

# What If...You Are Building a Building

## A White Paper For Conservation Districts

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Facilitator notes:

*This outline and attendant case studies is the capture of the thoughts and feelings of three dedicated district managers on a topic they all have had experience with. The record here in is meant to set the stage for “What if... You Wanted to Build a District Building”*

*The format is meant to be broad brush and then burrow down to more complex and dynamic issues. This is not an exhaustive analysis but merely an attempt to outline some of the implications of taking on the task of working on a building.*

**Disclaimer:**

***The views expressed here are the results of four people with experience in facilitation and building a Conservation District Building. They are by no means the final word on the subject. We have made every effort to be as thorough as possible but make no claim as to the completeness of this checklist nor do we take any responsibility, no matter what you think we may think, that your experience will be the same or successful as a result of using this information. We offer this treatise as a starting point for your explorations and hopefully it will help in your navigation of the pitfalls of “Building your own....”***

## **Overview --The WHY**

Many districts have expressed interest in or asked questions about the topic of building to own their office. This paper will explore those issues most germane to the topic of planning, funding, building and maintaining an office building. We have attempted to include as many of the issues as our authorities (District Managers with experience) had building a Conservation District Home. The following points highlight the reason for exploring the topic in the first place and set the stage for further dialog and research. The interest and questions asked on this topic have been the main reason to explore this issue. Many of the factors that Conservation District must contend with are addressed here with the caveat that every situation is different, every district is unique, and every site has different conditions that must be addressed.

The increased complexity of district operations and the need for many different types of workspace including offices, conference rooms, reading rooms, kitchen/break room, labs, utility and storage space make it very challenging to say the least. We have included a list of considerations and challenges that would be a good starting point for a District Board of

Directors. We would suggest that this is only a starting point and many more issues will most likely surface as the explorations continue.

The most important question to ask, and explore deeply and frankly would be the capacity of your board to plan and organize a project of this magnitude. Honest questions and truthful answers during this concept stage are critical to success and can't be stressed enough.

So with that introduction you should review the list below and ask those right questions of why should we build a building.

- 1) Because of interest and need.
- 2) Increased complexity of district operations & the need for diversity of space: Education, conference, reading rooms, wet labs, kitchen/breakrooms, utility/storage space.
- 3) Need for independence – voluntary or not.
- 4) Capacity of the district to organize, raise funds, plan for and vision the future of the District.
- 5) Visibility with the public.
- 6) Why you shouldn't: operating costs, capability, buy-in & ownership.
- 7) Importance of a thorough planning process (slow down!)
- 8) Each one (project) will be different.
- 9) If you take the risk & it's done right – HUGH REWARDS!!

## **Overall Things to Consider – The WHAT**

This section will be most helpful for districts considering the idea of building their own building. Once you've decided to go for it these are the fundamental questions to ask and be aware of as the concept is developed. The managers, our authorities, felt these were the most important issues that need to be honestly answered as a district implements a building from concept to plan to construction. These are meant to stimulate conversations on the big picture. Each one of these topics will be explored in detail further on in this white paper.

- 1) Demonstrated need, it's part of an overall plan/vision with Two Parts (must be built in):
  - i) Internal – thought out, do **we** need a building.
  - ii) External – community needs
- 2) Planning & evaluation:
  - i) Type of building – owner built, rehab., turn-key
  - ii) Costs & Financing

- 3) Identify & get Buy-in from partners – Farm Service Agency, Natural Resource Conservation Service, Cooperative Extension, County Gov.
- 4) “Champion” – everyone may say yes, but a “sparkplug” and cheerleader (project nag/bulldog) is a primary component for success.
- 5) Design Package – Preliminary concept to final as-builts. Rework, review, revise in stages and as the plan develops.
- 6) Site Evaluation/Criteria:
  - a) Location
  - b) Aspect (direction building faces)
  - c) Slope
  - d) Soils
  - e) Stormwater - Walk the Talk?
- 7) Business plan including financial package
- 8) Construction – General Contractor or Turn-key
- 9) Maintenance & Operations
- 10) All of this requires communication – talk to partners

So these are the big picture questions and issues that must be considered. Each one of them will be developed further.

