

Sarasota Soil and Water Conservation District Performance Review

Prepared for:
The Florida Legislature's
Office of Program Policy Analysis
and Government Accountability
(OPPAGA)

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Key Takeaways

- Sarasota Soil and Water Conservation District’s Board of Supervisors met most months during the review period (October 1, 2020, through April 30, 2024) and remained active in providing oversight to the District.
- The majority of Sarasota Soil and Water Conservation District’s programs and activities are intended to provide conservation-related education to members of the community, especially to students in the District.
- Sarasota Soil and Water Conservation District shares staff with neighboring Manatee River Soil and Water Conservation District, Sarasota and Manatee Counties, and the Natural Resources Conservation Service. The staff are employed and paid by the respective Counties’ boards of county commissioners, and the District does not employ any staff.
- Sarasota Soil and Water Conservation District receives nonrecurring revenues from multiple sources, and both revenues and expenditures have fluctuated within the review period.
- Sarasota Soil and Water Conservation District’s operations are not currently guided by a strategic plan, though the District does have an operations plan originally drafted in 2017 and updated in 2021 that staff utilize. The Development of a strategic plan that includes written goals and objectives as well as performance measures and standards could assist in ensuring a consistent direction for the District’s future prioritization of programs and activities.

I. Background

Pursuant to [s. 189.0695\(3\)\(b\)](#), *Florida Statutes*, Mauldin & Jenkins (“M&J”) was engaged by the Florida Legislature’s Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability to conduct performance reviews of the State’s 49 independent soil and water conservation districts. This report details the results of M&J’s performance review of Sarasota Soil and Water Conservation District (“Sarasota SWCD” or “District”), conducted with a review period of October 1, 2020, through April 30, 2024.

I.A: District Description

Purpose

Chapter [582](#) of the *Florida Statutes* concerns soil and water conservation within the State of Florida. The chapter establishes the processes for creation, dissolution, and change of boundaries of districts; the qualifications, election, tenure, and mandatory meetings of District Supervisors; the oversight powers and duties of the Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (“FDACS”); and the powers and purpose of the districts. The District’s statutory purpose, per [s. 582.02](#), *Florida Statutes*, is “to provide assistance, guidance, and education to landowners, land occupiers, the agricultural industry, and the general public in implementing land and water resource protection practices. The Legislature intends for soil and water conservation districts to work in conjunction with federal, state, and local agencies in all matters that implement the provisions of ch. [582](#), *Florida Statutes*.”

The District identifies a mission statement on its website, which states the District was founded for the purpose of “promoting and encouraging the wise use, management and general conservation of the County’s soil, water, and related natural resources. The District is committed to preserving and enhancing the quality of life in Sarasota County through conservation of its natural resources.”

Service Area

When the District was established in 1947, the service area included Sarasota County. The current borders and territory are identical to those of Sarasota County. The District’s service area includes unincorporated Sarasota County and the County’s 3 cities, 1 town, and 25 census-designated places.¹ It also incorporates all of Oscar Scherer State Park, Lewis Longino Preserve, Myakka River, Myakka State Forest, Orange Hammock Ranch Wildlife Management Area, Deer Prairie Creek Preserve, Palmer Ranch Conservation, and part of Myakka River State Park, Lemon Bay Aquatic Preserve, and Myakkahatchee Creek Conservation.

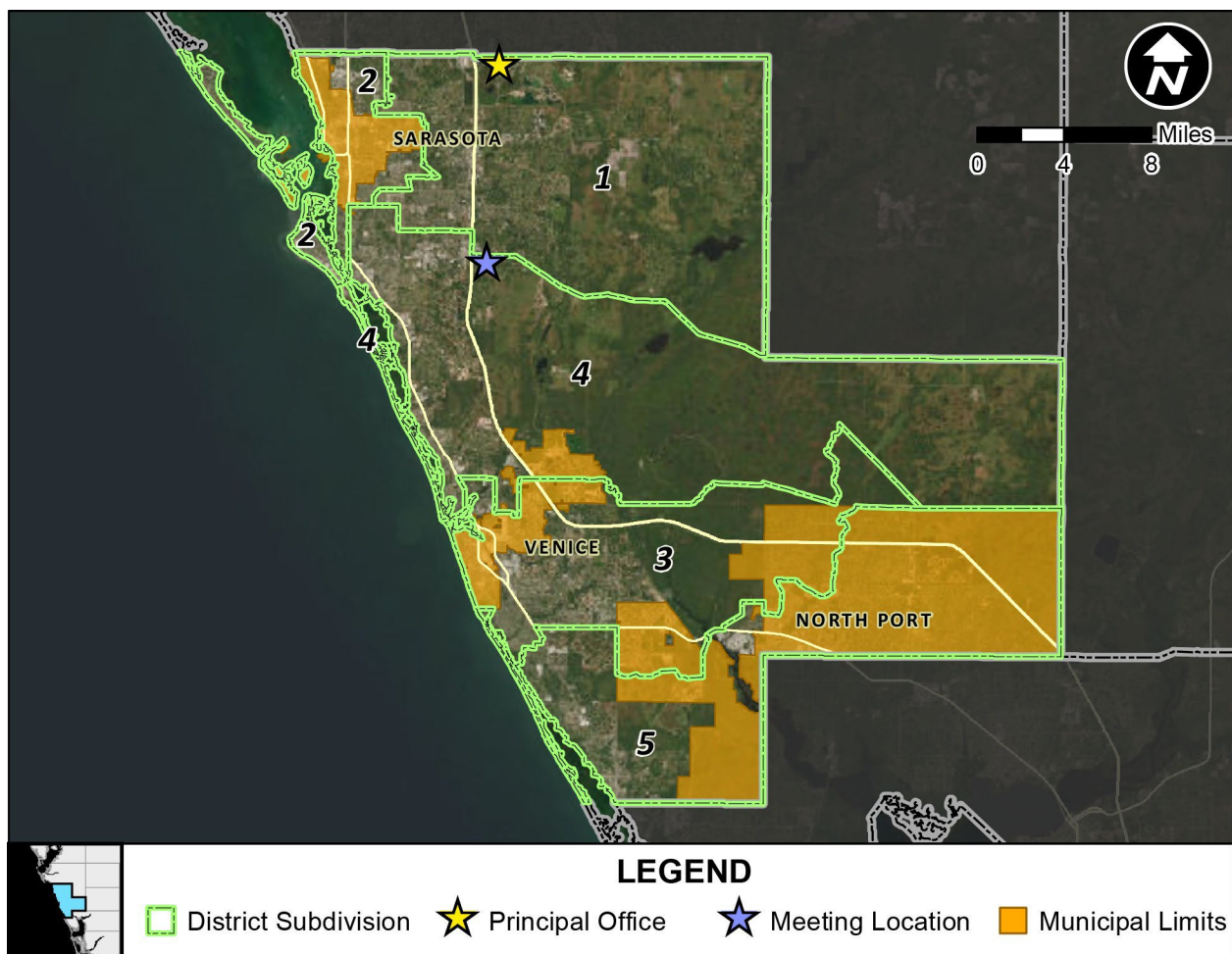
The District is bounded on the north by Manatee County, east by Desoto County, south by Charlotte County and west by the Gulf of Mexico. The total area within the District is 725 square miles, with 556 square miles of land and 169 square miles of water.

