

# Hillsborough Soil and Water Conservation District **Strategic Plan**

**2025-2029**



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# **Introduction**

## **Foreward**

Hillsborough Soil and Water Conservation District (“the Conservation District”) is one of more than 40 conservation districts in Florida, organized under Title XXXV, Agriculture, Horticulture, and Animal Husbandry, Chapter 582 (F.S.), known as the “Soil and Water Conservation Act.” The conservation districts operate as governmental subdivisions of the State of Florida, as locally organized special districts, with a strong historic connection to local agriculture and rural working lands.

The Conservation District’s governing body consists of a Board of five locally elected Supervisors. Each Supervisor must qualify for office as being directly involved in controlling the means of agricultural production, whether that be in agricultural production itself or agricultural land management/ownership. The office of District Supervisor is non-salaried and nonpartisan, and qualified candidates are elected in a general election to a four-year term. Mid-term vacancies are filled via appointment of qualified individuals by the remaining supervisors until the next regular election. District Supervisors receive no compensation for their services, although they may be reimbursed for travel expenses incurred in support of the Conservation District’s mission. A District Supervisor may be removed from office by the Governor for neglect of duty or malfeasance in office, but for no other reason.

Beginning in January 2023, the Conservation District experienced significant changes to its Board composition, funding sources, and legal obligations. Recent efforts to redirect the Conservation District’s commitments have paralleled the State Legislature’s efforts to demand and enforce more accountability on all special districts of the State. In August 2024, the Board received a performance audit from the State’s Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability (“OPPAGA Report”), which reflected its own findings in 2023. The OPPAGA Report emphasized a connection between the Conservation District’s deficiencies and its failure to maintain a Long-Range Plan with specific performance criteria. Further, the State Legislature clarified its expectation under Chapter 189, F.S., that all special districts establish goals, objectives, performance measures and standards to govern their activities, beginning October 1, 2024. All Florida special districts must also publish their performance achievements and deficiencies toward those expectations by December 1, 2025.

This FY 2025-2029 Strategic Plan is the first significant effort at developing a Strategic Plan for this Conservation District’s operations in decades. The Board of Supervisors recognizes that as of the beginning of this planning period, the Conservation District had very limited capacity to deliver the technical services it envisions as the core value of the District’s legislative purpose. Therefore, the Board intends that this Strategic Plan will direct development of its services in phases. To meet the expectations of the public, the Board will solicit input from its local stakeholders and institutional partners through mass emails, public workshops and surveys and will, beginning October 1, 2024, maintain the development of the plan on its website.

## Purpose

The Hillsborough Soil and Water Conservation District was organized on August 5, 1946, following a local referendum and administrative approval by the State Soil Conservation Board (citation, Agr. Ext. Svs., Administrative Record, 06/21/46-75-TKM, page 198, record #33). The efforts of the Conservation District were directed toward the preparation of work plans and the establishment and maintenance of soil and water conservation practices within the Conservation District.

Today, the legal purpose of the conservation districts is set forth under the Florida Soil and Water Conservation Act. In its original form and intent, it was enacted to reciprocate the U.S. Farm Bill of 1935. Section 582.02 (4), F.S., states, *"The purpose of the conservation districts is to provide assistance, guidance, and education to landowners, land occupiers, the agricultural industry, and the general public in implementing land and water resource protection practices. The Legislature intends for conservation districts to work in conjunction with federal, state, and local agencies in all matters that implement the provisions of this chapter."* The federal commitment is codified under Title 7, Volume 6, Section 610 of the Code of Federal Regulations, to deliver technical and financial resources through the local conservation districts. Active partnership between each conservation district and locally assigned staff of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is provided for through Cooperative Agreements between the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the governor of the State of Florida, and each local conservation district.

## Vision and Mission Statements

**Vision:** The Hillsborough Soil and Water Conservation District envisions a sustainable agricultural economic sector participating in the Hillsborough County economy throughout the 21<sup>st</sup> century and a robust system of rural working lands that receives positive recognition for the natural resources it supports in the Tampa Bay region.

**Mission:** The Hillsborough Soil and Water Conservation District develops and delivers programs in support of sustainable management of agriculture and natural resource values associated with rural working lands and educates the public on the importance of maintaining these values in Hillsborough and adjoining counties.

## Core Values

As a locally operated special district, having a long-established working relationship with Hillsborough County, the Conservation District's Core Values for public service align with those of the County Administration.

**Customer Commitment:** Conservation District officers and staff proactively seek to understand the needs of customers and provide the highest standards of service.