All of these questions or ideas need to be considered as part of the beginning planning for a building. As these ideas are developed more questions will surely come to mind. Again we will stress that each situation is unique and needs the creative application of communication and consensus. Remember, the districts that have been successful doing this have for the most part looked at most of these as opportunities not limitations.

With this matrix the necessary information can be assembled to reliably fulfill the vision of building your own space to house district operations. As we explore this do not get discouraged. It is important to remember that the impossible is sometimes what we are asked to do and to better frame the idea we need to switch to possibility thinking. When you get stuck and start thinking it's impossible remember to ask yourself: “If this was possible what would it look like?” or “how will we do this?” Let's start with the first one on the manager's list.

## **The Details – the HOW**

### **#1 Demonstrating the Need –**

Is it a vision from your long range plan? Have we answered the question early on “Is a building necessary to fulfill the mission of our district?” If you can answer this affirmatively then these are the next set of questions and ideas that will need development.

- 1) Service Center expectations & needs
- 2) Problems with existing situation?
- 3) Current situation w/ county, state, federal partners
- 4) Rate of growth – staff, budgets, programs
- 5) Marketing Survey – Public Meetings
- 6) Community/Client needs
- 7) District & Partner needs
- 8) One stop shopping/service for clients/public
- 9) Evaluate the functions of your partners – both real & potential
- 10) Reality vs/& Vision – make it an opportunity.
- 11) History of your housing/space
- 12) Future availability of housing (where will you be in 5 years or 10 anyway)
- 13) Impacts (good/bad) on existing programs and clients
- 14) Future stability of district staff and partner needs

### **#2 Planning & Evaluation –**

The planning and evaluation of the project will for the most part be done in iterations. First considerations will lead to further need and will identify what needs to be accomplished. The early development of a team attitude and structure will allow for division of labor and responsibilities. The sparkplug/champion will be tested in their leadership skills to keep the plan progressing and moving forward. This can be accomplished by a series of iterations of plan, evaluate, then replan and reevaluated. So answer this next round of questions, seek assistance to build strength in your partnerships and persevere.

- 1) Agency/Partner space in these categories:
  - a) How much do they/you want
  - b) How much can they/you pay for
- 2) Types of space:
  - a) Office
  - b) Education
  - c) Conference
  - d) reading rooms

- e) wet labs
- f) kitchens/break room
- g) utility/storage space
- 3) Once you have the Sq. Ft. then -- get the costs by: architect, contractors, Do It Yourself, hybrids. Some managers hired an architect, others worked directly with a contractor still others did it themselves or used a combination of these methods
- 4) Back to partners w/average \$/sq.ft. (remember to keep competitive rates for fed and state partners) . Past utility bills can help with estimates of maintenance costs needed for the rental rates.
- 5) Who pays? Major Players. Renters, County, Pizza shop? Will your federal/state partners pay for all the space or will you have county support or need to rent space to private businesses to foot the bill?
- 6) Function or Form – what can you build for us – use hybrid from input from arch, general contractor, builders, community volunteers.
- 7) Remember - The more you spend the more time and input will be necessary.
- 8) Evaluate options with board & obtain commitment from team
- 9) Evaluate costs of maintenance & operation for the design and review, rework, revise
- 10) Donations for design, time, materials: arch, contractors, suppliers?
- 11) Need for Labor & Industry for commercial/public buildings.
- 12) Co. Commissioners support/champion. They are KEY PLAYERS. But the District must maintain accountability
- 13) Maintain/consider autonomy?
- 14) Location-location-location

### **#3 Buy-In from Partners –**

As in any endeavor requiring complex relationships with agencies and diverse groups of people the buy-in from the partners is essential for success. The list provided will assist in developing and strengthening this partnership linkage.

- 1) Lease details (catch 22) negotiate leases (rates/terms) concurrent with financing and construction
- 2) Commitment from local, state, federal partners
- 3) Level of commitment? How long?
- 4) Requirements of ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) code
- 5) How to maintain participation all the way through to end
- 6) Donations: Legal, Construction, Design, Oversight
- 7) Conflicts of interest with Directors and Donors
- 8) Prepare for, expect, and ask for snowballing donations, discounts and support.

- 9) Working with municipal & county entities – land development, building permits, zoning, Erosion & Sedimentation Control.

