



## MEMORANDUM

**To:** MCWD Board of Managers

**From:** James Wisker

**Date:** July 14, 2016

**Re:** Improving Organizational Effectiveness through Clarity, Focus and Prioritization

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### **Purpose:**

To inform the July 14, 2016 Planning and Policy Committee discussion, focused on determining how to use the strategic program evaluation information to increase organizational focus and effectiveness.

### **Introduction:**

Historically the Minnehaha Creek Watershed District (MCWD) Board and staff identified the following impediments to continued organizational growth and success:

- Unclear mission and goals
- A lack of organizational focus and prioritization
- Programmatic silos and lack of alignment around a common mission

To address these issues the Board resolved to undertake a strategic evaluation of programs, policies and operations. The stated objectives of this process are to:

1. Evaluate existing programs to provide meaningful change, alignment and prioritization of resources.
2. Establish a procedural framework to evaluate new initiatives and opportunities, as well as revisit existing work on a recurring five year basis.
3. Provide a valuable communication tool to engage constituents in the District's work.

Staff is currently aggregating and synthesizing information from this evaluation process, for analysis by the Planning and Policy Committee (PPC). As discussed in June, to fully maximize the usefulness of this information, the PPC will focus over the next several months on developing clear frameworks for establishing organizational priorities, decision making and operationalizing those decisions. These recommendations will be advanced to the Board as they are developed.

Before discussions proceed on developing these frameworks, it is important to briefly revisit the organizational context leading the District to this juncture.

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**Background:**

The Minnehaha Creek Watershed District (MCWD) is considered among the premier water management organizations in Minnesota. This is largely due to the organization’s willingness to perpetually challenge status quo in search of the next level of improvement, and the philosophy that good ideas are not bound by hierarchy, experience, or department. This cultural imperative requires Board and staff commitment to actively seek out, identify, confront and solve policy and operational issues head-on.

However, this approach can generate discomfort. But, as Patrick Lencioni writes in *The Advantage: Why Organizational Health Trumps Everything Else in Business*, discomfort is a sign that there is productive tension around issues warranting discussion or debate, and overcoming the tendency to run from discomfort is one of the most important requirements for organizational health.

As MCWD evolves it has increasingly embraced this notion that constructive conflict is not bad for an organization or team, but is healthy, productive and only facilitated when there is encouragement at all levels to embrace productive dissent.

This ethos was memorialized in 2014 through staff’s development of *Organizational Culture: A Foundation of Core Values* (Attachment A). Staff identified that “*historically, the operational framework of the MCWD has often limited inter-departmental collaboration, individual initiative, program alignment, common priorities, entrepreneurialism, program and policy innovation, and leadership at all levels.*” In a transmittal to the Board of Managers staff recognized the organizational significance of individual employees understanding, identifying with and contributing towards the District’s overarching goals, objectives and priorities on a daily basis. Staff across the organization called for a culture that “*supports the questioning of status quo, reinforces the value of ideation and leadership at all levels, and facilitates interdepartmental collaboration outside of job descriptions to develop and implement innovative solutions by all staff.*”

This cultural fabric of a self-reflective, critical, learning organization has served MCWD well and has already cultivated a steady trajectory of changes that has incrementally improved organizational effectiveness. A summary of this organizational history was provided to the Board in May 2015, and is included as Attachment B.

Carrying this philosophy of continuous improvement forward, and building on the theme of needing more organizational clarity, through the 2016 budgeting process the Board of Managers raised questions regarding the merit of particular program initiatives, prioritization of District activities, resource allocation, and measures of success. It was noted that, while programmatic efforts may be well intentioned and have value, it was unclear whether certain activities should be the focus of the District’s finite personnel and financial resources (RBA 15-XXX).

