



Strategic and Communications Plan



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Strategic Plan: Purpose and Process

The strategic planning process began in May 2015. The goal of the process was to help to clarify the Missaukee Conservation District's course of action and the uses of the voter-approved millage, as well as to create an action plan for the District to communicate effectively with the public and with customers about its programs and services and the impacts of the millage.

The planning process included an external scan, a Commissioner and staff survey, and a public survey. The public survey was available online and an invitation to participate was advertised in the local newspaper.

Missaukee Conservation District Board members and staff also participated in a strategic planning retreat on May 19, 2015. One outcome of the retreat was the identification of strategic goals. These included:

Communications and Outreach

- Improve public awareness of services
- Improve the District's brand and image
- Educate and connect with local officials
- Connect with farmers
- Communicate with voters
- Communicate with the County Board of Commissioners
- Communicate about the benefits of our services

Sustainability

- Develop sustainable revenues
- Build a strong relationship with the County Board of Directors
- Ensure professional staff are compensated at average market rates for wages

Programs and Services

- Sustain existing programs
- Determine how soil conservation can be more "in line" with the business of farming
- Advance agriculture-related programs
- Determine how we serve non-farming residents
- Educate youth and build connections with schools, scouts, 4H and school groups
- Explore and develop new partnerships

The Recommendations and Action Steps, Budget Assumptions and Communications Plan below offer suggestions and activities to address these goals. Addition retreat outcomes are offered for reference in Appendix A.

Recommendations & Action Steps

The following recommendations regarding actions steps are an outcome of the Board and staff's dialogue at the retreat and one-on-one conversations with the District Manager regarding programs, services, staffing and budgets. The time frame for implementation of these actions steps is 2015 -2018.

1. Sell the No-Till Drill

The District's Manager reports that the use to the drill has declined now that a private sector farm services company has one for use. The District purchased the drill and the investment was paid off early due to relatively high use from farmers. Since the private sector has now responded to the demand for this service, there is no compelling reason for the government to provide the service.

Recommendation: Offer the drill for sale and put the sale proceeds back into the District's farm service programs. The funding could be used to support staffing costs for an employee who delivers these services to farmers. District staff indicates that the sale of the drill may net an estimated \$15,000 for the District. The drill must remain the property of the District until the end of September 2015 due to the grant parameters under which it was purchased. Sale of the drill would require consideration and a motion and resolution from the District's Board of Directors.

2. Nurture a Strong Relationship with the County Board of Commissioners

Maintaining a strong relationship and active communication with the County Board of Directors will help ensure transparency and accountability related to programs and impacts. It will also help to inform future planning and budgeting processes and will support partnership coordination.

Recommendation: District Manager should continue to attend each County Board meeting. Additionally, a District Board member and/or Associate Director should attend the monthly County Board meeting. This roll can be rotated, or could be an annual and informal point-of-contact "appointment" to the role. The District Manager should work annually with the Chair of the District Board to identify the work plan and goals to be reported on. Some suggested metrics are included in the Communications Plan below. Other staff may be asked to join the meetings as needed to share stories about the impact of specific programs. It may also be helpful to tie metrics to the goals of the County's Master Plan to show how the District is implementing the County's vision.

3. Clarify the Recycling Center Partnership between the County and District

Right now, the County owns the facility and the District is providing the staffing and services that keeps the Center open and accessible to the public. It is important that the public understands these roles.

Recommendation: The County and the Conservation District should discuss and finalize a lease and/or partnership agreement regarding short and long-term use of facility and a staffing structure for the Recycling Center. The partners should also agree to and affirm a message that can be shared with the public regarding who is responsible for providing and staffing the programs and services at the Center.

4. Nurture Relationships with Farmers and the Farm Community

At the strategic planning retreat, participants talked at some length about their desire to build and maintain strong relationships with farmers and the farm community, including farm service businesses and the Farm Bureau.