¹ Cities: Sarasota, North Port, Venice. Towns: Longboat Key. Census-Designated Places: Bee Ridge, Desoto Acres, Desoto Lakes, Englewood, Fruitville, Gulf Gate, Kensington Park, Lake Sarasota, Osprey, The Meadows, Nokomis, North Sarasota, Plantation, Ridge Wood Heights, Sarasota Springs, Siesta Key, South Gate Ridge, South Sarasota, South Venice, Southgate, Vamo, Venice Gardens, Warm Mineral Springs, Palmer Ranch, and Pinecraft.

The District’s primary office is located at 6942 Professional Pkwy East, Sarasota, FL 34240 – the Natural Resources Conservation Service (“NRCS”) Manasota Service Center. This building is leased by the United States Department of Agriculture. The District Board holds its meetings at 6700 Clark Rd, Sarasota, FL 34241 – the University of Florida’s Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (“UF/IFAS”) Sarasota Extension building.

Figure 1 is a map of the District’s service area, based on the map incorporated by reference in [Rule 5M-20.002\(3\)\(a\)41, Florida Administrative Code](#), showing the District’s boundaries, electoral subdivisions, major municipalities within the service area, the District’s principal office, and a secondary meeting location used by Supervisors for monthly workshop meetings, which are open to the public but do not usually include the conduct of regular business.

Figure 1: Map of Sarasota Soil and Water Conservation District



(Source: Sarasota County GIS, Florida Commerce Special District Profile)

Population

Based on the Florida Office of Economic and Demographic Research population estimates, the population within the District’s service area was 464,223 as of April 1, 2023.

District Characteristics

The Sarasota Soil and Water Conservation District is located on the southwestern coast of Florida, covering Sarasota County. This area includes a diverse economy, supported by sectors such as tourism, agriculture, healthcare, and manufacturing. Major economic drivers include tourism related to its unique beaches and cultural attractions, healthcare facilities, and a significant agricultural sector focusing on citrus, vegetable production, and ornamental plants.² Livestock operations, including cattle ranching, also play a significant role in the District's agriculture.³

The District is also home to a large number of golf courses. Golf course development may result in soil erosion, and the associated turf and landscape management practices can require a large volume of water usage and can cause runoff and groundwater pollution.⁴

Sarasota is generally flat with some coastal areas and inland wetlands. The area also includes the Myakka River and numerous smaller rivers and lakes, which are crucial for water management and biodiversity conservation.⁵ The District experiences a humid subtropical climate with hot, humid summers and mild winters. Environmental threats include hurricanes, heavy rainfall leading to flooding, and occasional droughts. These conditions can impact agricultural productivity and necessitate effective conservation practices.⁶

Sarasota has a mix of urban and rural areas throughout the region. The urban centers include Sarasota, Venice, and North Port, while the rural areas are primarily in the eastern parts of the District. The diverse urban and rural landscape, coupled with agricultural activities and environmental challenges, create distinct community needs. Urban areas require robust stormwater management and pollution control, while rural areas need support for sustainable agricultural practices and water resource management. The District's initiatives in education, conservation practices, and collaboration with various stakeholders are essential to meet these needs.⁷

² (SRQ Magazine 2021) SRQ Magazine. August 30. Accessed May 23, 2024. https://www.srqmagazine.com/srq-daily/2021-08-30/17858_Mayor-Receives-Key-to-Soil-and-Water-Conservation-District.

³ (UF/IFAS Extension Sarasota County 2021) UF/IFAS Extension Sarasota County. July 25. Accessed May 23, 2024. <https://blogs.ifas.ufl.edu/sarasotaco/2021/07/25/conservation-district-sets-public-working-group-meeting>.

⁴ (Sewell 2019) Golf Course Land Positive Effects on the Environment, Lauren Sewell, Seattle Journal of Environmental Law Volume 9 Issue 1, 2019

⁵ (NRCS Soil Survey: Sarasota n.d.) NRCS Soil Survey: Sarasota. Accessed May 23, 2024. https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/fl/soils/?cid=nrcs141p2_017417.

⁶ (UF/IFAS Extension Sarasota County 2021) UF/IFAS Extension Sarasota County. July 25. Accessed May 23, 2024. <https://blogs.ifas.ufl.edu/sarasotaco/2021/07/25/conservation-district-sets-public-working-group-meeting>.

⁷ (NRCS Soil Survey: Sarasota n.d.) NRCS Soil Survey: Sarasota. Accessed May 23, 2024. https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/fl/soils/?cid=nrcs141p2_017417.

I.B: Creation and Governance

Sarasota SWCD was chartered on July 14, 1947, as the Sarasota Soil Conservation District, following a successful referendum of local landowners and subsequent petition to the Florida State Soil Conservation Board. The District was created under the authority of the State Soil Conservation Districts Act (herein referred to as “ch. 582, Florida Statutes”).⁸ The Florida Legislature amended ch. 582, Florida Statutes in 1965 to expand the scope of all soil conservation districts to include water conservation, which renamed the District to the Sarasota Soil and Water Conservation District.⁹

The District is governed by a Board of Supervisors. Supervisors are unpaid, nonpartisan public officials elected by the voters within the service district. M&J analyzed the Supervisors’ elections, appointments, and qualifications within the in-scope period pursuant to applicable Florida Statutes.¹⁰

As of this report, the District has five Supervisors. The four elected Supervisors do meet the qualifications, confirmed by the signed Affirmations of Qualification provided to M&J by the Sarasota Supervisor of Elections. A signed affirmation for the appointed Supervisor has not been provided to M&J by the Sarasota Supervisor of Elections or the District, therefore, M&J is unable to confirm the appointed Supervisor’s qualifications. During the review period (October 1, 2020, through April 30, 2024), there have been five vacancies on the Board, as illustrated in Figure 2. The District had vacancies from December 2020 to March 2021 (two seats), from February 2022 to May 2022, from August 2022 to December 2022, and from June 2023 to October 2023. Additional assessment of the District’s electoral patterns is detailed in section II.D (Organization and Governance) of this report.