In response to the desire for increased levels of organizational clarity, in October 2015, the Board of Managers adopted a strategic planning framework to evaluate and align programs and to focus District resources towards common goals and mission. That evaluation process involves analysis at four organizational levels, and is outlined below:

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1. Organization Strategic:
  - a. Review organization's mission and goals considering alignment with the Balanced Urban Ecology Policy and a desire for improved focus and clarity.
  - b. Review program missions considering the purpose and role of each program in achieving the District's overarching mission and goals.
  - c. Evaluate the primary strategies employed by each program and assign a priority level (high, medium, low) with respect to the District's mission and goals.
2. Program Strategic:
  - a. Evaluate each program's tactics (as identified in work plans) considering how they support program strategies and mission and the outcomes and metrics that will be used to measure success.
  - b. Assign a priority level for each tactic with respect to the program's mission, strategies, and projected outcomes.
3. Program Operational:
  - a. Review allocation of resources within each program considering the assigned priority level and projected outcomes of each tactic.
  - b. Consider whether a given strategy could be achieved in a more efficient/effective way (use of different tactics, redistribution of resources, external partnerships, improved technology, etc.).
4. Organization Operational:
  - a. Review allocation of resources across programs and strategies considering the assigned priority level and projected outcomes of each strategy.
  - b. Consider whether a given strategy could be achieved in a more efficient/effective way.
  - c. Identify any areas where further information is needed or any program adjustments to be recommended for consideration by the full Board.

To begin gathering and synthesizing this information, staff worked through the process outlined in Attachment C. At this juncture, all of the program frameworks have been built by departmental staff, and the interdepartmental focus group meetings and anonymous surveys to critique the programs have been completed.

As this information is synthesized at a staff level, in preparation for future PPC discussion, the PPC has emphasized the need to concentrate its efforts on developing clear frameworks for establishing organizational priorities, making decisions, and operationalizing those decisions.

**Next Steps:**

Deciding what to do with the program evaluation information collected by staff represents a critical next step for the MCWD. Undoubtedly, by nature of the process purpose and structure, the information collected will be critical of the current status quo. This presents the obvious risk of changing the current level of operational success, juxtaposed against the potential for significant organizational gains. This reinforces the significance of the PPC's decision to spend time carefully and thoughtfully discussing expectations on how to best utilize the information collected, to inform policy, programmatic and operational decisions.

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At the July 14, 2016 PPC Meeting the Committee will briefly revisit the stated purpose and expectations of the strategic evaluation process, before discussing preliminary concepts that will facilitate the Board's decision making process.

The most recurrent themes informing the strategic evaluation, that may also inform the decision making process, are the quest for increased organizational clarity and focus. Clarity is identified pervasively in organizational and leadership literature as a hallmark of high functioning organizations. Clarity of mission provides clarity of program purpose, which provides clarity on individual roles and responsibilities, which in turn increases employee engagement across all levels of operation.

Lencioni writes in *Advantage* that three of four hallmarks for organizational success revolve around (1) creating clarity, (2) over communicating that clarity, and (3) reinforcing clarity. Alignment is a word incessantly used by leaders, consultants and organizations, and is also a stated goal of the District's current process. Lencioni notes that within the context of making an organization healthy, "*alignment is about creating so much clarity that there is little room for confusion, disorder, and infighting.*" He reminds the reader that all too often leaders underestimate the impact of even subtle misalignment at the top and the damage caused by small gaps in clarity. He goes on to note that "*alignment and clarity cannot be achieved in one fell swoop with a series of buzzwords, and aspirational phrases crammed together. It requires a much more rigorous and unpretentious approach.*"

He poses six critical questions that can help eliminate discrepancies in thinking and provide clarity and focus, that without answers will prevent an organization attaining levels of clarity necessary for success.

- Why do we exist?
- How do we behave?
- What do we do?
- How will we succeed?
- What is most important, right now?
- Who must do what?

The Minnehaha Creek Watershed District has begun answering these questions through the strategic planning framework, beginning by defining Vision, Mission, Goals and Guiding Principles (Attachment D). As the PPC prepares to develop frameworks to use the information being collected, it is recommended that Managers consider these questions as well as revisit the Vision, Mission, Goals and Guiding Principles and begin thinking about their perspective on what constitutes the core of the District's mission/purpose, and how organizational programming and priorities might relate to those answers.

