



Title: Land and Water Integration Strategy

Prepared by: James Wisker and Corrina Marshall jwisker@minnehahacreek.org; cmarshall@minnehahacreek.org

Purpose:

The Land and Water Partnership (LWP) program was adopted in 2024 as a responsive capital project implementation program to complement the Minnehaha Creek Watershed District's (MCWD) focal geography approach and promote early coordination and integration of land use and water planning.

The 2027 Watershed Management Plan process, including early discussions with the Policy and Technical Advisory Committees, is now informing a potentially broader LWP framework. These discussions have highlighted opportunities for MCWD to strengthen shared understanding of land and water responsibilities, support community capacity for integrated planning, and establish more consistent coordination across agencies and jurisdictions.

At the October 8 Operations and Programs Committee meeting, staff will introduce this framework and seek feedback on how the attached strategy outline could guide LWP development through the 2027 Plan.

Background:

MCWD's Balanced Urban Ecology (BUE) philosophy recognizes that land use decisions shape water quality, runoff, flood risk, habitat, and infrastructure needs, and healthy natural systems support thriving communities. Therefore, achieving a vision of a BUE requires coordination with the agencies, departments, jurisdictions, and private actors that shape the landscape.

As MCWD pursues its vision and mission, it is important to understand some of the systemic challenges. Although land and water function in the landscape together, for purposes of specialization and efficiency, their management is divided. Land use planning, water management, transportation, parks, and development operate through different authorities, professional perspectives, plans, budgets, and timelines. Separate responsibilities, limited capacity, and established routines reinforce these divisions. This can mean that development patterns, infrastructure locations, and financial expectations can become fixed before water priorities and restoration opportunities are considered outside of a regulatory context.

As a means to deeper integration, MCWD's 2017 Watershed Management Plan established a focal geography approach as a method for connecting watershed strategies with local community planning, redevelopment and infrastructure. Out of discussions with member communities, the Land and Water Partnership program evolved as a complement to those focal geography investments, by providing technical and financial support for opportunities elsewhere in the watershed.

2027 Watershed Management Plan: An Emerging Direction for Land and Water Partnership:

As part of the forward facing 2027 Watershed Management Plan, the Board adopted a scope of policy priorities that included a focus on organizing Land and Water Partnership work more deliberately, including development of a best practices and policies guide for integrating land and water planning.

Beyond policy best practices, MCWD's experience suggests that successful projects also depend on other parallel efforts that create opportunities for partnership, including, understanding community objectives, building relationships, recognizing local land use decisions that are on the horizon, and engaging early enough with partners to shape alternatives.

Early discussions with the Policy and Technical Advisory Committees have reinforced this experience and highlighted opportunities to broaden MCWD's thinking on how LWP initiatives might be organized in ways that strengthen shared understanding of water priorities, support community capacity for integrated planning, and align cities' ongoing regulatory water programs with MCWD's focused catalytic investment.

A broader LWP strategy would organize the work that creates project opportunities as well as the assistance needed to deliver them. Relationships build trust, reveal community priorities, and help MCWD identify where watershed improvements can advance shared goals. Dependable coordination systems, such as early notification, joint planning, and defined review points, make it routine for partners to evaluate those opportunities before decisions become fixed. Together, relationships and systems help partners develop feasible projects, establish responsibilities, and align resources for delivery.

Below are five areas of MCWD action that could organize this connected work:

1. Partnerships and Shared Understanding.

Build trust and understanding of community priorities needed to identify shared opportunities

Build trust and understand community priorities through relationships with city staff, elected officials, developers, and consultants. Engage through individual meetings, city coordination, and subwatershed coalitions. Use orientation, workshops, case studies, and peer exchange to strengthen shared understanding and collaboration.

2. Situational Awareness and Opportunity Development.

Recognize emerging opportunities and engage while decisions remain open

Identify and cultivate opportunities to connect community decisions with watershed priorities. Build and use a LWP Radar, that connects permitting information, planning calendars, capital programs, and partner knowledge to identify opportunities while decisions remain open. Assess alignment with watershed priorities and community objectives, assign an owner and response, and track follow-up.

3. Integrated Planning and Policy Systems.

Shape shared plans and policies that make integration routine

Bring landscape considerations, water priorities, and community objectives into planning before development and infrastructure expectations become fixed. Develop nature-based practices across municipal plans and development review, translate shared priorities into mapped opportunities, and establish reciprocal coordination processes. Evaluate policy tools such as stormwater and wetland banking.