#### **#4 Ownership –**

The question of ownership is a big one. The responsibility of ownership needs to be carefully considered and all options weighed. Will your district manager have the interest, drive and skills necessary to manage the maintenance and daily operation? Will you hire a manager for the building? Will the County assume ownership and the responsibility of day to day operations? In a sense this will be a subset of business plan/finance package. Here are some of the options and considerations:

- District outright
- County
- Trust
- Authority – Municipal Authority, Economic/Industrial Development
- Private
- Our any combinations thereof?

Consider these risks

- Financing
- Liability
- Insurance
- Maintenance & Operation
- Administration – Policy, use, staffing, scheduling, accounting

#### **#5 Project Champions (sparkplug) –**

These are some of the qualities and skills that a project champion must have to see the project through. This is not a definitive list and is not the description of one person, but is a way to identify and understand if the Board of Directors has the capacity to build a building and then operate it.

- 1) High level of commitment – long term
  - a) Directors, staff, volunteers, donors
- 2) Willing to go over, around and through walls and obstacles
- 3) Cheerleader
- 4) Level of expertise – finance, contracting, communication design
  - a) Common sense
  - b) or knows some who.....
- 5) Decision making core – empowered by the board/partnership
- 6) Burn-out, loss of staff.

7) Clarifies expectations – builds ownership.

### **#6 Site Evaluation –**

Now we are getting to the building itself. What will it look like, where will it be, how can we fit our vision to the site. The assumption here is we have truthfully answered all the background and supporting questions and now we have the commitment and necessary partnerships to actually start designing.

- 1) Clear purpose - what are we building here – long term plan for needs
- 2) Location – access for public, central to service area
- 3) Size of site – parking, expansion, demo sites.
- 4) Environmental impacts – weigh and compare with two sites
- 5) Compatible with mission/vision of District.
- 6) Old vs new
- 7) Land Costs
- 8) Utilities – near, what types
- 9) Impacts – walk the talk - positive and negative.
- 10) Access and visibility
- 11) Site capability characteristics:
  - a) Slope
  - b) Exposure
  - c) Soils
  - d) Aspect (direction building faces)
  - e) Run-off
  - f) Etc
- 12) What are we forgetting? Consult as many people as possible to review and assist with concept and design.

### **#7 Design Package –**

The following list assumes you have a suitable site and have done your homework to get this far. This must be done early on. Keep your board members informed, partners engaged and ask for help at every step.

- 1) Selection of Architect/designer compatible with District Mission
- 2) Include design team – a steering committee composed of partners, owners, staff, architect, contractors, community.
- 3) Address your occupant’s needs
- 4) Green Option – “practical green”, LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) Certification?
- 5) Long term Maintenance & Operation - consider payback
- 6) “good” evaluation of alternatives



- a) cost benefit analysis
- b) question all numbers
- c) site visits - go look at other district buildings, ask questions
- 7) Americans with Disabilities Act, Labor & Industry, and Uniform Construction Code Consistency
- 8) Will it be Turn-key or Do It Yourself: Developer, Architect, Design Team
- 9) Preliminary to Final requires several (many) iterations.
- 10) Need escape clauses – don’t be afraid to walk away from a bad plan or idea.
- 11) Project would include all aspects of:
  - a) Access
  - b) Parking
  - c) Stormwater
  - d) Design for expansion
  - e) Storage space: dead and real
  - f) Outbuildings/Sheds
  - g) LID/BMP demos

### **#8 Business Plan with financial package –**

This is the package that will help to “sell the product.” It’s a Catch 22. In order to sell it you have to have the design and order to get the design you have to sell it. Another case of iterations, each time around you get more detail more commitment, more complexity. You also get a better product with less likelihood of DUC’s (dynamic unforeseen consequences) appearing. Here is what you might have in or use to develop your business plan.

- 1) Ownership (see list)
- 2) Costs
  - a) Building
  - b) Utilities
  - c) Maintenance & Operation
  - d) Insurance
  - e) ?
- 3) Finance
  - a) Capital Campaign - War chest for capital improvements
  - b) Sinking Fund allocate \$ to reduce big ticket items
  - c) Straight finance
  - d) District backing – Municipal bonds
- 4) Income > than costs?!! Rental for meeting rooms vs service to the community (Buy-in?, we will provide you this opportunity to partner if you provide this service, donation, expertise, etc)
- 5) Good legal expertise – Co. Solicitor, District – on retainer?
- 6) Budget considerations kept separate from District operations.