**Dedication to Professionalism and Integrity:** Conservation District officers and staff demonstrate and promote fair, honest, professional, and ethical behaviors that establish trust throughout the organization and with the public we serve.

**Organizational Excellence:** Conservation District officers and staff take ownership for excellence through personal effectiveness and dedication to the continuous improvement of our operations.

**Success through Teamwork:** Conservation District officers and staff collaborate and build partnerships through trust and the open exchange of diverse ideas and perspectives to achieve organizational goals.

## Guiding Principles

In addition to the Conservation District's purpose, vision statement, mission statement, and core values, the following guiding principles are used to direct the development of this Strategic Plan, associated work plans, partnerships, and the selection of projects:

1. Officers and staff will maintain the Conservation District's Strategic Plan and use it to drive the effective use of resources (including tangible assets, staffing, technology and financial) toward implementing the legislative purpose of Florida Statutes Chapter 582 and in support of continued improvement in the management of natural resource values associated with rural working lands and green infrastructure in Hillsborough County.
2. Officers and staff will solicit and weigh the input of stakeholders and partners in good faith, toward developing strategies, priorities, goals, work plans and commitments.
3. Officers and staff will identify and prioritize specific rural land management and water quality needs in the watersheds that drain through Hillsborough County to Tampa Bay.
4. Officers and staff will work synergistically with and leverage the resources of other government agencies, major stakeholder groups, and public, private and nonprofit land management entities in meeting priorities and achieving goals.
5. Officers and staff will adopt and use SMART goals (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-Bound) to prioritize opportunities and to assess and improve work plans and projects.

# Strategic Plan

## Framework

The following priorities reflect the imperatives of the Board from Fiscal Year 2025 (beginning October 1, 2024) through FY 2029 (ending September 30, 2029). This report, dated November 17, 2025, is intended to look back at what the District has accomplished in FY 2025 and establish priorities that will direct the work of the Board moving forward. The plan will be reviewed and updated annually.

## Strategic Plan Priorities

Each of the following priorities are supported by specific performance metrics. These performance metrics are clearly defined short- and long-term goals, tied to measurable outcomes. These will be tracked using the framework provided in the Performance Dashboard section of this report, beginning page 16.

Each performance metric notes an anticipated completion date. Typically, this is measured on one of three timelines. Either it is expected to be (1) completed in a specific fiscal year, (2) completed each fiscal year on an ongoing basis, or (3) completed in a future fiscal year, which will be determined upon the annual review of this document.

The Hillsborough Soil and Water Conservation District has the opportunity to strengthen its leadership role as a resource hub for agricultural operators, rural working lands, and green infrastructure in Hillsborough and adjoining counties.

By focusing on **partnerships, advocacy, sustainable land management, and collaboration**, the Conservation District can **support local farmers in the pursuit of sustainable agriculture**, and **increase its visibility and value** to the community for years to come.

### 1. Strategic Plan

The District will emphasize development of technical knowledge and services through its Strategic Plan, via priorities and performance expectations developed in collaboration with the agriculture community and subject matter experts within the government sector. This also addresses a recommendation highlighted in the August 19, 2024, OPPAGA report.

Performance Metrics (PM):

PM 1: Strategic Plan publication (FY 2026)

The District will develop its first Strategic Plan in more than a decade as a five-year

staged plan, through professional assistance with its stakeholder communications and vetting process. This addressed the Florida Legislature's renewed mandate that all conservation districts demonstrate that they are following a Strategic Plan with performance standards by Dec. 1, 2025.

PM 2: Feedback plan (FY 2026)

Identify best practices for collecting ongoing comments and feedback to inform updates to the Strategic Plan in future years.

PM 3: Collect comments (FY 2026 and ongoing)

Receive public comment and stakeholder feedback to inform updates to the Strategic Plan in future years.

PM 4: Review Strategic Plan (FY 2027 and ongoing)

On an annual basis, review this Strategic Plan and incorporate comments from stakeholders and the public from the previous year. Incorporate changes to priorities and update performance metrics. Provide the revised plan by December 1 of each year.

PM 5: Background information (Future years)

Fully develop appropriate technical information to inform the Strategic Plan in future years.

## **2. Establish Governance and Financial Management Schedule**

In FY 2025, The Board recognized that it was operating without bylaws, was not exercising appropriate levels of oversight to its budget and was not making its annual budgetary decisions known to the public in a transparent and timely fashion. Concurrent with scheduling other performance values into the Strategic Plan, the Board will establish and publish an annual schedule for fiscal year budget adoption, budget performance review, and budget proposals for the forthcoming fiscal period, consistent with the budget rules of its major funding partner, Hillsborough County Board of County Commissioners.