4. Permitting and Technical Assistance.

Build relationships and a reputation as a trusted partner by navigating requirements to feasible solutions

Use permitting as a front door for engagement and build MCWD's reputation as a trusted partner. Guided by the Permitting Strategic Action Plan, provide reliable review, clear expectations, and early assistance to evaluate feasible alternatives. Use each permit experience to improve guidance, coordination, and policy and identify partnership opportunities that go beyond regulatory minimums and build relationships with the land use community.

5. Investment and Project Delivery.

Align resources and commitments to deliver shared watershed and community benefits

Advance selected opportunities through diagnostics, feasibility, partner commitments, funding, delivery, and long-term maintenance and monitoring. Apply transparent criteria for watershed benefit, community alignment, readiness, and MCWD capacity. Define responsibilities and program handoffs, complement focal geography investment, and use results to inform future planning and peer learning.

October 8th, 2026, OPC Discussion:

The committee discussion will explore how MCWD's LWP program can evolve from responsive project assistance into a more complete framework for creating and delivering land and water partnership opportunities, and furthering Balanced Urban Ecology.

Staff will seek feedback from the Committee on:

1. Does organizing these existing and emerging ideas into these connected areas of work clarify how the LWP program can create opportunities, develop partnerships and deliver results? What connections are missing or need strengthening?
2. How should LWP balance relationship building with dependable coordination systems and policies? Where might reciprocal commitments and routine processes improve consistency of coordination?
3. What examples from MCWD's work or community experience could help test and refine this framework? Are there particular practices or opportunities worth exploring as the strategy develops and matures?

Supporting Materials

Attachment 1 – DRAFT LWP Strategy Outline

Draft Land and Water Partnership Strategy

The Land and Water Integration Challenge

Land use decisions shape water quality, runoff, flood risk, habitat, and infrastructure needs. Balanced Urban Ecology (BUE) recognizes that the natural and built environments function together and can create shared value when planned through integration. Achieving that vision requires coordination among the institutions that influence the landscape.

However, while land and water are physically connected, their management is divided among agencies, municipal departments, jurisdictions, and professional disciplines. Land use planning, development review, water management, transportation, parks, and capital investment operate through different authorities, using different knowledge, language, plans, budgets, and schedules. Each process can advance its own objectives while missing opportunities that depend on another process.

Institutional and cultural barriers build and maintain these silos:

- Separate responsibilities and incentives. Departments and agencies are accountable for different mandates, services, and results. Coordinating a shared outcome may fall outside any single team's defined responsibility.
- Different professional perspectives. Planners, engineers, water scientists, parks staff, and developers use different information, language, and measures of success. These differences influence how they frame problems and recognize solutions.
- Disconnected plans and decision sequences. Water plans may be developed separately from land use plans. Density, infrastructure, and financial expectations can become established before water needs and opportunities are evaluated.
- Different timelines and funding systems. Development responds to markets and financing. Cities schedule infrastructure through capital programs. Watershed restoration requires diagnostics, land, partnerships, and sustained investment. These schedules do not align automatically.
- Limited capacity and established routines. Immediate service demands and compliance work compete with time for joint planning. Staff turnover and reliance on individual relationships can weaken coordination.

MCWD's experience has shown that integration depends on an understanding of community objectives, responsive relationships, and awareness of changing land use. These practices help the District engage while decisions remain open and connect water improvements with local priorities.

Integration also requires dependable policy systems that promote and require coordination. Relationships vary across communities and can weaken through staff turnover, competing demands, or disagreement. Coordination needs to occur consistently under those conditions.

LWP should therefore pair relationship building with reciprocal municipal commitments to defined coordination points. Shared planning calendars, early notification protocols, joint review milestones, coordinated capital planning, and partnership agreements can establish when information is exchanged, who participates, and how issues are resolved. If cities bring MCWD into consequential decisions early, and MCWD provides timely and clear guidance, watershed and community outcomes will improve.

These arrangements make integration part of routine business. They create reliable opportunities for coordination where relationships are still developing and preserve continuity when personnel change. The task for MCWD is to combine trust and flexibility with systems that make coordination expected, reciprocal, and durable.