- 7) Cash Flow - debt service?
- 8) Grants / Public \$\$
- 9) Administration of funding?

### **#9 Construction Considerations –**

Now we are finally getting somewhere! We're building this building. Here's where the hard work you put into concept design and financial planning start to show some results. But we are also just beginning so....more questions, more decisions, and each one will now show how carefully you paid attention to the details in the early planning. Remember if the foundation is square and level to start the roof line will have a much higher probability of being square and level when you finish.

- 1) Bid vs non-bid (based on source of project \$\$)
- 2) Prevailing wage
- 3) Design & build
- 4) General Contractor with subs
- 5) Management of construction budget
- 6) Construction Oversight - certification and documentation
- 7) As-builts and manuals (including warrantee paperwork) for all equipment and fixtures
- 8) Time tables (with penalties)
- 9) Material specs
- 10) Change orders
- 11) Payment schedules
- 12) Penalty clauses
- 13) Local and state code inspections
- 14) Bonding and insurance
- 15) Coordination and communication
- 16) Clerk of the works – construction manager who makes day to day decisions.

### **#10 Maintenance and Operations –**

Day to Day. This is where we need clear commitment and understanding between our partners and owners. It also is where many plans do not meet the expectations of the district. These day to day issues can make or break a partnership, cause strife and bad feelings. Clear understanding of who does what and what those expectations are and how to accomplish them is very necessary.

- 1) Cleaners – payroll or contract
- 2) Grounds Keepers

- 3) County Responsibility
- 4) Emergencies – who fixes the toilet
- 5) Snow removal – plow and shovel
- 6) Security – open versus closed facility sections, outside lighting, bouncer
- 7) Scheduling – meeting rooms and grounds
- 8) Periodic maintenance – rugs, shampooing, painting, changing the light bulbs etc.
- 9) Utility cost increases can cause lease strain
- 10) HVAC (Heating & Air Conditioning) Maintenance
- 11) Lawn mowing gardening
- 12) Who changes the lights in the parking lot
- 13) Land lord responsibilities
  - a) complaint department
  - b) leasing and marketing
  - c) policy administration
  - d) vector control
  - e) ?
- 14) Parking lot issues
- 15) Information Technology – computer, phones, equipment
- 16) Property manager
- 17) Meeting room set-up tear down
- 18) ????

## **Conclusion**

Well now, we’ve gone through quite a list of important details, some of them very broad brush – the vision of the future of your Conservation District to details that often don’t get mentioned in a plan - who cleans the toilets. Each one of them is critical to the success of your dream to own your own building. If you have answered these questions truthfully and explored your options thoroughly you will be well on your way to fulfilling the dream. Remember what we said at the outset, we didn’t write this as a definitive treatise of Buildings but as a starting point and an outline for things to consider. It is our hope that this white paper has helped you organize the necessary information you will need to facilitate that process. We have also included three case studies from the district managers that helped with this white paper that describes their experiences in doing just this. So we would invite you to contact them if you have any questions or would like to visit their facilities and explore further with them the topic we’ve covered.

## **CONSERVATION DISTRICT OWNED AND OPERATED BUILDING CASE STUDY – BRADFORD COUNTY**

### **OVERVIEW:**

The Bradford County Conservation District, independently owns and operates a 11,700 square foot office building that serves as Service Center. The building houses the District, NRCS, FSA, RC&D, and Bur. of Forestry. It is situated on approximately 3 acres of ground.

### **HISTORIC OVERVIEW (PLANNING, FINANCING AND CONSTRUCTION):**

The District began the process in the mid 80's when it became apparent that the current space being utilized by the Service Center occupants needed more space. The District, realizing the potential income from the federal and state agencies would be sufficient to finance a building project, began investigation of the possibilities. The project was further enhanced by the offer of a farmer/veterinarian to donate a piece of property, centrally located in the County, as a thank you to the farming community.