Accordingly, at the July 14, 2016 PPC staff will facilitate discussion on:

1. Revisit purpose of strategic planning and current status of effort internally
2. Concepts to begin construction framework for organizational priorities
3. The workflow and decision making process for strategic planning information

If there are questions in advance of the meeting, please contact: James Wisker at [Jwisker@minnehahacreek.org](mailto:Jwisker@minnehahacreek.org) or 952-641-4509

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ATTACHMENT A

**Organizational Culture: A Foundation of Core Values**

Prepared by Minnehaha Creek Watershed District Program Staff:  
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August 12, 2014

**WHAT: Organizational Culture.**

Building on recent Board direction to operationalize the *Balanced Urban Ecology* policy, staff first recommends the development, adoption and implementation of an organizational culture. A culture that establishes and supports staff collaboration, innovation and execution, with the purpose of improving the Minnehaha Creek Watershed District's (MCWD) delivery of services to its constituents.

Historically, the operational framework of the MCWD has often limited inter-departmental collaboration, individual initiative, program alignment, common priorities, entrepreneurialism, program and policy innovation, and leadership at all levels. Staff believes that a healthy and vibrant organizational culture ingrained with these values will most effectively advance the organizational mission.

Staff recognizes the organizational significance of individual employees understanding, identifying with and contributing towards the District's overarching goals, objectives and priorities on a daily basis. This level of meaningful and passionate engagement of employees with the District's mission requires a culture that supports the questioning of status quo, reinforces the value of ideation and leadership at all levels, and facilitates interdepartmental collaboration outside of job descriptions to develop and implement innovative solutions by all staff.

**WHY: Improved Organizational Effectiveness.**

Spurred by discussion on the *Balanced Urban Ecology* policy, and in response to the recent transition in District leadership, staff was encouraged by management to reflect upon the internal structure of the organization and identify areas that should be strengthened to advance organizational renewal and ultimately, propel the District forward into a new era of operation.

Established repeatedly in leadership and business literature, the issue of engagement or fully committed and motivated employees is becoming one of the biggest differentiators in business success. Accordingly, staff desires to establish and operate in an environment that supports professional and personal growth at individual and team levels, cultivating an exciting, entrepreneurial, team oriented place of employment.

Therefore,

- We believe that a healthy, successful organization requires a strong organizational culture rooted in shared values of honesty, integrity, and authenticity;
- We believe that a management culture supportive of a collaborative environment, where ideas from all staff are acknowledged and encouraged, creates the foundation of a strong organization;

- We believe that an environment of idea-generation and innovation, uninhibited by hierarchical (vertical) or inter-department (lateral) restriction, will promote professional development, creativity and the free flow of information, improving service delivery;
- We believe that an organization which empowers and celebrates leadership and accountability at all levels will enhance productivity and increase the successful execution of innovative ideas, serving to perpetually advance the organizational mission;
- We have identified our shared values and are dedicated to the integration of our core values as a way of professional life, creating a foundation for a transformed philosophy and a strong, respected organization.

**HOW: Core Values.**

We will honor and demonstrate our shared core values in redefining our organizational culture, thereby building a strong foundation for our team and our organization.

- **Dedication:** We are committed to the MCWD mission, to the growth, adaptation and continued success of the organization, and to the continued professional development of ourselves and our fellow staff.
- **Humility:** We shall not allow title or rank to be a barrier to open communication and problem solving; all voices are equal and all opinions must be valued as such. We recognize and celebrate that ideas can (and should) come from any level of the organizational hierarchy. We acknowledge our own personal strengths and weaknesses in our ability to meaningfully contribute to the success of our team. We recognize what we do not know and will uphold a willingness to learn.
- **Humor:** We will foster a safe and enjoyable work environment where camaraderie is valued by all staff. We will promote a fun and upbeat atmosphere that encourages relationship-building, interaction and brainstorming of new ideas to enhance productivity and effectiveness of staff. We acknowledge that humor is a key ingredient to establishing trust, boosting morale, retaining staff, and inspiring unrestrained creativity.
- **Innovation:** We will uphold our curiosity and persist in challenging the status quo, supporting new ideas, and creating adaptive approaches, thus resulting in dynamic solutions. We will not assume that today's knowledge and skills will be sufficient for tomorrow's challenges.
- **Leadership:** We must be confident in recognizing our own individual strengths, and the strengths and ability of others, to empower all staff, catalyze action and promote leadership and accountability at all levels.

