



NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF CONSERVATION DISTRICTS

District Guides: “More Dollars for Your District”

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Raising money to operate district programs and support your state and national organizations is a basic, but often difficult task. Tight government budgets have squeezed public funds allocated for conservation programs, and most districts are searching for creative ways to replace these traditional funding sources.

As public funds dwindle, demands for district action continue to grow. Most district officials constantly face conflict between projects and issues they would like to undertake and the funds available to accomplish them.

This document provides ideas and approaches for financing district operations; many of the ideas come from conservation districts themselves. These ideas can be accomplished by districts small and large, with minimal staff or numerous employees.

Experienced districts know effective programs make for better fundraising results. They also know that a well-organized, successful fundraising effort has innumerable positive spinoffs. People learn about district programs through a well-publicized fundraiser, so these events can build good public support for district activities.

However, most districts must go beyond traditional fundraising events like barbecues and car washes in order to be successful. Other financing strategies, like cost-sharing with other organizations, securing grants from public or private sources and making district services profitable can provide long-term solutions to funding dilemmas. In any case, following basic marketing principles can help your district achieve financial stability.

NACD hopes this document will serve as a practical guide for you and your district, helping you raise the money you need for district programs. As you come up with innovative ideas different from those listed, please let us know so we may share them with other districts.

Organizing a Finance Committee

As part of your district's fundraising strategy, it is good idea to establish a finance committee. The committee should include local experts, such as bankers, businesspeople, professional fund-raisers, civic leaders and others experienced in raising money for worthy community enterprises. Organizing a district finance committee can put valuable people and their ideas to work for your district.

Besides developing fundraising projects, a finance committee can work with the district on a statement of overall financial needs. If everyone understands the relationship between funding requests and programs the funding supports, fundraising efforts tend to go more smoothly.

A Supporting Membership Program

One successful way to raise funds for district projects is to develop a supporting membership program. In the program, members would make yearly contributions to the district.

One group to target is district cooperators. Farmers and other landowners who have been served by the district are most likely to appreciate the value of conservation district work.

A letter to this group announcing your supporting membership program should include information on your district's major accomplishments. It is also helpful to mention future projects that deserve support. Point out how district officials volunteer their valuable time to administer the affairs of the district. This may encourage support from those the district serves. A membership fee plan may be recommended, but note that any and all support is valued.

Institutions or prominent individuals interested in resource management may also be interested in supporting memberships. These may include local banks, farm supply businesses, community leaders, politicians or educators.

Think ahead and plan activities for supporting members. A special meeting with a guest speaker can increase the opportunity for members to meet each other and learn about district activities. Slide presentations or videos can be effective tools for these meetings. You can also bring members together by hosting a yearly “open house,” district annual meeting or field day.

Districts should create photo and promotional opportunities to recognize supporting members for their contributions.

Ongoing services, such as newsletters or meeting notices, may attract supporting members. A certificate of membership, signed by the chairman of the board and suitable for framing, can also build pride in the program. Even a bumper sticker with the inscription “Supporter, _____ SWCD” can give prestige and publicize the district name.

After the first year’s activities, send the supporting member a copy of the district’s annual report along with a bill for membership dues. This might be a good time to ask for an increased contribution. A visit from the district official who originally contracted the member can be helpful, but is not always necessary.

Finally, to ensure the program continues to grow, develop a process for adding to your list of supporting members each year. Your district might want to consider forming a committee of enthusiastic cooperators and supporting members to help promote this program.

Making District Services Profitable

It is a growing trend for districts to charge fees for the special services they provide. Most commonly, districts involved in erosion and sediment control, reclamation of surface-mined land, and certain water quality projects fund these programs through permit and application fees for the development, review and approval of conservation and land use plans.

In addition, many districts across the country support and encourage the rapid growth of conservation tillage practices by renting conservation tillage drills or other equipment. To make such programs cost-effective, rental fees should at least cover program costs. The fees can also generate money for your district.

Districts have covered their costs or generated additional district revenue with these programs as well:

- Brush eradication
- Certification of irrigation water depletion for income tax purposes
- Percolation testing
- Pond management service
- Recycling program
- Seeding of road banks
- Soil test
- Sponsorship of professional speakers in a conservation services
- Subdivision plan review in urbanizing areas
- Timber stand improvement
- Tree planting
- Used equipment auctions
- Water quality tests
- Water withdrawal measurements
- Woodland assistance
- Workshops or seminars on topics such as attracting wildlife or home landscaping with native plants.

