Developing and Fostering Relations with County Government

A White Paper For Conservation Districts

Facilitated by:

Lynn Sandieson, District Manager, Crawford County Conservation District

District Authorities:

The Honorable John Eichelberger, PA State Senator, former Blair County Conservation District Commissioner Director
Donna Fisher, District Manager, Blair County Conservation District
John Green, Field Representative, DEP NW Region Office
Michael W. Lovegreen, District Manager, Bradford County Conservation District
Edward M. Magargee, District Manager, Delaware County Conservation District
Susan Reed, District Manager, Clearfield County Conservation District
Dave Rupert, District Manager, Armstrong County Conservation District
Roger Williams, Commissioner Director, Crawford Conservation District

Conditional Clause

The information and materials presented here are those of Conservation District members, County Commissioners, and Conservation Partners who have had experience relating to the topic. They are sharing their successes and challenges in this paper as a service to other Conservation Districts that are considering or experiencing similar situations. The information is not meant to be the authoritative "last word" on the subject; it is only meant as a guidance tool.

Overview of the Topic - The Why

It can be said that there is no more critical relationship for a Conservation District than the one it shares with its County Government. The sixty-six Conservation Districts in Pennsylvania were authorized into existence by their County Governments as they each recognized a need for a Conservation District to serve their constituents and protect and enhance the county's natural resources. County Government selects and appoints the Directors of the Conservation District from nominations provided by county-wide organizations, thereby determining the composition of the District's Board of Directors, and a County Commissioner (or the County Executive, or elected County Council Member), serves on every Conservation District board. Moreover, Conservation Districts have traditionally depended on county financial support to provide the staff and operating funds necessary for them to function and carry out their missions. The success of this relationship in meeting mutual needs is critical to the function of a Conservation District and the county it serves.

According to the District Team Visits Year 6 Report, "District and County relationships continues to be a critical issue in the Districts' success. Both Districts and counties need to understand their respective roles and benefits."

"Working with County Government" was also identified in the District Team Visits Year 6 Report as a key topic of interest for the subject of a white paper at the annual District Manager's training meeting.

Today's Conservation Districts are encountering changes and challenges as they grow to meet the increasing needs within their counties. Likewise, Counties face pressure to provide both a greater number of services and more complex services with limited revenue sources. Additionally, with changes in personnel both among county leadership and Conservation District Directors and staff, traditional roles and relationships may need to be redefined and reestablished.

It is in the interest of exploring how Conservation Districts approach the challenges to making the county-district partnership a mutually successful one that this report is undertaken.

Things to Consider and Evaluate

A number of important factors go in to building effective relationships between Conservation Districts and County Governments. Some of these include:

- Commissioners' and Conservation District Directors' understanding of the responsibilities and powers of Conservation Districts (Act 217)
- Effective Communication between the District and County Government
- Knowledge of how the District benefits the county
- Effective Public Relations
- The role of the County-Commissioner Director
- Maintaining the continuity of the District-County relationship when county administrations change
- A concern for the County's natural resource base
- Knowledge of how programs are adopted and priorities set
- District Accountability
- A formal Memorandum of Understanding or not?
- District integration into county programs
- District understanding of Commissioner board's priorities and constraints

THINGS THAT CONCERN COUNTY COMMISSIONERS:

- 1. The District Board and County Commissioners serve the same constituents and are responsible for the same geographic area. Generally, Commissioners want to assure that county operations are running smoothly. Public fights with a prominent developer, angry farmers writing letters to the editor or people showing up at a public meeting to complain about something can create public relations problems which may be concerning to County Commissioners. As problems cannot always be avoided, Districts should strive to develop and maintain a close working relationship with the Commissioners so they will be informed as soon as possible when potential problems are recognized.
- 2. Money is another hot button concern. If the District has financial problems, needs additional money in the middle of the year, has bad financial practices and experiences a theft or loss, or has a large financial surplus that Commissioners only learn about via the grapevine, these kinds of things are not well received, and again, could become a public relations problem.
- Customer service is the third area that can make or break your relationship with the Commissioners. If they hear good things regularly or nothing at all, that is great. If Commissioners hear an occasional

complaint of rudeness, apathy, ineptitude, etc., they look into things more carefully. Again, not a good thing.

