

## ***What If.....You’re Thinking About Going it Alone?***

### ***County Aligned versus Independent Districts - Challenges and Opportunities -***

#### **A White Paper for Conservation Districts**

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**Facilitator Notes:**

*This outline and attached case studies represent the thoughts of Conservation District directors, managers and cooperating DEP staff on a topic they have all had experience with or have observed closely. The record here is to set the stage for “What if... You’re Thinking About Going it Alone”.*

*The format is meant to be broad in nature and to highlight issues to consider in making decisions to help you meet your specific District needs. There are many different situations that face Districts and this is an attempt to outline some of the pros and cons of two different operational scenarios.*

**Disclaimer:**

*The views expressed here are the collective thoughts of a number of people with experience relating to the topic of District/County alignment. They are by no means the final word on the subject. We have made efforts to be as thorough as possible but make no claim as to the completeness of this information nor do we take any responsibility, no matter what you think we may think, that your experience will be the same or as successful as a result of using this information. We offer this paper as a starting point for your explorations with the hope that it will assist in your attempts to grapple with the challenges and opportunities associated with County alignment or District independence.*

## **Overview – The WHY**

Ask any of Pennsylvania’s 66 County Conservation Districts to describe how they operate in relation to their respective County governments and you’re likely to get 66 different answers. A recent review of Conservation District operations by the Legislative Budget and Finance Committee of the Pennsylvania General Assembly<sup>1</sup> noted: *“There is significant variation in the extent and nature of County government involvement with conservation districts and their programs. Some districts are closely aligned to their county government, while others function largely independently. Such variation can have impact on conservation district programming. It can also affect its administrative efficiency.”* The report goes on to note differences in financial support, personnel practices, services provided, visibility and program and policy oversight associated with differences in County/District alignment.

The importance of the relationship between County and Conservation District leadership cannot be understated, particularly in a period marked by evolution of larger staffs, more complex programs and the corresponding complexity of fiscal and administrative duties that create ever-increasing challenges for Districts. According to the District Team Visits Year 6 Report; *“District and County relationships continues to be a critical issue in Districts’ success. Both Districts and counties need to understand their respective roles and benefits.”*

<sup>1</sup> Legislative Budget and Finance Committee Review of the Operation and Structure of County Conservation Districts. June 2005

Positive and negative dynamics of District/County relationships have long been topics of discussion among District management, staff and board members. The PA Association of Conservation Districts and the State Conservation Commission have encouraged the use of Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) between Districts and County governments to better define the extent and nature of District/County working relationships in areas such as personnel matters, financial management, office facilities and support services, and board/management roles. However, a relatively small percentage of Districts have chosen to utilize MOUs.

In recent years, we’ve seen examples of some County governments that have opted to separate Districts from the County or to significantly decrease financial and other support. In other counties, District boards are exploring options for independence to enhance flexibility and control over various aspects of programming, staffing and other operational issues. In still other counties, the relationship between County Commissioners and Districts has developed into a well-defined system that is both mutually supportive and highly beneficial to Districts and the counties they serve.

This purpose of this paper is to highlight some of the challenges and opportunities associated with both close alignment with County government and operating independently of County government. It is meant to provide an objective overview of the pros and cons identified by Conservation District staff and board members who work under a variety of District/County scenarios, from total reliance on County support and direction to near total District independence and many permutations in between. Given the significant variation among Districts statewide, the paper cannot begin to formulate conclusions about which option is the most advantageous or disadvantageous for a particular Conservation District. We leave that decision to Districts since they are most familiar with the political climate and community needs of their individual counties.

### **Things to Consider and Evaluate**

A number of important District operational issues were identified as being impacted by the nature of District/County alignment. These include the following:

- ➔ Personnel Management
- ➔ Financial Support and Management
- ➔ Infrastructure Availability
- ➔ Policy Authority
- ➔ Programs/Priority Setting
- ➔ Board/Management Roles
- ➔ Accountability/Chain of Command
- ➔ Support Systems Available

In general, the advantages of close District /County alignment parallel those issues that challenge more independent Districts. Alternately, many of the positives associated with District independence mirror the disadvantages identified with close County alignment.