Recommendation: The District should connect with farmers and the farm community in ways that feel meaningful to them. The District should celebrate and document the stories of farmers who choose to work with the District and its partners, and should share these stories with the public and other District supporters. Suggested activities and relationship building ideas are proposed in the Communications Plan below.

5. Develop Criteria to Evaluate New Programs

At the strategic planning retreat, Board members and staff generated a relatively significant number of ideas for new programs and projects. As the District develops its annual work plans, it will be important to vet ideas about new projects in a thoughtful manner.

Recommendation: The District should develop a basic decision-making matrix to evaluate future programs and projects, including which grants to pursue. This matrix could be as simple as a list of questions or criteria through which all projects and programs are vetted and could include an assessment of:

- Alignment with the District's mission and vision
- Alignment with current strategy and goals
- Financial and funding capacity
- Staff time and capacity in the short- and long-term
- The risk/threat to organization
- The risk/threat to community

The criteria could be used to evaluate the potential capacity, impact, and return-on-investment of resources for the community's benefit for the following program ideas that were shared at the strategic planning retreat:

- Educating youth and build connections with schools, Scouts, 4H and school groups
- Exploring and developing new partnerships
- Focusing on advancing agriculture-related programs
- Developing a community garden
- Developing an interpretive trail through the school's forestland
- Developing an Agricultural Plastics recycling program

Budget Considerations

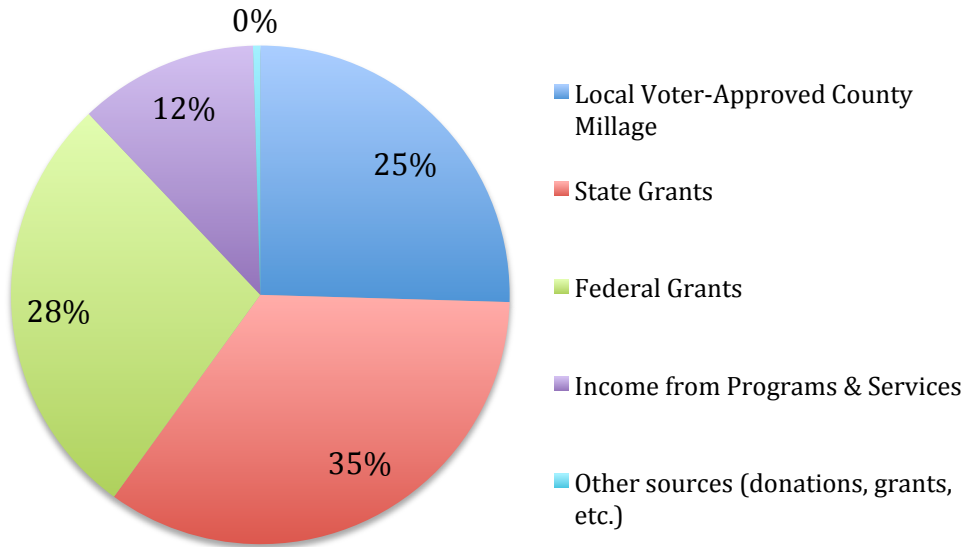
Current Budget

A draft fiscal year 2016 budget was developed in alignment with this planning process. Here is a summary of anticipated costs and revenues.

