

Hillsborough Soil and Water Conservation District Meeting of the Board of Supervisors

March 10, 2025 @ 10:00 AM

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

Supervisors and staff in attendance: Terri Parke, (Seat 1), Betty Jo Tompkins, (Seat 2), Gretchen Hoke, (Seat 3); Aly Sullivan (Seat 5) via video-conference; Special Council Tom Gonzalez; Dr. Joe Walsh (Executive Director); K. Eckdahl (Office Manager)

Absent: Absent/Vacant (Seat 4).

Items 1-4

1.-4. Call to Order / Pledge of Allegiance/Introductions: Chair Parke called the meeting to order at 10:01 A.M.; led the Pledge of Allegiance; vice Chair Hoke led the prayer; Chair Parke welcomed attendees; and asked for introductions.

Partner Agency and Vendor Representatives in Attendance: Simon Bollin, Hillsborough County Agribusiness Development; Zack Landers, NRCS/Plant City, Acting District Conservationist; video-conference attendees- Mona Neville, FDACS-Forestry; Troy Green, HCBOCC-Div Env. Mgt.; Christian Padgett, (Chapter President, FNGLA)

Public in Attendance: via video conference- Margie Martin (Martin Communications); Urban Greenworks-Miami/Dade.

Item 5. Public Comment: None at this time.

Item 6. Public Correspondence: None at this time.

Item 7. Review and Approval of Agenda: Supervisor Hoke moved to add the following to the agenda under new business – a) Supervisors reports and b) discussion of the Impact of FL Legislative bills SB 986 and HS 973. Supervisor Tompkins seconded. Motion to amend Agenda for March 10, 2025, with proposed Non-Agenda items approved, 4-0.

Item 8. Partner Agencies (introductions and reports):

- a. NRCS – Zack Landers reported that NRCS is servicing the following breakout of contracts for Hillsborough County: Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP), 117 contracts; Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), 21 contracts; and Hurricane Relief, 23 contracts. Total proposed funding is about \$800K. Otherwise, he is in contact with Joe [Walsh] to flesh out the upcoming Local Working Group meeting; important, NRCS is asking for a delay date; early in May seems to be reasonable.

Item 9. Minutes of January 10, 2025, HSWCD Regular Board Meeting: The minutes from February 10, 2025, meeting were reviewed. Supervisor Tompkins requested that the reason for her absence be added to the meeting minutes for Feb 10, 2025, as follows: Supervisor Tompkins was unable to attend in

person and was restricted to a hospital bed; she made several attempts to join via the conference hub phone number and couldn't connect; alternatively, she tried two other phone numbers to notify the Board. Supervisor Tompkins moved to accept the amendment to the meeting minutes. Supervisor Hoke seconded. Motion carried: 4-0. Supervisor Hoke moved to accept the minutes with the amendment from Feb 10, 2025, meeting as presented. Supervisor Tompkins seconded. Motion carried 4-0.

Item 10. District Seat 4 Vacancy: Chair Parke requested the application window for District Seat 4 be reopened with a deadline of April 14, 2025. Dr Walsh will follow up on this task. The notification for the need for candidates will be posted on the HSWCD website, Facebook and emails will be sent out to Trade groups, Constituents, and Stakeholders.

Item 11. DY 2025-26 Proposed Org Chart and Budget Amendment: The cover letter (memo) for the *HSWCD Budget Requests – Impact for FY26 and FY27* was reviewed with the Board. The total requested increase for the next budget year is approximately \$185,000. Supervisor Tompkins requested a more detailed report. Walsh stated he was able to send any requested information out to the board. Supervisor Tompkins requested the cover letter to be tabled until the next meeting. Special Counsel Gonzalez reminded the board that the budget request and cover letter are statutory requirements. Dr. Walsh stated he has repeatedly requested a budget review agenda item throughout 2024 and in the beginning months of 2025, stressing the point that the County Administration had conceded an extension to accommodate this board meeting date, which cannot be delayed any longer. For the record, Dr. Walsh informed the Board that the County schedule for budget amendments had kicked off at the beginning of February with a deadline of February 21st, 2025.

Supervisor Sullivan left 11:00 AM

The first item on the Budget was a review of the Executive Director's pay band and a discussion of the budget allocation to support future contracts of employment for that position. The desktop review conducted by County Human Resources was discussed with the "Unclassified General Manager 3' pay band being identified by the County as best match with the role and fair market value in terms of salary. Further discussion centered on the Board's ability to compensation for the significant jump in income tax bracket that would take effect above the fair market value range of \$91K – \$96K. Supervisor Parke made the motion to identify the job description with the CAD-UM3 pay band. Supervisor Hoke seconded. Motion carried: 2-1. Supervisor Tompkins voted: nay. Supervisor Sullivan was absent.

Chair Parke then made a second motion for a FY26 salary cap for Executive Director of \$96,600/year. Supervisor Hoke seconded. Motion carried: 3-0.

The second item in the budget is the reclassification of a full-time early career, community information liaison, to full-time mid-career, agricultural professional (Land Conservation Specialist) and one mobile phone with plan. The proposed Decision Unit would have a financial impact of \$12,508 for FY26 and \$11,850 for FY27.

The third item in the budget is the reclassification of a part-time unskilled events worker position to a full-time early career, agricultural professional (Conservation Technician), plus acquisition of one 4x4 truck, a laptop and one mobile phone with plan. The proposed Decision Unit would have a financial impact of \$135,075 for FY26 and \$87,089 for FY27. Discussion focused on whether another vehicle was necessary.

