

HENNEPIN CONSERVATION DISTRICT
2004 Annual Report
and
2005 Work Plan

March 15, 2005

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Introduction

The Hennepin Conservation District (referred to as "the District" or "HCD" throughout this report) was founded on November 7, 1949 as a special purpose unit of government under Minnesota Statutes Chapter 103C. The District is one of 91 Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCD) throughout Minnesota and is part of a national network of conservation districts. SWCDs have no taxing or regulatory authority. Hence, these districts must develop and implement their conservation programs through voluntary cooperation with individuals, citizen associations, and other governmental units.

The governing body of the Hennepin Conservation District is an elected board of supervisors. There are five supervisors on the District Board. Supervisors are elected county-wide for a term of four years. For continuity, terms are staggered so that two or three positions are elected every two years. Although the election for supervisors is county-wide, each must come from one of five nominating districts. Election contests are among candidates within the same nominating district. All eligible voters in the county can vote their preference in each contest.

The original charter of the Hennepin Conservation District was "...to provide a local organization through which land owners and operators may obtain on-the-farm technical assistance..." with a focus on productive agriculture. The role of the District has evolved as the landscape of Hennepin County has changed. In the recent past, the District was involved in a wide variety of land and water conservation issues. HCD participates by assisting the people of Hennepin County with the administration of the Wetland Conservation Act (WCA), technical expertise in conservation and access to grant opportunities through state, regional and local sources. The tradition of soil and water conservation districts is to build cooperative relationships with individuals and agencies.

Due to program and funding changes in the spring of 2003, HCD significantly reduced its staff and activities. Following this transition, the Hennepin County Division of Environmental Services assumed many, but not all, of the program functions performed by the HCD. In February 2004, a staff person, Stacey Puranen, was hired in a part-time capacity. In July 2004 Ms. Puranen became employed full-time and is now responsible for the delivery of local SWCD programs. HCD cooperates with the Hennepin County Division of Environmental Services, as well as other local water and land conservation groups, to maximize the amount of conservation information and practices available to people in Hennepin County.

2005 Board of Supervisors

District One Term Expires January, 2008	Kim Boyce Chair
District Two Term Expires January, 2006	Vacant (Appointment Pending) *
District Three Term Expires January 2008	Dan Jones Secretary
District Four Term Expires January 2006	Justin Blum Treasurer
District Five Term Expires January, 2008	Mike Wyatt Vice -Chair

* Note: Former District Two Supervisor, David Donnelly, submitted his resignation on March 2, 2005. An appointment process will commence in late March to fill the vacancy.

HCD Staff

Conservationist..... Stacey Puranen

2004 Program Report

In 2004 the goal of the District was to reconstitute itself with a tight focus on its statutory obligations and to build cooperative relations with other conservation agencies. HCD functioned with one part-time staff person for a portion of the year (February through June). The employee, Ms. Stacey Puranen, began full-time employment in July 2004. Accomplishments include:

Wetland Conservation Act Administration

In order to improve responsiveness to WCA issues, the HCD staff person attended training on wetland delineation in July 2004, as well as training on the use of the statewide "E-Link" computerized reporting program. Twelve "cease and desist" orders were issued in 2003 (when funding and staffing changes made HCD unable to respond). Ten "cease and desist" orders were issued in 2004. Of the ten orders issued in 2004, four meetings were held with landowners to outline corrective actions. Three of the orders were rescinded. Addressing these cases and the backlog from 2003 continues to be a high priority. The HCD staff person also participated in 54 Technical Evaluation Panels (TEPs). In over one-third of the TEPs, suggested changes were made to improve the conservation effectiveness of the original plans. The HCD Conservationist also reports 72 other meetings with staff from the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR), the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR), the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), local units of government and landowners. WCA cases represent in excess of 50% of the work commitment for the HCD staff person. HCD received \$9,763 in WCA funding from Hennepin County for 2004.

Land and Water Conservation

The principal purpose of soil and water conservation districts is erosion control, and even with limited staff and financial resources, HCD has given attention to this issue. On an annual basis, HCD provides local landowners access to state cost share funding for approved conservation practices. In 2004 there were eight consultations with landowners regarding cost share proposals. Three projects are underway and scheduled to be completed by the middle of 2005. The balance of the 2004 cost share allocation is expected to be allocated for approved projects by June 2005. Cost share funding for 2004 was \$20,072.