Performance Metrics (PM):

PM 1: Bylaws (FY 2026)

The Conservation District Board will formally adopt bylaws. Success metric - adoption of by-laws within FY 2026.

PM 2: Establish policies and procedures to implement by-laws and statutory requirements. (FY 2026)

Success will consist of renewing the Board's policies and procedures documents, ensuring that compliance with requirements is maintained for annual and periodic statutory reporting and public records access.

PM 3: Annual budget schedule adopted and posted (FY 2026 and ongoing)

Maintain an annual budget management schedule to include formal adoption of the

budget annually, and to adopt and submit a proposed budget amendment, consistent with the budget amendment schedule of the District's major funding partner, Hillsborough County Board of County Commissioners.

### **3. Stakeholder Outreach**

To ensure that the Board's decisions are informed by the needs of its major agricultural stakeholder groups, the District will commit to targeted outreach events with each of them.

The District will continue to measure its stakeholder interactions annually, tracking its interactions against an established standard and using the collected data to monitor its performance, evaluate progress toward stated goals and objectives, and support future improvements to the District's service delivery methods. To this end, the District will participate in a minimum of one targeted outreach event annually for each of its defined major constituent groups.

#### Performance Metrics (PM):

PM 1: Florida Strawberry Growers Association (FY 2026 and ongoing)

Participate in at least one targeted outreach event for members of Florida Strawberry Growers Association.

PM 2: Hillsborough Cattlemen's Association (FY 2026 and ongoing)

Participate in at least one targeted outreach event for members of Hillsborough Cattlemen's Association.

PM 3: Florida Nursery Growers and Landscapers Association (FY 2026 and ongoing)

Participate in at least one targeted outreach event for members of Florida Nursery Growers and Landscapers Association.

PM 4: Hillsborough County Farm Bureau (FY 2026 and ongoing)

Participate in at least one targeted outreach event for members of Hillsborough County Farm Bureau.

PM 5: Florida Fruit & Vegetable Association (FY 2026 and ongoing)

Participate in at least one targeted outreach event for members of Florida Fruit & Vegetable Association.

PM 6: Plant City Chamber of Commerce (FY 2026 and ongoing)

Participate in at least one targeted outreach event for members of Plant City Chamber of Commerce.

PM 7: NRCS working group (FY 2026 and ongoing)

Host annual USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service local working group.

#### **4. Support Industry Resilience through Policy and Advocacy**

Identified by stakeholders as a key area for growth, the Conservation District will develop a proactive campaign of advocacy for the sustainability of natural resources supported by the agricultural economic sector, rural working lands and green infrastructure. The Conservation District's Board will develop, publish and deliver policies and position statements, based on sound technical information and aligned to its legislative purpose toward the long term sustainability of the natural resource values associated with rural working lands and green infrastructure and in support of the agricultural base of Hillsborough County's economy.

##### Performance Metrics (PM):

###### PM 1: Scope (FY 2026)

Confirm the Conservation District's legal constraints with regard to engaging in political advocacy and policy, in consultation with the Board's Special Counsel, the Florida Department of Commerce and the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services.

###### PM 2: Technical information (FY 2026)

Identify scope of technical information that will be used to inform this priority.

###### PM 3: Develop policy agendas (FY 2026 and ongoing)

Develop at least one policy agenda each year to address those topics of concern to the District's partners, greenspace operators and rural landowners, which fall within the subject matter expertise and mission area of the Conservation District. Examples that the Board may be able to engage with include: land use planning initiatives and zoning actions with the potential to either promote, conserve or conflict with agricultural land uses; farmland conservation overlay areas; development orders for housing projects that allow or require landscape management actions that are incompatible with existing State, Regional and Local laws, regulations or resource use restrictions; maintenance of green infrastructure and surface water control features including for stormwater; adoption of Basin Management Action Plan rules; Water Use Caution Areas; Total Maximum Daily Loads; Minimum Flows and Levels; fertilizer use regulations; and/or funding for conservation easements and Rural & Family Lands Protection Program projects.

###### PM 4: Advocacy based on adopted Board Policies (FY 2026 and ongoing)

The Conservation District will demonstrate a record of active advocacy related to its policy agenda on a year-over-year basis. Success in this regard would be based on the Board's ability to record at least one official Board position in any given year and delivery of a unified position statement on an issue of concern to the long-term function and sustainability of green infrastructure, rural working lands and the natural resources associated with them.