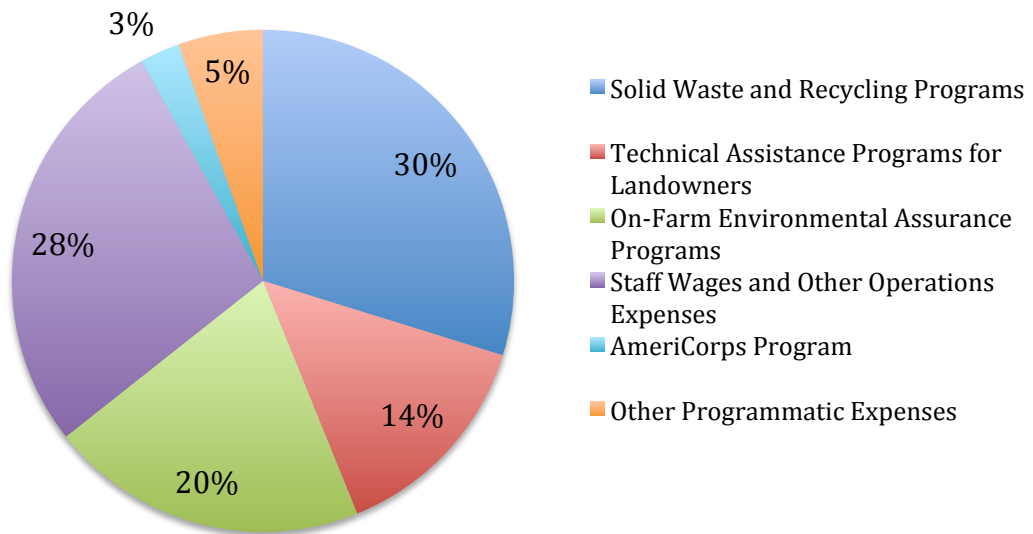
Revenue Sources		
Local Voter-Approved County Millage	86,577.00	25.46%
State Grants	117,385.00	34.52%
Federal Grants	95,000.00	27.94%
Income from Programs & Services	39,462.20	11.61%
Other sources (donations, grants, etc.)	1,600.00	0.47%
Total	340,024.20	

Expenses		
Solid Waste and Recycling Programs	98,625.00	29.79%
Technical Assistance Programs for Landowners	46,635.00	14.09%
On-Farm Environmental Assurance Programs	67,750.00	20.47%
Staff Wages for Programs and Other Operations Expenses	91,443.70	27.62%
AmeriCorps Program	8,500	2.57%
Other Programmatic Expenses	18,070.50	5.46%
Total	331,024.20	

Missaukee Conservation District Fiscal Year 2016 Income Sources



Missaukee Conservation District Fiscal Year 2016 Expenses



Future Budget Needs

A relatively high percentage of the District's budget is supported by state and federal grants for programs and services. This budgetary circumstance makes the District's programs relatively vulnerable.

If funding from grants and other public funding sources declines in the future, this will necessitate either a reduction in community programs and services and/or a renewal of voter-approved millage funds.

Communications Plan

Purpose and Goals

The desired strategic planning outcomes communicated by the Board and staff point to the need for the District to implement an audience-centric communications strategy. Landowners, elected and appointed officials, educators, students and the general public may all need access to your services in different ways based on their respective needs and interests. The District can best serve them and build a foundation for strong and trusting relationships by adopting a communications plan that honors their needs and the way they want to connect with the District.

The communications activities listed below strive to offer ways for different audiences of people to connect with and access information and services. These suggestions assume that the resources available for your communications and outreach activities will not change in a significant way, and can be accomplished within the District's existing and projected operating budget.

In addition to audience-specific recommendations, additional suggestions are also offered related to specific products or activities. These goals of these recommendations are to improve an awareness of the Missaukee Conservation District's programs and services, to more effectively share stories of the impact of those services, and to create opportunities for meaningful engagement with customers and members of the public.

Evaluating and Communicating Impact

Monitor Activities and Success

Right now, other than the articles and budget information shared in the Annual Report, the District does not have a routine way of monitoring programmatic progress or organizational success.

Recommendation: The District should adopt and use a “dashboard” of metrics that are tied to organizational goals, work plans, and desired outcomes. It is important that these metrics are relatively easy to collect and analyze. Given the staff's capacity and time constraints, any data that are too cumbersome to collect will not add value to the process. Ideally, the District would establish an annual and longer-term goal or target related to each metric and would compare data year-to-year to identify trends, risks and opportunities.