It is important not to compete with local businesses when providing district services. The services should be related to the conservation goals of the district and not conflict with any federal, state or local mandates or priorities.

Finally, in contracting to perform services, districts may be liable to legal claims if the services are not performed properly or if damages occur in connection with such services. Legal advice and appropriate insurance are vital parts of a service program.

Check with your state conservation agency personnel to determine the appropriate level of liability and errors and omissions coverage for your district's program.

Multiplying the “Buying Power” of District Funds

Districts can do more with fewer dollars by developing a good action plan. Working with groups rather than individuals, for example, maximizes the use of staff time. In organizing conservation education work, some districts plan teacher workshops and “conservation carnivals,” where students in the area are brought by bus to a central location in the district. Several resource people are stationed with hands-on educational presentations running about 10-15 minutes.

Throughout the day, students pass through each station, hearing each presentation. All grade levels are educated on many different conservation, natural resource and environmental issues.

When districts face erosion and drainage problems, a meeting of area landowners can save money and staff hours.

In all cases, helping people help themselves can effectively multiply the staff time of districts. Reaching out to influential community leaders can also multiply the impact of district programs, kick-starting large projects or improving multiple sites through a single contact.

Developing contacts with local news media can multiply the conservation message. If you have a good relationship with your local television station or newspaper, they may use stories and photos from your district.

Districts can maximize the buying power of their funds by cooperating on projects with neighboring districts or other local organizations. Public service announcements are a good example. Multiple sponsorships cut the purchase price for each district while demonstrating broad support for the project. Districts have also cooperated in activities ranging from sharing county fair booths to jointly sponsoring a publication to hosting multi-district tours or field days.

Another way to save money is to apply for nonprofit or governmental subdivision status from the U.S. Post Office (if you do not already have it). This will reduce your costs for bulk mailing.

Grant Funding and other Contractual Arrangements

Grant money can be obtained for a wide variety of projects and from a diverse assortment of organizations. Grants are not only available through federal, state, and local agencies, but also through private foundations and businesses. Federal and state grants commonly address issues like water quality, forestry, habitat restoration and education. Private sector grants are sometimes less restrictive, but they must coincide with the goals or address the needs of the granting organization.

Your local library may have information on businesses and foundations that offer grants to worthy projects. Your state conservation agency may also have information on grant possibilities.

Contractual arrangements to perform surveys, studies or other resource-related projects for city and county governments can also generate revenue.

Don't overlook the possibility of grants from local businesses, many of which have a vested interest in projects beneficial to the community.

Sales of Conservation-related Items

Districts have raised funds for many special projects by selling conservation-related products. Among these are:

- Aerial maps or other local photography
- Bird seed
- Bumper stickers
- Calendars with photography of local scenery
- Conservation-related materials such as moisture meters, irrigation equipment, pipe for drop structures
- Cooperator signs
- Dry hydrant supplies (local fire protection which reduces insurance)
- Firewood
- Fish for stocking farm ponds
- Grass seed
- Hats or T-shirts featuring conservation themes
- Literature developed in relation to local conservation needs

- Native plant sale
- Nesting boxes or other wildlife supplies
- Soil surveys published by district
- Stakes and flags
- Tree or shrub seedlings
- Wildlife and windbreak packets

When developing a fund-raising sales campaign, try not to choose an item that places the district in direct, unfair competition with local, taxpaying businesses. Check to see that there is a real need for the item you have in mind, and that a local dealer does not already supply that item to your customers.

Special Events

If fundraisers are well planned, they can raise money, take the district message into the community and involve supporters in a worthwhile and enjoyable project. They can also build conservation spirit. Some successful ideas from districts include:

- Barbecue with local produce and meat
- Boat trips
- Car washes
- Celebrity dinners (charge a fee per plate)
- Equipment auctions
- Fish fry
- Harvest dinner
- Hunting and fishing clubs (charge membership and registration for trips)
- Nature hikes (charge a registration fee)
- Raffle of a conservation-related item (a quilt with nature-related designs, a special conservation service, produce or meat donated by a cooperator)
- “Run (or bike) for conservation” with sponsors for each participant. Donations of prizes and sales of such items as T-shirts can add to the profits.
- Wine-tasting with wine from local wineries
- Yard sale with contributions from cooperators and supporters.

- Poker Run stopping at conservation practices and having someone there to explain the benefit of each to water quality
- “Draw Down” (visit NACD’s website for an explanation of these rules)

Appropriate insurance is advisable for these events. Insurance coverage for a special event can normally be obtained at a reasonable cost.