HCD staff completed 33 Reinvest in Minnesota (RIM) easement inspections in 2004. These annual inspections are necessary to verify that landowners are honoring the conservation easements on their properties. All inspection reports have been successfully filed with BWSR. HCD received \$1,244 for RIM inspections.

On a weekly basis, the HCD staff person has responded to questions from land owners providing information and referrals regarding appropriate land use and conservation practices.

Environmental Education

Recognizing that environmental education represents a wise investment in youth and conservation knowledge, HCD provided financial and staff support two high schools, and three Envirothon teams.

Natural Resource Monitoring

The District currently measures static water levels in thirteen wells that are a part of the MN Department of Natural Resources observation well network. All wells are monitored once a month, ten months a year by the HCD staff.

Conservation Associations and Collaborations

To leverage and best maximize limited HCD resources, partnering with other state and regional conservation associations continued in 2004. Membership in the Minnesota Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts (MASWCD) enabled staff and elected supervisors access to high quality staff development, training and information networks; resources that enhanced the capacity of HCD in 2004. Partnering with other metropolitan SWCDs provided access to engineering services and regional staff who work directly with residents of Hennepin County to assist with conservation planning and the installation of conservation practices.

One example of the effectiveness of this partnership is demonstrated in the work of Gregg Thompson, a regional landscape restoration technician. Mr. Thompson is based at the Anoka County SWCD, and delivers programs throughout the metro region. His primary focus is to work with landowner groups, lake associations, and local units of government on the design and installation of lakeshore and streambank restoration projects, rain gardens, and native buffer strips. In a recent report Mr. Thompson cites the following activities in Hennepin County; 16 designs and 8 installations of rain gardens, 27 plans for shoreland restoration projects, and 9 shoreland restoration projects installed.

Management

In 2004, moving to a part-time and then full-time staff person represented a significant investment by HCD. It is a necessary investment given the unique conservation program responsibilities delegated to local SWCDs. The limited HCD budget has been leveraged effectively. Re-establishing a functional SWCD office was important. Full-time staffing has also allowed HCD to fully participate in the statewide E-Link program and data entry system, and to upgrade the HCD computer system. HCD received \$33,071 in general services support from BWSR in 2004.

2005 Work Plan

As mentioned in the introduction, HCD is in a state of transition. While levels of staff resources and financial support have changed during the past two years, HCD remains committed to the following mission:

"To facilitate the conservation of water, soil and related natural resources through education, technical assistance and implementation of sound land use practices, in the most cost-effective manner, for the benefit of current and future generations."

In a HCD Planning Committee meeting on February 22, 2005 the HCD Board reaffirmed this mission and our dedication to assisting Hennepin County residents in addressing soil and water conservation issues.

Our 2005 HCD Work Plan builds on efforts of 2004 and sets the stage for 2006 and beyond. HCD recognizes that addressing the conservation issues in a rapidly "urbanizing environment" in the most populated county in the state is a unique and important challenge.

Priorities for 2005

- HCD staff time and program resources will focus on the reduction of soil erosion, as well as addressing issues of water quality and natural habitat as the priority issues for 2005.
- The HCD Board will continue strategic program planning efforts in 2005 with the goal of developing a long-range strategic plan by 2006. The plan will address program, fiscal, management and partnership strategies to clarify and strengthen the role HCD has in local and regional soil and water conservation.
- HCD will continue to provide conservation program services in the areas where the District has a unique statutory role and responsibility. Efforts will be made to partner with other conservation and environmental agencies in order to leverage the limited HCD resources - maximizing the conservation benefits to landowners and residents of Hennepin County.

Land and Water Conservation

As mentioned before, the principal purpose of soil and water conservation districts is erosion control. Currently there is an increased emphasis at the Federal and State levels on non-point pollution control and agricultural nutrient management. Recently, HCD's focus has been primarily on conservation easements. In the future, it may be advantageous for the District to increase its attention on non-point source management. Given the limited resources available to the District at this time, ranking order of land uses for erosion

control/nutrient management efforts are: 1) agricultural lands, 2) urban construction sites, and 3) stream banks and lake shore. The HCD Board still considers erosion control as the top priority. We also recognize that providing additional expertise for landowners, developers and local units of government in the area of addressing storm water runoff may be type of program service to explore – particularly if additional funding and staffing could be obtained.