- Respect: We will dedicate ourselves to a genuine understanding of and care for one another. We will continually strive to cultivate an atmosphere of honesty, encouragement and admiration.
- Passion: We shall maintain a conviction and personal stake in achieving the District's important mission and moving it forward as a unified team.
- Perseverance: We will be tenacious in our endeavors. We will strive to complete our work to the best of our ability and overcome barriers, frustrations and past failures that influence our environment.
- Positivity: We will remain optimistic in the face of adversity; spending time, energy and spirit on only the things within our control, and inspiring, through example, others to do the same.
- Service: We will be attentive to our constituents and partners, and provide them with responsive, individualized support and innovative solutions. We recognize that outward service is best facilitated by first capitalizing on opportunities to serve our fellow colleagues and departments through collaboration and sharing of resources and ideas.
- Teamwork: We must value and combine the talents of all members, through unfettered collaboration and coordination, to successfully achieve the goals of the organization.

**ATTACHMENT B**  
May 21, 2015 Policy and Planning Committee  
Comprehensive Plan Self Assessment

- Purpose of Self Assessment - Part of an ongoing process to reflect on the District's performance and progress over the last plan cycle to inform the development of the next Plan.
  
- Key staff findings:
  - The 2007 Plan was grounded in sound science and was very technically-focused. There was a large amount of valuable information and data available to inform planning efforts.
  - Historic challenges and limitations of the current Plan:
    - Lack of focus, prioritization, and clarity of mission and goals
    - Too specific and prescriptive, limiting our ability to integrate with land use planning and respond to opportunities
    - Programs were siloed, causing a lack of alignment and coordination
  - Significant progress has already been made in addressing these challenges. Staff are excited about District's current trajectory and want to work with Board to cultivate more program alignment and focus.
  
- History and major milestones of how the District's approach has evolved:
  - 2009-2010 – Board began discussing partnership model and need for prioritization and focus with consultants like Jim Brimeyer, Sara Noah, Louis Smith
  - 2010-present: Urban Corridor successes – partnership development, integration of water and land use planning, leveraging regulatory authority into opportunities, leveraging outside funding
  - June 2013: MC Subwatershed plan amendments – allowed for more flexibility and opportunity-driven projects
  - 2012-2013: Six Mile Creek Diagnostic study – systems approach to planning and implementation
  - 2013-2014: Development of AIS and E-grade programs – recognizing need to characterize water quality more comprehensively
  - May 2013: TMDL Credit Sharing policy – allows District to be less geo-political and focus implementation where there is greatest need/opportunity
  - May 2013: Board retreat – discussed strategic planning and subwatershed approach



- September 2013: Adoption of a policy regarding the use of District regional stormwater management facilities for regulatory compliance
- September 2013-January 2014: PPC discussions regarding integration with land-use planning and benefits of focus
- January 2014: Adoption of Balanced Urban Ecology policy – identified partnership, focus, and innovation as guiding principles
- May 2014: Adoption of Six Mile Creek as priority focal geography
- June 2014-present: Development of Comp Plan framework and Two-Track Approach
- August 2014: Staff's adoption of core values document – incorporates Balanced Urban Ecology principles into staff culture (collaboration, innovation, leadership, service)
  