PM 5: Board delivery (FY 2026 and ongoing)

Board members will actively deliver messaging from these policy and position papers to decision makers at partner agencies and stakeholder groups.

## **5. Collaborative Partnerships**

The District will strive to leverage all available resources through collaborative partnerships with major stakeholders, as well as traditionally under-represented natural resources entities. It will serve the mutual interests of Hillsborough County, the State of Florida and the United States, for the long-term sustainability of Hillsborough County's agriculture and related natural resources.

The Conservation District's Board will develop the District's expertise and capacity to deliver technical services and products to agricultural and rural land operators and otherwise will work in a proactive manner with partners and stakeholders to leverage its resources with those of its partners.

It will invigorate and continue to grow its level of engagement with core stakeholders as well as with the broader public throughout the planning period of this Strategic Plan, taking advantage of and promoting appropriate uses of cutting edge technologies.

Performance Metrics (PM):

PM 1: Resource hub (FY 2026 and ongoing)

Expand its role as a resource hub, including in a collaborative fashion with its major partners to identify technical information, provide technical services and otherwise identify potential service providers for farmers and greenspace managers.

PM 2: Mutual interests (FY 2026 and ongoing)

Host or serve as the lead sponsor for at least one opportunity per year for stakeholders to advise, share expertise, and support demonstration projects. Examples include improving on the implementation of annual resources of concern surveys and local working group meetings on behalf of the USDA-NRCS; moderating panel discussions at an agricultural trade expo; or hosting lunch-and-learn workshops in partnership with FDACS, SWFWMD or FDEP, on mission-relevant topics, such as on changes to Best Management Practices, and environmental liabilities under Federal or State regulatory rule changes, etc.

PM 3: Pilot demonstration projects (FY 2026 and ongoing)

Explore at least one opportunity to sponsor demonstration of new technologies in agriculture, such as drone applications, new forage plants for improved pasture installations, under-utilized irrigation automation devices, etc.

PM 4: Advisory body (Future years)

Establish an advisory body supporting the Conservation District's Board of Supervisors to include crop growers, nurseries, ranchers, landscapers, trade associations and at least one local government representative (as provided for under Chapter 582, F.S.).

PM 5: Land conservation partnerships (Future years)

The Board will explore its capacity to facilitate or co-hold voluntary agricultural and conservation easements in partnership with private landowners and other funding partners.

## **6. Agricultural Leadership Development and Retention**

The Board of Supervisors recognizes that the Conservation District has a narrowly defined mission and purpose under Chapter 582, with its geographic focus specific to Hillsborough County. The Board also recognizes that its major partners have competing priorities at regional, statewide, and national scales and urban versus rural landscapes. The competing priorities periodically cause realignments of their resources over larger spatial extents, to other geographic areas and/or resource reductions relative to the local agricultural economy. Recent events have further illustrated that the Board has inconsistently employed technical staff to produce specific technical deliverables, and that it has never invested in a leadership development model to ensure long term sustainability of the organization itself.

Therefore, the District will seek to stabilize its position in the economy with the following goals in mind. 1. Establish a favorable reputation among its public and private stakeholders as a technical service provider in the realm of natural resources conservation associated with rural working lands and green infrastructure. 2. Ensure that the Board has a continuing supply of technical staff at different stages of professional development toward addressing its leadership succession needs. 3. Serve as both a destination and source of trained career professionals participating in the local agricultural and natural resources job market. To address these goals, the Conservation District will establish and maintain the following technical staff positions:

Performance Metrics (PM):

PM 1: Senior Land Conservation Specialist (FY 2026 and ongoing)

Convert one staff resource position from a post-bachelor community information liaison position to a mid-career, Senior Land Conservation Specialist with a training background in agronomy or closely related technical field. This position will be directly involved in identifying, developing, and delivering technical services, products, and partnerships in support of land conservation, planning, and management activities on rural working lands. The District also will pursue training for this position toward certification as a "Conservation Planner" in FY 2026.

PM 2: Conservation Technician (FY 2026 and ongoing)

Convert one part-time unskilled labor position to a full-time early career Conservation Technician with training background in agronomy, agricultural communications, or closely related technical field. This position would be directly involved in delivering technical services and products and working through partnerships to support land conservation, planning, and management activities on rural working lands. The District also will pursue training for this position toward certification as a "Conservation Planner" in FY 2026.

PM 3: Intern (FY 2025 and ongoing)

Deliver at least one agriculturally-focused college internship each year to a student in an agriculture or natural resources management academic track with ties to Central Florida. Where feasible, the District will offer at least one training opportunity on the "Conservation Planner" curriculum.