Figure 2: Supervisor Terms

Seat	FY21				FY22				FY23				FY24			
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	
1	AB	Steven Horton					Matt Palmer									
2	RM		Audie Bock							CJ	Joseph Welden					
3	Todd Underhill															
4	BB		Richard Suggs							Ky Miller			Louis Sanchez			
5	Matt Wooddall						Charles Johnston									

Legend for FY21

Audie Bock (AB)
Rory Martin (RM)
Brett Blackburn (BB)

Legend for FY23

Charles Johnston (CJ)

(Source: District Meeting Minutes)

⁸ s. 582, Florida Statutes

⁹ ch. 65-334, Laws of Florida

¹⁰ Including s. 582.15, Florida Statutes, s. 582.18, Florida Statutes, s. 582.19, Florida Statutes, Rule 5M-20.002, Florida Administrative Code, and ch. 2022-191, Laws of Florida

During the review period, the District met 35 times¹¹ and met the mandatory meeting requirement of s. 582.195, Florida Statutes, to meet at least once per calendar year with all five Supervisors for both 2022 (February) and 2023 (October). The District additionally met two times without a quorum. M&J has determined that the District did not properly notice each meeting and workshop. Additional assessment of the District’s pattern of providing meeting notices and adherence to relevant statutes is detailed in section II.D (Organization and Governance) of this report.

Neither Sarasota County nor the in-district municipalities have adopted any local regulations for the District.

I.C: Programs and Activities

The following is a list of programs and activities conducted by the District within the review period (October 1, 2020, through April 30, 2024), along with a brief description of each program or activity. The District’s programs and activities will be described in detail in section II.A (Service Delivery) of this report.

- Envirothon
 - An outdoor competition in which students develop skills related to aquatic ecology, forestry, soil and land use, wildlife, and other current environmental issues.
- Sarasota Farm Tour
 - An annual Farm Tour hosted by the University of Florida’s Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (“UF/IFAS”) Sarasota Extension. District Supervisors support the event by serving as guides for the tours.
- Perimeter Fencing for Feral Swine Program Application
 - The District has recently applied for cost-share funding from the National Association of Conservation Districts (“NACD”) to incentivize landowners to install and maintain fencing against feral swine encroachment. The selected recipients of this cost-share funding have not been announced yet.
- Hidden River Community Liaison
 - The District serves as a liaison between the Hidden River Community and several agencies to obtain assistance for the flooding that resulted from Hurricane Ian.
- Environmental Quality Incentives Program (“EQIP”)
 - A conservation practice incentive program administered by the National Resources Conservation Service (“NRCS”). EQIP provides financial and technical support to agricultural producers and forest landowners to address natural resource concerns.
- Conservation Stewardship Program (“CSP”)
 - An NRCS-administered program that provides financial and technical support to agricultural producers for the enhancement of conservation practices.

¹¹ Meetings occurred in January, February, March, April, May, June, July, and August 2021; February, March, April, May, June, July, August, October, November, December 2022; January, February, March, April, May, June, August, October, and November 2023; January 2024.

I.D: Intergovernmental Interactions

The following is a summary of federal agencies, State agencies, and/or public entities with which the District interacts, including the means, methods, frequency, and purpose of coordination and communication.

Sarasota County Board of County Commissioners (“SBoCC”)

SBoCC employs a full-time Administrative Assistant who is assigned part-time to support the District. This Administrative Assistant has responsibilities to both Sarasota SWCD and Manatee River Soil and Water Conservation District, allocating approximately 15% of work time to each district. The remaining 70% of this position’s time allocation is to be split between work for UF/IFAS and Sarasota County. SBoCC has agreements with Sarasota Soil and Water Conservation District, but not with Manatee River SWCD.

Manatee County Board of County Commissioners (“MBoCC”)

MBoCC employs two full-time staff who are assigned part-time to support the District: a Soil Conservation Planner and a Soil Conservation Supervisor. These positions have responsibilities to both Sarasota SWCD and Manatee River Soil and Water Conservation District. MBoCC maintains an agreement with Manatee River Soil and Water Conservation District, but not with Sarasota SWCD.

Manatee River Soil and Water Conservation District (“Manatee River SWCD”)

Sarasota SWCD and Manatee River SWCD share staff, all of whom are employed by either SBoCC or MBoCC. These District staff have obligations to both Sarasota SWCD and Manatee River SWCD. The two districts have different Boards that meet separately. The two districts jointly host the annual Manasota Regional Envirothon.

Natural Resources Conservation Service (“NRCS”)

The two District staff employed by MBoCC operate out of the United States Department of Agriculture (“USDA”) Manasota service center. This is due to an Unfunded Cooperative Agreement between Manatee River SWCD and NRCS, which provides the two District employees access to the office, computers, printers, and NRCS technical information. While Sarasota SWCD is not a party to this contract, Sarasota SWCD does benefit from the contractual arrangement as the staff perform Sarasota SWCD duties at this office. The District’s third staff position does not work in the Manasota service center.

Approximately 50% of the work allocation for the two MBoCC-employed staff is for the promotion and support of NRCS programs. The NRCS primarily interacts with District Supervisors through the NRCS District Conservationist Report during Board of Supervisors (“Board”) meetings. NRCS has a National Perimeter Fencing for Feral Swine cost-share grant program, which is being managed and administered by the National Association of Conservation Districts (“NACD”). The District has applied to NACD for \$275,000 as part of this program. If awarded, the District plans to distribute the funds to local landowners to incentivize improved perimeter fencing against feral swine.

University of Florida’s Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences Sarasota Extension (“UF/IFAS Sarasota Extension”)

The District partners with the UF/IFAS Sarasota Extension to co-host an annual Sarasota Farm Tour. One of the District’s staff positions, the Administrative Assistant, works out of the UF/IFAS Sarasota Extension office at no cost to the District through a verbal agreement with UF/IFAS. Approximately 70% of this position’s time allocation is split between work for UF/IFAS and Sarasota County. The District also has a verbal agreement with UF/IFAS to hold its monthly Board meetings in the Sarasota Extension office at no cost to the District.

I.E: Resources for Fiscal Year 2022 – 2023

The following figures quantify and describe the District’s resources for Fiscal Year 2022 – 2023 (October 1, 2022, through September 30, 2023, herein referred to as “FY23”). Figure 3 shows the total amount of revenues, expenditures, and long-term debt maintained by the District in FY23. Figure 4 shows the number of paid full-time and part-time staff, contracted staff, and volunteers by employer. Figure 5 shows the number and type of vehicles, number and type of major equipment, and number and type of facilities owned, leased, and used by the District.