BUILDING RELATIONS WITH COUNTY GOVERNMENT

THE BASICS

Know Who You Are

- ⇒ The District needs to have a strong self identity
 - District is an independent unit of State Government and not a department of County Government.
 - Independence and extent of powers of the District need to be understood by all – County, District, Directors, Staff
 - District needs to know who it is (mission, clients, etc.) to be a good partner to other agencies such as the County. High self esteem and value makes for a good partner.

Communicate Who You Are To County Government

- ⇒ Commissioners need to recognize the areas of expertise the district has and respect the district's contributions.
- The District has an obligation to let the Commissioners know what the District's powers are under Act 217 so that they and the County Solicitor can be comfortable in the knowledge that the District is acting within its authority. The District Manager, Board Chairman, and/or County Commissioner Director can play a pivotal role in educating County Leadership.
- Depending on the situation, a Memorandum of Understanding between the Conservation District and the Commissioners can help define roles and expectations and help maintain the continuity of the relationship even though personnel and administrations change. A Memorandum of Understanding is nonbinding, however, and the District should evaluate the need for one based on their own "feel" for the situation. The Commissioner-Director may be able to provide insight on how a request to develop an "MOU" would be received.

PROVIDE SERVICES, TEAMWORK & LEADERSHIP

- ⇒ The District needs to demonstrate its value to the County (and other partners) constantly
 - District Board and Staff need to participate on County Task Forces, Committees, etc. and provide valuable input and resources
 - o Comprehensive Plan
 - o ACT 167 Storm water Planning
 - o Open Space / Greenways Plan

- o Planning Commission assistance
- o Recreational Plans
- o Transportation Plans
- Ag Land Preservation
- ⇒ In addition to technical assistance and task force roles, the District can take on additional projects as the board deems appropriate which are of importance to County Government. (A few examples...)
 - Administering the County's MS4 program
 - Assuming responsibility for a county park
 - Assisting with grant writing
 - Taking the lead in the County on GIS
 - Administering the West Nile Virus Program
 - Administering the County Gypsy Moth Suppression Program
 - Assisting with Ag Related Problems
 - Assisting with County Growing Greener II Fund Planning
 - Helping with municipal planning and education
 - Doing Emergency stream work
 - Taking the lead on environmental education
 - Participating in the Dirt & Gravel Road Program
- ⇒ Incorporate County Commissioners and other County department heads on committees where possible
- ⇒ The District should participate and invite participation of other County departments
 - District can show how it is a valuable resource to these agency heads, who then may discuss or share with County Government (i.e. GIS data layers, resource inventories, other partner resources.)

COMMUNICATE – SPEAK AND LISTEN

- Dommunication is critical. This one item was mentioned by District people and County Commissioners more than any other. The District needs to keep the County Commissioners informed about what they do, why they do it, and who benefits. The Commissioners can't help build a district program if they don't know what the District wants; you can't assist them if you don't know what they're looking for.
- ⇒ The District needs to listen to the County's needs. You may not agree on every issue, but you will know where they are coming from. You may change some things and this is always a good first step.

- ⇒ District Staff (Manager) should schedule regular update meetings with the Commissioners to discuss items of mutual interest
 - Don't always meet to ask for resources; sometimes provide resources
 - Provide updates on how the District has helped the County achieve its goals
 - Consult with Commissioners on how they think the District can better serve the public
 - Be sure you communicate the full extent of the District's SCOPE of work. They may hear about SOME of the things that you are doing, but do they know ALL of the many things that you are involved with?
 - The District Manager should strive to be a meaningful point of contact for the Commissioners. That doesn't necessarily mean being willing to undertake every program or issue but more importantly to be able to guide and provide advice based on situations specific to the county served. Show the Commissioners that the District is a responsible, knowledgeable and integral unit within the County.

Examples of Some Additional Ways Districts Communicate Include:

- Sending the Minutes of the District meeting
- Annual report
- E-mails regularly about District business.
- Have the winning envirothon team acknowledged at County Council or Commissioners' meeting.
- Inviting the Commissioners/County Executive/Council Members to District events, including the annual dinner meeting
- A Quarterly Newsletter or "Commissioner Update"
- Sharing the District's Comprehensive Plan and Proposed Annual Plans of Work
- ⇒ The task of interfacing with the County is not just the Manager's job. It involves the Board and Staff.
 - The Board members represent the Community and other organizations that are the constituents of the Commissioners and can act more "politically" than staff. This is especially valuable when the District needs to request resources from the County.