## Close District/County Alignment - Advantages

If we had to sum up the advantages of County alignment in a few words, they might include **STABILITY**, **CONVENIENCE**, and **SERVICES**. County aligned Districts have the advantage of being part of larger governmental systems with established policies, administrative procedures and support systems in place. Depending on the size and complexity of the County government, closely aligned Districts may have available a variety of services that benefit the District but are managed by other County administrators. Advantages identified include:

### → Personnel Management

- Payroll services provided
- Established personnel policy and procedures and a level of support for and supervision over personnel actions
- Defined structure for staff salaries and advancement
- Some measure of job stability – staff “institutionalized” within County framework
- Clearer definition of exempt and nonexempt employee categories
- Cross application opportunities within other County departments
- Benefits, including retirement plans provided
- Bigger pool for benefits and benefits researched/administered/managed by County
- Family/medical leave available to employees

### → Financial Support and Management

- Some predictability in annual budgeting/planning
- Less likelihood of being severely impacted by overall County budget cuts or staff cuts
- Fewer cash flow problems – can cover salaries and other costs without depending on external sources such as state reimbursement
- Central purchasing services often mean lower prices for supplies/equipment
- Audit services sometimes provided at considerable cost savings

### → Infrastructure Provided

- Office space
- Furniture, phones, internet
- County maintenance services
- Access to County IT (information technology) assistance
- Vehicles, vehicle insurance, maintenance services, County gas at lower prices

### → Access to County Support Services

- Insurance coverage
- Legal services
- Training on personnel issues and in other areas
- Communications office/public relations services
- Print office
- Grant writing assistance
- Mental health programs
- Integration with other County offices
  - Positive synergy of working with other County offices

- District not considered an “outside agency”
- Automatically part of planning efforts that benefit resource management efforts
- Qualification for FEMA reimbursement for staff time

## **Close District/County Alignment - Challenges**

In many ways, the advantages of County alignment are the very source of the challenges that face closely aligned Districts – institutionalized policies and procedures that provide a level of predictability and services also dictate a certain inflexibility and lack of control over some aspects of operations. County governments are inherently political and County goals and priorities may conflict with those of the District or fluctuate with changes in County elected or appointed officials. County, board and management roles, including chain(s) of command may also be difficult to definitively identify. Challenges identified include:

### **→ Personnel Management**

- Lack of flexibility in salary structure
- Established job classifications and salary structure may not fit specific District program needs
- Limitations on or lack of control in hiring/firing
- Lack of flexibility to create new positions based on community needs
- Civil service/union issues may negatively impact program and staff scheduling flexibility

### **→ Financial Support and Management**

- Tied to County budget, including mandatory budget cuts
- Procurement procedures may limit flexibility and efficiency

### **→ Policy Authority**

- Lack of policy flexibility to fit specific District functions

### **→ Programs/Priority Setting**

- County-mandated responsibilities not necessarily in accordance with District mission/priorities (i.e. West Nile, Gypsy Moth programs)

### **→ Board/Management Roles & Accountability/Chain of Command**

- Separate set of bosses with different agendas
- Extra layers of oversight – i.e. other County administrators
- Board/commissioner conflicts
- Political pressure

## **District Independence from County Alignment - Advantages**

If we had to sum up the advantages of District independence from County alignment in a few words, they might include **FLEXIBILITY**, **CONTROL** and **CREATIVE LICENSE**. Independent Districts aren’t as confined by the dictates of County governmental systems. They have greater ability to adjust programs, policies and staffing to meet specific District goals and community needs, without the political pressures sometimes experienced by closely aligned Districts. Advantages identified include:

→ **Personnel Management**

- Total control over hiring and firing
- Control over salaries
- Flexibility in using bonuses/incentive pay
- Ability to customize benefit structure to meet staff needs (Districts often have staff younger than County average who may be looking for different types of benefits)
- Flexibility to rewrite job descriptions or create positions as needed, i.e. middle management
- Greater flexibility in subcontracting work or hiring part-time help
- No union or collective bargaining pressure

→ **Financial Support and Management**

- Total fiscal control
- Control over day to day cash flow
- Purchasing flexibility - not necessarily tied to bidding requirements
- Some insulation from County budget process
- Ability to accumulate larger cash reserves

