



Minutes

Vermillion River Watershed Planning Commission Meeting

February 10, 2021 - 3:30 p.m.

Zoom Videoconference

WPC Members in Attendance

Mark Henry Chuck Clanton
Tony Wotzka Carolyn Miller
Ken Betzold James Kotz
Andy Riesgraf

Staff in Attendance

Mark Zabel, VRWJPO
Mark Ryan, VRWJPO
Paula Liepold, VRWJPO
Travis Thiel, VRWJPO

Others in Attendance

Curt Coudron, Dakota County SWCD
John Stelzner, Dakota County SWCD
Georg Fischer, Dakota County

1. Call to Order

The meeting was called to order by Commissioner Henry at 3:30 p.m. Members Hamrick, Borton and Betzold were absent.

2. Audience Comments on Items Not on the Agenda

None

3. Approval of Agenda

Commissioner Henry asked for a motion to approve the agenda as provided in the packet.

Motion by Commissioner Clanton, second by Commissioner Miller, to approve the agenda. The agenda was unanimously approved by a 6-0 roll call.

4. Approval of Minutes

Motion by Commissioner Clanton, second by Commissioner Kotz, to approve the minutes of the January 13, 2021, meeting, as distributed. The minutes were unanimously approved by a 6-0 roll call vote.

5. Business Items

Chair Henry welcomed new Commissioners Riesgraf and Kotz to the Vermillion River Watershed Planning Commission. Commissioners and some staff introduced themselves and their backgrounds for the new Commissioners.

a. Progress Update on Wetland Restoration in Castle Rock Township

Chair Henry introduced the Item. Mark Zabel provided the background on the VRWJPO financial participation in the development of the wetland restoration creating a wetland bank and wetland bank policy for the VRWJPO. John Stelzner of the Dakota County Soil and Water Conservation District presented an update on the progress for construction and seeding activities for restoration of the wetland and how wetland credits will be generated over time. Wetland credits are released upon a certification schedule that is highly reliant on performance standards for planned vegetation establishment in the wetland. The wetland restoration is taking place in Castle Rock Township, in the South Branch subwatershed of the Vermillion River. The wetland easement for this project is 120 acres, nearly 115 of which could become certified as wetland bank. The VRWJPO would receive about 1/3 of certified credits. Credits are released in stages with certification at each stage. Another benefit of the restoration is the habitat it creates. Mark Ryan pointed out that credits generated will be shared between the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources, Dakota County, and the VRWJPO, and so an example of how wetland credits will be used for replacement of wetland impacts is for transportation projects within the watershed. Commissioner Wotzka asked about burning for long-term maintenance of vegetation in addition to the work done during establishment. Burning will be a part of the management approach for maintaining the restored wetland and is good for controlling invasives and promoting growth of native vegetation, as explained by John Stelzner.

b. Presentation on Current Draft Cost-Share Programs of the Dakota County Soil and Water Conservation District

Chair Henry introduced the item and turned the presentation over to Curt Coudron of the Dakota County Soil and Water Conservation District. Curt described how the Dakota SWCD and the VRWJPO jurisdictions cover much of the same ground geographically and have much of the same mission and goals in pursuing conservation efforts. The VRWJPO and the Dakota SWCD act in partnership to prevent unnecessary redundancies and improve efficiency of service.

Part of the services provided include conservation projects with landowners through Cost-Share Programs. There is about \$80,000 dollars allocated to projects through the Joint Powers Agreement between the VRWJPO and Dakota SWCD for 2021. Practices are put in according to specific design standards. Projects go before the Dakota SWCD Board for approval before construction begins. Dakota SWCD staff certify construction and requests for cost share payment go to the Dakota SWCD Board for payment approval. Programs include:

- Landscaping for Clean Water (Cost-share up to \$250 per project)
- Citizen Conservation Stewards (Cost-share up to 75% of project cost, \$5,000 limit)
- Conservation Initiative Funding (Cost-share up to 75% of project cost, \$25,000 limit)
- Community Partners Funding (Cost-share up to 75% of project cost, \$50,000 limit)
- Incentive Payment Practices (Cost-share rates and limits vary)

There is a new cost-share initiative this year which is Harvestable Covers which provides incentive for planting cover crops that can be harvested. This is currently in draft form awaiting approval by the Dakota SWCD Board. The initiative targets providing vegetation that covers the ground year-round. Existing cover crop programs generally limit to crops that are not harvested for profit. This program would allow harvest while the cover remains in place. Payments are graded less than payment for cover crop due to the potential for earnings with the crop, and contracts may be single or multiple year. A property can only enter the program once to provide incentive for multiple year contracts. Curt also highlighted several projects that were implemented in the VRWJPO in 2020 through the cost-share programs identified above.

Commissioner Betzold joined the meeting.

Chair Henry thanked the Dakota SWCD and their staff for the good work that they do and have done over the years. Commissioner Clanton asked about the harvestable covers program and whether that extends to pastures and other existing cover areas. Curt explained that this would apply to new planting areas. There is a five-year contract cap. There is also a 100-acre cap per contract. Commissioner Clanton noted that this program does not provide incentive or reward for those who are already doing the right thing.

6. Updates

a. Chairperson's Report

Chair Henry commented that he has been involved in obtaining a conservation easement and maintaining a portion of the Dakota County Fairgrounds over several years through grants. The easement area wet mesic prairie has been burned several times. Unfortunately the burns have not been effective at controlling invasive tree growth. To control the trees is requiring manual removal of the unwanted trees (Willows, Cottonwoods, Buckthorn, etc.), with some of that work going on presently. Chair Henry wanted to note this in case people were asking questions about the work and tree removals going on around the Fairgrounds.

b. Staff Updates

Zabel noted a couple of housekeeping needs. The Vermillion River Watershed Planning Commission has the authority to set the dates and times for their meetings. The meetings were changed several years ago to the current meeting date and time for regular meetings, the second Wednesday of the month from 3:30PM to 5:30PM. The meeting date and time can be changed to accommodate needs of the members. Commissioners agreed to keep the meeting on the second Wednesday of the month, but move the time to start the meeting at 4:00PM. **Motion by Betzold, second by Riesgraf, to set the regular meeting date and time as the second Wednesday of the month beginning at 4:00PM. Motion carried on a 7-0 roll call vote.**

The Commissioners are eligible to receive a per diem of \$35 for attendance at Vermillion River Watershed Planning Commission meetings. With COVID and the meeting restrictions we have been lax in tracking and making payments. To address this Zabel asks that Commissioners send him an email indicating if they wish to receive per diem. Zabel will follow up and get payment arranged and processed for those that request per diem.

Paula Liepold asks that the new Commissioners send photos for use on the Website.

Mark Ryan introduced himself and described his role with the VRWJPO and welcomed new members to the WPC.

Zabel announced that the Public Outreach and Communications position (Jen's position) has been approved to be filled. Zabel is still working through the finalization of the posting of the position which should happen soon.

7. Adjourn

Motion by Commissioner Miller, second by Commissioner Clanton, to adjourn the meeting at 4:51 p.m. The motion passed on a 7-0 roll-call vote.