## **7. Increase Technical Services (Quality and Quantity)**

The District will continue to grow its capacity to deliver technical services through the efficient use of resources, recognition of the strengths of its partners, and effective collaboration that leverages the strengths of each toward a strong sustainable, local agricultural sector.

Performance Metrics (PM):

PM 1: Site visits (FY 2025 and ongoing)

Conservation District staff will conduct site visits to agricultural properties, conservation lands, and other rural or green infrastructure lands every year during the planning period. The purposes of these visits will include: development of staff technical expertise; increased familiarity with the needs of the District's customers; consultations related to management of land or water resources onsite; delivering for-fee technical services; and/or for monitoring of project performance. Successful growth of this activity will consist of at least one visit per technical staff member on a year-over-year basis; growth in this context means site visits may be either to new customers, to returning customers for ongoing projects, and for new or higher levels of service.

PM 2: Referrals (FY 2025 and ongoing)

District staff will make at least one customer referral to a partner-agency for further technical assistance, potential project design or cost-share funding in the first year. Successful growth of this activity will be measured for the technical team as a whole, as plus one or more referrals, on a year-over-year basis.

PM 3: Paper Deliverables (FY 2026 and ongoing)

The District will achieve the proficiency necessary to deliver technical written products in FY 2026 and will deliver not less than one technical product to a customer resulting from a site visit, technical consultation or project planning effort. Successful growth of this activity initially will be measured as plus one for the whole team in Fiscal Year

2027, with consideration for more rigor in following years.

PM 4: For-fee equipment services (FY 2026)

Acquire at least one piece of equipment and delivery of for-fee service to one customer.

PM 5: Increase use of for-fee equipment services (FY 2027 and ongoing)

Increase use of services tied to district-owned equipment. Rentals will be net positive and increase cash flow associated with any one machine. Expansion may include service to underserved nearby counties and capacity to invest in additional pieces of equipment on the same for-fee model.

PM 6: Selection of a Field Data Exchange System (FY 2026 and ongoing)

The District will explore information technology tools collaboratively with partners and customers in support of its customers' land and water management decision making, including the selection and implementation of a data exchange system ahead of the FY 2027 fiscal period.

PM 7: Implement Data Collection and Exchange System (FY 2027 and ongoing)

District customers will engage with services the system would be capable of providing. District staff will become proficient in data collection and management, will teach customers how to engage with the system as a decision support tool, and collect feedback from customers on the system's utility in their own decision making.

PM 8: Assessment and Adaptive Management (FY 2028 and ongoing)

The Conservation District's Board and Staff will assess the performance of the District's service offerings for the period 2025 to 2029. Continue, enhance, adjust or eliminate service offerings on a case-by-case basis, identify new opportunities and technologies of value to its constituents, and proactively plan for expanding its capacity to do work in the forthcoming planning period.

## **8. Communication/Community Education & Engagement**

The Conservation District's Board will reinforce the simple, straightforward message to stakeholders that, "We exist to help you." Increased communication will help to remove barriers of stakeholder perception about the District.

Performance Metrics (PM):

PM 1: Identity (FY 2026 and ongoing)

Reinforce identity as a problem-solver and advocate for farmers. Include messaging supporting this in digital content, newsletters, and targeted communication.

PM 2: Communication strategy (FY 2026 and ongoing)

Develop a dual communication strategy: Digital (social media, online resource hub) and traditional (media outreach, public campaigns, education events).

PM 3: Web content (FY 2025 and ongoing)

Publish relevant content on the District website, ensuring transparent and up-to-date information for stakeholders and the general public. Increase engagement annually.

PM 4: Newsletter (FY 2025 and ongoing)

Establish interval for publishing District newsletter (previously two to four times per year). Publish newsletter and send out via email on a regular basis.

PM 5: Social media (FY 2025 and ongoing)

Publish content to District social media, including Facebook. Increase engagement annually.

PM 6: Traditional media (FY 2025 and ongoing)

The District will continue to contribute to reliable paper media outlets, such as *In The Field Magazine* and *Tampa Bay Times*. Provide articles or media releases and respond to interview requests to serve as a subject matter expert for print publications. Track articles appearing in print that reference the Conservation District, which should include at least one article annually.

PM 7: Messaging focus (FY 2026 and ongoing)

Focus messaging on agriculture's economic contributions, the necessity of irrigation and soil management, and the value of agriculture within the context of urban green infrastructure. Emphasize sustainability, land stewardship, and the critical role of conservation districts.

