CHAPTER IV: CONSERVATION DISTRICT BUSINESS PLANNING

To ensure that Conservation Districts provide for the proper local management of resources, it is essential that Directors be aware of their role in establishing both a long range plan and an annual business plan to accomplish the goals of the District.

Section I: Role of the Director

The Michigan legislature has given Conservation District directors broad powers to develop and carry out soil and water conservation programs. To carry out these powers, directors have the responsibility to take the leadership role in the following:

- Participate in development of long term, strategic plans of action and in developing and carrying out the annual plan of action.
- Prepare for, conduct and participate in Conservation District board meetings and attend Michigan Association of Conservation District (MACD) state and area meetings, and state and regional training sessions conducted by MDA and partners. To be effective, a committed Director may miss no more than three (3) consecutive board meetings per year, and no more than of 25% of regularly scheduled meetings total. *(Refer to Appendix D for sample policy on Board Member Absenteeism)*
- Provide for the keeping of a full and accurate record (minutes) of all proceedings and all resolutions, regulations, and orders issued or adopted.
- Provide for the preparation, publishing, and distribution of an Annual Report.
- Secure needed funds for adequate District operations and oversee proper dispersal of funds according to state and federal law.

It is important to note here that it is the director's responsibility to secure funding by setting priorities, identifying sources, meeting with other public officials, and keeping open channels of communication with conservation organizations. Staff will complete the necessary applications, but should not be expected to make all contacts necessary.

- Prepare an annual budget and maintain an approved bookkeeping system that reflects all income and expenditures. Prepare an annual financial statement and provide for an annual audit. Provide financial oversight in the areas of receipt of District funds and expenditure of District funds.
- Employ personnel and determine their qualifications, duties, and compensation. Keep abreast of performance and provide administrative supervision. Understand working agreements established with personnel and comply with all conditions.
- Serve as the "up-front" person for the District by representing the District at public functions sponsored by the District and at functions related to conservation activities.
- Establish, review, and understand Conservation District policies.
- Annually designate the board chairperson and other officers.
- Establish the priority of work.
- Establish and maintain communications with public and private leaders within the Conservation District who can support the District program.
- Make decisions in response to all proposals presented to the board.
- Sponsor and actively participate in educational activities to inform people about the conservation program and to enlist their support.

Section II: Planning in Partnership

Successful District Business Planning requires Directors to understand the role of the District's two fundamental partners in Natural Resources Conservation; the Michigan Department of Agriculture (MDA) and the United States Department of Agriculture Natural Resource Conservation Service (USDA-NRCS). This partnership between the District, MDA, and NRCS constitutes the "three legged Stool" that is vital to developing an appropriate long range and annual business plans.

Michigan Department of Agriculture

As the government agency charged with providing oversight in the District's general state allocated funding, MDA has set forth Operations Grant Requirements that must be met by the District. One of these requirements is that every District must conduct an assessment and analysis of local natural resource problems and concerns, and develop a written resource assessment of the county that identifies and summarizes the District Board's priority issues once every five years. This Assessment for all intents and purposes provides the District with a basis to develop both an annual business plan and a long range plan. The District is also required to complete and submit an annual audit to the department as directed each year..

Note: Grant Requirements are subject to change on an annual basis so it is essential that Districts obtain updated Operations Grant terms and conditions each fiscal year.

For additional information regarding the relationship between MDA and Conservation Districts, please refer to Chapter XII this manual titled "Partners."

USDA-NRCS

The United States Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service provides technical assistance and information to Districts in delivering conservation management programs to private landowners. Two agreements are in place that lay out the terms of the partnership. The Mutual Agreement is between the Secretary of Agriculture, the Director of the Michigan Department of Agriculture, and the Chairman of the Conservation District Board. This agreement lays out the general purpose of the partnership as follows; broad based conservation programs delivered through the cooperation of the three partners are vital to the protection of the natural resources, economic stability and well-being of our Nation.

A more detailed agreement, the Cooperative Working Agreement, provides more specific responsibilities of the three partners, and is between the NRCS State Conservationist, The Chairman of the Conservation District Board, and the Director of the Environmental Stewardship Division of the Michigan Department of Agriculture.

A third agreement, the Annual Operations Agreement (AOA), establishes measurable contributions of working space, equipment, vehicles and supplies, and goals of the individual agencies within the partnership. For additional information regarding the relationship between NRCS and Conservation Districts, please refer to Chapter XII of this manual titled "Partners."

Section III: The Long Range Plan

As required by MDA Operations Grant, every Conservation District must have a Natural Resource Needs Assessment on file in the District office. This is not intended as an in-house document. It needs to be understood by those in a position to develop, fund, approve, or administer conservation programs. Legislators, county/city commissioners, agencies, environmentalists, interest groups and individuals should be able to determine quickly what the conservation problems are, what actions need to be taken, who should take the actions, and why such actions were proposed. This document recognizes the District's current needs in resource development and the authorities with which Districts are empowered. Assessments should be reviewed annually when preparing the annual plan of work and updated every five years. Amendments should be added as necessary.

An effective Natural Resource Needs Assessment will result in an improved combination of individual conservation programs with adequate funding and good administration. The assessment must contain specific recommendations that can be broken down in annual segments to include the efforts that are needed and the levels of operation required. It should also include federal, state, local and private efforts and specify which agencies and groups are responsible for each efforts; why the efforts are necessary; and the estimated time of completion. It should cover all of the important natural resource problems and needs in the District and still be brief enough to be interesting and effective.