Dr. Walsh asserted that we are looking at two vehicles to serve a staff of five people with two of those being field staff positions.

The fourth item is the recurring operating budget increase request of \$10,400 - Dr. Walsh said this increase was intended to ensure that the Conservation District could pick up the new costs of supporting the office building as outlined under the County lease, while also contracting for support services to stakeholder management/strategic planning. He noted certain other adjustments he was making such as reducing the commitment to travel components (previously budgeted for about \$12,000 per year). Supervisor Tompkins recommended that the budget not be reallocated for technical services at the expense of general conservation outreach programs and public events activities.

The fifth item is a one-time approval to our operating budget of \$25,872 for FY26. These funds would go towards renovations not already completed on the Old Springhead Fire Station #25, prior to the lease agreement. Proposed activities include window replacement/upgrade, exterior paint and interior paint of office space and the garage bay.

Chair Parke moved to accept all the above proposed budget items for FY26-27, and recommended the budget be approved to go to County Administration. Supervisor Hoke seconded. Discussion - Supervisor Tompkins requested more specificity on the duties of the new positions proposed. Dr. Walsh stated these duties would be developed further under the Strategic Plan. Supervisor Tompkins stressed her expectation that the budget focus on Urban and Suburban elements of Hillsborough County. Dr. Walsh reiterated that development of the Strategic Plan and identification of technical services would be a focus of the FY26 Budget and the main driver for future commitments. Motion carried 2-1. Supervisor Tompkins voted nay. Supervisor Sullivan was absent.

Item 12. Upcoming/Proposed Business Schedule: the upcoming dates were reviewed; most were dismissed as unsupportable; Local Working Group was proposed for delay until May.

Item 13. New Business:

a. Supervisor Reports

- a. Supervisor Hoke:** reported she had presented at Agri Fest in Polk Co. Topics included: Wildlife Corridor and Conservation Methods. Reminding the Board: April 22 is Wildlife Corridor Day. Otherwise, she reported having reached out to Senator Collins about SB 986 and HB 973.
- b. Supervisor Tompkins:** reported she had attended the Ag Hall of Fame, FL Champion of Champions, and the Farm Credit Breakfast. She noted that in attending the Hall of Fame dinner, she had been asked to get commitment from this Board to engage with the 2025 Land Judging contests to be held on April 4th. Discussion revolved around a precaution about Supervisor(s) implying the ability of the Conservation District to engage in commitments without adequate notice to the Board and the planning of resources. Supervisor Tompkins stated that she would commit to this activity on her own time through the nonprofit that she operates. On SB 986 and HB 973, she stressed that everyone needed to focus urgent attention to these bills. Lastly, Supervisor Tompkins revisited her expectation that the Board should be focusing its resources on serving programs to the broader urban/suburban communities with the slogan “Conservation is Everyone’s Business”.
- c. Supervisor Parke:** reported she had directly contacted Representative Alvarez and Senators Collins and Burgess by phone to make her concerns and support for SB 986 and

HB 973 known. She said she also emailed every senator and representative on the committees that were reviewing these bills; specifically, to have this Conservation District be stricken from the dissolution list.

- d. **Ex. Director Walsh:** reported he had reached out to Senator Collins’ office about SB 986 and HB 973, reiterating the same message as Chair Parke.

- b. **February 10th, 2025, Public Comment, RE Title XXXV, Section 582.19, Qualifications and tenure of supervisors (Sections 582.19, 570.02):** Dr. Walsh followed up on the February 10th Public Comment from Debbie Hunt, Hillsborough Citizens Defending Freedom, in which she asked the Board to substantiate Supervisor Tompkins’ qualifications to serve on the HSWCD Board. Dr. Walsh presented his findings, per direction given to him by the Chair and Special Counsel, to which, he said there was no reasonable evidence going back 25 years, from records that are readily available to the public, that would support Supervisor Tompkins as eligible for this office. Otherwise, he had interviewed a number of reputable people in the Ag industry who refused to substantiate Supervisor Tompkins eligibility. Chair Parke stated the HSWCD board has the duty to respond to this particular Public Comment given the nature of the complaint, and that the other three sitting supervisors had in fact all substantiated their qualifications during the appointment process. Special Council Gonzalez asked Supervisor Tompkins to state which qualification standard she could meet and whether it would be as a landowner of agricultural lands or as having documentation of financial dependence on agricultural production.

Supervisor Tompkins stated that under the law her signed affidavit with the Supervisor of Elections office was sufficient, to which Special Council Gonzalez stated that there was such a thing as a false statement. Mr. Gonzalez stressed that the situation created an “existential crisis” for the Conservation District under the current political climate and if she could not provide constructive evidence of her qualification when challenged, then a false statement would be sufficient to have her removed from office by the State. He followed with the direct question of when Supervisor Tompkins would be able to give constructive evidence that would prove her qualification. Supervisor Tompkins said she had run many businesses over many years and could not remember exactly what business name or time frame her qualification was based on. Supervisor Tompkins reached agreement with the Board members present to provide constructive evidence of her qualification in document form to the board at/by the May 19, 2025, HSWCD Regular Board meeting.

Item 14. Adjournment: Chair Parke adjourned the meeting 12:02 PM

Next Board Meeting:

April 14, 2025 @ 10 AM

HSWCD Office 4503 Coronet Rd/Plant City/FL 33566