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Conservation district board meetings show division

Recent Monroe County Conservation District board meetings have found a board majority often at odds with their paid staff.

At February's board meeting, a representative from Kalahari Resort, which touts itself as the world's largest indoor waterpark, and Pocono Mountains Municipal Airport aired a litany of complaints. They described what is, in their view, an excessively regulatory climate. Later in the meeting, a board majority voted to scale back the district's longstanding delegation agreement with the state Department of Environmental Protection. For years, the Level 3 agreement authorized the district to act on the DEP's behalf in monitoring and regulating projects. But a board majority said that scaling it back to a Level 2 agreement would reduce the time staff spends on enforcement.

District Manager Adam Schellhammer, hired last year, argued that the Level 3 agreement has served as an important tool for the district's technical staff. District employees work closely with project applicants during the planning and building phases with an eye toward complying with regulations and achieving a building project without damaging the natural environment.

Long-time district manager Craig Todd (also a BWA board member) supported Schellhammer during the meeting. He said maintaining the Level 3 agreement was important because significant DEP staff cutbacks left the state agency without the staff to enforce the regulations. Scaling back the agreement would remove an important tool in the district's toolbox to gain compliance, an important part of achieving sustainable development over time. Non-voting district associate members Janet Weidensaul and Theresa Merli also questioned the majority's move. Staff members have expertise and knowledge, and surely the board and staff share a common goal of assisting development while preventing pollution, Weidensaul said.

District board member Heidi Secord (also a BWA member) said maintaining the Level 3 agreement allowed for greater consistency and time to achieve compliance from applicants, and ensured local control and accountability. She and Paul Canevari voted to keep the agreement intact, but the measure passed 4-2.

The March meeting saw another discussion between board and staff regarding the permit application process. Responding to challenges about the sometimes lengthy process, Head Resource Conservationist Lori Kerrigan said that staff members try to make the process as easy as possible through regular conversations with applicants, including phone calls, letters and emails. Application times on average have dropped in recent years, she said. District Engineer Drew Wagner said when staff members find serious shortcomings or problems in a project application, they alert the applicant even before sending a required, formal letter, to give applicants a heads-up.

Also during the March meeting, district board member Dave Moyer raised a plan to review the nominating organizations that present candidates to serve on the district board. Which organizations

nominate candidates to the Monroe County commissioners, who appoint them, can make a big difference in the composition and philosophy of the board. After some discussion, the board decided to send that nominating-organization review to an ad hoc committee.

Conservation district meetings can be informative for BWA members, who have an expressed interest in maintaining or improving water quality. Craig Todd noted at February's meeting that Monroe County was the second-fastest growing in Pennsylvania for the past 20 years, yet while builders and developers added myriad new houses and schools, roads, big-box stores, strip malls and other development, water quality was not degraded. He praised the district staff for being proactive — preventing pollution is better than cleanup.

It's important to note that regulations, and the disputed delegation agreement, were in place during this period of fast growth. District staff shepherded builders and developers through the regulatory system and projects got built at the same time natural resources were safeguarded.

Although once it was rapid, residential construction hasn't recovered from the Great Recession. But regulations haven't stopped other growth. Many major projects, including the new St. Luke's Hospital here, have moved successfully toward completion by working with the district's staff.

Citizens are beginning to pay more attention to the district board. Two concerned residents attended March's district meeting and said they feel the board majority's direction is misguided and runs counter to the state's Constitution. Local news media coverage has largely represented the board majority's position. A recent Pocono Record article quoted board President Joe Hanyon and member Dave Moyer's proposal for volunteers to create beaver-type dams to try to clean up water pollution.

Citizen involvement is important if BWA hopes to keep track of board activities. Everyone – from backyard gardeners to fly fishermen, campers to water company officials – has a stake in strong protections for our shared water resources. The next board meeting is at 8 a.m. April 20.