- Guiding principles:
  - Focus – geographic focus, program alignment, clarity of mission and priorities, resource optimization, strategic
  - Responsiveness – remaining nimble, flexible, opportunistic
  - Innovation – creativity, entrepreneurialism, continuous improvement
  - Integrated planning – land use-water connections; diversified knowledge, skills, language
  - Partnerships – outcome-based communication, understanding goals of others', designing water resource projects to solve other issues, non-regulatory emphasis
  
- Next step - Continue self-assessment process at program/operational level:
  - Permitting program example

## ATTACHMENT C

### Strategic Framework – Program Evaluation Process

#### Purpose:

Evaluate District programs to ensure that resources are allocated to the highest and best use to achieve the mission

#### Desired outcomes:

- Define program objectives and activities
- Establish Board priorities and allocate resources accordingly (address budget-levy gap)
- Improve focus and effectiveness through use of best strategies/tactics
- Improve program alignment, collaboration, and staff engagement
- Develop clear outcomes and metrics for evaluation (qualitative or quantitative)
- Establish process for evaluation of current and future activities

#### Goals and expectations for staff process:

- Process will be inclusive and transparent:
  - Everyone encouraged to participate
  - Cross-departmental review and input
- Departments have ownership, but input from all will be considered
- Each department is unique and may require unique process/questions
- Process will be iterative, we will learn and adjust as we go
- Will chart a course for improvement, not result in drastic change
- Remember the core values:
  - **Respect** – we will encourage honest, open discussion and respect the opinions and work of others
  - **Innovation** – we will be curious, challenge the status quo, and support creative thinking
  - **Humility** – we recognize that no person/program is perfect and will be open to constructive criticism
  - **Teamwork** – we are all on the same team and working collectively to improve the organization
  - **Leadership** – this is an opportunity for all to contribute toward setting a new and improved direction for our program/the organization

## Staff process:

1. Process set-up:
  - a. All staff meeting to review goals, expectations, and process. – **March 3**
    - i. Solicit volunteers to facilitate small-group discussions for another department (1-2 facilitators per department).
  - b. Each department meets with facilitators (Planning and volunteer) to review program histories, organizational framework, and process. – **by April 7**
2. Departments build program frameworks: - **by May 6**
  - a. Define program purpose/role within organizational framework.
    - i. Why does the program exist?
    - ii. How does it contribute toward the mission and goals of the organization (direct, supporting, both)?
  - b. Identify the strategies/tactics that the program implements or supports.
    - i. Show linkages to other programs that you support or require support from.
  - c. Define the program activities/sub-tactics.
  - d. Define the projected outcomes and metrics for each activity.
    - i. What will it achieve, and how will you measure success/progress?
  - e. Identify resource needs for each activity (staff time, funding, technology, support from other programs, etc.)
  - f. Evaluation (see attached questions)
  - g. Identify any recommended program adjustments for staff/Board consideration.
3. Facilitator check-in:
  - a. Department meets with facilitators (Planning and volunteer) to review draft framework and evaluation narrative. – **by May 13**
  - b. Departments revise as needed. – **by May 27**
  - c. Facilitators distribute draft frameworks to all staff. – **by June 1**
4. Cross-departmental review:
  - a. Staff review and input via anonymous survey. – **by June 30**
  - b. Volunteer facilitators host small group work sessions: - **June 20-28**
    - i. 3 staff work sessions and 1 external stakeholder session (District counsel, District Engineer, CAC representative, other WD representatives?)
  - c. Facilitators synthesize feedback/recommendations from surveys and work sessions and report back to department, Staff Collaboration group, and Management Team. – **by July 8**
5. Departments consider recommendations and revise original drafts – **by July 31**
  - a. Departments present frameworks to all staff to review feedback received and changes made.
6. PPC reviews program frameworks: - **August-October**
  - a. Committee presented with program history, department frameworks, and recommendations from other groups