Support for your Newsletter

A regularly printed newsletter can be an effective way to get the conservation message to district cooperators, supporters and to the district population at large. Because printing costs are proportionally less as volume increases, doubling the budget for a newsletter may allow the district to move from printing 200 copies to printing 2000 copies, allowing the district to reach more of the population.

Districts may earn funding for a newsletter through sponsorships or display ads. For example, local businesses or organizations interested in supporting conservation work may sponsor the newsletter as a special project. In this case, the district may acknowledge this support with a small note in the newsletter.

Display ads are a second source of newsletter income. As the newsletter’s circulation increases, more businesses may find it profitable to advertise in your newsletter. The business may pay to run the ad in one issue, or in every issue. Printing ads is fairly simple, especially if the business provides the camera-ready ad.

Your local newspaper may have their back page available for sale quarterly. If this is the case, you may pay your local paper to print your newsletter on their back page, also increasing your readership.

Support for Other Specific Projects

Other district projects – such as award programs, essay, poster, or speech contests and special events – also attract supporters. Although businesses may have limits on the “charitable contributions” section of their budgets, they can often provide money for these projects from advertising or marketing funds. In such cases, the project usually includes some discrete form of advertising, such a note acknowledging sponsorship. For example, many districts find that farm equipment dealers are willing to contribute to a district

equipment rental program or help support a demonstration project. These projects give recognition to both the dealer and the district.

Make a list of projects that could attract the support of one or more sponsors. Try to match sponsors with programs that are relevant to their interests. Consider ways to advertise the sponsorship without interfering with the objectives of the district program, then contact potential sponsors.

Volunteer Support

Volunteers can assist a district in many ways, including decreasing office workload, alleviating burdens of professional staff and providing extra assistance for special projects. The key to a good volunteer program is developing clear objectives for the volunteers that ensure commitment and reward their efforts.

Each volunteer needs a job description and informational packet listing the projects requiring volunteer support, establishing supervisors and providing details about the workplace, insurance coverage, use of vehicles, etc.

Districts may find that their local university or college is a good source of volunteers. Many degree plans require students to spend one semester as an intern in a field related to the student's degree or future career. For example, interns may help with conservation education programs or with publications.

Interns are usually eager to gain work experience, especially if they earn college credit. Although many internships are unpaid, businesses often try to give their interns financial compensation through a small stipend, or at least recognize them in some way. To find out more about working with interns, call your local college or university.

Youth groups are also good sources of volunteers. Group members might clean up litter, seed erosion sites or give conservation talks to other youth groups or schools. Developing a strong youth program builds the district capacity. You may be interested in starting a youth board. The purpose of the youth board is to help the district's board fulfill all its priorities and goals.

Senior citizens may also serve as volunteers. Offer them a chance to participate in rewarding, community-oriented projects. Seniors can contribute in a variety of ways, from typing to planning events. There are many healthy and active seniors who could lead hikes,

present seminars or conduct other projects. You may find a wealth of knowledge from the seniors in your community.

Gaining Funds from Local and State Governments

Regular appropriations from state and local governments are essential to the funding of most district programs. Adequate funding from these levels can make substantial sums of money available for district work. Strong reasons exist for both state and local government to support district programs:

- Protecting soils from erosion saves government funds otherwise spent on dredging sediment from rivers, cleaning up ditches or purifying polluted water for public consumption.
- Flood prevention structures are built to reduce flooding and damage to infrastructure. Hydroelectric operations and other public facilities and recreation areas are built as secondary functions of these Flood Prevention structures. They can also reduce the size of a bridge needed for a particular area.
- Conservation achievements contribute to county and state goals for environmental quality and economic growth.
- District personnel salaries contribute to the local economy
- The added value of well-cared-for properties maintains the local tax-base and helps build a prosperous community.
- Volunteer time in district work (including time spent by district officials) makes all district programs available at a low cost.

To gain state funding, districts, their state association and state agencies should work together to develop a unified conservation campaign. They must earn the support of state legislators, who will help develop and pass legislation supporting conservation goals.

Letting legislators know about your work and the ways legislation can increase the effectiveness of soil and water conservation work should be a regular part of your effort at the state level.

District Taxing Authority

When the model conservation district legislation was sent to the states in 1937, it contained a section which would grant districts “taxing power” to fund their conservation programs. Most states did not include that provision in the legislation they passed, but some did. Since that time, more states have passed laws giving taxing authority to districts, and other states are currently considering such legislation.

Contact your state association or state conservation agency if you are interested in pursuing this means of providing funds for your district programs.

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