PM 8: Education campaigns (FY 2026 and ongoing)

Develop public education campaigns to dispel misconceptions about farming, irrigation, and land use.

PM 9: Storytelling (FY 2026 and ongoing)

Collaborate with the media to highlight stories that illustrate farmer contributions and challenges. Consider partnering with local outlets (e.g., *Good Day Tampa Bay*) and trade associations for outreach.

PM 10: New opportunities (FY 2026 and ongoing)

Identify new communication vehicles for messaging, such as podcasts, and determine whether the Conservation District staff or board members want to pursue emerging opportunities for such avenues for reaching new audiences.

PM 11: Surveys (FY 2026 and ongoing)

Create surveys that include an educational element, delivering at least one per year to stakeholder groups and interested parties.

## **9. Assessment**

The Conservation District Board of Supervisors will review its Strategic Plan at least annually and assess its progress toward meeting performance metrics, using the Performance Dashboard on the following pages as an outline.

## **Performance Dashboard/Implementation Timeline**

Below is an overview of all performance metrics from priorities listed on earlier pages. This performance dashboard provides a framework for tracking outcomes and reporting progress toward goals.

“Result” column will be measured in “Exceeded expectations,” “Met expectations,” or “Did not meet expectations” on an annual basis.

<b>Priority</b>	<b>Performance Metric</b>	<b>Timeline</b>	<b>Result</b>
<b>1. Strategic Plan</b>			
	1. Publication	FY 2026	
	2. Feedback plan	FY 2026	
	3. Collect comments	FY 2026 and ongoing	
	4. Review	FY 2027 and ongoing	
	5. Background	Future years	
<b>2. Governance and Financial Management</b>			
	1. Bylaws	FY 2026	
	2. Policies and procedures	FY 2026	
	3. Budget schedule	FY 2026 and ongoing	
<b>3. Stakeholder Outreach</b>			
	1. Florida Strawberry Growers Association	FY 2026 and ongoing	
	2. Hillsborough Cattlemen’s Association	FY 2026 and ongoing	
	3. Florida Nursery Growers and Landscapers Association	FY 2026 and ongoing	
	4. Hillsborough County Farm Bureau	FY 2026 and ongoing	
	5. Florida Fruit & Vegetable Association	FY 2026 and ongoing	
	6. Plant City Chamber of Commerce	FY 2026 and ongoing	

Priority	Performance Metric	Timeline	Result
	7. NRCS working group	FY 2026 and ongoing	
4. Industry Resilience			
	1. Scope	FY 2026	
	2. Technical information	FY 2026	
	3. Policy agendas	FY 2026 and ongoing	
	4. Advocacy	FY 2026 and ongoing	
	5. Board delivery	FY 2026 and ongoing	
5. Collaborative Partnerships			
	1. Resource hub	FY 2026 and ongoing	
	2. Mutual interests	FY 2026 and ongoing	
	3. Pilot projects	FY 2026 and ongoing	
	4. Advisory body	Future years	
	5. Land conservation partnerships	Future years	
6. Agricultural leadership			
	1. Senior Land Conservation Specialist	FY 2026 and ongoing	
	2. Conservation Technician	FY 2026 and ongoing	
	3. Intern	FY 2025 and ongoing	
7. Increase Technical Services			
	1. Site visits	FY 2025 and ongoing	
	2. Referrals	FY 2026 and ongoing	
	3. Paper deliverables	FY 2026 and ongoing	
	4. For-fee equipment services	FY 2026 and ongoing	
	5. Increase use of for-fee equipment services	FY 2027 and ongoing	

Priority	Performance Metric	Timeline	Result
	6. Selection of field data exchange system	FY 2026 and ongoing	
	7. Implement Data Collection and Exchange System	FY 2027 and ongoing	
	8. Assessment and adaptive management	FY 2028 and ongoing	
<b>8. Communication/ Community Education &amp; Engagement</b>			
	1. Identify	FY 2026 and ongoing	
	2. Communication strategy	FY 2026 and ongoing	
	3. Web content	FY 2025 and ongoing	
	4. Newsletter	FY 2025 and ongoing	
	5. Social media	FY 2025 and ongoing	
	6. Traditional media	FY 2025 and ongoing	
	7. Messaging focus	FY 2026 and ongoing	
	8. Education campaigns	FY 2026 and ongoing	
	9. Storytelling	FY 2026 and ongoing	
	10. New opportunities	FY 2026 and ongoing	
	11. Surveys	FY 2026 and ongoing	

## **FY 2025 Accomplishments**

The following priorities reflect accomplishments toward strategic priorities by the Conservation District Board in FY 2025, which encompasses October 2024 through September 2025.