Programs

Because of budgetary and staffing constraints the scope of conservation activities continues to be quite limited at this time. The District will concentrate its attention and resources to the statutory and contractual obligations it retains. These activities are summarized as below:

- WCA
- State Cost Share
- Non-Point Source Engineering Assistance
- Reinvest in Minnesota (RIM) easement inspection
- DNR Obwell network

Wetlands Conservation Act (WCA)

The HCD has a statutory role to verify landowner compliance with the WCA. Participation in technical evaluation panels to evaluate wetlands and project proposals is now done by the District conservationist. An average of ten “cease and desist” orders are received by HCD annually. Priority will be given to immediately addressing any new “cease and desist” orders and handling the backlog of “cease and desist” orders remaining from 2003 and 2004. From the experience in 2004 it is estimated that addressing WCA requirements takes 50% to 65% of the time of our sole HCD staff person. The District receives \$9,763 per year from the county to perform this work (the minimum as per the statute). HCD is required to match these funds.

State Cost Share

The District expects to receive approximately \$21,072 from BWSR in cost share funds towards conservation projects. Approximately \$16,800 of this money will be available for cost share projects in 2005. If the total amount of funds is allocated, 20% is retained by HCD to help cover administrative costs.

Non-Point Source Engineering Assistance Program (NPEAP)

The NPEAP is administered through the Scott County SWCD. Although there are no funds to HCD through this program, the work can support the cost share projects in Hennepin County.

RIM Easement Inspection

HCD is contractually obligated to BWSR to accomplish this task. The work is to verify that conservation easements continue to be honored. BWSR has funded this activity at \$1,440 for 2005. This activity should be fairly routine now that HCD staff is familiar with the inspection and reporting process.

DNR Obwell network

The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources has contracted with HCD to measure water levels in twelve (12) observation wells over the course of the year. HCD will receive \$1,335 to perform this work. The staff time commitment for this contract is approximately ten, eight-hour days per year.

Environmental Education

HCD is currently funding the school Envirothon activities at \$60 per team and intending to participate in the annual Children's Water Festival. Ms. Puranen is well qualified in this area and the Board is anticipating that no more than 10% of her time will be spent on environmental education activities.

Management**Staffing**

As the District moves forward it will be critical to the success of the organization to build the skills of qualified staff. Moving to a full-time employee was the first step in this process. We recognize that a portion of Ms. Puranen's time will be taken up with training as she increases her skills in GIS, WCA, and increased use of computers and software. BWSR has funded conservation activities at HCD by \$33,071 in 2005 under its general administration grant.

Because of the limited amount of HCD staff resources, HCD Board members are directly active in assisting with many HCD operations and management functions including; website development and organizational communications, managing routine financial transactions, managing personnel systems, developing strategic planning processes, and creating organizational reports. HCD Board members are required to be very "hands-on" in their roles.

Board Training

With three newly elected HCD Board members, and a new vacancy in District Two, HCD is investing in board development. The three new board members will attend a two-day training session in March sponsored by MASWCD. Additional HCD Board development may also be required during the year.

Strategic Planning and Operations

The HCD Board will continue work on strategic planning through a series of Planning Committee meetings. Specific items to be addressed include:

- 1) A careful examination of the appropriate program and service niches for HCD within Hennepin County – with particular attention to avoiding any unnecessary duplication of conservation services provides by other conservation organizations,
- 2) The development of specific annual program goals and outcomes,
- 3) Enhancing partnerships with other local and regional conservation agencies,
- 4) Developing budget stability and finding additional sources of fiscal support for HCD operations,
- 5) Re-establishing strong working relationships with the Hennepin County Board of Commissioners and other elected and appointed officials, and
- 6) Developing systems to more effectively address the financial and personnel management requirements of the HCD.

Board Vacancy

Given the recent resignation of a HCD Board member, we will also be working closely with Hennepin County and the community to identify qualified and interested people to fill the vacancy in District Two. It is our goal to have this vacancy filled before the end of May 2005.

Budget

The HCD budget will be reviewed at the April 4, 2005 HCD meeting and will be officially submitted to BWSR by the April 15, 2005 budget deadline.