Figure 3: FY23 Finances

	Revenues	Expenditures	Long-term Debt
Total for Year	\$700	\$1,199	\$0

(Source: District Bank Statements)

Figure 4: FY23 Program Staffing

	Full-time Staff	Part-time Staff	Contracted Staff	Volunteers
District-employed Staff	0	0	0	0
Board of County Commissioners-employed staff	0	3	0	0
NRCS-employed staff	0	0	0	0
Total	0	3	0	0

(Source: Interviews with District staff)

Figure 5: FY23 Equipment and Facilities

	Number	Ownership Status	Type(s)
Vehicles	0	N/A	N/A
Major Equipment	0	N/A	N/A
Facilities	2	1 leased by United States Department of Agriculture 1 owned by University of Florida’s Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences	1 Principal Office 1 Meeting Space

(Source: Interviews with District staff)

II. Findings

The Findings sections summarize the analyses performed, and the associated conclusions derived from M&J's analysis. The analysis and findings are divided into the following four subject categories:

- Service Delivery
- Resource Management
- Performance Management
- Organization and Governance

II.A: Service Delivery

Overview of Services

M&J has identified the following programs and activities that the District has performed during the review period (October 1, 2020, through April 30, 2024):

Envirothon

Envirothon is an outdoor competition encouraging student interest in natural resource conservation and environmental management. The event is jointly hosted by Sarasota SWCD and Manatee River Soil and Water Conservation District, with students from schools in both school districts participating. Students in grades 9-12 work in teams to compete at a local or regional level and develop hands-on skills related to five core environmental subjects – aquatic ecology, forestry, soil and land use, wildlife, and a current environmental issue selected by competition organizers each year. Sarasota SWCD received \$700 from the Sarasota Farm Bureau in FY21, FY23, and FY24, earmarked to be spent on t-shirts for Envirothon. The District also pays the upfront cost of the charter buses that pick up students from Sarasota schools for the event. The District was reimbursed by the Sarasota School Board for this expenditure up through the 2022 Envirothon. There were 55 student participants in FY21, 133 students in FY22, and 140 students in FY23.

Sarasota Farm Tour

The annual Sarasota Farm Tour is organized by the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences ("UF/IFAS") Sarasota Extension. The District does not contribute to this event financially, but the District helps with finding tour sites, and Supervisors serve as guides for the bus tours.

Feral Swine Program Application

Sarasota County has feral swine, which can cause substantial damage to agricultural operations and native ecosystems. District staff asserted that most land in the County is susceptible to feral swine encroachment, and farms have suffered financially due to feral swine damage in previous years. The Natural Resources Conservation Service ("NRCS") has developed a \$7.5 million cost-share program to incentivize landowners to install or repair perimeter fencing, which is being managed and administered nationally by the National Association of Conservation Districts ("NACD"). Sarasota SWCD has applied to NACD for \$275,000 and is currently awaiting a response.

Hidden River Liaison

The Hidden River Community is a residential neighborhood within the District’s service area that was severely affected by flooding after Hurricane Ian in September 2022. The District Board served as a liaison between the community and several government agencies, helping to provide assistance to those most affected. The District also coordinated assistance between the community and Sarasota County Emergency Services during Hurricane Idalia in August 2023.

Environmental Quality Incentives Program

The NRCS administers the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (“EQIP”). EQIP is a conservation practice incentive program that provides financial and technical support to agricultural producers and forest landowners to address natural resource concerns. District Supervisors and staff help promote EQIP to local agricultural producers. In addition to helping with program outreach, the Soil Conservation Planner and Soil Conservation Supervisor assist NRCS with program applications, eligibility of applicants, conservation planning, site visits, documentation, and contract management.

Conservation Stewardship Program

The NRCS administers the Conservation Stewardship Program (“CSP”), a conservation enhancement program. CSP provides financial and technical support to agricultural producers through the development of a conservation plan that enhances the landowner’s existing efforts, decreases the need for agricultural inputs, improves crop resiliency, and/or develops wildlife habitats. District Supervisors and staff help promote CSP to landowners as an incentive program for implementing conservation practices. In addition to helping with program outreach, the Soil Conservation Planner and Soil Conservation Supervisor assist NRCS with program applications, eligibility of applicants, conservation planning, site visits, documentation, and contract management.

Analysis of Service Delivery

M&J evaluated each of the District’s programs or activities, assessed whether the program or activity aligns with the District’s statutory purpose and authority, and referenced the statute most relevant to each program or activity. All of the programs and activities identified by M&J are within the scope of the District’s statutory purpose and authority. Programs and activities meant to provide or assist in providing training and education (Envirothon, Farm Tour) align with the District’s purpose of conducting conservation education programs. The promotion of EQIP and CSP aligns with the District’s authority to demonstrate best management practices and conservation projects. There are no overt cost-reduction efforts the District has undertaken within the review period, based on a review of District expenditures.

Comparison to Similar Services/Potential Consolidations

The following soil and water conservation programs are provided by other public and nonprofit entities within the District’s service area:

- The UF/IFAS Sarasota Extension partners with the local 4-H chapter to provide agriculture and conservation educational programming for youth within the District’s service area, and serves as a resource between agriculture scientists and the local community.
- The Natural Resource Conservation Service, an agency of the United States Department of Agriculture, provides technical advice and data collection assistance to landowners implementing conservation practices.

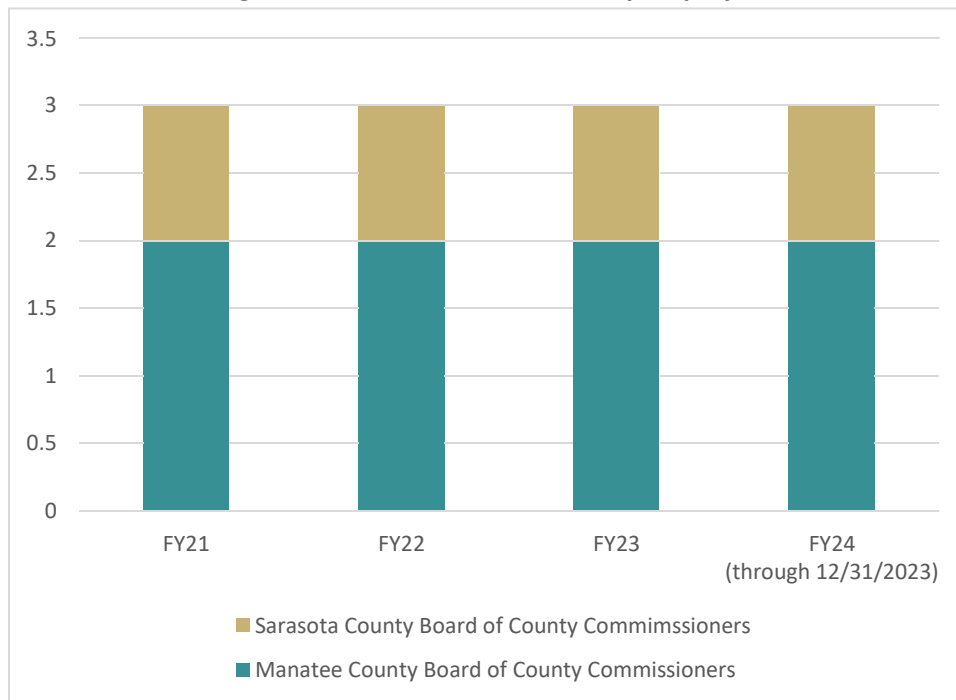
- The Water Division of Sarasota County’s Public Utilities Department promotes water conservation by hosting classes on conservation techniques and distributing free Energy and Water Conservation Kits to residents.