PUBLIC RELATIONS

- ⇒ Be known to all in the Courthouse and develop a personal working relationship with as many as possible. Don't be a stranger at the Courthouse. Participate in County functions.
 - County Commissioners
 - County Clerk / Administrator
 - Secretaries

- Budget Director
- Planning Director
- Parks Director
- Maintenance Director
- ⇒ Share credit with the County as often as possible.
- ⇒ Don't ever mix in "County politics" if at all possible. The District should remain neutral and as its representatives, staff should try to do the same.
- ⇒ The District needs to be a valuable interactive part of the Community by participating in all areas that it can provide assistance and resources, thus making it apparent that it is a valuable asset to the County. By being "everywhere" in the Community, County Commissioners will take note. Press coverage, PR, etc. help the image.

A CONSERVATION ETHIC

- Dounty Commissioners need to understand and appreciate their county's natural resources and the need to protect them. If natural resource challenges come up, the Commissioners need to be informed of the problem, possible impacts, and solutions. It is incumbent upon the District's Board of Directors to make sure that the Conservation District's program recognizes and addresses resource concerns.
- All Commissioners want economic development, but it is vital that Commissioners recognize that development needs to be done in a responsible way that protects the county's resources and quality of living.
- ⇒ It is important that the County Representative to the District Board have a conservation ethic and care about the county's natural resources. An interested, motivated individual is a much more valuable member of the team. If the Commissioner Director comes to the board with these qualities, it's a great blessing. If not, Districts should be prepared to help their County Board Member reach his full potential through education, motivation, and involvement. Ask your Commissioner Director about his interests and strive to find common ground to build your working relationship on. Enthusiasm and success can be catching.
- ⇒ Districts can be an active partner in economic development by assisting in appropriate planning for development prior to permits and being active participants in plan and permit development if timing is an issue.

BUDGET & FISCAL CONCERNS

- ⇒ Districts need to show how they "multiply" the investment of the county in terms of dollars and services delivered to the district. The Annual Report can be a critical place to showcase this.
- ⇒ Budget contributions/partnerships from the County should be well justified
 - Show history of budget and sources of revenue leveraged by the County contributions
 - o Know all the players in the budget process. Not just the Commissioners but also the accounts supervisor, budget director, etc.
- Remind the county that your budget is not just a "wish list". It is a document hammered out by a District Manager, a District Budget Committee, and a county-appointed Board of Directors who are all tax payers. The budget represents what the Board thinks is necessary to meet county resource challenges; it is key to carrying out the district's mission and responsibilities, and is not put forward lightly.
- ⇒ Many ethics problems involve fiscal issues. Be proactive in making sure that all board members and staff are fully versed on ethical issues and responsibilities.
- Above all, show fiscal responsibility and professionalism. Remind the Commissioners and County fiscal agents that Districts are all required to be audited annually by professionals. Make sure County officials get copies of your audit results. If your auditor makes suggestions for ways that you can increase your fiscal or procedural security, make sure that you follow them.

THINGS TO REMEMBER IN CASE THE RELATIONSHIP IS NOT WORKING OUT

- ⇒ Make an effort to clear up misunderstandings-the sooner, the better.
- ⇒ If there is a particular issue which represents a problem, try working to resolve it.
- Appreciate the good people you have to work with and spend extra effort to reach out to those county offices or officials that may not fully appreciate the conservation ethic.
- ⇒ Try to find a way to help with something the county needs assistance with that is within the scope of the District but may not be a core function at the present

time. Do something above and beyond your usual work and they may love it. If you become a resource for them, they may learn more about District operations and appreciate the work you do day in and day out.

⇒ It's important not to give up – keep communicating. Send E-mails, board minutes, notes – keep up the team spirit.

YOU KNOW YOU'VE SUCCEEDED WHEN:

- ⇒ The Commissioners are vying to be the one who gets the privilege to serve on the District Board as County Commissioner Director.
- ⇒ You hear Commissioners refer to District projects and accomplishments with enthusiasm.
- ⇒ The Commissioners call the district if they have a natural resource question or concern and need an informed answer.
- ⇒ The County begins to refer to the District as "their" District with pride.