Early talks with commercial builder and architects proved to be too expensive. The District realized that it could only charge so much for rental in order to remain competitive in securing the agencies leases. The District requested local contractors/builders to submit concept design and estimated costs related. District personnel then combined the best of all the concept designs and designed their own building. A local architect donated time to provide input, develop the drawings and building spec package and secure Labor and Industry approval.

Financing was accomplished by the District through the sale of District issued municipal bonds, which were purchased by a local bank. The security provided for the bonds were the lease agreements with the agencies. Leases were advertised by the agencies and bid on by the District in a tight, concerted effort.

District staff provided the day to day construction oversight. Volunteers and donating contractors provided site prep and landscaping. Total cost for the completed 6,000 square foot building was \$187,000.00 in 1989. The building is wood frame with steel siding. Natural gas heat, private well and public sewer are utilized. Multiple air and heating units were installed to reduce energy for distribution.

The District renegotiated the financing several years later to a lower rate. A 24 foot by 60 foot addition was added a number of years latter. The entire debt load on the building was retired seven years after the initial construction. In 2003-4 a 72 by 60 foot second addition was added along with additional parking.

### **UNIQUE FEATURES / CHARACTERISTICS:**

- ✓ In house approach to design, permitting, construction and construction supervision.
- ✓ Unique financing utilizing municipal bonds and later converting to tax exempt loans
- ✓ Close working relationship with volunteers such as architects, lawyers, contractors, etc.
- ✓ Coordinated approach to lease procurement from federal and state agencies

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## **CONSERVATION DISTRICT OWNED AND OPERATED BUILDING CASE STUDY – DAUPHIN COUNTY**

### **OVERVIEW:**

The Dauphin County Conservation District, independently owns and operates the 14,300 square foot Dauphin County Agriculture & Natural Resource Center. The Center houses the Conservation District, Penn State Cooperative Extension, NRCS and FSA. The site is 11 acres in size.

### **HISTORIC OVERVIEW (PLANNING, FINANCING AND CONSTRUCTION):**

Planning for the DCANRC began in the early 80's with a vision of increased office space and co-located agencies to better serve the farm community. The road was not smooth or easy with many obstacles being encountered. The persistence of several District Directors combining with the support of the Commissioner Director led to the Center being dedicated in December 1987. The original building was 11,800 sq. ft. and included 3 meeting rooms that were available to organizations and agencies whose purpose and function related to agriculture or natural resources. The meeting rooms could accommodate 25 people, 40 people and 200 people respectively.

Criteria for locating the Center established that if possible, it should be centrally located with equal driving times to the far corners of the County. This criteria was met when 11 acres of land was graciously donated to the District.

The County Commissioners pledged \$250,000 with a challenge to the District Directors to match the amount. Fund raising from businesses and individuals proved to be more difficult than originally anticipated and fell significantly short of the \$250,000 goal. A District Director who was a well respected auctioneer established an annual consignment auction with all profits going to the Center. In addition to the auction income, the Pennsylvania Land Improvement Contractors Association teamed up with local equipment dealers to hold several demonstration work days that provided over \$110,000 in site work at no cost to the District. District staff combined with volunteers from many sporting and environmental organizations to install site amenities and landscaping at minimal cost. The District Directors borrowed \$530,000 from a bank to permit construction of the building. The estimated value of the building and land was 1.2 million dollars. The rent paid by the 3 other agencies and an annual contribution from the County pays for all overhead expenses including the loan repayment.

The Center is a wood frame construction with cedar shake and vinyl siding. The heating and air conditioning is electric heat pumps. An on site well and sand mound provide for our water and septic needs.

In 2000, the Center was expanded by 2,500 sq. ft. to provide additional office space for both the District and Penn State Cooperative Extension. Difficulties were encountered as the General Contractor for the expansion project declared bankruptcy. This is noted to highlight the importance of adequate bonding and proper representation by an architect and legal counsel. In 2005, the site was developed as a Stormwater Best Management Practice Demonstration Park. BMP's such as porous paving, infiltration tanks, turf pavers, etc. were added to show practical methods of reducing stormwater runoff and treating stormwater runoff.

