

Hillsborough Soil and Water Conservation District Meeting of the Board of Supervisors

January 10, 2025 @ 10:00 AM

Location: HSWCD Office/4503 Coronet Rd/Plant City/FL/33566

Supervisors and staff in attendance: Terri Parke, (Seat 1), Gretchen Hoke, (Seat 3); Aly Sullivan (Seat 5); Special Council Tom Gonzalez; Dr. Joe Walsh (Executive Director); K. Eckdahl (Office Manager); Via Cell Phone: Betty Jo Tompkins (Seat 2).

Absent: Absent/Vacant (Seat 4).

Items 1-4

1.-4. Call to Order / Pledge of Allegiance/Introductions: As senior sitting officer from previous terms, Vice Chair Hoke called the meeting to order at 10:07 A.M.; led the Pledge of Allegiance; led the prayer; welcomed attendees; and asked for introductions.

Partner Agency and Vendor representatives in attendance: Simon Bollin, Hillsborough Agribusiness Development; Jeff Whealton, Environmental Scientist with SWFWMD; Vanessa Bauzo-Deleon, Env. Consultant, FDACS-OAWP; Diane Jones, DJ Public Relations

Public in attendance: None

Item 4a: Oaths of Office: Special Council Gonzalez led the discussion, beginning with a review of Robert's Rules of Order as it related to assignment of Officers and duties among the board members. Supervisors Hoke, Sullivan, and Parke confirmed that their Oath(s) of Office were sent to the FL Dept of Elections and a local copy was delivered to the Conservation District's Office Manager (K. Eckdahl). Supervisor Tompkins stated she had sent her signed and notarized Oath of Office to the FL Dept of Elections, per their communications to her shortly after the November election. Special Counsel Gonzalez queried Supervisor Tompkins on the notarization; both Special Counsel and the Executive Director clarified for Supervisor Tompkins and the record that a local copy of each Oath of Office must be maintained per State Statute; typically, the office staff have managed the filing of these docs, which includes being filed with the local Clerk of Court. Special Counsel Gonzalez offered to take lead in ensuring that Supervisor Tompkins paperwork was properly collected and recorded at earliest convenience, acknowledging that the State deadline of 30 days started counting down from the date the term of office began (deadline is February 8th, 2025).

Item 5: Public Comment: There were no comments offered from the public at this time. Supervisor Tompkins made a formal request of Acting Chair Hoke to allow her to make a comment at this time; Special Counsel Gonzalez advised the Acting Chair and Supervisor Tompkins that her use of this time would not be appropriate.

Item 6: Public Correspondence:

- A Public Records Request was initiated by Mrs. Terri Parke prior to her appointment as Supervisor, Seat 1. Executive Director reported (with confirmation by Office Manager Eckdahl) that this record request was progressing toward completion.
- Supervisor Elect Barrett notified the Executive Director by email that he was stepping down from his elected office with an effective date of January 5th, 2025. Supervisor Barrett cited the issue of Qualification to Serve under F.S. Chapter 582 as his reason. Executive Director forwarded the email to the Board of Supervisors and Special Counsel on January 6th, 2025, and read the email for the record at this meeting time.

Item 7, Board Officer Selections: Supervisor Hoke opened the discussion on Board Executive Officer positions. The Special Counsel and Executive Director offered to the Board that State Statute only requires 1

officer actually be identified (Chair) and under interagency agreements that position serves as the “Agency Head” for signing contracts and other agreements. Further, the Board’s Fiscal Controls only mandate that two officers must be available to countersign financial transactions based on identified thresholds. Lastly, the Executive Director shared that the previous sitting Board (2022-2024) had decided to purchase Commercial Bonds on only two officers in addition to the Executive Director. In recent years the Board had had 3 identified officers (Chair, Vice Chair, and Treasurer). Supervisor Tompkins stated that at some point in the past, the Board had had four officers (Chair, Vice-Chair, Treasurer, and Secretary). Motion: Supervisor Tompkins moved to have 4 positions for the board including: Chair, Vice Chair, Secretary, and Treasurer. Motion was not seconded.

Acting Chair Hoke moved to have 2 positions on the Board consisting of Chair and Vice Chair/Treasurer. Supervisor Parke seconded. Special Council Gonzalez clarified for the Board members that there is no rule or law designating the number of officers; he shared that he had experience with Executive Boards for which the roles of Vice Chair and Treasurer were consolidated into a single position and also pointed out that physically taking notes does not require appointment of a Secretary when staff can be delegated to perform this function. . Acting Chair Hoke brought the motion of two executive officer positions (Chair and Vice Chair) to a vote; Motion carried 3-1; Supervisors Hoke, Sullivan and Parke voted yea; Supervisor Tompkins voted nay.