Case Study - Armstrong County Conservation District

Background

The Armstrong Conservation District was created by resolution of the Armstrong County Commissioners on February 7, 1963. Armstrong is a county of the 6th class. According to the 2000 census data, the population of Armstrong County is 72,392. From the creation of the District in 1963 until 1982, the District employed part time managerial assistance to implement the official "Long Range Program" of the County. When the first "Executive Assistant" was hired, he was an employee of the District as have been all subsequent employees. In 1982, the Board of Directors made the decision to employ full time managerial assistance to grow the District Program. Before 1982, District employees were not afforded the opportunity to participate in Social Security or any other benefits normally afforded other public employees. Currently, the District offers all full time permanent employees the following benefits: contributory health insurance plan, contributory retirement plan, holiday, vacation, sick, and personal leave, and District paid term life and disability insurances.

The Armstrong Conservation District has always managed its own finances and currently administers three funds: The District General Fund, The Clean Water Fund, and the Dirt and Gravel Road Fund. Over the last three years, the District budget has averaged \$750,000.00. The District annually requests an allocation from the County Commissioners to support the District Program. The allocation is granted in quarterly allotments and must be both requested from and approved in writing by the Board of Commissioners. In addition to the annual allocation, the County provides the Directors and Staff of the District with all General and Professional Liability Insurance. The County also provides all fuel and automotive insurances for the three District owned vehicles. The County also permits the District the opportunity to "carry over" unexpended funds from one budget year to the next if the Board requests to do so in writing. The District currently employs 6 full time permanent staff, 2 full time temporary staff, and one seasonal position as the Board determines necessary to implement the annual work plan. The District currently rents office space from the County at a discounted rate.

Our Relationship with the County Commissioners

The District received its first allocation from the Commissioners in 1964. The first allocation was \$500.00 and that money coupled with funds raised by the Board was used to employ the first part time "District Clerk". During the mid1970's, the County and the District partnered through the CETA program to provide the District with full time clerical assistance. The District then employed a part time "Executive Assistant" who worked less than 20 hours per week. The District relied on the USDA- Soil Conservation Service (SCS) for both office space and phone services, while providing the SCS with needed clerical assistance. With the termination of the CETA program, the District Board asked the County to fully fund the "Clerical and Managerial Positions" under the Board. The Commissioner approved this request and this arrangement continued until 1982. Day to day supervision of the District staff was provided by the SCS District Conservationist.

In late 1981, the Board recognized the need to more fully implement its long range plan and approached the County Commissioners about funding the upgrade to a full time Manager with benefits. The County granted this request and the District allocation for 1982 was increased to \$25,000.00 so that the Board could employ 2 full time persons and offer both benefits. A full time Manager was hired and day to day supervision of staff was transferred to the Manager from the District Conservationist. Since 1982, the County contribution to the District has grown from \$25,000.00 to \$202,000.00, while the staff has grown from 2 full time to 8 full time and one seasonal position.

The biggest reason for the growth of the District has been the relationship among the Board, Staff, and the County Commissioners. The County recognizes the District as the principal "natural resources agency" of the County. The Commissioners and District Board have asked the Staff to be actively involved in and take a leadership role in the areas of local Watershed Association formation and technical assistances, the creation of a local non-profit land conservancy (trust) to compliment the District, the technical training of County staff, and a lead role in working with Municipalities to solve problems dealing with stormwater and flooding issues. In addition, the District has been asked by the Commissioners to assume leadership responsibility in sand and gravel extraction from the Allegheny River, assisting with proper reclamation techniques to control stormwater on active and abandoned mined lands, cleanup of illegal roadside dump sites using prison labor forces, and working with our agricultural cooperators on the installation of innovative agricultural best management practices, and most recently being asked to administer the Armstrong County Farmland Protection Program.

District Board and Staff members have served the County in many other ways. Among those have been participating in the development of the County Comprehensive Plan, the Hazard Mitigation Plan, the Recreation and Open Space Plan, the Natural Area Plan, the Glade Run Act 167 Plan, and by serving on the Local Emergency Planning Committee, and establishing the Large Animal County Animal Response Team. Technical assistance has also been provided to the County Planning staff when the Sub-Division and Land Development Ordinance was redrafted and implemented. The District Manager and Staff have been active participants in the Department Heads meetings conducted by the Commissioners and have assisted various County Departments wishing to incorporate GIS into their annual work plans.

