



REPORT ON MCCD

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By Paula Heeschen for Brodhead Watershed Association

Board mired in manure and more minutiae

“Pick a little, talk a little, pick a little, talk a little, pick pick pick, talk a lot, pick a little more.”

Those lyrics from the Broadway hit “The Music Man” reflect the approach some members of the Monroe County Conservation District board show toward the district’s professional staff. They’re so deep into the picking part they can’t see that, in fact, staff members are just doing their jobs.

At Oct. 18’s board meeting, one board member cross-examined staff members about an item on the technical report for September: an odor complaint about chickens. The law requires district staff to respond to such complaints within five days, so they did, coordinating with the township zoning officer. The chicken owner was complying with the law, so nothing happened.

The board member wasn’t satisfied. A lengthy discussion followed regarding manure management plans — what kinds of operations require them, who creates them, what’s in them. District Manager Adam Schellhammer pointed out that the district offers free manure management seminars to assist farmers.

“It seems to me we’re getting a little heavy-handed,” board member Charlie Garris, a county commissioner, commented.

“Talk to your legislators,” Shane Kleiner, the district’s liaison with the state Department of Environmental Protection, suggested, noting of the staff that “we have to follow the law.”

The chicken complaint resurfaced an hour or so later when yet another board member voiced his aggravation that district board had spent time discussing odor reports while his repeated charges that the state Department of Transportation is not keeping salt, chemicals and mud out of area streams go unaddressed.

“The board has authority to address those things that are concerns within your county,” Kleiner said, but “knowing the process is important.”

Kleiner and associate board member Janet Weidensaul expressed frustration that board President Joe Hanyon, citing board members’ inability to attend, canceled a round table meeting they had planned with DEP and the state Conservation Commission for October.

The canceled meeting aimed to clarify what the district staff’s responsibilities are and how the DEP works with the professional staff and the board. That shared information, Kleiner said, could clarify many of the questions that crop up — sometimes repeatedly — during board meetings. And board members could convey their specific concerns, including state roads’ impact on streams, to DEP.

The board then revisited the issue, raised in earlier meetings, of exactly how district technicians handle communications with builders and developers on active construction sites. A member demanded to

know whether technicians talk to the responsible person at the site during inspections, whether they put their comments in writing “at that time,” versus a “three-page stenographic document,” using an iPad, or emailing, or sending the comments in a letter.

Another griped that the staff has neglected important issues. “We’re here, willing to help,” member David Moyer said, “and find out why after 10 or 15 years we haven’t jumped on these problems.”

Kleiner reminded the current board members that for many years the MCCD had served as a model for conservation practices around Pennsylvania, yet the relationship between board and staff has deteriorated.

“You’re questioning everything they do” during board meetings, Kleiner said. “These are professional people who have gone through hours and hours of training to do what they have to do under state law.”

October’s meeting also included much back-and-forth talk over whether a round table was a good idea or a bad one. Eventually, board members again agreed to pursue a round table meeting, possibly in January, to allow plenty of time to ensure good attendance.

District personnel have been doing their jobs capably for many years, shepherding building and development projects through the often complex regulatory process. Their efforts help designers and contractors achieve compliance with conservation law through measures that limit soil erosion and curb the impact of runoff from rooftops and paved surfaces. This protects Monroe County’s streams and waterways from pollution. Growth in recent decades has been very rapid — and for the most part, Monroe County has continued to enjoy clean streams.

Discussion during board meetings, though, indicates that some district board members believe the district has actively prevented growth. Either that, or these members are too absorbed in the minutiae of manure management or other agencies’ purviews to grasp how their repeated second-guessing disheartens and undermines those who work for the agency.

The Pennsylvania Constitution specifically cites the commonwealth’s clean air and water resources as “an inherent right” of all Pennsylvanians, into the future, and district board members are bound by law to protect them. MCCD’s board has four vacancies going into 2018, including incumbents Hanyon and Heidi Secord and two public members. County commissioners will decide, after ostensibly consulting nominations from various nominating agencies, who gets those spots.

Local residents who support conservation-minded members for this conservation district board should let their elected commissioners know how they feel about who would best honor the state Constitution, and thus represent the public’s interest.

The MCCD board will meet at 8 a.m. Thursday, Nov. 16, at Kettle Creek Environmental Education Center, 8050 Running Valley Road, Bartonsville.