### **1. Realignment of Board Supervisors and Strategic Vision**

The impact of changes on the Conservation District's activities from major revisions to Chapter 582 F.S., which went into effect in 2022, continued to stretch into FY 2025. The Board experienced a complete changeover of Supervisors between January 2022 and January 2025, after receiving clarity on the qualifications to serve the elected office of Board Supervisor (ref. 2022 Legislative amendment to Section 582.19, Florida Statutes). Throughout the process, the Board and staff invested significant energy to outreach and education to raise the electorate's awareness of the statutory changes affecting the November 2024 general elections and in recruiting candidates for appointment to fill vacated seats. During that process, executive leadership heavily canvassed the Conservation District's agricultural operators and rural landowner constituents toward realigning its mission and service offerings.

### **2. Reestablishment of the Conservation District's public presence and brand**

The Conservation District reestablished its public presence and began efforts to establish its brand. Previously, it has owned no physical assets or equipment, nor raised any significant funds toward acquiring such. It is widely acknowledged by partners and agricultural producers that this lack of physical presence had a diminishing and negative effect on the public's perception of the District in recent years.

In FY 2025, the Board took possession of the decommissioned "Old Springhead" Fire Station #25 on Coronet Road in unincorporated eastern Hillsborough County, for the Conservation District's sole use. It is situated on a busy rural road surrounded by farms and has clear road signage identifying the Conservation District's presence to the public. Hillsborough County Administration offered the facility under lease in FY 2024.

Now, the District Board and staff have a modest conference room space, equipped with video conferencing capability, which has facilitated an increase in stakeholder engagement with Board meetings.

The facility also has a roughly 3,000 square foot garage bay in use for vehicle and equipment security, which the Conservation District is affording to the NRCS in a spirit of reciprocity during Federal budget cutbacks. Public awareness of the District's presence is gradually increasing through meetings with stakeholder representatives, customer service visits, and outreach tours conducted through the Plant City Chamber of Commerce.

### **3. Improved public records, transparency, and increased outreach**

The Conservation District undertook significant efforts in FY 2025 to improve public records and transparency, and increase outreach efforts.

In FY 2025, the Conservation District completed a full public records retention review of documents extending back to the 1960s to ensure compliance with Florida Statutes. Per recommendation of the Hillsborough County Clerk of Court's Office, the Conservation District now hosts 10 years of formal records for public viewing on its website and maintains its working files, as well as a backup of records and documents of historical interest, on a County-provided network drive.

The District also addressed inconsistencies and improved its procedures to ensure meeting schedules are set annually and properly noticed according to statutory requirements. The Board of Supervisors meeting schedule, agenda, minutes and financial records are consistently published on the District website.

District staff created profiles on Plant City Chamber of Commerce, Google Maps, Facebook, NextDoor and LinkedIn, which redirect public inquiries to the District's website and to its physical office location.

Increased outreach also included delivery of content not less than monthly on the District website, collecting customer service requests via webpage submittal, and tracking public engagement with its website and Facebook pages. Throughout FY 2025, the Conservation District had a total of 624,499 website views with 314 website subscribers and 35 submissions, and 17,985 Facebook views with 573 followers. The most visits to each occurred in October 2024, with 54,360 website visits and 4,700 Facebook views. This represents significant growth over previous fiscal years. Previously, website views went from 0 in FY 2023 to 226,082 in FY 2024, with 42 website subscriptions and 20 submissions. Facebook followers went from 0 to 558.

#### **4. Improvement of HR practices and realignment of staff resources**

Conservation District staff positions were reviewed and realigned in FY 2025 through collaboration with Hillsborough County Human Resources (HR) and with input from partner representatives at Federal, State, Regional and Local government agencies, to achieve parity with NRCS, FDACS, and Hillsborough County work units operating in the agricultural, environmental and natural resources management sector. This follows District implementation of Hillsborough County HR policies and procedures in its hiring and retention practices to ensure properly trained staff, encourage retention and achieve stability throughout FY 2024.

In addition, the Conservation District converted one part-time unskilled labor position to a full-time community information liaison position for FY 2025. This follows the Board's successful recruitment of an executive director, hired in FY 2024, with a combination of experience in natural resources management, science-based policy and decision support, and government and corporate leadership.