→ **Policy Authority**

- Board of Directors can adopt policies to meet unique District needs

→ **Programs/Priority Setting**

- Greater opportunity for creativity
- More ability to “think outside the box”, examine available resources/needs, find different solutions to problems,
- Control over setting priorities, expanding programs beyond County limitations
- Greater ability to form partnerships independent of County

→ **Board/Management Roles & Accountability/Chain of Command**

- Chain of command is clearer - one set of “bosses” sets goals and policy and holds management and staff accountable

→ **Infrastructure**

- Housing flexibility may better meet District staff and program needs

## **District Independence from County Alignment – Challenges**

Just as Independent Districts aren’t confined by the dictates of County governmental systems, they also aren’t always able to take advantage of many of the services provided by County government. And with independence also come the “make it or break it” realities of meeting financial obligations in a climate of rising health care costs, insurance rates, gas prices and other costs of doing business. Many of these added responsibilities fall to the District management and board, who, in spite of their independence, must also make extra efforts to maintain the lines of communication and cooperation with County government. Challenges identified include:

→ **Personnel Management**

- Challenges in research, management, administration and costs of:
  - Benefits packages
  - Payroll
  - Insurance

- More exposure on personnel issues
- Salaries, if funds are limited, may be lower than County's
- **Financial Support and Management**
  - Cash flow can be a problem
    - Need for large reserves and/or
    - Line of credit and associated interest expenses
  - Long-term uncertainty of state funding/grant availability
  - Inability to take advantages of group rate purchase options without larger County pool
  - Must come up with annual budget increases without the benefit of ability to increase taxes
- **Policy Authority**
  - District needs more comprehensive policies
- **Board/Management Roles & Accountability/Chain of Command**
  - Need broader administrative skills at management and staff level to handle research, management, administration of payroll, benefits, insurance, personnel policies, etc.
  - Greater Director involvement and level of responsibility is necessary in many areas:
    - Fiscal responsibility
    - Personnel
    - Policies/procedures
    - Legal issues
- **Infrastructure**
  - Fewer County perks available – office space, furniture, vehicles, gas,
  - District must absorb major equipment purchases – copiers and other office equipment office equipment, vehicles, etc.
- **Access to County Services**
  - Many valuable County services may be unavailable to the District - personnel, legal, risk management, purchasing and other services
  - Potential for disconnect with County – need to work harder to maintain lines of communication and partnerships with County Commissioners and other County departments

## Conclusion

Understanding some of the pros and cons of different relationships between Districts and County governments is just the first step in evaluating what type of administrative integration might work best in a particular situation. All of the authorities for this paper, whether representing County aligned or independent Districts, agree on one thing; the District/County relationship is a key factor in any District's success (or lack thereof). Whether Districts choose County alignment, independence, or some combination of the two, they must continue to look for ways to market their programs and services to County government, integrate their activities with other County functions, and communicate the importance of their work to County commissioners and the general public. And Districts that do decide to go it alone will need to be creative in finding revenue sources to accommodate rising costs and replace County funding and services that may be lost.

## **Case Studies**

Several of the authorities listed on the cover page were asked to provide a one page summary of “vital information” on how their Districts operate relative to their respective County governments. In considering which Districts to highlight in the case studies, we looked for a cross section of different sized Districts and scenarios from close County alignment to District independence, with a few examples somewhere in between.

## **District/County Alignment CASE STUDY – DAUPHIN COUNTY**

### **Overview**

The Dauphin County Conservation District operates both as a subdivision of state under the direction of the Conservation District’s Board of Directors and as a line department of County government under the direction of the County Commissioners. The goal of this type of arrangement is to work in partnership so both units of government can benefit from District accomplishments. Currently the District employees 15 full-time, 1 part-time and 1 seasonal staff.

### **District/County - Working Relationships**

**Program Selection and Oversight:** The District Board determines what programs, projects and grants are administered by the District. When the County Commissioners have desired for the District to administer a program on their behalf, it has been openly discussed and not mandated. A mutual respect exists that allows this process to work. There are different levels of program oversight responsibilities between the Board and Commissioners dependent upon the purpose and function of each specific program. Examples of the division of oversight responsibilities are as follows: West Nile Program is primarily the Commissioners; Nutrient Management Program is primarily the Board; Agricultural Land Preservation is shared between the Commissioners, Board and a separate Agricultural Land Preservation Board. There is no formal policy to define oversight responsibility, it is largely determined by the District Manager as to which governing body to turn to for a decision.

