meetings.
 - TAC members recommend that MCWD identify areas of opportunity for regional water resource improvement, both to inform coordination on private development review, and also for integration into city land use plans to shape zoning and development requirements. This will be a focus for the development of the 2027 Watershed Management Plan.
 - Annual meetings are valued as a venue for reviewing plans and priorities and identifying partnership opportunities, as well as building and maintaining relationships. MCWD staff plan to conduct these meetings this winter to report on progress for the action items identified through this initiative, and to preview the upcoming climate planning and engagement process for 2024.

In addition to vetting and building support for the Land & Water Partnership program and rule revisions, a primary goal of the engagement process was to continue strengthening relationships with cities and other key partners. TAC feedback at the final meeting and through the post-meeting survey was overwhelmingly positive, with TAC members expressing that the process and proposed action steps helped strengthen relationships with, and build trust in, the MCWD.

Next Steps:

Staff are developing work plans to advance the action steps identified through the initiative in close coordination between the Policy Planning and Permitting programs. This includes finalizing deliverables like the Land & Water Partnership program guidance and policy documents, draft rules, and template for regulatory partnership agreements. These deliverables will be brought forward for Board review over the next several months, beginning with a discussion of the draft rules at the July PPC meeting.

In addition to these deliverables, staff are working to develop improved workflows, guidance documents, and GIS tools to support the identification and evaluation of partnership opportunities. Finally, staff will be developing a capstone publication to share the outcomes from the process with our broader stakeholder group. Several TAC members have expressed willingness to provide a quote for the publication or a letter to show their support for the initiative.