II.B: Resource Management

Program Staffing

The Sarasota County Board of County Commissioners (“SBoCC”) employs a full-time employee who is assigned part-time to the District as an Administrative Specialist. The Manatee County Board of County Commissioners (“MBoCC”) employs two additional full-time employees who are assigned part-time to the District – a Soil Conservation Planner and a Soil Conservation Supervisor. The District does not reimburse either county for personnel costs. The District does not employ any other full-time staff, part-time staff, or contract staff, and uses volunteers to assist in programs. As shown in Figure 6, the District staff remained the same during the review period (October 1, 2020, through April 30, 2024).

Figure 6: Allocated District Staff by Employer



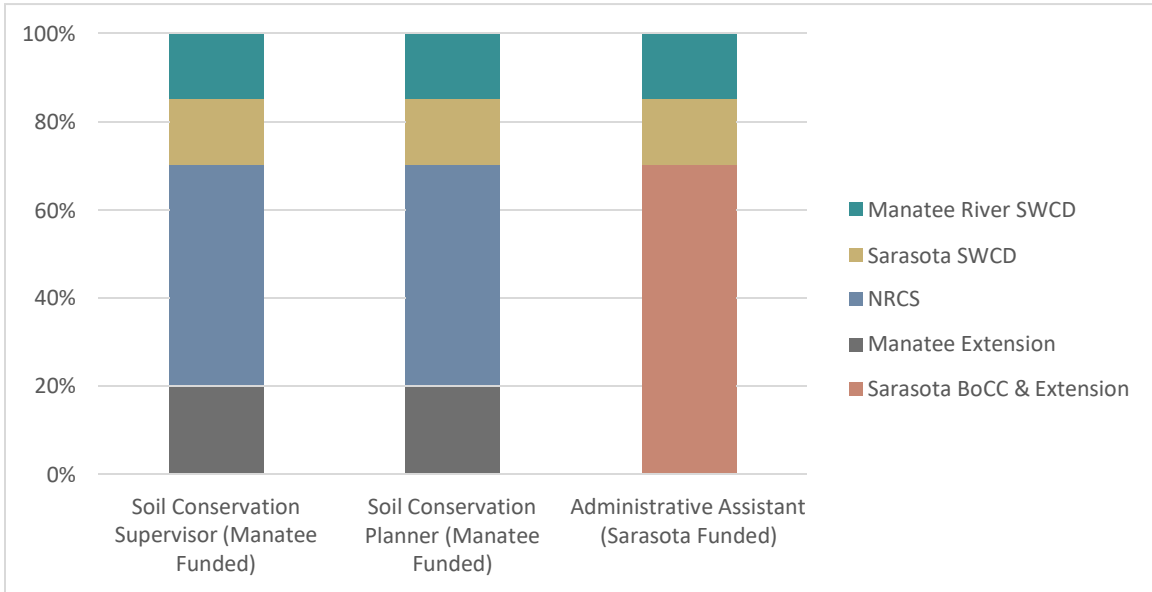
(Source: Interviews with District staff, job descriptions)

The Soil Conservation Supervisor conducts environmental evaluations, accepts applications for Natural Resources Conservation Service (“NRCS”) programs, and prepares Resource Management Systems for landowners and agricultural managers. There has been no turnover in this position during the review period.

The Soil Conservation Planner explains NRCS programs to landowners, conducts environmental evaluations, and prepares conservation plans. Three people held the position during the review period, with a vacancy in August 2021 and a vacancy from December 2022 to April 2023.

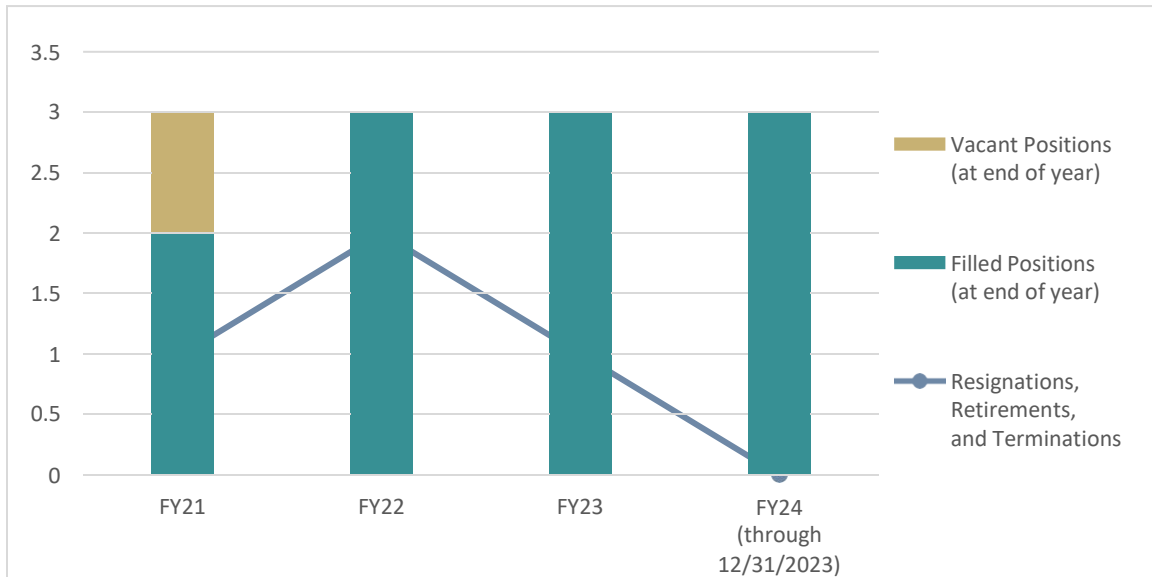
The Administrative Assistant assists with events, meeting minutes, and financial reporting. Two people held the position within the review period with a vacancy from August 2021 to December 2021. The position was subsequently vacated in April 2024.