Some suggested metrics include:

- Number and location of landowners served through farm programs
- Number and location of landowners served through forestry programs
- Acres of land conserved through programs and services
- Number of recycling visits
- Pounds/yards of recycling materials kept out of landfill
- Pounds and/or number of tires reclaimed

- Linear feet shoreline restored or protected through programs
- Number of soil erosion permits issued
- Number and age/grade level of children served through programs
- Total number of community members served per year for all programs
- Satisfactory compliance with all state and federal mandates related to programs
- Customer satisfaction (evaluated through surveys or interviews)
- Sources and uses of funds; availability of funding

Measure Short- and Long-Term Impacts

In addition to sharing information about the District's progress toward metrics and goals, it is also important that the community understands the short and long-term impacts of the District's programs and services, and how the community will be improved or protected as a result your efforts.

The District has a mission statement and should continue to display this on its materials.

The District should also communicate its desired outcomes for programs or services. Some suggestions for ways to measure and communicate about the District's short and long-term impact include focusing on measurements that highlight how the programs and services:

- Maintain and improve water quality
- Maintain or restore healthy forests
- Maintain and support working farms
- Provide access to nature for people of all ages and physical abilities

Share Stories about People and Places

Statistics and outcome-based metrics and financial information are important. However, most people build connections to each other and to organizations through the stories that they hear and share.

Every year, the District should brainstorm a list a five key places (rivers, farms, forest areas) where the District's programs and services making an impact. In your annual report, share the story of these places. Consider addressing these elements in each story:

- Why is this place important? Why is it loved?
- What activities happen or have happened on this property?
- Who lives here, works here, and/or is stewarding this place? How did they develop their connection to this place?
- How is it being conserved right now? Which of the District's programs or services are supporting the health of this place?
- Who is benefitting from the conservation of this place? How and what the benefits?
- How can others help to support the conservation of this special place and/or connect with this place?

Customers, Audiences and Activities

Customer or Audience	Desired Outcomes	Communications Tools	Action Steps	Who is Responsible
Landowners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase awareness of the District’s services and programs, including voluntary opportunities for private land conservation • Increase participation in District programs and services • Increase impacts of District programs and services • Increase awareness of funding sources for District programs and services • Develop a sense of community around District programs and services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Newsletter • Annual event • Annual report • Website • Signage 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Include one landowner story per newsletter. 2. Honor a landowner who has made a significant contribution to community conservation at your annual event. 3. If participating landowners grant their permission, list their names in the annual report to honor their commitment to conservation. 4. Create a Landowner section of the website that provides a portal to all programs and services that private landowners can access. 5. Host a series of free, informal “coffee and conversation” meetings at a local hangout spot where people can come to meet staff and ask questions about District programs and services that are available for landowners. Host these events at a time that is convenient for landowners and property managers. 6. Create signage that can be featured on participant landowners’ property. (See specific signage suggestions below.) 	The Manager is responsible for maintaining relationships with this audience. Activities and tasks may be delegated to other staff per the terms of their job description and role.
Local Elected and Appointed Officials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase awareness of the District’s services and programs • Increase participation in District programs and services • Increase impacts of District programs and services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Newsletter • Annual event • Annual report • Website • Meeting participation • One-on-one conversations 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Include all elected and appointed officials on the newsletter distribution list. 2. Invite all elected and appointed officials in community to the annual event. 3. Identify new commissioner and officials with whom the District does not yet have a relationship. Ask District 	The Board of Directors and the Manager are responsible for outreach with elected and appointed officials.

