**Seminole Soil and Water Conservation District’s Response to the Performance Review conducted by M&J.**

Key Takaways should read as follows –

* Seminole Soil and Water Conservation District’s Board of Supervisors is active, meeting all but one month ~~most months~~ in the review period.
* Seminole Soil and Water Conservation District has no consistent funding, resulting in limited District programs and activities but includes an annual environmental contest for students, a statewide Land Judging Contest for Future Farmers of America, a photo contest of wildlife in conservation areas, community outreach – soil health, agriculture workshops to introduce our NRCS conservationist, participation in SERVE to restore creaks, lakes, and wetlands, advocacy for conservation and related infrastructure projects, tracking and publicizing pollution events on social media, created a museum exhibit, presented information to civic groups, recognized the Ag Conservationist of the Year, provided a liaison to the Board of County Commissioners, hosted the Local Working Group for our NRCS conservationist, and participated in private well testing for residents.
* Seminole Soil and Water Conservation District has no inventory, facilities, vehicles, staff, or consistent revenues and expenditures. The District’s operations are sometimes ~~all~~ conducted in conjunction with other public entities and the District’s contributions to these events is usually to organize and lead the event, ~~are typically~~ volunteering Supervisor time rather than funding.

**Programs and Activities on page 7 and Service Delivery page 11 –**

Only Envirothon and private well testing, are listed. M&J dropped the recognition of Agricultural Workshops in previous versions on page 7. Twice the Seminole Soil and Water District has supplied M&J with a complete list, twice, M&J has inaccurately stated only three and now two activities.

The American Institute of Certified Public Accountants has a Code of Ethics with includes Article V Due Care – *.04 Members should be diligent in discharging responsibilities to clients, employers, and the public. Diligence imposes the responsibility to render services promptly and carefully,* ***to be thorough,*** *and to observe applicable technical and ethical standards.*

**Be advised that if this list is, again, left incomplete, the Seminole Soil and Water Conservation Board will file an ethics complaint with the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants against M&J.**

1. Envirothon

Envirothon is an outdoor competition in which students develop hands-on skills related to aquatic ecology, forestry, soil and land use, wildlife, and other current environmental issues.

1. **Land Judging Contest**

The Land Judging Contest is a statewide competition for students who participate in Future Farmers of America. It is hosted by different counties each year to give students a variety of soils to examine. These students are expected to know the science of healthy soil in preparation for their entry into an agricultural profession. Approximately 250 students attended the event.

1. **Wildlife Photo Contest**

As a result of the popularity of the images of wild animals captured by the five trail cameras owned by the District, The wildlife images attracted citizens to our FaceBook page. The District held a Wildlife Photo Contest, awarding prizes, and displaying the winning photos in the County Commission Building, where they continue to hang today. Seminole County residents were surprised and amazed at the variety of wildlife that still remains in our conservation areas.

1. **Local Working Group**

In 2021, 2021, and 2024 the NRCS conservationist was required to hold a local working group with agricultural producers in Seminole County to determine the spending priorities for the Farm Bill programs.

1. Private Well Water Testing

The District tests private wells to screen for bacteria and other contaminants. Private well owners who attend meetings at the Geneva Citizens Association can bring water samples to be tested. The District provides the water testing service in coordination with a Water Resource Specialist from the University of Florida’s Institute of Food and Agriculture Sciences Seminole Extension office.

1. **Community Outreach**

The district has a table at several community events each year including: EarthFest in Casselberry, the Arbor Day tree give away in Oviedo, and the Great Day in the Country in Oviedo. Typically, the supervisors hand out information about soil health. Children dig in a box of soil to find earthworms which they take home. No other group promotes healthy soil.

1. **Agriculture Workshops**

The District holds a variety of workshops on topics such as pasture management and dealing with invasive or poisonous plants. Supervisors speak at some of these workshops, while external speakers are brought in for others like the pasture management workshop. What differentiates this from IFAS/ Extension programs is that we mailed postcards to every ag producer in Seminole County. The ulterior motive was to introduce producers to our conservationist.

1. **The SERVE Program**

District Supervisors participate in the Seminole County SERVE Program as leaders of small groups of volunteers, typically students. SERVE cleans out creek beds, restores wetlands, and removes invasive plants from lakes and waterways.

1. **Advocacy for Conservation and Related Infrastructure**

District Supervisors have relationships with other elected officials, Stakeholders, and civic groups. We use the opportunities afforded to us to advocate for the protection of environmentally sensitive lands and critical infrastructure projects that serve our goals of water quality and water conservation.