Section IV: The Annual Business Plan

The District's long-range plan should be broken down into annual segments that are readily identifiable, and guide the District in its day to day programs. If the annual plan of work is not prepared, planning and decision-making tends to be made on an "as needed" basis and long range objectives often suffer as a result. The annual plan of work lists the major goals the District has set for the year and the activities that will be used to achieve those goals.

In 1998, changes were made in the Memorandums of Understanding between Districts, MDA, and NRCS dealing with working space, equipment, vehicles and supplies. The annual plan of work should be developed jointly by NRCS and the Conservation District. The Annual Operational Agreement (AOA) contains a performance plan attachment that details the natural resource goals of the partnership where long range objectives must be taken into account. The annual plan of work is to be developed jointly between District Directors and the NRCS District Conservationist stating what the District and NRCS expect to achieve and how it will be accomplished.

The role of the NRCS District Conservationist (NRCS DC) in developing the long range and annual plan of work is to provide technical advice and counsel to the District Board of Directors in the following ways:

- Assist the CD board with program development by providing resource inventory data and evaluations and suggest ways to accelerate the conservation accomplishments of the district.
- Encourage and assist the District Directors to evaluate the soil, water, and related resource needs of the District; to establish priorities; and to develop specific goals and actions needed to address the resource needs.
- Provide pertinent information to help District Directors be well-informed conservationists.

Section V: Developing and Using a Local Decision Making Team

Once the District has completed a Natural Resource Needs Assessment as required by MDA, and has successfully developed an annual business plan and an Annual Operations Agreement with USDA-NRCS, the planning process must also include input from, and expertise, of local stakeholders in the community.

It is important that the District stay abreast of the needs and concerns of its community. A local decision making team, made up of a variety of leaders and interested citizens in the community, can assist directors in defining the overall direction and appropriate programs for the District to follow to meet the needs of the community and its natural resources. The following serves as a guide to utilizing a local decision making team in the planning process:

1. Identifying Resource Concerns Using Community Leaders.
    a. Leaders should be from a diverse group including representatives of agricultural industry, farmers, wildlife, environmentalists, fisheries, tourism, recreation, elected officials and governmental agencies.
    b. When asking for representatives, be prepared to discuss the following:
        i. An estimate of how much time it will take to complete the required tasks of the committee.
        ii. The purpose and responsibility of the committee.
        iii. What results the District expects from the committee's efforts.
    c. The meeting should be convenient to the members of the committee.
    d. The results of the committee's effort should be:
        i. Identifying the critical resource concerns facing the city, townships and the county.
        ii. Prioritizing the same list of concerns based on the importance of the concern; the potential for a solution; and the public interest in the concern.
        iii. Developing for each concern a list of individuals or organizations that would have a vested interest in that specific concern.
        iv. Developing for each concern a list of organizations that could or should be the lead organization.
2. Invite Vested Interest Leaders to a Problem Solving Process Hosted by the District to Address Critical Resource Concerns.
    a. Directors should invite these people personally with invitations followed by a thank you/reinforcement letter. The following criteria should be considered in deciding whom to invite:
        i. The individual has the respect of their peers.
        ii. The individual has the ability to clearly communicate their position.
        iii. The individual has the ability to listen and learn.
        iv. The individual has the ability to compromise and work in group settings.
        v. The individual will take the job seriously and give the necessary time.
        vi. The individual must concur that there is a problem.
        vii. The individual must agree that the problem is worth investing resources to resolve it.
        viii. The individual must believe that a solution is possible.
    b. Again, the meeting should be convenient to the members of the committee and the invitee(s).
3. Locate a Facilitator.
    a. In order to help move the group through this process, a facilitator may be used.
    b. The facilitator must be capable of:
        i. Separating causes from symptoms.
        ii. Keeping the members focused on the issues.
4. Problem Solution.
    a. The facilitator should get the problem solving team to first identify and prioritize the causes of the number one priority concern. Special attention must be placed on keeping the members focused on identification and not allowing them to slip into solutions during this part of the session.
    b. The facilitator should get the group to prioritize the causes of the number one priority concern based on key factors such as:

        i. The cause has a solution.
        ii. The most important cause results in the greatest impact on the problem.
        iii. This cause also results in the greatest payback.
    c. Conduct a brain storming activity to propose solutions to the number one priority concern. This should involve taking the problem and asking for potential solutions from the group. Things to remember as you go through this process:
        i. No answer or suggestion is to be rejected.
        ii. This is not the place to figure out all the details.
        iii. Everyone must be given an opportunity to submit an idea.
    d. The group should begin another activity to prioritize the proposed solutions, remembering:
        i. The solution should result in the biggest bang for the buck.
        ii. The affected people should support it.
        iii. There must be someone willing to take responsibility for implementing the solution.
    e. Finally, the group should identify all the details needed to implement each of the solutions. This plan should be written down and include: the person responsible, milestones, starting and ending dates.
    f. If you come to an insurmountable problem during any of these steps, the facilitator should ask the following:
        i. Is this issue important to the people?
        ii. Do we want to give the energy and resources to solve this problem?
        iii. Is there another more important issue?
5. This should get the group thinking about the importance of the issue. If the team agrees that this is the wrong issue or the problem is impossible to deal with, move on to the next issue.
6. The District is the Follow-Up Agency: The last responsibility of the District is to ensure that the plan is implemented.
    a. If a commitment is made to hold meetings by some other organization, the District staff needs to contact that organization to make sure that commitment is being carried out.
    b. If any organization cannot fulfill its commitment, representatives should be invited to a board meeting to explain the problem. The committee that put the plan together should be notified so that other support for implementation of the plan can be obtained.