**Financial Management:** District operations function with two budgets, a County Budget established by the County Commissioners and a District Budget established by the District Board. The two budgets are prepared to compliment each other. In some areas such as personnel costs, there is overlap between the budgets.

- **County Budget:** The salaries and benefits of all District employees are included in the County Budget. Of the 17 positions, the County pays for 6 positions and the District reimburses the County for the other 11 positions. Other line items included in our County Budget include office supplies, vehicle gasoline, printing (County print shop), vehicle insurance (for both County and District vehicles), vehicle repairs, office rent, computer rental, stormwater management studies and farmland preservation. The office supplies are largely those common items used by all departments and purchased in bulk by the County Purchasing Department. Simple work orders or requisition forms are authorized by the District Manager for charges made against this budget. Every employee is issued a gas card that tracks gas from the County pumps.
- **District Budget:** The District Budget is much more extensive with the number of individual line items. The budget is prepared by the District Manager and approved by the District Board. There is an understanding between the Board and the Manager that administration of the approved budget is the responsibility of the Manager. This administrative authorization extends from simple day to day purchases to large purchases such as a vehicle or piece of office equipment. The Board is provided a list of expenses for approval monthly. On a quarterly basis, the District reimburses the County for salary and benefit expenses for 11 positions.

**Personnel Management:** All District staff are employed by the County, participate in the County benefit package and are covered by the County personnel policies and procedures. The District staff is non-union. Hiring and firing must be done in accordance with County policy and procedures but these basic decisions are made by the District.

**County Services Provided:**

- **Audits:** The County auditors audit all District accounts as per any line department of County government.
- **Payroll:** All payroll services are provided.
- **Personnel Administration:** The entire personnel department is available to the District to offer advice and support in relation to personnel issues.
- **Information Technology Department:** A line item in the County budget provides computers for the District. The I.T. Department provides technical services related to our inter-office network and consultation on purchases and trouble shooting.
- **Print Shop:** A line item in the County budget covers the cost of printing that is done by the County print shop.
- **Risk Manager:** The County employs a risk manager with oversight responsibilities of insurances, workmen’s compensation, etc. The risk manager reviews and makes recommendations on all insurances including those on the Agriculture & Natural Resource Center that is owned by the District and not the commissioners.
- **Insurance Coverage:** All District vehicles, whether purchased by the County or the District, are covered by the County insurance.
- **Solicitor:** Depending on the program and the nature of the need, the services of the County Solicitor may be available.
- **Security:** The County Security Department has offered advice in relation to security of the Agriculture & Natural Resource Center.

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## **District/County Alignment CASE STUDY – CLEARFIELD COUNTY**

### **Overview**

Clearfield County is located just west of the center of Pennsylvania on the western slope of the Allegheny Mountains. The County is 37 miles from north to south and 40 miles from east to west. With an area of 1,143.5 square miles Clearfield County is the fourth largest County in the state. The 2000 census shows Clearfield County’s population at 83,382, with a density of 73 persons per square mile. Based on population, we rank 36<sup>th</sup> in the state, and 54.1 percent of our population is considered rural.

Clearfield County Conservation District was formed in 1962 as an independent District. We have a staff of five full time employees, one Experience Works helper and seasonal interns.

### **District/County Working Relationships**

While we function as an independent District, we have a close working relationship with our County Commissioners. Our Commissioner Board Member is very active and involved with District activities. In addition to that, we work hard to maintain communications with the other two Commissioners and keep them well informed of our activities.

We are governed by a seven-member Board of Directors. Our Board determines our program involvement, supervises the manager, oversees our budget, and sets policy for the District.

**Personnel Management:** In the past, Clearfield County experienced challenges related to personnel issues. The basis of these problems stemmed from a lack of written guidelines. Our Board of Directors worked diligently to develop a Personnel Policy, and this policy is used to govern the staff. A written policy is imperative to a well functioning office. It insures that all employees are treated equally and fairly. It further provides guidance to staff so that they are able to concentrate on their individual responsibilities with a clear direction.