Figure 7: Staff Responsibilities by Percentage



(Source: Job descriptions for District staff)

Figure 8: Retention and Turnover



(Source: District's written responses to M&J questions)

Equipment and Facilities

The District does not lease or own any facilities, vehicles, or major equipment. The District’s inventory is limited to small quantities of general supplies used in events, which total less than \$250. This figure is supported by the District’s Annual Financial Reports, as submitted to the Florida Department of Financial Services, which lists the only District asset as cash.

Sarasota SWCD has a verbal agreement with the University of Florida’s Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (“UF/IFAS”) Sarasota Extension, which allows for the District’s Administrative Assistant to work out of the Extension office. Additionally, the District Board holds its monthly meetings in the UF/IFAS Sarasota Extension building.

Manatee River Soil and Water Conservation District has an agreement with NRCS that allows the District’s Soil Conservation Planner and Soil Conservation Supervisor to use office space in the United States Department of Agriculture’s Manasota service center, computers, and printers at no cost. Sarasota SWCD is not party to this agreement, but still benefits from it as it provides office space and equipment to two of its staff. The number of offices was unchanged within the review period.

Current and Historic Revenues and Expenditures

Sarasota SWCD develops and approves an annual budget, but actuals are not tracked against budgeted line items. In order to determine revenues and expenditures during the review period, M&J reviewed bank statements provided by the District.

The expenditures the District has made within the review period have primarily been the annual Envirothon or general operating expenditures. The District’s total expenditures within the review period were \$5,539, with \$3,399 going towards Envirothon t-shirts and bus costs. The bus costs were reimbursed by the Sarasota School Board until 2022. In 2023 and 2024, the school district paid the transportation cost directly. The remaining \$2,140, categorized as operating expenditures in Figure 9, went towards the District’s website fees, one-time donations to individual events, and travel costs to attend an Association of Florida Conservation Districts (“AFCD”) meeting.

Figure 9: Total Expenditures

Program or Activity	Total Expenditures			
	FY21	FY22	FY23	FY24 (through 12/31/2023)
Envirothon	\$382	\$2,051	\$966	\$0
Operating	\$126	\$1,602	\$232	\$179
Total	\$508	\$3,653	\$1,198	\$179

(Source: District Bank Statements)

The District’s total revenues within the review period were \$4,796, which have been broken out by revenue source in Figure 10. The District has received a consistent donation from the Sarasota Farm Bureau within the review period, with the money specifically earmarked to be spent on t-shirts for Envirothon. The amount donated each year has been \$700, with the exception of FY22 which was \$200. The District was reimbursed in FY22 by the Sarasota School Board for the bus costs to transport Sarasota students to and from Envirothon. The District’s remaining revenues were donations from Supervisors or reimbursement for travel to an AFCD meeting. The District had \$763 in cash reserves in February 2024.

Figure 10: Total Revenues

Revenue Source	Total Revenues			
	FY21	FY22	FY23	FY24 (through 12/31/2023)
Envirothon Donations	\$700	\$2,433	\$700	\$0
Private Donations	\$600	\$0	\$0	\$0
Reimbursements	\$232	\$0	\$0	\$131
Total	\$1,532	\$2,433	\$700	\$131

(Source: District Bank Statements)

Recommendation: The District should consider developing and adopting a balanced budget for each fiscal year. The budget should include expected revenues, including the source of each revenue or category of each revenue (e.g., administrative fees, donations, government grants, fees for equipment rentals, etc.). The budget should also include expected expenditures, including both regular expenses and categorization of other expenditures (e.g., sponsorship of programs and activities, property improvements, reimbursements for conference or regional meeting attendance, etc.). The budgeted expenditures should not exceed budgeted appropriations or total expected revenues, per the requirements of [s. 189.016\(3\), Florida Statutes](#).

Trends and Sustainability

District expenditures have exceeded revenues within the review period, which has decreased the District’s cash reserves from \$2,468 at the beginning of the review period to \$763 in February 2024. The District will need to obtain a consistent and reliable source of revenue to improve its long-term financial position and continue its ability to aid the community. Sarasota SWCD should explore opportunities to secure funding from entities such as the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (“FDACS”), Sarasota County Board of County Commissioners, or solicit donations from private donors.

Recommendation: The District should identify new sources of revenue to fund District outreach and conservation programming. The District could consider identifying grant opportunities from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, the National Association of Conservation Districts, or another public or private conservation-related entity. The District could also consider proposing an agreement with the Sarasota County Board of County Commissioners to allow the District to present an annual budget request, subject to approval by the Board of County Commissioners.

II.C: Performance Management

Strategic and Other Future Plans

In 2017, the District developed a Plan of Operations outlining the monthly tasks needed to ensure that various events could be funded and conducted. This plan was updated in 2021 to reflect the District's new objectives. Both plans include a timeline and assign responsibilities for tasks to individual Supervisors or the Board as a whole, but the objectives remain too high-level for progress to be tracked accurately. The District has not taken the development and goal-setting steps necessary to label either of these documents a strategic plan, which would require a clear statement of District goals and actionable steps to achieve those goals. These Plans of Operations were never approved by vote and adopted; this was the last time such a plan was drafted. The District does not have a documented strategic planning process in place currently.

Recommendation: The District should consider amending its current Plan of Operations to better establish long-term and short-term priorities based on the District's purpose and vision. The plan of operations should address the needs of the community and the changing land use patterns within the District's service area. The strategic plan should not use specific programs or contracts as foundational elements.

Goals and Objectives

The District's 2017 and 2021 Plans of Operations articulated the District's objectives when the documents were drafted. The 2017 plan focuses on maintaining the District's ability to host programs and finding a more consistent revenue source. The 2021 updated plan added objectives, including improving communications with the community and developing a relationship network with local growers. These objectives can be developed into a larger strategic plan for the District but will require refinement into individual action items so the progress of objectives can be tracked by Supervisors.

Recommendation: The District should consider refining its existing goals and objectives to better align with its statutory purpose, as defined in [s. 582.02\(4\)](#), *Florida Statutes*, and the Board's vision and priorities as established in the District's strategic plan. The goals and objectives should contemplate measurable progress, capturing the results of the District's efforts and ensuring a consistent direction forward for the District's future prioritization of programs and activities.

Performance Measures and Standards

Sarasota SWCD does not have any performance measures or standards, written or unwritten, related to program offerings that the District provides or activities that the District participates in.

The District's Soil Conservation Planner and Soil Conservation Supervisor positions are required to provide an annual report of activities and accomplishments to the Natural Resource Conservation Service ("NRCS") each fiscal year as part of the Unfunded Cooperative Agreement between NRCS and

Manatee River Soil and Water Conservation District. A gazette published by Manatee River, which publishes information about programs, including the jointly held Envirothon, satisfies this requirement. Sarasota SWCD is not a party to this agreement but is impacted by it as it places requirements on District staff.

