

Hillsborough Soil and Water Conservation District

Regular Meeting of the Board of Supervisors

May 23, 2024 @ 1:00 pm

Location: HSWCD Office/4503 Coronet Rd/Plant City/FL 33566

Supervisors and staff in attendance: Ryan Gill (Chair, Seat 2); Robert “Myke” Morris (Treasurer, Seat 4); Mark Proctor (Seat 5); Dr. Joe Walsh (HSWCD Executive Director); Linda Chion (HSWCD Staff), Kathy Eckdahl (HSWCD Staff); Bear McCullough (Seat 1) via MS Teams and left after 10 min.

Absent: Adam Young (Vice Chair, Seat 3); Bear McCullough (Seat 1); Tom Gonzalez (Counsel, HSWCD Board)

Items 1-4

Call to Order / Pledge of Allegiance/Introductions: Chair Gill called the meeting to order at 1:11 p.m.; led the Pledge of Allegiance; welcomed attendees and asked for introductions.

Partner Agency and Vendor representatives in attendance: Ellen Cruz (Regional Director of FL Dept of Ag and Consumer Services), Leslie Diaz-Alvarez, District Conservationist- NRCS, Ken Griner, Thomas Stevens SWFWMD FARMS Program Group.

Public in attendance: Betty Jo Tompkins (public)

Public comment: Betty Jo commented on the following: R. Davis wife passing; Lake County Soil and Water Conservation District voted to dissolve; requested a copy of Year in Review FY 2022-2023.

BOARD MOTION: Supervisor Proctor moved to express the HSWCD Board’s condolences and sympathies to R. Davis Family of the passing of Leta Davis. Morris seconded. Motion carried 3-0.

Item 5: Public correspondence: Congresswoman Laurel Lee’s congratulatory letter to the HSWCD Board for opening the District’s new office was read.

Item 6: Minutes of meeting April 18, 2024 were reviewed. Supervisor Morris moved to accept the minutes as presented. Supervisor Proctor seconded. Motion carried 3-0.

Item 7: Treasurer’s Report: Treasurer Morris presented the financial report for April 2024. Treasurer Morris moved to accept and file for audit. Supervisor Proctor seconded. Treasurer Morris and Supervisor Proctor commented. Motion carried 3-0.

Item 8: Partner reports:

- **NRCS:** Leslie Diaz-Alvarez of Plant City Service Center reports having approved a total of 14 assistance applications with 9 of those being for their Conservation Stewardship Program. Local Working Group effort - Leslie reported that one survey response was received after the April 18th Local Working Group meeting; Ed. Director Walsh reported receiving no survey responses to the office, by either mail or email. Dr. Walsh brought up the idea of including an online survey for next year, to which Leslie added that a QR code is also an option. Chair Gill encouraged further effort in this regard.

- **SWFWMD Report:** Ken Griner reported there are a variety of assistance options with Southwest Florida Water Management District's Mini-Farms Program. Limitations on its use include a cap of 10K to each project and a limit of only 2 projects per year per business. However, each business can be funded for a total of 10 projects over their life span. Dr. Walsh asked Ken about how a collective approach between SWFWMD, FDACS and NRCS might work, so Ken added that Mini-Farms can be used at the same time as FDACS and NRCS funds, as long as there's no double-dipping. Chair Gill encouraged Dr. Walsh to explore the possibilities with Ken Griner.
- **Agribusiness Development:** no report at this time.

Item 9: Request for Non-Agenda Items

FDACS Regional Director Cruz commented about new bill signed to save more FL lands. Supervisor Morris thanked Director Cruz for all that she and FDACS have done for Florida.

Item 10: Old Business

FDACS contract: ED Walsh explained there will be no new FDACS contract to begin July 1, 2024, with FDACS. In response to questions about the reasons why, Dr. Walsh shared that he'd spoken with JP Fraites in Tallahassee, who said this decision was not about past performance of the District, but rather about the performance of OWAP's funds throughout the State, and that there were specific areas elsewhere in the State the program was underfunded from the perspective of \$\$-per-acre, and total acres enrollment. Regarding concerns about audits and the FDACS contracts, Dr. Walsh pointed out that the Board's recent problems with paying for the 2022 annual audit stemmed from a specific condition in the FDACS contract, prohibiting the use of the contract funds for audits. The situation was discussed with Regional Director Cruz, as originating from erroneous information provided to the Board by FDACS middle managers on the record at Board meetings in 2023.

2022 and 2023 Audit Fees: ED Walsh confirmed with FDACS that the contract dollars cannot pay for the State-mandated Special District audits. The Board and the ED are pursuing a modification to the FY 2023 Audit [with Hamilton & Associates] for a lower rigor audit, than was approved by the Board in February 2024, with the expected outcome of also lowering the auditor's fee. Regional Director Cruz, Supervisor Morris, Chair Gill, and ED Walsh discussed the part that FDACS managers played during the Board's public meetings in 2023, with respect to audit rigor and fees. Member-of-the-Public Ms. Tompkins was allowed to speak on this topic in the context of her tenure as the former executive director, for audits procured for the years 2015 through 2022; she shared that during her tenure, audits had always been paid for with FDACS contract dollars, that no complaints had been raised by FDACS, and that the same auditors were used year over year because the audit fees were well below market value.