	<p>programs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase awareness of funding sources for District programs and services • Develop a sense of community around District programs and services 		<p>Board members to connect one-on-one with these officials to share information about District program and services.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Rotate Board members' attendance at County Board of Commission meetings. Share a progress report with the County Board, including impacts and outcomes of programs and services. 5. Consider hosting an annual "listening session" with elected and appointed officials to gather ideas and feedback about conservation needs, issues and priorities. This session could coincide with a regularly schedule District Board meeting. The outcomes could help to inform the annual work plan and strategy. 	
Educators and Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase awareness of the District's services and programs • Increase participation in District programs and services • Increase impacts of District programs and services programs • Increase awareness of funding sources for District programs and services • Develop a sense of community around District programs and services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Newsletter • Annual event • Annual report • Website 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Continue to manage and promote the annual poster contest. 2. Work with local high school teachers and sponsor an essay contest regarding farm and forest conservation on private lands and its impacts in the community. Encourage students to interview and connect with landowners and staff directly to listen to and learn about their experiences. 3. Feature the winning essay an essayist at the Annual meeting. Honor the educator who worked with the student as well. 	<p>The Manager is responsible for maintaining relationships with this audience. Activities and tasks may be delegated to other staff per the terms of their job description and role.</p>
General Public	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase public awareness of the District's services and programs and 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Signage at office • Signage at landowners' properties 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Develop a consistent style for communications materials. Use consistent fonts and colors and the 	<p>The Board of Directors and the Manager are responsible for</p>

	<p>how the general public can access those services</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase participation in District programs and services • Increase impacts of District programs and services • Increase awareness of funding sources for District programs and services • Develop a sense of community around District programs and services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Newsletter • Annual event • Annual report • Website 	<p>logo in way that reinforce a brand for the District.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. Develop and install welcome and way finding signage at the District's office and at the trailhead of the native garden area. 3. Continue to partner with the local newspaper to produce and distribute the annual report to the public. 4. Continue to invite the public to the annual event. 5. Develop and use "customer feedback" surveys for events, workshops, and programs. 6. Consider changes to the District's website. (See below.) 7. Continue to work with the media to share information about programs and services, including events and the recycling program. 	<p>connecting with the general public.</p>
Media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share information with the general public about the District's programs and services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Media releases • Website • Annual report • Annual event 	<p>See list of suggestions including in the section below.</p>	<p>The Manager is responsible for maintaining a relationship and communicating with the media.</p>
Project & Program Partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build, nurture and maintain strong and effective relationships with partners who work to deliver programs and services in collaboration with the District 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Newsletter • Annual event • Annual report • Website 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Recognize and thank project and program partnership in print media, in annual report and on website. 2. Conduct (at a minimum) an annual formal evaluation session with each partner to assess the relationship, monitor progress toward goals, and create an annual work plan and identify communications expectations and needs. 3. Initiate exploratory meetings with new prospective partners. 	<p>The Manager is responsible for administering, developing and monitoring relations with project and program partners.</p> <p>Specific tasks and activities may be delegated to other staff related to their job descriptions and roles.</p>

Additional Suggestions for Specific Communications Elements

Annual Event

- Continue to host this annual event. Consider marketing it as a “State of the County’s Land and Water” event in order to feature and communicate the impacts of the District’s work, celebrate community strengths and conservation successes, and highlight future needs and challenges.
- Continue to secure corporate sponsorships to connect with the business community and to keep the cost of the event affordable for attendees.
- Continue to honor landowners and other community members who have made a significant commitment to conservation by participating in or supporting a District program or service.
- Invite County and watershed area partners (e.g. Trout Unlimited, Farm Bureau, etc.) and encourage them to set up a table to share information about their programs and services that align with the District’s mission and goals.

Annual Report

- Continue to partner with the local newspaper to print this report and distribute it within the community.
- Include statistics regarding metrics and short and long-term benefits.
- Include financial information in the annual report including a summary of costs by general category (administration/general operations, conservation programs and services) and sources (voter-approved millage, other local funding, state grants, federal grants, private gifts and grants, etc.). Use charts that show how funding uses and sources compare with the previous year in order to provide context.
- Include stories and interviews and images of landowners who access the District’s services. Share stories about people and places in order to demonstrate the needs and impact of the District’s programs and services.

