

Interesting Facts & Anecdotes

from your District Operations and Member Services Committee

September 2013

Did you know?....

1. An advisory board, committee, task force, or other official group established by the conservation district board to deliberate on recommendations or complete board-delegated actions must comply with public meetings law. As such, they are "governing bodies."
2. In order to "maintain order" and get business done, in most states, the public has no "right" to participate actively at a conservation district meeting by commenting, asking questions, or interfering in any other verbal or physical manner. Participants must request to be recognized by the chair; the chair may or may not grant the person the right to speak. If granted permission, the chair may define the scope of participation, such as how long a person may talk, on what topic, etc. Exceptions might include:
 - Employment of public officer
 - Standards to use to hire the CEO
 - Standards to evaluate CEO job performance
3. The conservation district board should establish policies on public participation in their meetings, such as whether to schedule "public comment periods" regularly or only in special circumstances. The chair may also request public participation on specific issues.
4. Conservation district meeting locations should anticipate the need for adequate space; be within the district boundaries (exceptions are usually defined in law); be places that allow undisturbed meeting action (no excessive noise or commotion); not be where discrimination is practiced; and be accessible to disabled persons.
5. Notice of district meetings should go to:
 - Public mass media, such as general newspaper
 - Mailing lists of those requesting notice
 - Notice bulletin boards
 - Those whom the district wants to invite
6. In most states, no final decisions can be made in executive sessions. A few states do allow final decisions.
7. Regular district board meeting minutes should not report any "content" of what went on in an executive session.
8. Annual reports should not contain advocacy or political statements.
9. Two key contributors to conservation district development were Philip Glick and M. L. Wilson. Glick was a USDA attorney who worked with Wilson to draft the model law – the Standard State Soil Conservation Districts Law. Wilson was the USDA Assistant Secretary of Agriculture who advocated for more local direction and control.
10. M. L. Wilson's main principles for a national conservation program were:
 - Can't do it from Washington D.C.
 - Can't do it with only demonstration sites
 - Congress can't regulate private land
 - Farmers have to feel involved, take active roles, and be in control
 - Trained Soil Conservation Service (NRCS) technicians should work with local leaders and landowners

A personal note from District Operations-Member Services Committee (DO/MS) Chair John McDonald in response to several emails: "As the disclaimer below states, the DO/MS Committee cannot ensure every statement applies to all states' laws and rules equally. That would be impossible. We acknowledge some might be wrong for your state or district. In which case, we invite you to find out your local rules and help others understand 'how YOU do business,' while we continue to distribute nuggets of information for district official training."