## 7. Board review and action – **November-December**

### **Program evaluation questions (provide responses in narrative form or indicate in framework):**

1. Framework review:
  - a. Do all activities and budgeted items from the program work plan(s) show up in the framework?
  - b. Do all activities have a clear connection back to the mission and goals?
2. Prioritization of tactics/activities:
  - a. What are the core/baseline activities the program must do to achieve its purpose?
  - b. What activities are non-essential/secondary?
  - c. Prioritize activities (high, medium, low) based on projected outcomes and support for the mission.
3. Resource allocation:
  - a. Is the distribution of resources across activities appropriate with respect to priority level?
    - i. Is there substantial time/\$ spent on activities that are low priority/low output?
    - ii. Are there high priority/high output activities that are under-resourced? Necessary program functions that are not getting done?
  - b. Considering the need for budget reductions, where could your program save costs (assume 10% cuts)?
    - i. Are there non-essential activities that could be cut/scaled back?
      1. What are the implications? Consider value to communities/partners.
    - ii. Are there ways to improve program efficiency/effectiveness?
      1. Consider changes to procedure or policy, improved technology, cross-departmental coordination/resource sharing, use of student volunteers, etc.
    - iii. Are there external funding sources/partnerships that could be leveraged?
4. Customer analysis:
  - a. For each tactic, consider the customer - who do you need to reach/work with/influence to be successful?
    - i. How is that being done and by whom?
5. Program coordination:
  - a. Are there other programs using the same tactic?
    - i. Are these efforts coordinated?
    - ii. Are they reaching different audiences?
  - b. What support do you need from other programs to be successful?
  - c. How does the program support/work under the 2-track approach?
6. Alternatives analysis:
  - a. What other tactics/activities could your program use to achieve these strategies?
    - i. Have these been tried/considered?
    - ii. How would the outcomes and resource needs compare to current activities?
    - iii. Should these be considered as future growth opportunities?

## Cross-departmental evaluation questions:

1. Program-level:
  - a. Do you agree with the purpose statement? Does it accurately describe how the program helps meet the organization's mission and goals?
  - b. Do the strategies and tactics fully and accurately represent the program's work?
  - c. Are the outcomes and metrics clearly defined for each tactic? Are there other ideas for how outcomes could be measured?
  - d. Does the distribution of resources seem appropriate?:
    - i. Are there low priority/output activities that should be considered for elimination/scaled back?
    - ii. Are there necessary or high priority/output activities that are under-resourced?
  - e. Are there new tactics that should be considered to achieve these strategies?
  - f. Are there ideas for improving efficiency/effectiveness (external partnerships/funding, procedural changes, improved technology, cross-departmental coordination/resource sharing, etc.)?
2. Organization-level:
  - a. Does the distribution of resources across the strategies and tactics seem appropriate with respect to projected outcomes?
  - b. Is it clear how programs interact/support each other? How can this be better represented?
  - c. Are there multiple departments using the same strategies/tactics? Are these efforts coordinated? How could resources be shared?
3. Recommendations:
  - a. Are there any changes you would recommend that the program consider?
  - b. Is there any additional information/clarification needed?



# MINNEHAHA CREEK WATERSHED DISTRICT

QUALITY OF WATER, QUALITY OF LIFE

## *Vision*

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**A landscape of vibrant communities where the natural and built environments in balance create value and enjoyment.**

## *Mission*

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**We collaborate with public and private partners to protect and improve land and water for current and future generations.**

## *Guiding Principles*

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**Partnership** – We seek to understand the goals of others so that we can meaningfully integrate our work to add broader value to the community.

**Innovation** – We are flexible and creative in our approach and strive for continuous improvement.

**Excellence** – We commit to work that achieves outstanding results and honors our partners.

**Sound Science** – We are a trusted source of scientific data and analyses that provide the foundation for wise decisions.

**Service** – We are responsive and accountable to our communities and careful stewards of public funds.

## *Goals*

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**Water Quality** – To preserve and improve the quality of surface and ground waters.

**Water Quantity** – To manage the volume and flow of stormwater runoff to minimize the impacts of land use change on surface and ground waters.

**Ecological Integrity** – To restore, maintain, and improve the health of ecological systems.

**Thriving Communities** – To promote and enhance the value of water resources in creating successful, sustainable communities.