General Communications and Branding

Handouts and Fliers

- Include the District’s logo on all event flyers and handouts, including on partnership programs and events.
- Standardize the font style and colors the District uses for its print materials and signage.
- Reduce or eliminate the use of acronyms (e.g. MAEAP, EQIP, NRCS, etc.) on printed communications materials. Spell out the names of programs, services, partners, funding sources.

Logo Wear

- Create nametags for staff, Board members, and volunteers that include the District’s logo. Ask staff, Board members and volunteers to wear their nametag on site visits and while hosting and participating in District events and workshops, and when representing the District at off-site meetings and events.
- Create T-shirts for staff, Board members, and volunteers to wear that include the District’s logo. Consider having different colored T-shirts for staff, Board members, and volunteers in order to help visually communicate these distinct roles.

Signage

- The District's office is located on a campus with many other agencies and institutions. The District's "brand" is not substantially and uniquely present at this location. The District should consider adding a Welcome sign and kiosk at the trailhead to the native garden/outdoor nature area located at the District's office. The sign could include information about local plants and animals, invasive species, local agriculture, and a trail and amenity map for the site. It could also include District contact information and other information about District programs and services.
- The District should consider borrowing the signage concept used by the Michigan Agriculture Environmental Assurance Program and should consider a request to place signage on landowners' properties that are utilizing District services. Like the Michigan Agriculture Environmental Assurance Program signs, these could be placed along the roadway, in compliance with local permit requirements, so that travelers can see them. These signs are a way of thanking and recognizing farmers for their choices with their agricultural practices. The signs should feature the District's name and logo and a simple message like: "This private property owner proudly chooses to work with the Missaukee Conservation District to care for our community's land and water quality."

Newsletter

- Increase the number of articles featuring landowners who are using services. Use an "interview" style format and describe how and why they connected with the District, their vision for their property, the type of service they received and the benefits to their farm and the community.
- Include a story about a significant place in each newsletter. (See suggestions related to stories about people and places above.)
- Include statistics regarding metrics and the short and long-term benefits of your programs and services in every newsletter issue.
- If possible, establish an event and workshop calendar at the beginning of the year and share the events calendar and information about upcoming events in every newsletter.
- In order to control costs, increase the use of email for newsletter distribution. Invite people to sign up to receive the District's newsletter at all events and via your website.
- Include a full list of staff members and their contact information in each newsletter.
- Include the full list of Board members in each newsletter.
- Consider featuring a story about a staff member or intern in each newsletter. This helps to put a face on the programs and services.

Media

- Meet with or call members of the media on an annual basis to develop a personal relationship and to share information about how the District's services help community members to solve problems and create solutions that relate to soil conservation, farming and forestry, water quality, and solid waste and recycling.
- Prepare and distribute written releases to print, radio, and television media when there is news to share about a program or service, an accomplishment of one of your customers/clients, an event, or an impact or accomplishment that is noteworthy.
- Share more information and media releases featuring private landowners who are using the District's programs and services. Use an "interview" style format and describe how and why they connected with the District, the type of service they received and the benefits to their farm and the community.

- Request a dedicated space in the local newspaper each month where a farmer, forester, or other property manager can share their story about working with the District and the impacts of the programs and services they have received.
- In every media release, let the public know how they can find the District online and/or sign up to receive your newsletter.
- Share the District’s public event and workshop calendar with the media. In addition to working with the local newspaper to print and distribute the annual report, ask media to print observations of the community’s conservation needs and strengths from area students leading up to the Annual Event/“State of the County’s Land and Water” event.