### **UNIQUE FEATURES / CHARACTERISTICS**

- \* Meeting room use exceeded expectations with as many as 500 meetings in a year
- \* Site BMP Stormwater Demonstration Project
- \* Unique and innovative ways of sustaining the project when conventional fund raising failed

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**WESTMORELAND CONSERVATION DISTRICT (WCD)  
OFFICE/CENTER FOR CONSERVATION EDUCATION  
CASE STUDY**

**OVERVIEW:** The WCD planned, fundraised, designed, built, and operates an 8,000 sq. ft. facility that serves as office space for 20 staff and volunteers and contains a resource library (900 sq. ft.) and Conservation Education Center (seating capacity of 75-100 people). The structure is a “practical” green building and is an adaptive reuse of a traditional Pennsylvania Bank Barn. Our campus is situated on County property and is comprised of the Barn and the Donohoe Center (12,000 sq. ft.) which contains FSA, RD, NRCS, FPP and PSCES. In addition, the County has acquired and WCD will operate a neighboring 20,000 sq. ft. building called DreamGreen. WCD will sublease the DreamGreen building to the Progress Fund (tourism promotion), WPCAMR, RC&D, PA CleanWays, NRCS Soil Scientists and other conservation groups. Our 5 acre campus contains a 120 tree arboretum, wind turbine, solar panels and many conservation demonstrations. WCD also operates a 60 acre nature park with 4 miles of trail.

**PLANNING/FINANCING/DESIGNING/BUILDING/OPERATING:** WCD moved into Donohoe Center in 1994. We quickly outgrew our space. Our 1992 and 1997 Long Range Plans both identified conservation education as the number one priority in Westmoreland County. Public and cooperating agency involvement in our meetings, planning sessions and surveys verified the need for our new facility. The project rapidly grew in scope as needs were identified and soon a multi-thousand dollar job became a multi-million dollar endeavor. We realized that this project was too large for one person to handle and so we established several teams to take on the various aspects of the work.

**Leadership Team** – The District Board took on the leadership role and had a unified vision for the project. The County Commissioners were briefed on the project early on and were very supportive of it. The leadership team consisted of our Board, District Manager, key staffers, funders, and volunteers. This team kept the project ‘on message’ over its four year duration. This committed Team was willing to take on the uncertainty and risk of such a unique and untried program.

**Planning Team** – At the first planning meeting, with the help of an outside consultant, it was decided that the building would be very unique and would “walk the conservation talk.” Building with conservation in mind starts with a teamwork approach to planning. Instead of operating separately, the Center’s architect, engineers, staff, volunteers, funders, and contractors all spent time at the table together before the first shovel of earth was turned. They agreed on common goals for the project and worked together to design and build integrated systems that achieve those goals.

**Fundraising Team** – Consisting of the District Chairman, District Manager, grant writing consultant, foundations person, and communications consultant, this team made the personal contacts necessary to raise \$1.5 million in cash, in-kind services, and donated materials. This team functioned over the duration of the project as it continued to evolve and expand. The Team secured ‘bridge’ loans from a local bank to enable the operations to proceed while other funds were gathered. Ongoing fundraising efforts aid in sustaining the programs, operations and maintenance of the Barn.

**Construction Team** – The day to day oversight of building construction fell to a team consisting of a volunteer Associate Director who served as our Prime Contractor, District technical staff, and a few volunteer developers and building professionals who ‘consulted’ in their specific areas of expertise. Local contractors were hired and also donated men, materials, and machines for the project as they began to understand its value.

**O & M Team** – The unique nature of the building requires special operation and maintenance attention. The O&M Team consists of the County Maintenance Crew, District directors and staff, volunteers, and paid and volunteer contractors who share our vision of a ‘green’ facility and program.

**UNIQUE FEATURES/CHARACTERISTICS:** Reused timber frame construction, geothermal HVAC system, structural insulated panels, radiant floor heat, operational windows, water saving toilets, recycled auto tire deck materials, 3,000 gallon rainwater cistern with a solar pump, native plant landscaping, infiltration parking lots, stormwater management trail, demonstration roof rainwater garden area, reused barn stone foundation, cull and gypsy moth damaged salvaged lumber, careful siting/use of existing infrastructure, iron oxide pigment in concrete floors and window blinds, low VOC finishes, solar shading, low energy consumption fixtures.

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