Supervisor Tompkins moved to amend the Board-Officer motion to hold 3 officers including: Chair, Vice Chair and Treasurer. No second. Motion did not carry.

Special Council Gonzales said that the duties of treasurer can be amendable to the position of Vice Chair of the Board. Supervisor Parke moved to adopt the positions of Chair and Vice Chair w/the duties of Treasurer vested in the Vice Chair. Seconded by both Sullivan. Motion carried: 3-0. Supervisor Tompkins abstained.

Acting Chair Hoke nominated Supervisor Parke for Chair. Supervisor Parke accepted the nomination, and Supervisor Sullivan seconded. Supervisor Hoke nominated herself for Vice-Chair; Supervisor Sullivan seconded the nomination. Discussion points – should the nominations and votes be handled as separate motions(?); Special Counsel Gonzalez stated that it was not necessary to separate the nominations or the votes into separate items, provided the motion was clearly stated. Supervisor Hoke moved that Supervisor Parke be installed as Chair and Supervisor Hoke be installed as Vice Chair/Treasurer. Motion carried: 4-0. (*Gavel has handed to Chair Parke to conduct the remainder of the Agenda*).

Item 8: Review and Approval of Agenda/Non-Agenda Items: Non-Agenda/Old Business items - Dr Walsh requested two items left outstanding since the November 8th, 2024 meeting be addressed: 1) the matter of his pay raise had not been communicated to Hillsborough County Human Resources, and 2) the matter of the reassessment of the Executive Director’s position description had not been conveyed to Hillsborough County Human Resources by the outgoing Chair. Chair Parke committed to conveying authorization of Dr. Walsh’s pay raise at first opportunity after the meeting. Chair Parke then moved to request Hillsborough County HR reassess the job description of Executive Director to more accurately reflect the delegations, duties and market conditions with validation for changes that have occurred between the years 2015 and 2025.. Supervisor Sullivan seconded. Discussion - Supervisor Tompkins raised concerns that the purpose of the reassessment was to raise the educational requirements and inadvertently disqualify valid career growth among non-college graduate professionals. Special Council Gonzalez and Executive Director Walsh reiterated that the request was not asking for the educational requirements be raised – only that the position description and compensations be reevaluated in light of the demands of the job that came to light in 2024. Supervisor Parke made the motion that the Board send a request to Hillsborough County Human Resources to reevaluate the position of Executive Director to better reflect current duties and market conditions in 2025; motion was seconded by Supervisor Hoke; Motion carried 3-1; Supervisors Sullivan, Parke, and Hoke voted yea; Supervisor Tompkins voted nay.

Item 9: Minutes of HSWCD Board Meeting: The minutes from Nov 8, 2024 meeting were reviewed. Chair Parke moved to accept the minutes from Nov 8, 2024 meeting as presented. Supervisor Hoke seconded;

Motion carried 3-0; Supervisors Parke, Hoke and Sullivan voted yea; Supervisor Tompkins abstained (*on the grounds that she was not a Board participant at that time*).

The minutes from Dec 16, 2024 Special Meeting were reviewed. Supervisor Sullivan moved to accept the minutes from Dec 16, 2024 Special Meeting as presented. Supervisor Hoke seconded. Motion carried: 3-0; Supervisors Parke, Hoke and Sullivan voted yea;. Supervisor Tompkins abstained (*on the grounds that she was not a Board participant at that time*).

Item 10: Schedule Board Meetings for 2025 Calendar Year: Executive Director Walsh asked for a moment to summarize the previous Board's performance with its 2023-2024 meeting schedule with conventional practices of other Conservation Districts and with informal recommendations coming from Tallahassee. The previous Board's habit of scheduling on a meeting-to-meeting basis had caused hardship for Special Counsel throughout 2024, and was counter to the practice of nearly every other District that Dr. Walsh had surveyed, where the practice was to publish all of a year's meetings at the beginning of the calendar year. Supervisor Sullivan moved to adopt a recurring appointment, generally to occur on the 3rd Monday of every month at 10 AM unless the dates conflict with Public Holidays; Vice Chair Hoke seconded. Discussion – Supervisor Tompkins proposed a commitment to hold all meetings at the FSGA Event Center, with alternative time slots, and opportunities to host informal dinners after the Board meetings. Contrasting remarks pointed out the Board's enhanced conferencing capability at its new office; the frequent difficulty that external partners have with accessing the conferencing capability at the FSGA Event Center; and scheduling conflicts for younger Board officers with families. Motion to adopt a recurring appointment, generally to occur on the 3rd Monday of every month at 10 AM, unless the dates conflict with Public Holidays carried: 3-1; Supervisors Sullivan, Parke, and Hoke voted yea; Supervisor Tompkins voted nay.