As an Independent Organization

Annually, the District Board prepares and adopts a budget at or before their October monthly meeting. Adopted as a component of the budget, is an annual allocation request to the County Commissioners. Usually, the budget committee and the Manager will make a budget presentation to the Commissioners and the County Finance Director. County allocations are usually finalized during December. If necessary, the District will adopt a revised budget at the January meeting that reflects the County allocation for that year.

At the budget presentation, the Commissioners are briefed on the accomplishments of the District for the current year and the upcoming years objectives are presented for their review and input.

The District must continually attempt to build and maintain their relationship with the County. One way this is accomplished is through the annual conservation tour for elected officials and the annual legislative breakfast meeting to showcase the breadth and depth of the District Program while highlighting present and future funding needs. Another element has been the bi-annual Nominating Organization meeting held with the Commissioners, the Chief Clerk, all Nominating Organizations, and the Directors and Associate Directors of the District. At this meeting, the nomination and District Director selection process is discussed with all parties. The Commissioners are also given an opportunity to meet with individuals interested in serving on the District Board in an informal setting. Other activities such as the Annual Cooperator and Conservation Awards Banquet provide an opportunity for the Commissioners to address the conservation community while presenting some of the District's annual awards.

Other Thoughts

The Armstrong District Board of Directors prides itself in assuming an active role in the development and management of the District Program. Since 1982, the Directors have delegated the role of day to day management of its affairs to the Manager. As an independent District, the staff and Board must continually work to improve and maintain the relationship with the Board of Commissioners. This is accomplished by exposing newly elected and current Commissioners to the District Program through tours, field days, meetings, and the sharing of information. Monthly minutes, financial reports, and staff reports are electronically shared with the Board of Commissioners and not just the Commissioner Director. Another way of making the Commissioner feel that they are an integral part of the District Team is the District uniform consisting of a ball cap, short sleeve and long sleeve shirts, and a fleece jacket. The Board, Associate Directors, Staff, and Board of Commissioners are provided these uniform components annually to wear show their pride in being an integral part of the District Team.

For further information contact:

David R. Rupert, District Manager Armstrong Conservation District Suite B-2, 124 Armsdale Road Armsdale Administration Building Kittanning, Pa. 16201

724-548-3425 (phone) 724-545-9012 (fax) drrupert@co.armstrong.pa.us

Case Study - Bradford County Conservation District

BACKGROUND

Bradford County is a 6th class County. District Staff salaries are all administered through the County system, thus making them all "County" employees, as well as "District" employees. District Staff enjoy all the benefits of a County employee, which includes: hospitalization; holiday, vacation, and sick time; retirement package; etc. The District Manager is considered a "Department Head" by the County. The District manages all its own finances and reimburses the County for all salary and salary related costs. While the County does not contribute to the operating expenses of the District, it does provide for 100% of the salary and related costs for the Manager, Clerk and Accounts Clerk, as well as 50% of those costs for the Technician and the Ag Team Leader (who administers the Farmland Preservation Program). The District currently has 16 staff and owns and operates its own resource center.

COUNTY RELATIONSHIP

The Bradford County Conservation District has "grown" its relationship with the County on a continuous basis since its birth. The District operated for many years with little or no monetary support from the County. On the other hand, many of the Commissioners that served on the District Board were some of its most ardent supporters. The CETA program, which was administered through the County, was the source for many of the earlier District staff members. This program provided staff for a 12 to 18 month period with little or no cost to the County. Early Board meetings were usually held where ever the District could find space, often in the basement of the Courthouse.

The County picked up the first fully County funded position in the late 1970s when it agreed to help SCS with developing conservation plans by hiring a District Clerk. An early CETA funded education coordinator position was created to work extensively in the County parks. This began a day to day presence of District staff in both the County Courthouse and through interaction with various County departments. When the CETA program was terminated, the District Board went as a group to the County Commissioners to request a second County funded position, the District Manager. This was granted.