Recommendation: The District should consider identifying performance measures and standards as part of the development of a strategic plan, such as the number of interactions at outreach events. The District should then track the identified performance measures against established standards and use the collected data to monitor the District's performance, evaluate progress toward the goals and objectives the District adopts, and support future improvements to the District's service delivery methods.

Analysis of Goals, Objectives, and Performance Measures and Standards

The District's 2017 and 2021 Plans of Operations serve as a starting point for District objectives. The plan requires additional refinement to be considered a strategic plan. Individual events the District would like to participate in will need to include actionable steps with a timeline for completion. When developing this plan, the District should identify performance measures it can track to accurately gauge District progress towards its goals.

As stated earlier in this section of the report, M&J recommends that the District consider revising its current plan of operations into a strategic plan, and subsequently develop performance measures and standards to provide the District direction and ensure that current and future programs and activities align with its intended statutory purpose, as defined in s. [582.02\(4\)](#), *Florida Statutes*.

Annual Financial Reports and Audits

Sarasota SWCD is required per s. [218.32](#), *Florida Statutes*, to submit an annual financial report to the Florida Department of Financial Services within nine months of the end of the District's fiscal year (September 30).

Pursuant to s. [218.32](#), *Florida Statutes*, the District is required to submit an Annual Financial Report every fiscal year by the compliance deadline 9 months after the end of the fiscal year (June 30 of the following year). The District filed its FY21, FY22, and FY23 Annual Financial Reports within the compliance deadline.

Sarasota SWCD does not meet the criteria in s. [218.39](#), *Florida Statutes*, to require the District to submit an annual financial audit report, as the District's annual revenues and combined expenditures and expenses are below the \$50,000 threshold, the lowest requirement threshold for special districts.

Performance Reviews and District Performance Feedback

The only program where the District seeks feedback is the Farm Tour. After the guided farm tours conclude, the group of attendees filled out a survey numerically ranking aspects of the tour. The District received positive feedback on the tour guide's commentary, and received more critical feedback regarding the lunch provided. Individual stops on the tour also received a range of scores. In the development of a strategic plan, the District would benefit from identifying more ways to receive feedback from constituents. This would help the District adjust its operations to better serve the community.

Recommendation: The District should consider implementing a system for collecting feedback from partners, agricultural producers that the District serves, and other conservation stakeholders. As the District continues to develop and implements programming, the District should consider creating a process to systematically review feedback. The District should consider to use the findings from the review of feedback to refine the District's future service delivery methods.

II.D: Organization and Governance

Election and Appointment of Supervisors

Supervisors are required by [s. 582.19\(1\)\(b\), Florida Statutes](#), to sign an affirmation that they meet certain residency and agricultural experience requirements. These signed affirmations are required of both elected and appointed Supervisors. Starting with the November 2022 Supervisor elections, Chapter [2022-191, Laws of Florida](#), amended [s. 582.19\(1\), Florida Statutes](#), and required that candidates for election to a Supervisor seat had to live in the district and have agricultural experience, as defined by the Florida Legislature. Candidates in the November 2022 election were required by [s. 582.19\(1\)\(b\), Florida Statutes](#), to sign an affirmation that they met the residency and qualification requirements.

Since the start of the January 2023 term, one Supervisor has been appointed. In response to the performance review, the District provided M&J with a written list of the qualifications for the Sarasota Supervisors who held a seat at any point since January 2023 that meet the agricultural experience requirements of [s. 582.19\(1\), Florida Statutes](#).

M&J has not received requested documentation from the Sarasota County Supervisor of Elections, and is unable to confirm if any of the appointed Supervisors signed an affirmation of qualifications. Documentation has been received for the four elected Supervisors, who have all signed the Affirmation of Qualification. If the District failed to require appointed Supervisors to complete documentation that affirmed their compliance with the residency and qualification requirements of [s. 582.19\(1\), Florida Statutes](#), the District may have unqualified and/or ineligible Supervisors occupying seats.

Two of the five Supervisor seats are up for election in November 2024.

Recommendation: The District should consider collaborating with the Sarasota Supervisor of Elections to ensure that appointed Supervisors complete the affirmations necessary to document each Supervisor's compliance with the requirements of [s. 582.19\(1\), Florida Statutes](#).

Notices of Public Meetings

Section [189.015](#), *Florida Statutes*, requires that all Board meetings be publicly noticed in accordance with the procedures listed in ch. [50](#), *Florida Statutes*. This chapter has been amended twice during the review period, and M&J reviewed for compliance with the governing statute in effect at the time of each meeting date and applicable notice period.

Sarasota SWCD posted public notices of its meetings on the Sarasota County government website. The District also posted meeting notices on bulletin boards in the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Services Extension Office in Sarasota County, the United States Department of Agriculture Manasota service center, and submitted meeting notices to the *Florida Administrative Register* for publication. M&J searched [floridapublicnotices.com](#), the State of Florida's designated repository of public notice publications and did not identify notices posted for any Board of Supervisors ("Board") meetings held during the review period.

M&J's review concluded that the District notices did not meet the requirements of the version of ch. [50](#), *Florida Statutes*, in effect at the time of each meeting date and applicable notice period. Prior to January 2023, ch. [50](#), *Florida Statutes*, required any board located in a county with a county-wide newspaper to publish meeting notices in that newspaper. The District did not meet this requirement for meetings held in 2021 and 2022. Since January 2023, ch. [50](#), *Florida Statutes*, has permitted publication of meeting notices on a publicly accessible website (such as the Florida Administrative Register) as long as the board publishes a notice once a year in the local newspaper identifying the location of meeting notices and stating that any resident who wishes to receive notices by mail or e-mail may contact the board with that request. The District did not meet this requirement for meetings held in 2023 and 2024.

Failure to provide appropriate notice may deny the public an opportunity to attend meetings and participate in District business. Violation of ch. [50](#), *Florida Statutes*, may subject District Supervisors and staff to penalties, including fees, fines, and misdemeanor charges, as outlined in [s. 286.011](#), *Florida Statutes*. Additionally, business conducted at such meetings may be invalidated.

Recommendation: The District should consider improving its meeting notice procedures to ensure compliance with [s. 189.015](#) and ch. [50](#), *Florida Statutes*, for future notices. The District should retain records that document the District is in compliance with the applicable statutes.

Retention of Records and Public Access to Documents

The District maintains a record of meeting agendas and minutes from October 2020 through the most recent meetings and was able to provide the agendas and minutes to M&J on request. The District was able to provide the other existing records and documentation requested by M&J for this performance review, and includes the appropriate link to the District's Annual Financial Reports on its website. M&J concludes that there are no notable issues with the District's records retention and public access to information as required [s. 119.021](#), *Florida Statutes*.