Our Board of Directors also made the decision to employ a manager with past experience in management and financial matters, rather than program experience. This worked in our case because we had a very qualified technical staff that was willing to perform as a team to carry out the conservation needs of our County.

The Board of Directors determines salary increases, and makes all decisions regarding hiring and discipline.

**Financial Management:** Our District receives a monthly allocation from the County. This allocation is determined based on recommendations from our Commissioner representative who sits on our Budget Committee. Accomplishments from the current year, as well as projected needs for the upcoming year are factors in this decision.

The County allocation amounts to approximately 22% of our overall budget. The remaining funds come from a combination of program reimbursements and various grants.

**Housing/Support Services:** In addition to the allocation that we receive, the County Commissioners provide the District with office space in a County-owned facility. The District is responsible for all daily operating expense including insurance, audits, equipment, telephone, computer support, and employee wages and benefits. The staff uses their own vehicles for District business, and are reimbursed at the state rate.

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## **District/County Alignment CASE STUDY – BLAIR COUNTY**

### **Overview**

The County of Blair is situated in Central Pennsylvania just east of the Allegheny Front. The County is a 5<sup>th</sup> Class County governed by 3 County Commissioners. The leading industry in Blair County is Agriculture followed by Tourism. Altoona is the only City located within our boundaries and the County is to be considered rural with nearly 70% of our land mass still classified as woodland.

The Conservation District was formed in 1966 and is governed by a 7-member board of directors. Currently, the Blair County Conservation District operates both as a subdivision of state government under the direction of the Board of Directors and as a line department of County government under the direction of the County Commissioners. The District is staffed by 2 County Employees (Manager and Clerical Position), 5 District Employees (Program Staff), and utilizes interns and Americorp Participants as needed. The District office is currently co-located in the USDA facility with a contract and rent paid directly by the District to the landlord.

### **District/County Working Relationships**

The District relationship with the County Commissioners has always been one of open dialogue and respect. Program selection and guidance is based on discussion and decisions by the District Board of Directors. Blair County has historically been blessed with County Commissioner interest, attendance and involvement in District Activities. Although only one Commissioner is involved as a voting member, all three have a cursory knowledge of District programs and activities.

**Personnel Management:** It was determined in 1987 to make the manager position a full time, County of Blair employed staff. As a follow-up, the Board of Directors and the Commissioners entered into an MOU in 1988, to formalize the District/County working relationship with respect to staffing. Specific items dealing with hiring and firing, supervision, job descriptions, funding and benefits are outlined. As mentioned above, the Manager and Clerical positions are paid through the County of Blair payroll and are eligible for the County of Blair benefit package. Cost-share funding received for the employment of the Manager’s position is reimbursed to the County of Blair from the District. Salary issues for these positions are ultimately handled through the County Salary Board.

As the Blair District continued to grow with the addition of program staff, it was mutually determined that those positions would become employees of the Conservation District. Mutually, in that the County was hesitant to add staff to the County rolls and the District recognized a greater flexibility in relation to salaries if the positions were District paid. The District over the years has attempted to build a benefit package for these employees similar to the County package. Similar hospitalization coverage is garnered through a group agreement with the PA Farm Bureau, Simplified Employee Pension contributions serves as a retirement package, all holidays, vacation, sick leave, etc. mirror that of a County Employee. Salary issues for these employees would be handled at the District Board level. Cost-share funding for these positions is maintained in the District Account.

The District/County and the Ag Land Preservation Board are also parties to an MOU for the administration of the County’s Conservation Easement Purchase Program. Staffing by Conservation District employees, administration and funding are considerations in this multi-party agreement.

**Financial Management:** Annually the District, through its Budget and Objectives Committee, prepares an annual operating budget for the Conservation District. All expenses to be incurred are part of that budget including salaries, benefits, insurances, taxes, supplies, office rent, phone, special projects, etc. All expected incomes are also listed to include: employment cost-shares, state funding for administration of programs (CDFAP Administrative, Ag Easement Program, Nutrient Management, Dirt & Gravel Road, etc.), E&S review fees, and a **specific line item listed as County Allocation**. The budget is approved by the full District Board (including the Commissioner Member) and is submitted to the County Commissioners for review and approval. The Commissioners, although they are presented with the entire budget, are only being asked to approve the Manager and Clerical Salaries and the dollar amount listed as County Allocation. Depending on the volume of outside funding (grants, programs) the County portion of the District’s overall budget ranges from between 25 and 35%. Funds are requested on a quarterly basis from the County to draw from the direct allocation and normally are utilized to cover general operating expenses.