1. **Track Pollution in Seminole County using DEP data**

While many urban areas contribute non-point source pollution, fertilizer run off, to our already impaired waterways, one of our municipalities, in particular, has sewage spills. One of the Supervisors takes the data from the DEP website where the location in given in latitude and longitude, and translates the location to a point on a map making it easier for residents to understand. The sewage spills which affect that lake contribute to toxic algae blooms during parts of the year. The SSWCD is interested in tracking this because cattle drink the water from that same lake. The map and description of the spill are posted on the Districts’ Facebook Page.

1. **SSWCD Celebrated its 75th birthday**

We sifted through our archives and worked with the Seminole History Museum to create an exhibit and hold a birthday party. The exhibit that our Supervisors created remained on display for the following month.

1. **Recognized the Ag Conservationist of the Year**

We created an award for the Ag Conservationist of the Year and presented it for the first time. This award was requested by our district conservationist. He chose the recipient.

1. **Presented information about the Seminole Soil and Water Conservation District to two civic groups.**

One group was only a 5 minute talk, for the other, we were the main speaker for the evening. The 20-minute presentation was followed by 30 minutes of questions and discussion.

1. **Providing a liaison to the Board of County Commissioners**

Our Supervisor conducted two presentations for the entire Board and met often with individual Commissioners about

items on upcoming agendas

**I.D: Intergovernmental Interactions on page 7 is significantly incomplete.**

SSWCD provided a complete list on August 1, 2024.

Congressman for the 7th District, Cory Mills, City of Longwood, University of Florida’s Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences Extension Office, Natural Resource Conservation Service, Osceola and Orange Soil and Water Conservation Districts, Seminole County Sheriff’s Office, Seminole State College, Oviedo, Seminole Board of County Commissioners, The City of Oviedo, The City of Sanford, Calno (Community Leaders and Elected Officials)

SSWCD described the interaction with each in the August 1, 2024 communication.

**I.E: Resources for Fiscal Year 2022 – 2023**

 **Figure 3 – FY23 Finances**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Revenues** | **Expenditures** | **Long-term Debt** |
| **Total for Year** | ~~$0~~ $2979.29 | ~~$0~~ $1081.20 | $0 |

**. $2717.29 $458** $0 **(Source: Interview with District Supervisors) This is false!**

 $2979.29 $1081

 (According to the transaction ledger from the bank and the Annual Financial Report)

**Recommendations:**

**New Sources of Revenue:**

**FDACS**: The District requested the contract for the Mobile Irrigation Lab. However, FDACS jumped over Seminole and awarded it to Brevard, a Board without a strategic plan, performance measures or programs and activities. The SSWCD would like to know the criteria for obtaining contracts.

**County Commission**: Funded SSWCD until 20 years ago when young, political opportunists engaged in political canvassing for one of their own running for a higher office then enjoyed pizza at the taxpayers’ expense. The BOCC is happy to provide in-kind services.

**Grant Locator**: We are working with a grant locator. She takes a 7% commission.

**Refine Strategic Plan**

Our next step in our Strategic Plan is to make sure that our plan lines up with the Comprehensive Plans from the County and the seven cities within Seminole County. Soil and Water Districts can work in all jurisdictions. We can work inside cities when the County Department of Environmental Services cannot. We will seek to collaborate with all municipalities to work towards common goals.

**Timeline for Annual Financial Report**

SSWCD just received an email from the CFO’s office telling us that we have 45 days to correct the discrepancy between the Annual Financial Report and the audit. The email referred to a DEW.

We are not required to file an audit, so how can there be a discrepancy between the Annual Financial Report and a document that we did not file? The email does not explain the acronym DEW

SSWCD will refine our timeline, but the problem exists on both sides of the equation.

**Meeting Notices**

Publishing meeting notices requires a website which will allow the calendar to be changed and documents uploaded. Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services contracts with the Association of Florida Conservation Districts to provide a website at no cost to the district - Contract Total: $534,000

At no time during the review period did SSWCD have access to a website that would allow changes to a calendar or the upload of a document.

***Regulatory Compliance:***

To be compliant, a SWCD must have:

a) knowledge of the regulation and timeline

b) possess the knowledge of how to accomplish the task and

c) have the technology that makes accomplishing the task possible.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| ***From FDACS Contract*** | ***Seminole SWCD’s Response*** |
| Deliverable #3: Respond to requests from districts for SWCD-related information. The Project Manager shall respond to all incoming requests to include the number of initial e-mail requests and telephone calls responded to, and the topic of concern. | This requirement provides the knowledge of how to accomplish the task. When a treasurer calls AFCD for help finding, logging into, or navigating LogerX to file the financial report, the response is, “call Dept of Finance”. The staff person at the Dept of Finance replies, “Read the user manual”. In contrast with the Commission of Ethics which provides assistance in complying with their regulations.  |
| Deliverable #4: Provide assistance to the SWCDs, special districts, to develop, host and maintain an official website that complies with Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) accessibility requirements, minimum content, and include links to those sites on the official website of the Association of Florida Conservation Districts. The RECIPIENT may contract with a website development company to assist with the technical aspects of developing and maintaining an official website pursuant to Chapter 189.069, F.S. **at no cost to the SWCDs.** The website must comply with and include at a minimum the following information: | This requirement provides the technology that makes accomplishing the task possible. The FDACS contract requires that SWCD’s be able to upload documents and schedule meetings on the website calendar. Seminole SWCD had three tech-savy Supervisors attempt to upload documents. When they could not – the little “wheel” just went around indefinitely. AFCD responded to requests for help by saying that technical support costs $125/hour. When the chairman asked for login and password information explaining that if unsuccessful at uploading documents, she would personally visit the FDACS contract manager, the website was miraculously healed. **AFCD controls which websites are able to upload documents and when. This is not a deficiency on the part of SWCD’s** |
| Deliverable #5: Assist SWCDs with meeting and reporting requirements. The RECIPIENT shall monitor meeting, recordkeeping, annual auditing and financial reporting requirements of the UNIFORM SPECIAL DISTRICT ACCOUNTABILITY ACT, Chapter 189, F.S.  | This requirement speaks directly to the knowledge of the regulation and the timelineHistorically this was accomplished by publishing a Supervisor’s Handbook containing a calendar of regulatory requirements and the specifics of each requirement. The handbook was last published in 2018 even though FDACS is paying AFCD to update it each year.  |  |

The SSWCD has corrected these areas now for the third time.

**Agriculture**

Cattle ranching is by far the most prevalent form of agriculture, followed by ornamentals, then cropland, orchards and timber are tied for third. Seminole County has a growing presence of Urban Ag.

Page 4 – SSWCD does not have an office.

Page 5 – Topography

**The topography of Seminole** is generally flat, with some rolling hills. The area includes 220 lakes according to the Seminole County Watershed Atlas, in addition to wetlands, springs and major rivers including the St. Johns River, the Econolatchee, the Wekiva, and the Lockhart Canal, which influence land use and conservation practices.

The region’s geology primarily consists of sandy soils, clay, and chlorides which affects agricultural productivity and water management because of salt water intrusion caused by relic sea water in our aquifer.[3](#_bookmark7)

Lake Jesup, Lake Harney, Lake Monroe, the Middle St. Johns River Basin, Smith Canal, the Wekiva River, and the Econolatchee River have Basin Management Action Plans. There are 17 drainage basins within the county, many of those basins have impaired water bodies that are not fit for swimming or ro. Lake Jessup has a health advisory for no swimming or fishing. It has toxic algae at times. The concern of the SSWCD is that cattle routinely drink from that lake.

**Comparison to Similar Services/Potential Consolidations**

None of the SSWCD programs are provided by other public and nonprofit entities within the District’s service area:

• The UF/IFAS Extension partners with the local 4-H chapter to provide agriculture, food preparation, and sewing classes ~~and conservation educational programming~~ for youth within the District’s service area, ~~and is a resource between agriculture scientists and the local community~~. 4-H does not organize an Envirothon for high school students to win scholarships, nor does it organize a statewide land judging contest for Future Farmers of America.

• NRCS provides technical advice and data collection assistance to landowners implementing conservation practices. We support NRCS by organizing a Local Working Groop (23 participants last year), creating the Ag Conservationist Award, and by assisting EQIP recipients navigate city ordinances. Furtermore, postcards are mailed to all ag producers about upcoming workshiops in order to introduce them to our NRCS conservationist.

• The Seminole County Department of Environmental Services provides the flyers that SSWCD disseminates to homeowners regarding fertilizer usage. ~~The District does not have consistent funding, and therefore, the events that the District hosts are primarily in coordination with other groups, including NRCS, UF/IFAS Extension, and other soil and water conservation districts.~~

SSWCD provides community education regarding soil health at community events, the evolving nature of Soil and Water Districts through a museum exhibit, is a resource to our County Commissioners that they choose to listen to and name as voting members to a County wide land use committee, and excites the public about conservation with a wildlife photo contest. In addition SSWCD took Department of Environmental Protection data and plotted it on a map and disseminated it on Facebook, building community support for increased water quality. DEP could do this, but they don’t. Individually, Supervisors lead teams to do hands on wetlands restoration, successfully advocate for conservation and related infrastructure, and speak to civic groups about conservation issues.

**We did all this at no cost to the taxpayer!**