III. Recommendations

The following table presents M&J’s recommendations based on the analyses and conclusions in the Findings sections, along with considerations for each recommendation.

Recommendation Text	Associated Considerations
<p>The District should identify new sources of revenue to fund District outreach and conservation programming. The District could consider identifying grant opportunities from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, the National Association of Conservation Districts, or another public or private conservation-related entity. The District could also consider proposing an agreement with the Sarasota County Board of County Commissioners to allow for the District to present an annual budget request, which would be subject to approval by the Board of County Commissioners.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Potential Benefit: Expand the District’s ability to provide services to the community. • Potential Adverse Consequences: M&J does not anticipate any adverse consequences as a result of implementation of the recommendation. • Costs: M&J does not anticipate any additional funding needed. • Statutory Considerations: M&J does not anticipate any legal, operational, or other issues that may arise from the proposed change.

Recommendation Text	Associated Considerations
<p>The District should consider developing and adopting a balanced budget for each fiscal year. The budget should include expected revenues, including the source of each revenue or category of each revenue (e.g., administrative fees, donations, government grants, fees for equipment rentals, etc.). The budget should also include expected expenditures, including both regular expenses and categorization of other expenditures (e.g., sponsorship of programs and activities, property improvements, reimbursements for conference or regional meeting attendance, etc.). The budgeted expenditures should not exceed budgeted appropriations or total expected revenues, per the requirements of s. 189.016(3), Florida Statutes.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Potential Benefit: Allow for the District to improve the accuracy of the budget process and enable District Supervisors to make more informed planning decisions. • Potential Adverse Consequences: M&J does not anticipate any adverse consequences as a result of implementation of the recommendation. • Costs: M&J does not anticipate any additional funding needed. • Statutory Considerations: M&J does not anticipate any legal, operational, or other issues that may arise from the proposed change.
<p>The District should consider amending its current plan of operations to better establish long-term and short-term priorities based on the District’s purpose and vision. The plan of operations should address the needs of the community and the changing land use patterns within the District’s service area. Additionally, the strategic plan should not use specific programs or contracts as foundational elements.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Potential Benefit: An actionable roadmap to address the community’s needs and a more effective method of planning and goal setting. • Potential Adverse Consequences: M&J does not anticipate any adverse consequences as a result of implementation of the recommendation. • Costs: M&J does not anticipate any additional funding needed. • Statutory Considerations: M&J does not anticipate any legal, operational, or other issues that may arise from the proposed change.

Recommendation Text	Associated Considerations
<p>The District should consider refining its existing set of goals and objectives to better align with the District’s statutory purpose, as defined in s. 582.02(4), Florida Statutes, and the Board’s vision and priorities as established in the District’s strategic plan. The goals and objectives should contemplate measurable progress, capturing the results of the District’s efforts and ensuring a consistent direction forward for the District’s future prioritization of programs and activities.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Potential Benefit: Help focus the District resources on objectives that align with the District’s purpose and better serve the community. • Potential Adverse Consequences: M&J does not anticipate any adverse consequences as a result of implementation of the recommendation. • Costs: M&J does not anticipate any additional funding needed. • Statutory Considerations: M&J does not anticipate any legal, operational, or other issues that may arise from the proposed change.
<p>The District should consider identifying performance measures and standards as part of the development of a strategic plan, such as number of interactions at outreach events. The District should then track the identified performance measures against established standards and use the collected data to monitor the District’s performance, evaluate progress toward the goals and objectives the District adopts, and support future improvements to the District’s service delivery methods.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Potential Benefit: A more effective assessment of the District’s performance towards goals and objectives. • Potential Adverse Consequences: M&J does not anticipate any adverse consequences as a result of implementation of the recommendation. • Costs: M&J does not anticipate any additional funding needed. • Statutory Considerations: M&J does not anticipate any legal, operational, or other issues that may arise from the proposed change.
<p>The District should consider implementing a system for collecting feedback from partners, agricultural producers that the District serves, and other conservation stakeholders. As the District develops and implements programming, the District should consider creating a process to systematically review feedback. The District should consider to use the findings from the review of feedback to refine the District’s future service delivery methods.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Potential Benefit: An effective way to collect constituent feedback to better refine District operations to meet their needs. • Potential Adverse Consequences: M&J does not anticipate any adverse consequences as a result of implementation of the recommendation. • Costs: M&J does not anticipate any additional funding needed. • Statutory Considerations: M&J does not anticipate any legal, operational, or other issues that may arise from the proposed change.

Recommendation Text	Associated Considerations
<p>The District should consider collaborating with the Sarasota Supervisor of Elections to ensure that appointed Supervisors complete the affirmations necessary to document each Supervisor’s compliance with the requirements of s. 582.19(1), <i>Florida Statutes</i>.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Potential Benefit: Better transparency and avoidance of business potentially being voided. • Potential Adverse Consequences: M&J does not anticipate any adverse consequences as a result of implementation of the recommendation. • Costs: M&J does not anticipate any additional funding needed. • Statutory Considerations: M&J does not anticipate any legal, operational, or other issues that may arise from the proposed change.
<p>The District should consider improving its meeting notice procedures to ensure compliance with s. 189.015 and ch. 50, <i>Florida Statutes</i>, for future notices. The District should retain records that document the District is in compliance with the applicable statutes.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Potential Benefit: Avoiding potential compliance issues and the resulting penalties. • Potential Adverse Consequences: M&J does not anticipate any adverse consequences as a result of implementation of the recommendation. • Costs: M&J does not anticipate any additional funding needed. • Statutory Considerations: M&J does not anticipate any legal, operational, or other issues that may arise from the proposed change.

IV. District Response

Each soil and water conservation district under review by M&J was provided the opportunity to submit a response letter for inclusion in the final published report. Sarasota SWCD's response letter is provided on the following page.



Sarasota Soil & Water Conservation District
6942 Professional Parkway
Sarasota, FL 34240
Phone (941)907-0011 Fax 1(855)-464-1961

Chuck Johnston, Chairman
Matt Palmer, Treasurer
Todd Underhill, Vice-Chair

Louis Sanchez, Supervisor
Joseph Welden, Supervisor

July 11, 2024

Mauldin & Jenkins
1401 Manatee Ave. W.
Suite 1200
Bradenton, FL 34204

Dear Mr. Jahosky:

The board has reviewed the SSWCD Performance Review-Draft Report. The board is satisfied that in the analysis of service delivery that all programs and activities identified by M&J are within the scope of the District's statutory purpose and authority, additionally M&J concluded that the promotion of NRCS programs aligns with the District's authority. Your recommendations have been received and duly noted by the board.

Sincerely,

Chuck Johnston, Chairman