

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

February 10, 2025 @ 10:00 AM

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

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

Absent: Supervisor Tompkins (Seat 2), Absent/Vacant (Seat 4). *Note: Supervisor Tompkins attempted several times to join the meeting via MS Teams and by phone.*

Items 1-4

1.-4. Call to Order / Pledge of Allegiance/Introductions: Chair Parke called the meeting to order at 10:00 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: Ken Griner, SWFWMD; Vanessa Bauzo-Deleon, Env. Consultant, FDACS-OAWP; Diane Jones, DJ Public Relations, Allie McCue, SW Regional Director FL Fish and Wildlife, Harvey Roderick, HCT-CPA, Authorized Representative.

Public in Attendance: via MS TEAMS: Sophia Tighe, Renetta Dillard, Brenda Earley, Debbie Hunt, Jon (*last name missed.*) In Person: Ryan Gill

Item 5. Public Comment: Debbie Hunt (Hillsborough Count Citizens Defending Freedom) made a public comment regarding qualifications to serve on the Board. Her research indicated that although several of the current Supervisors met the requirements under chapter 582, Ms. Hunt could not find any evidence online that suggested that Supervisor Tompkins is qualified to serve this office. Ms. Hunt requested that the Board verify [for the public] Supervisor Tompkins' qualifications to serve as a Supervisor of the Conservation District.

Item 6. Public Correspondence: As directed by the Board at its January 10th Board meeting, Executive Director Dr. Joe Walsh crafted a letter to Wilton Simpson, FL Commissioner of Agriculture, requesting the reconstitution of the Soil and Water Conservation Council. The letter was presented to the Chair at this time; Chair Parke approved and signed the letter and directed Ex. Director to send it to FDACS at earliest opportunity.

Item7. Review and Approval of Agenda: Agenda for February 10, 2025, was approved.

Item 8. Partner Agencies (introductions and reports):

- a. Allie McCue, SW Regional Director FL Fish and Wildlife, was introduced. Ms. McCue invited the Conservation District to work with her office in identifying opportunities for collaboration on several FWC priorities.
- b. FDACS – Vanessa Bauzo-Deleon reporting; no newsworthy items at this time.

- c. SWFWMD Intergovernmental Affairs – Amber Smith reporting; no report at this time.
- d. SWFWMD FARMS Program Group – Ken Griner reported that SWFWMD is working on various projects including sod and nursery growers. He encouraged the Board to promote small farm participation in the Mini Farms program whereby SWFWMD can help fund weather stations, irrigation automation, moisture probes, etc. Dr Walsh asked if HSWCD could be granted access to GIS-based data sets. Ken offered to connect Dr Walsh with Jessica Hendrix, the SWFWMD’s GIS Team Lead for follow up.
- e. Hillsborough Agri-Business Development – Simon Bollin; no report at this time (*Simon being on paternity leave at this time*).
- f. USDA/NRCS – no representatives available – Dr. Walsh noted that the senior technical position in Plant City currently is vacant and that he is reaching out to Walter Albarran (Dep. State Conservationist) for an update on the anticipated impacts of administrative changes coming out of Washington, DC .

Item 9. FY2024 Audit – HCT Harvey Roderick: Mr. Harvey reviewed the results of the FY2024 Audit, via PowerPoint presentation. Dr. Walsh expounded on Mr. Harvey’s comments with regard to the Conservation District’s bookkeeping practices, which HCT as well as the previous accounting firm determined to be weak. Presently, Dr. Walsh collaborates with County Management & Budget, and Enterprise Solutions and Quality Assurance to track and reconcile transactions that are conducted through the County’s contribution to the District’s budget. This collaboration does not extend to the Board’s bank accounts or external contracts, which is where the Board got into trouble with FDACS during the period FY 2021-2022 and 2022-2023. As an aside, Dr. Walsh noted that the County provides subaccounts in their contribution to the District budget for travel and training; however, those funds are restricted to supporting the District’s staff, and the Board officers are not eligible for reimbursements for travel or training through that funding source. Hence, if the board Supervisors decide to travel or pursue relevant training opportunities, they will need to resolve how to reimburse those costs through the HSWCD external bank account or accept those costs on their own. Supervisor Sullivan moved to accept the HCT-FY2024 Audit. Supervisor Hoke seconded. Motion passed 3-0. Supervisor Hoke moved to file and make payment to HCT for services rendered. Supervisor Sullivan seconded. Motion carried 3-0.