Vice Chair Hoke moved to schedule the Board's 2025 meetings at the HSWCD office located on Coronet Rd in Plant City, by default; Chair Parke seconded; Motion carried: 3-1 Supervisors Sullivan, Parke, and Hoke voted yea; Supervisor Tompkins voted nay.

Item 11a: Financials: November - December 2024 Bank Accounts: Dr. Walsh reported that the Mini Farms-, Hillsborough 100-, and the Envirothon accounts were all closed and funds were deposited to the General Account. All outstanding payments authorized to be paid during the September 2024 Board Meeting were completed. He reminded the Board that the Hillsborough County budget can pay for event registrations that match the mission of the Board, which reduces the strain on the Board's fundraising activities. The Hillsborough County BOCC contribution is otherwise restricted to pay for admin and staff costs only; it cannot be used to pay for food (such as for Board-hosted luncheons) or for Board members' business travel expenses. Those latter items need to be paid for out of the Board's General Account with authorization by the delegated Board officers. Supervisor Sullivan moved to accept and file for audit the Bank statements presented. Motion carried: 3-0; Supervisors Hoke, Parke, and Sullivan voting yea;. Supervisor Tompkins abstained.

11b. FY2024 Audit: Dr Walsh reported on the status of the FY2024 Audit, which kicked off in November 2024. Drafts of the completed audit were provided by the accounting firm HCT to him and the Treasurer in December 2024, which was proposed to be presented to the Board today via the conference hub,. Director Walsh apologized for the fact that HCT was unable to make its presentation and answer Board officer questions, because District staff were unable to connect to the FSGA's conferencing hub. He pointed out that in previous years, it had been established that an annual report/audit is considered officially conveyed once the Director and Treasurer acknowledge receipt from the external auditing firm. Supervisor Tompkins moved to table audit acceptance until the next scheduled Board meeting. Supervisor Sullivan seconded. Motion carried: 4-0.

Break:10 min break was requested at 11:27 AM.

Reconvened: at 11:37 AM.

11c: Format of Financial Reports going forward: Vice Chair Hoke, Dr. Walsh, and K Eckdahl will work as a committee to establish an easy-to-present format for financial reports that includes the monthly expenses and annual burn rate encumbered to the Hillsborough County budget contribution.

12. Partner Agencies (introductions and reports)

a. FDACS – Vanessa Bauzo-Deleon, Env. Consultant, OAWP Vanessa was formally introduced as FDACS’ intergovernmental liaison for our area of the State. She informed the Board that the previous representative, Matt Warren had been promoted to a management level position over field staff. Vanessa will be working with the Board and Dr. Walsh to coordinate information sharing and help to familiarize the District with program changes in 2025.

Dr. Walsh raised the issue of the vacant Soil and Water Conservation Council to both Vanessa and to the Board. The Council has an administrative oversight role assigned to it under Chapter 582, and the void should be seen as a concern to all of the Conservation Districts, given the atmosphere within the legislature, as well as this Board’s recent instability with regard to ensuring that its officers are qualified to serve. The Board requested that Vanessa Bauzo-Deleon farm our concern upward through her management channels and report back to Dr. Walsh anything she could learn about the future of the Soil and Water Conservation Council. Supervisor Tompkins moved to have Ex Director Walsh prepare a letter formally asking both the Commissioner for Agriculture and the FDACS to reconstitute the Soil and Water Conservation Council. Chair Parke seconded. Motion carried: 4-0.

b. SWFWMD Intergovernmental Affairs – Amber Smith. Intergovernmental Liaison: Amber Smith not present/no report at this time.

c. SWFWMD FARMS Program Group – Jeff Whealton introduced himself to the Board and provided a quick overview of the FARMS program, which helps producers with groundwater conservation, weather stations, and helps to reduce groundwater usage overall. He briefly introduced the “Ag-Slim” program – this partnership between SWFWMD and NRCS is a variation on the FARMS program that Jeff manages, and which the Board historically engaged with. The Ag-SLIM version is focused on a narrower subset of applicants who are in the process of changing their farm practice from one crop to another.