The Natural Evolution of Land & Water Partnership

Land and Water Partnership began as a responsive framework for supporting opportunities beyond MCWD's focal geographies. Through the 2027 Plan, it is evolving into a broader strategy that connects relationships, planning practices, coordination systems, permitting, and investment to make land and water integration more consistent

- Focused investment. Through the 2017 Watershed Management Plan, MCWD concentrated resources in focal geographies to connect watershed priorities with community planning, redevelopment, and infrastructure.
- Responsive partnership. LWP complemented focal geography investment by providing technical and financial support for opportunities elsewhere in the watershed.
- Policy development with communities. The 2027 Plan scope identifies LWP as an area of policy development alongside the Plan's other focus areas. It will deliver a practical set of best practices for integrating land and water planning.
- A more complete ecosystem of programming. Drawing from Policy, Technical and Citizen Advisory Committees (PAC, TAC, CAC) feedback, LWP can extend the deliverable into the connected relationships, planning assistance, situational awareness, permitting, investment, that deliver sustained integration of land and water.

The areas of integration needed to fulfill BUE

Recent Policy Advisory Committee discussions highlighted the need to connect cities' ongoing regulatory water programs with MCWD's catalytic investment, integrate land use and water management within cities, and strengthen coordination and peer learning across upstream and downstream communities.

These insights point to four areas of integration needed to fulfill Balanced Urban Ecology:

1. Across land and water planning. Build water priorities and natural systems into the plans and policies that guide growth, redevelopment and infrastructure before expectations and designs become established. For example, identify potential regional stormwater areas, desired creek corridors, restoration opportunities and water-based planning principles in a comprehensive plan before density expectations, infrastructure locations, and project designs become established.
2. Within cities. Establish shared priorities and coordination processes among Community Development, Engineering, Public Works, Parks, and other departments so their plans and investments reinforce one another. For example, use a joint review of the capital improvement plan to combine road reconstruction, stormwater treatment, and park improvements.
3. Between cities and MCWD. Establish reciprocal commitments and regular coordination points that connect city decisions with MCWD diagnostics, technical assistance, and investment. For example, agree on an early CIP or project notification process in which cities flag emerging opportunities and MCWD provides timely guidance before project scope is fixed.
4. Across communities. Build subwatershed coalitions that connect upstream and downstream perspectives, establish shared priorities, coordinate implementation, and support peer learning. For example, convene communities along a creek to develop a common greenway vision and align local plans and investments.

The connected areas of LWP programming

LWP promotes integration through five connected areas of programming that build relationships, identify opportunities, shape shared solutions, and deliver selected investments. Together, they connect community objectives with watershed priorities and establish reciprocal coordination that lasts.

Areas of connected programming include:

1. Partnerships and Shared Understanding.

Build trust and understanding of community priorities needed to identify shared opportunities

Build ongoing relationships with city staff, elected officials, planning commissions, developers and consultants. Engage through individual meetings, coordination within each city, and coalitions of communities sharing creek, lake and subwatershed priorities. Provide ongoing education about land use and water planning through orientation, workshops and conferences. Use case studies, site visits, and peer exchange to share practical lessons and strengthen partners' abilities to work together.

2. Situational Awareness and Opportunity Development.

Recognize emerging opportunities and engage while decisions remain open

Identify and cultivate opportunities to connect community decisions with watershed priorities. Build and use a Land and Water Partnership Radar LWP Radar, that connects permitting information, planning calendars, capital programs, and partner knowledge to recognize approaching decisions while options remain open. Compare emerging opportunities with watershed diagnostics, community objectives, focal geographies, and existing commitments. Screen their significance, assign a response and owner, and track follow-up so awareness leads to timely engagement.

3. Integrated Planning and Policy Systems.

Shape shared plans and policies that make integration routine

Promote planning with landscape function, water priorities and community objectives before development patterns and infrastructure expectations become established. Develop nature-based practices for comprehensive and small area plans, capital programs, parks, transportation, and development review. Translate shared priorities into subwatershed strategies, mapped opportunities, and clear responsibilities. Establish reciprocal notification and review processes, and evaluate tools such as stormwater and wetland banking.

4. Permitting and Technical Assistance.

Build relationships and a reputation as a trusted partner by navigating requirements to feasible solutions

Position permitting as a front door for engaging cities, developers, and consultants and connecting projects with watershed opportunities. The Permitting Strategic Action Plan guides reliable review, clear expectations, trusted pathfinding, early engagement, and policy alignment. Help partners navigate requirements and evaluate alternatives before designs and financing become fixed. Use project experience to improve guidance, coordination, and policy and inform broader LWP planning and investment.

5. Investment and Project Delivery.

Align resources and commitments to deliver shared watershed and community benefits

Advance selected opportunities from diagnostics and feasibility through partner commitments, funding, delivery, and long-term maintenance and monitoring. Use transparent criteria to assess watershed benefit, community alignment, readiness, and MCWD capacity. Establish clear responsibilities and program handoffs. Responsive assistance should complement focal geography investment, with results informing future planning and peer learning.