One of the recognized tasks for the Manger is to provide a day to day interaction with the County. The District places a high priority on this relationship for its board members as well as the staff. One of the keys to the growing relationships between the County and District is that the District is always willing to serve on the various County committees and initiatives and provide resources where it can. The County Comprehensive Plan, the Open Space Greenways Plan, the Natural Areas Inventory, the Hazard Mitigation Plan; are all examples of committees that the District provides representation on. The presence of District representation at all regional and municipal

initiatives also helps create the awareness of the value of District participation and functionality.

Budget presentations to the County have focused on the resources that are leveraged by the District through support provided by the County. County Commissioners are briefed on the District activities on a regular basis and are solicited for their advice and guidance on most new District initiatives. Long Range, Strategic and Annual work plans are shared with the County Commissioners and other County Department Heads are solicited for their input.

Interaction with other County departments is also a priority for the District, thus integrating the District more completely in the County operation. The District can often provide resources, information and assistance to these other County programs. Examples include working on some of the above cited initiatives, providing training for tax assessment field people on wetlands and other land uses, and sharing resource information with the Planning Commission.

As District capability began to grows, so does interest by the County in utilizing that capability to help achieve its goals. The District has taken on the responsibilities for such programs as the Farmland Protection Program and the West Nile Virus Program at the request of the County.

The District sees its relationship with the County as a day to day responsibility. While tied intimately together, both sides of the relationship understand the strength of the mutual independence. The County Initiative under Growing Greener II is an example where the District is assisting the implementation of a County Project through a contract with the County. Part of the key to an "institutionalized" relationship has been the emphasis on getting to know the different County Commissioner Boards and County Department Heads and staff on a one to one basis. Elected officials are recognized as both having constituents and being constituents of the District.

"Team Building" events, such as District banquets, picnics, retreats, committee meetings and planning meetings always include an invitation to County officials. Credit for accomplishments is always shared with the District's partners, especially its County partners.

For more information contact:

Mike Lovegreen, District Manager Bradford County Conservation District R.R. #5, Box 5030C Towanda, PA 18848 (570) 265-5539 ext. 120 mike.lovegreen@pa.nacdnet.net

Case Study - Clearfield County Conservation District

In the late 1990's, the Clearfield County Conservation District was in a difficult situation. Our Erosion and Sedimentation Technician at that time was a retired gentleman who worked part time for the District. He became ill and unable to work during a period when the District was also without a Manager. The Board of Directors decided to temporarily suspend our 102/105 Delegation Agreement with DEP. The Commissioner who served on our Board at that time then recommended that the Conservation District be dissolved. After all, he said, "What do they do to justify the allocations that we give them?" It should be noted at this point that we are an independent district. We receive monthly allocations from the Commissioners, plus housing.

That same Commissioner was not successful in his re-election, and in January of 2000 we were assigned a new Commissioner Director. This new Commissioner enjoyed outdoor activities and was very concerned about the environment. He also had a background in Public Relations. When the Board hired a new manager in May of 2000, the Manager and this Commissioner began working on a campaign to enlighten the remaining two incumbent Commissioners on the value of the Conservation District, and the valuable contribution that we made to the County.

Since some politicians primarily focus on the monetary cost of supporting a department, we began by preparing Annual Reports that focused not only on the environmental contributions in which we were involved, but also on the amount of grant funding that we were responsible for bringing into the County. We demonstrated to the Commissioners that their investment of \$32,000 in the year 2000 enabled our staff of five to obtain over \$400,000 in grants and allocations for conservation projects that would protect and preserve the natural resources of our county. Before long, the attitude towards the Conservation District started to change. We continued to keep all three commissioners advised on various projects, and made sure that we shared all of our "success stories" with them on a regular basis.

While the District Manager and staff need to be responsible for compiling information on district's accomplishments, we found that the information was better received when it came from members of the Board of Directors. A rapport was formed between our Board and the Commissioners. The Commissioners recognized and appreciated the passion and commitment that these volunteers processed, and that helped in building a positive image for our District.

I am pleased and proud to report that we now have a great working relationship with all three commissioners. Our current Commissioner Director is very involved in our District's activities, and we continue to maintain excellent communication with the other two commissioners. It's an election year again, so there is the possibility that we may have to start this whole process over again. But that's just life in the Conservation District!

For More Information Contact:

Susan Reed Clearfield County Conservation District 650 Leonard Street Clearfield, PA 16830

Phone: (814) 765 2629

Email: clfdccd@atlanticbbn.net