Website

- Spell out all acronyms on the Missaukee Conservation District website. Spelling out the names of programs and funding sources will improve the public’s understanding of the District.
- Use consistent fonts and a consistent color palette throughout your website.
- Consider reorganizing the website’s major headings and pages from a programmatic lens to a more user or audience-focused lens. User and audience categories may include: Farm & Forest Landowner Conservation Services, Educator/Student Programs, Recycling & Waste Collection Services, Native Garden Area & Trails, Public Workshops and Events, Soil Erosion Services, etc.
- Include photographs and a brief biography for each staff member and Board member in the area where they are listed on the website.
- Include the annual plan of work and annual budget on the website.

Customer and Event Feedback

- Seek customer feedback regarding their satisfaction with the District’s programs and services. Mechanisms for feedback could include:
 - Paper or online (emailed) surveys
 - Interviews or focus groups with a sampling of customers from different programs, conducted annually
 - Informal feedback sessions with community members
- Use the feedback to evaluate what is working well, to identify areas of improvement, and to collect data and stories about the use, outcomes and impact of programs and services.

Appendix A

Planning Retreat Goals

On May 19, 2015, members of the Missaukee Conservation District Board and staff, a County Commissioner, and an external partner gathered for a half-day session to discuss the District's strategy and direction.

The goals of the session and the desired outcomes of the District's strategic and business planning work, as identified by participants, included:

- Define a course of action for the District
- Have a plan to move forward
- Determine how to communicate with the voters who financed us
- Determine how to communicate with the County Commission
- Determine how to connect with people who disagree
- Determine how soil conservation can be more "in line" with the business of farming
- Determine how we serve non-farming residents
- Determine how to remove "negative name"
- Determine how to communicate about the benefits of our services

Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats

Strengths (not prioritized)

- Knowledgeable staff who are accessible and dedicated
- Recycling center
- Passed a millage
- All programs
- Customer relationships; customers leave as friends
- Household Hazardous Waste cleanup
- MAEAP
- Strong management; excellent manager
- Strong internal communication
- Staff works well together
- Staff willingness to grow
- Volunteers
- History and track record
- Composting program
- Dedicated Board
- Tree sales
- Landowner outreach

Weaknesses (prioritized using dots/voting)

- Relationship with County Board of Commissioners; Board to Board relationship (6)
- Lack of funding (5)

- Weak brand – people do not know who we are (5)
- Underpaid staff (4)
- Not getting our service message out to farmers (3)
- Lack of staff (2)
- Grant dependency (2)
- Board composition – need farmer representation (2)
- Communication with public – lack of understanding of how programs are run (1)
- Soil erosion program – a good program but has mixed benefit to District because of impacts to relationships with customers
- Dependence on millage
- Physical location (hidden), including recycling
- Lack of public understanding of how programs are run and what we do

Threats (prioritized using dots/voting)

- Inability to sustain funding (8)
- Local government officials not educated about District, want service “for free” plus resistant to grants; lack of respect and understanding (7)
- Community not aware of services (6)
- Resistance to change (3)
- Lack of support from state officials during budget time (2)
- Overlapping services with lake improvement boards (2)
- Disconnect with groups that serve similar purpose such as MRWA (1)
- Negativity surrounding millage; negativity surrounding tax (1)
- Judgment of “non-locals”
- American Waste as threat/competition to recycling program
- Availability of information online – do farmers need us if they can learn about programs from a website?

Opportunities (prioritized using dots/voting)

- Educate youth and connect with schools, scouts, 4H and church groups (6)
- Educate farmers about programs (5)
- New partnerships/work with other agencies such as with Ducks Unlimited, Trout Unlimited, Quality Deer Management group, Safari Club, high school students/recycling program, Baker College/recycling program, community garden (5)
- Improve public reputation and awareness of programs (5)
- Board development and recruitment (4)
- Branding (4)
- More grants (2)
- Reach new audiences with new programs (1)
- Connect with lake and stream landowners
- Staff development
- Work on policy and legislation – local, state, federal

The group agreed that they got a good start during the retreat on the goals identified above, and that these outcomes needed to be accomplished by August 31, 2015.