NRCS Cost-Share Agreement for Ag Tech Position: Dr. Walsh reported that the proposed Ag Tech cost-share agreement with NRCS was withdrawn from the County budget amendment for FY 2024-2025. He explained that the cost-share negotiations had started very late relative to the kickoff of the budget cycle, and that the salary issues were clarified too late to be included in the amendment. Dr. Walsh said that Supervisor McCullough (in his role as sponsor of the effort) and Walter Albarran had treated this situation with patience and that both parties were committed to continuing to work on the cost-share through the summer. Dr. Walsh asserted that a solid agreement proposal should be before the board for adoption in Jan 2025, enabling it to be ready for the FY 2025 budget amendment in the February-March timeframe. Dr. Walsh provided more context, noting that because the NRCS/HSWCD agreement will be for five years, with yearly allocation approvals, the position really needs to be treated as a temp hire, and

therefore, the position needs to be better accounted for in Ex. Director's proposed work plans and the District's strategic planning efforts. ED Walsh also suggested that pursuing a short-term lease vehicle from Hills Co Fleet services may serve the agreement better than a long-term asset acquisition. Supervisor Morris and Chair Gill expressed support for Ex. Director's proposed schedule for a January adoption of the cost-share.

Item 11: New Business

HB-7013 Policy Analysis: Dr. Walsh apologized to the Board for Attorney Gonzalez's absence, due to a scheduling conflict. This item segued into a discussion of the Board's Independent-versus-Dependent District status. Supervisor Morris and Chair Gill expressed a desire to pursue establishing the District as "dependent" on Hillsborough County Board of Commission (HCB OCC). Dr. Walsh committed to advancing the topic to the County.

Related to this issue, the Board members present, the executive director, and others discussed the District's relationship with the Assoc. of Florida Conservation Districts. In general, the comments were not favorable to continuing to participate as a member in the AFCD in 2025; there were several issues raised with the AFCD's activities and lack of commitment to the health and long-term viability of locally elected boards. The issue of continuing to pay AFCD dues was discussed but tabled to the next board meeting.

Item 12: Director's Report

Board Policy Statement: ED Walsh requested that the board develop a HSWCD Board Policy Statement to guide procurement of yearly audits going forward.

Budget Workshops for FY 2024-25: ED Walsh asked the board to schedule a Budget Workshop for FY 2024-25, to encompass both the County's contributions to the operating and salary components, as well as the income and expenses the Board manages via its external accounts. Chair Gill made a motion to schedule a Budget Workshop meeting in the near future. Supervisor Morris seconded. Motion carried 3-0.

2024 Elections Outreach Campaign: ED Walsh raised the idea of establishing a public outreach specific to the electoral process for the Board of Supervisors, noting that the qualification deadline for November elections is June 14, 2024. Dr. Walsh already had consulted with Supervisor of Elections and Special Counsel Gonzalez on processes and sideboards for the Ex. Director's proposed outreach. Supervisor Proctor, Supervisor Morris, and Chair Gill commented and asked Ex. Director to gather more information from the Supervisor of Elections and the State Division of Elections.

Annual Work Plan: Dr. Walsh said that a draft of the OPPAGA report is due to the Board for review in early July and proposed that the results of the OPPAGA audit be used to develop a Strategic Plan and related Work Plan for the HSWCD Board, because of the OPPAGA's focus on the presence/absence of high-level agency goals, objectives, targets and performance measures. Supervisor Proctor and Chair Gill responded in favor of using the OPPAGA to inform the planning and budget workshops proposed for Fall of 2024.

The scope of duties for the proposed full-time "Community Information Liaison" was discussed in the context of the work plan and of the challenges associated with the ag-tech cost-share agreement. ED Walsh suggested that after pulling back the cost-share negotiations with NRCS, the community information liaison position could be reframed as the more senior position in the team, by emphasizing a broad program knowledge base and leadership development on this role within the District/Department. He asked NRCS Rep Diaz-Alvarez if there were any problems with working in the field with NRCS staff if

there wasn't cost-share agreement in place. Ms. Diaz-Alvarez liked the idea and affirmed Her's and her agency's strong desire to continue to develop programs within this District for 2024-2025.

Item 13: Strategic Plan: ED Walsh requested commitment from the Board to bring back the “strategic plan” tool, which was a core document of the Agency for decades; he proposed using this tool to establish and communicate the Agency’s mission statement, agency values, agency goals and performance objectives. Reaction to this proposal by the Board members present was favorable; Chair Gill proposed this be included in the Budget workshop in September.

Item 14: Upcoming Events: Hillsborough Co Fair Oct 31st – Nov 11, 2024; Chair Gill directed staff to sign the Board up for participation in the County Fair.

Item 15: Next Board Meeting: set for June 11, 2024 @1pm; Location TBD.

Item 16: Adjournment: Chair Gill adjourned the meeting 3:35 pm.