Item 10. Minutes of January 10, 2025, HSWCD Regular Board Meeting: The minutes from January 10, 2025 meeting were reviewed. Supervisor Hoke moved to accept the minutes from Jan 10, 2025 meeting as presented. Supervisor Sullivan seconded. Motion carried 3-0.

Item 11. Supervisor Report – Chair Parke: Chair Parke reported her experience with the Fresh From FL breakfast and the State Fair’s Governor’s Luncheon. She reported a positive interaction with Plant City Commissioner Jason Jones and other individuals who attended the events. The Supervisors discussed pursuing the relationship with Plant City Commission, in the context of land use developments extending into agricultural areas. Chair Parke offered to take lead in following up with Commissioner Jones.

Item 12. Supervisor Report – Vice Chair/Treasurer Hoke: Reiterated Chair Parke’s comments about the FFF Breakfast and Governor’s luncheon, stating that she found the networking to be a very positive experience.

a. January 2025 Bank Account: Treasurer Hoke reported the daily balance of \$18,845.06.

Treasurer Hoke moved to accept and file for audit the January bank statement. Supervisor Sullivan seconded. Motion carried: 3-0.

b. Earth Day Event Proposal: Supervisor Hoke presented several activities that the Board could sponsor for Earth Day and other future events. With the various HR and budget items Dr. Walsh is handling at this time, he asked for a raincheck on planning events for this spring; the Board members acknowledged his workload; Supervisor Hoke offered to continue to build on this item and report back to the board, with a target date of 2026 Earth Day.

c. Sponsorship of Turkey Creek Middle School Ag Program: Supervisor Hoke and ED Walsh met with Principal Savino and Ag Teacher Mrs Hawkins of Turkey Creek Middle School, to discuss sponsorship of their Ag education program; Jennifer Houston (Asst Principal for curriculum) and Asst HCPS administrator for vocational education (name and business card missing) also were there. ED Walsh explained he and Supervisor Hoke came away from that meeting with the idea of the Board focusing their future efforts in outreach and education on Turkey Creek Middle School's AG Education program as a "flagship project", and Supervisor Hoke told the Board that she had invited Mrs. Hawkins to submit a "Wish List" of critical support items for the Ag program. Dr. Walsh added that he saw adoption of the TCMS' Ag program as an opportunity to focus the Board's outreach and education efforts where they could see clear impacts on kids and establish a clear relationship to the Agricultural community. Chair Parke liked the idea and provided a deeper dive into the school's rich agriculture history; with TCMS being a Title 1 school, the Board members [present] felt that there would be enthusiastic support from the surrounding community for improving the school's Ag Program. Supervisor Hoke moved to have an adopting resolution to partner with Turkey Creek Middle School (Title 1 school) for the Ag Education program, instructing Dr Joe Walsh to craft a written resolution for this motion. Chair Parke seconded. Motion carried. 3-0.

Item 13. Supervisor Report – Sullivan: Supervisor Sullivan asked Dr. Walsh for a brief on applicants to the Board's Seat 4 vacancy; Dr. Walsh reported that although he had understanding that there is a very strong interest from a cattleman, Dr. Walsh had yet to see an applicant packet. Supervisor Sullivan encouraged the other Board members to continue to reach out to the public in their search for interested and qualified candidates for Seat 4.