Jeff asked that the Board move the inter-agency reports to an earlier spot in the agenda, out of respect for their partners’ busy schedules. Dr. Walsh acknowledged the conflict and offered to the Board and to Mr. Whealton that they would do so; they had in fact adopted the practice of earlier presentations in 2024, and today’s meeting agenda should be viewed as more of a one-off due to having to handle beginning of term business.

Lastly, Jeff brought up the Taste of Florida event scheduled for March 18-19, 2025 in Tallahassee. The event is a great opportunity for elected officials to interact with trade group officials and legislators from all over the State of Florida at a time when the legislature is considering ag-centric bills.

d. Hillsborough Agri-Business Development – Simon Bollin, Business Manager provided a brief overview of his services to producers and the agricultural land development community. Dr. Walsh added comments on his interactions with Simon and on his goals for increased cooperation between the Conservation District, Simon, the Extension Service Office and the Agricultural Economic Development Council. Dr. Walsh emphasized to the Board that the Extension Service is specifically recognized under Chapter 582 as a first go-to partner agency when developing technical services.

e. USDA/NRCS – no representative present at this time; Dr Walsh made note that currently the Plant City NRCS inter-agency positions are all vacant.

13. Director’s Report:

- a. Strategic Plan- due September 30, 2025. Dr. Walsh shared with the new Board officers that over the last several months, he had been treating public relations as a necessary early activity in support of developing a strategic plan. He also pointed out for the Board that they must have adopted and report on performance measures and goals by December 1st, 2025..
- b. Budget: Dr. Walsh introduced the Board to the County, State and Federal Budget cycles, and made them aware that the County's amendment needs to be received in the late February-early March time frame. Although not properly executed in recent years, the Board is supposed to formally request its budget amendment. Dr. Walsh suggested that the Board needs to be familiar with the major categories of expense identified in the Hillsborough County Operating Budget and assist him in rearranging it for FY 2025-26, and specified that he is asking for a Board-signed cover letter this year.
- c. Informal agreement with NRCS: The NRCS has a mandate to receive stakeholder input to their proposed annual Cost-Share allocations through a "Local Working Group" each year. Their schedule calls for "one meeting" to occur no later than April of each year, and where local conservation districts exist, the Conservation District is asked to coordinate/facilitate the meeting. Dr. Walsh shared that there had been poor execution in recent years and stakeholder attendance had dropped off precipitously in the last two years. Dr. Walsh had consulted with NRCS (Albarran and Diaz-Alvarez) who shared concerns with the previous format of the meeting. Dr. Walsh indicated that he wanted to eventually get to two meetings a year, whether specifically supported by NRCS for the second, or not, and to wanting better management of the stakeholder communication (both in and out).

14. Update on Public Relations Plan: Dr. Walsh reintroduced Diane Jones (DJones Public Relations) and turned the discussion over to her.. Diane shared the results of her interviews with Director Walsh, Supervisors Hoke and Sullivan and former Supervisor Morris. Her key take-aways from those conversations was that the Board needs to focus its communications on agency mission, preservation of Agriculture, and Youth Education over the long term, and target legislators and farmers in the short term to ensure buy-in toward maintaining the District as an agency.. Diane stressed one point – that creating a public relations message really demands that the Board already have a Strategic Plan well developed, and that in terms of timing, the Board is not now ready for a polished Public Relations Plan. She requested meetings to occur very soon with Chair Parke and Supervisor Tompkins. Chair Parke moved that Staff continue to work with Jones in 2025 on a PR plan to be presented to the Board for consideration. Vice Chair Hoke seconded. Motion carried: 4-0.

15. Upcoming Business Schedule: Dr. Walsh presented a draft list of action items and events for the next several months in the Agenda. Items requiring the most immediate attention are the filing of the Board officers with the Department of Economic Opportunity/Special Districts Office and the Commission on Ethics; and arrangements for the Fresh From Florida Breakfast (February 6th). He noted also that a hiring offer had been presented to the preferred candidate for the Community Liaison position, and he was waiting to hear back from them.

16. Supervisor Group & Individual Photos of Supervisors: Dr. Walsh requested new Supervisors send a photo and short summary bio to soilandwater@hcfl.gov in order for the information to be posted on the HSWCD website. A group photo was tabled until the next board meeting.

Continued from 6. Public Correspondence: Vice Chair Hoke moved to advertise the recently vacated Supervisor Seat 4 position for appointment with an application window to be closed on February 10, 2025. Supervisor Tompkins seconded. Motion carried: 4-0.

17. Adjournment: Chair Parke adjourned the meeting 1:05 PM

Next Board Meeting:

February 10, 2025 @ 10 AM

HSWCD Office 4503 Coronet Rd/Plant City/FL 33566