**Vehicle Purchase and Operation:** The Blair District has purchased one vehicle through the County Purchasing Department using the State Contract Option and by reimbursement of the purchase price to the County from the District Account. Gas and Insurance is covered under the County Plan and again reimbursement is provided to the County; however this is a significant saving by virtue of the County involvement. Normal maintenance and inspection is provided by the County Highway Garage at no cost to the District.

**Other County Services:** The District is permitted with the recommendation of the Commissioner Board Member to solicit advice and review of contracts and documents by the County Solicitor at no charge to the District. The District is permitted and encouraged to utilize the County Print Shop when feasible with a fee per job. The District has received limited assistance from the County Information Technology (IT) Department.

**Other District Services:** In addition to the working agreement for the Conservation Easement Purchase Program, the District was instrumental in the advancement of the Geographic Information Technology and use within the District and other County Departments. Because of the close working relationship with the Commissioners, the District was able to attain a staff position to promote the County and District GIS Program.

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## **District/County Alignment CASE STUDY – WESTMORELAND COUNTY**

### **Overview**

Westmoreland County is located in southwest Pennsylvania on the western slope of the Allegheny Mountains and east of Pittsburgh. With an area of 1,025 square miles Westmoreland County is the 7<sup>th</sup> largest County in the state. The 2000 census shows Westmoreland County’s population at 369,993, with a density of 361 persons per square mile. Based on population, Westmoreland County ranks 6<sup>th</sup> in the state.

Westmoreland Conservation District (WCD) was formed in 1949 as an independent District. A nine-member Board of Directors governs WCD. The WCD Board, using the “Locally Led Process”, determines program priorities, supervises the manager, approves and oversees budget, and sets policy for the District. Directors and Associates serve on committees and complement the staff expertise.

### **District/County Working Relationships**

While WCD functions as an independent District, WCD has a close working relationship with our County Commissioners, County planning and parks departments. The Commissioner Board Member is very supportive of the District and has delegated his aide to attend WCD board meetings and events and maintain communications with the County Commissioners. In addition, the WCD board and management actively strive to maintain a dialogue with all three Commissioners, Commissioners Aides, Director of County Planning, Chief Clerk and nominating organizations, keeping them well informed of our activities.

**Personnel Management:** WCD has a staff of 14 full time employees, 2 part-time, 1 position shared with Penn State Cooperative Extension Service and 2 seasonal interns.

WCD experienced challenges related to establishment of middle management, appropriate role of the administrative support staff and redefining the manager’s duties from day to day employee supervision and program management to role of CEO. The Manager/COE supervises key personal, plans fundraising, and takes responsibility for partnering, building and maintaining relationships.

WCD board uses annually reviewed and board approved job descriptions, annual employee evaluations, employee handbook, policy manual, and personal committee to provide the management tools to supervise staff. The WCD board, with input from personal committee, management and annual employee evaluations, sets salaries.

**Financial Management:** WCD staff and board prepare an annual budget request and consult with the County commissioner fiscal affairs office before submitting. WCD receives an annual allocation from Westmoreland County. In 2004 the County allocation was 47 % of the operating budget, state allocation 10 % and balance from fees and grants. The County allocation in 2004 represents a \$1.68 investment in conservation per County resident.

WCD is responsible for all daily operating expense including insurance, audits, equipment, telephone, computer support, vehicles and employee wages and benefits. WCD retains a CPA and Attorney to provide audit, financial and legal advice.

**Housing:** WCD is housed in a District built, County owned building. Rent for the space is included in the County allocation. WCD is co-located on campus with NRCS, FSA, Cooperative Extension, Farmland Preservation, RC&D. WPCAMR, County Parks and Rural Development See the Westmoreland Conservation District Office/center for Conservation Education Case Study for more details on the building.

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*Note: These individuals/Districts are willing to provide information or assistance to other Districts on the issues discussed in this paper, including travel to various District locations. If you request that one or more of these individuals travel to your District location we suggest that consideration be given to providing expense/travel compensation.*