Item 14. Supervisor Report – Tompkins: *absent/no report; Dr. Walsh reported that Supervisor Tompkins was in the hospital.*

Item 15. Director's Report:

a. Update on Public Relations Plan: Dr. Walsh reintroduced Diane Jones (DJones Public Relations) and turned the discussion over to her. Diane provided an update on her Public Outreach & Communications activity and offered her opinion on actions the Board needs to focus on for now. She reviewed the District's current mission statement and touched on the existing strawman for its strategic plan. She was of the opinion that the Board had yet to clearly define who their stakeholders were and what the District's Core Values ought to be. She the Board to shift to creating a stakeholder survey to answer these questions. At ED Walsh's request, the Board decided to table further discussion on Public Relations development, and schedule a Workshop where the Board can address this item.

b. HR Activities:

1. Graphics Designer/Admin Specialist reclassification – Dr. Walsh recently completed a reclassification of this position to a semester-based college internship titled “Public Policy and Communications in Agriculture” with no impact to the District’s budget. This reclassification offers several advantages – 1) it enables the District to recruit and train entry level talent with knowledge of agriculture; 2) skills can include social media, graphics design, internet research; 3) the District is able to contribute to agricultural leadership development within the local ag community; 4) it does not encumber the District with having to negotiate salary increases year after year with an incumbent; 5) the position will fit into an internal staff development path that ED Walsh sees as critical to ensuring that succession planning is available to the District.

2. Community Liaison Position Retitle – Dr. Walsh reported that after making a best offer to the preferred candidate for this position in January, he had concluded that overall, there was poor turnout for the recruitment. Further, after considering additional input, Dr. Walsh said he wanted to retitle this position, more clearly as an agricultural-technical position, and more clearly sees it as the intermediate level position in his succession planning model. Lastly, he sees an advantage in not having filled it in January, because the District now can readvertise it at the higher base salary, recently approved by County Administration.

3. Community Events Worker Position Reclass – Dr. Walsh is pursuing reclassification of the last remaining unskilled labor position to a senior non-supervisory, full-time technical position. Last year, this position was offered to NRCS as a cost-share opportunity, which fell through because NRCS leadership considers the cost-share jobs to be entry level, year- to-year funded opportunities. Their policy came into conflict with the Board’s intention to offer a market competitive salary that was more suited for a mid-career professional position. This year, Dr. Walsh is aiming to reclass the position as the seniormost technical position within the District’s team, that a) allows the District to ensure level of service to the local ag community despite cutbacks or realignments at either the State or Federal partner agencies; and b) gives the Board some assurance of a leadership backup to the Executive Director. Dr. Walsh is focusing on agronomy and soil science as the core knowledge area; skillsets in geographic information systems and/or automated systems; and familiarity in/among the peninsular Florida ag community. The County’s recent pay schedule update also enables Dr. Walsh to pursue market-competitive salary ranges that would encourage a long-term commitment to the District.

4. Desktop Assessment/2025 Update of Executive Director position – HCBOCC HR’s reassessment of the executive director job description is underway.

Item 15. Upcoming Business Schedule: Upcoming events were reviewed.

Item 16. Supervisor Group & Individual Photos of Supervisors: Dr. Walsh requested Supervisors Parke and Supervisor Tompkins send a digital photo and short summary bio to soilandwater@hcfll.gov so the information can be posted on the HSWCD website and FB. A group photo was tabled again until the next board meeting.

*****Chair Parke and Special Counsel – redirected to the Public Comment:** Special Council Gonzalez recommended to the Chair that Executive Director Dr. Walsh do an independent due diligence review of Supervisor Tompkins’ qualifications to serve on the HSWCD Board as stated in FL Statue 582, and to

verify with Debbie Hunt what her record review consisted of. Dr. Walsh was directed to report his findings back to the Board at their next meeting.

Supervisor Sullivan left the meeting at 11:34 AM

Item 17. Adjournment: Chair Parke adjourned the meeting 11:34 AM

Next Board Meeting:

March 10, 2025 @ 10 AM

HSWCD Office 4503 Coronet Rd/Plant City/FL 33566