Also in FY 2025, the Conservation District converted one part-time general administrative support position to a college-track internship in agricultural policy and communication. The

District successfully hired a University of Florida intern for summer 2025, actively contributing to the development of early-career, agricultural leaders in Hillsborough County's agricultural job sector. In FY 2025, the intern directly supported the development of this Strategic Plan by contributing content to the stakeholder outreach project detailed under item #5 below. The student contribution consisted of a survey of technical staff and online records, detailed in a report on the technical services currently being made available by other conservation districts in Florida.

**5. Stakeholder outreach project**

A stakeholder outreach project was completed in FY 2025. The resulting report was unanimously adopted by Board Supervisors on September 19, 2025, following months of research that included interviews with representatives from major trade associations, subject matter experts and conservation districts throughout the state. This Strategic Plan benefits from that recent research and outreach, and lays the foundation for specific goals, performance measures and metrics, and best practices to help guide the Conservation District moving forward. (See link to full document in appendix on page 22 for further detail.)

**6. Sound financial management and growth**

A balanced budget was achieved in FY 2025, including through closeout of all external financial liabilities. The current budget for FY 2026 is balanced, with the focus of its expenditures being on administrative functions of the new office and the realignment of the District's mission, priorities and staffing.

**7. Feasibility of for-fee equipment services**

The District explored the feasibility of delivering certain pieces of in-demand farm equipment for rental to its smaller farm operators in FY 2025. High priority was placed on soliciting input from the District's constituent trade associations as well as on the success of other conservation districts with certain pieces of equipment. Suitable machines are those that are used by all producers of a particular commodity (such as cattle), but are too expensive for smaller operators to maintain full-time ownership.

## **Appendices**

### **Stakeholder Engagement**

In 2025, the Conservation District contracted Martin Communications, Inc., a Tampa-based firm, to conduct a stakeholder engagement project.

The results of many hours of conversations, research and analysis informed an extensive report to determine where the Conservation District may consider focusing its resources to develop and execute a long-term Strategic Plan.

From these conversations and supporting materials, a key opportunity was made clear: The Hillsborough Soil and Water Conservation District has the opportunity to strengthen its leadership role as a resource hub for rural working lands and green infrastructure in Hillsborough County.

By focusing on partnerships, advocacy, sustainable land management, and collaboration, the Conservation District can protect farmland, support local farmers, and increase its visibility and value to the community for years to come.

The full report of the stakeholder engagement efforts and outcomes can be accessed on the Conservation District website here: <https://www.hillsboroughswcd.com/strategic-plan> or download the report by clicking here: <https://www.hillsboroughswcd.com/files/c78c81c1c/Martin+Communications+Phase+1+Stakeholder+Outreach+Report.docx.pdf>.

### **OPPAGA Report**

Recommendations outlined in the Performance Review of Hillsborough Soil and Water Conservation District prepared for the State of Florida's Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability (OPPAGA) on August 19, 2024, are addressed in this Strategic Plan.

The full OPPAGA report can be accessed on the Conservation District website here: <https://www.hillsboroughswcd.com/financial-reports> or download the report by clicking here: <https://www.hillsboroughswcd.com/files/26186c7b2/2024+Hillsborough+SWCD+Performance+Review+Report.pdf>.

## **Florida Special District Handbook**

The Florida Special District Handbook, published by the FloridaCommerce Special District Accountability Program, also informed this report. The full handbook can be accessed on the FloridaCommerce website here: <https://floridajobs.org/community-planning-and-development/special-districts/special-district-accountability-program/florida-special-district-handbook-online>.

## Key Partners

### Major Stakeholders

- Florida Fruit & Vegetable Association (FFVA)
- Florida Strawberry Growers Association (FSGA)
- Florida Nursery Growers and Landscapers Association (FNGLA)
- Hillsborough Cattlemen’s Association (HCA)
- Hillsborough County Chapter of Florida Farm Bureau
- Plant City Chamber of Commerce

### Partners

- Florida Department of Agriculture & Consumer Services (FDACS)
- Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP)
- University of Florida’s Gulf Coast Research and Education Center (UF-GCREC)
- Hillsborough County Agricultural Economic Development Council (HC AECD)
- Hillsborough County Board of County Commissioners
- Hillsborough County Administration Department
- Hillsborough County Environmental Protection Commission
- Hillsborough County Planning and Development
- National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD)
- Southwest Florida Water Management District (SWFWMD)
- Tampa Bay Estuary Program (TBEP)
- University of Florida Institute of Food & Agricultural Services (UF/IFAS)
- USDA Farm Service Agency (USDA-FSA)
- USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service (USDA-NRCS)