

RCD of Monterey County

Retreat Summary

Strategic Planning Retreat

October 11, 2016

These notes were accepted and approved as Minutes for the Special Meeting held by the Directors of the RCD of Monterey County on October 11, 2016 at 744A LaGuardia Street, Salinas, CA. No actions or votes were taken at this meeting. Attendees at the retreat are listed at the bottom of this document.

Introduction

On October 11, 2016, the board of the RCD of Monterey County, along with Executive Director Paul Robins, gathered at the RCD's office in Salinas, CA for a discussion of the organization's strategic plan. This retreat, facilitated by Amy Stork of Solid Ground Consulting, built upon the results of stakeholder engagement as well as a previous organizational assessment retreat held in March 2016.

The retreat began with introductions and a discussion of the retreat objectives. Participants affirmed the stated objectives of the retreat, including:

- Shared understanding of organizational opportunities and challenges
- Shared vision and strategic direction
- Shared commitment to the steps needed

Participants added these additional desired outcomes:

- Be able to follow through
- Clear vision and priorities

Setting the Context

In order to set the context for decision-making, participants discussed the pre-planning report. Participants noted that the RCD is in a position where it has lots of potential, but due to its current small size it is difficult to realize that potential. This is a bit of a catch-22 for the RCD – to have more impact, it needs more staff. To have more staff, it needs more funding. To secure more funding, it needs more staff. As one participant noted, the RCD is “small enough to care [about the issues] but not large enough to serve.”

Board members suggested that this very dilemma makes it even more important for the RCD to prioritize its focus. One member mentioned the degree to which the survey indicated an interest in seeing the RCD do more education. Retreat participants discussed:

- The need to improve understanding and perception of the RCD;
- The difficulties of being effective within bureaucratic constraints;

- The desire of board members to fulfill their commitments, and the need for mechanisms to ensure that fulfillment happens;
- The opportunity reflected just in the attendance at the listening sessions.

The group then created a Strengths/Weaknesses/Opportunities/Threats matrix for the RCD.

<p>Strengths (Internal)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Visible projects – big dollars and high visibility ■ Variety of partners ■ Not the Gestapo ■ Good staff – core is solid ■ Partnership-building skills ■ Staff and board understanding ■ Not overextended-can grow sustainably ■ Board engaged ■ Perceived as trustworthy by agencies 	<p>Weaknesses (Internal)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Board recruitment ■ Not visible enough ■ Not enough staff-no critical mass ■ Paul doing it all – needs assistance ■ Need a concise story/vision/elevator speech ■ Not much cushion if projects dry up ■ Need to diversify funding ■ Follow through ■ Perception of serving only small farmers
<p>Opportunities (External)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ City projects ■ Peninsula ■ Proposition 1 money ■ Cap and Trade money ■ Need for unbiased advice ■ Schools (e.g. Monterey gap analysis for ag education) ■ Funders’ interest in education ■ Multi-year public grants can leverage private investment 	<p>Threats (External)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Regulations: Unclear ■ Permit coordination ■ Drying up grant funds ■ Election ■ Other ag uncertainties that discourage from doing projects ■ Competition for funds ■ Environmental group alignment around clean water & ag ■ Litigation of our partners

Facilitator Amy Stork presented a diagram of the elements of a strategic plan (see graphic). The group confirmed that the vision and mission of the RCD are the same, and that the day would focus on the Goals and Strategies for achieving the mission and vision.



What impact do we want to have, and for whom?

Each retreat participant then listed the three natural resource issues that seem most important for the RCD to work on, and the people or groups the RCD needs to serve.

Natural Resources	People
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ water supply (water saving, water efficiency) ■ water quality ■ erosion ■ invasive plant management ■ river channel maintenance ■ native habitat ■ ag productivity ■ fertilizer and pesticide management ■ grazing lands ■ farmer sanity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ farmers in sensitive areas ■ property owners including large and small farms, and urban property owners ■ the ag industry (in terms of addressing perceptions) ■ the community at large ■ students ■ cities, counties, the ag commissioner ■ future generations

The participants then wrote “headlines” that describe the impact the RCD would make if it were wildly successful over the next few years. The headlines included:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ RCD finishes the Salinas Basin invasives clean-up ■ Community is aware of the value of the Sal. River ■ Salinas River Program is a clear program that people trust ■ The Salinas River doesn't flood ■ The Salinas River is flowing ■ No more Arundo ■ The Salinas River is safe in winter ■ Salinas growers are perceived as proactive, engaged, efficient ■ Increased awareness of farmer efforts ■ Salinas irrigators are recognized for their irrigation practices ■ Farmers have clear path to positive impact on water quality ■ The RCD demonstrated an effective collaborative project to improve water quality ■ The RCD and partners decreased sediment into the Monterey Bay sanctuary ■ The water is okay to drink in the Salinas Valley | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Runoff violations are record low, leading to safer roads and cleaner creeks ■ The Salinas groundwater basin is sustainable ■ RCD manages recharge incentive program ■ 3rd, 4th or 6th graders get out and see projects ■ RCD and ag commissioner reduce erosion and create water efficiency (education/ outreach) ■ Farmers work with RCD to reduce erosion and manage invasives, resulting in improved habitat, improved production and less need for chemicals ■ RCD helps farmers use science-based info; public agencies respect this approach ■ Monterey County students dream of working in ag and resource conservation ■ City residents learn the value of ag ■ City residents understand their role in conservation ■ People are educated about the urban/ag interface ■ RCD brokers deal for a longer term demo site |
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Setting Strategic Direction

Retreat participants then used three blue dots each to prioritize among the headlines. Four clear priorities emerged as goals for the RCD. For each priority, the participants discussed strategies to support that priority, and identified the items that are new or require significant new effort.

1. An established Stream Management Plan in the Salinas River

- ◆ Execute current project
- ◆ Continue to pursue funding for full implementation
- ◆ Build trust with wildlife agencies and landowners
- ◆ NEW Communicate the benefits of the project to communities. (Activity ideas included finding milestones, using video, using before and after photos, and highlighting farmer investments in the project)

2. Farmers work with RCD to reduce erosion and manage invasives, resulting in improved habitat, improved production and less need for chemicals

- ◆ Test strategies, techniques and technologies and participate in troubleshooting on projects
- ◆ Execute conservation innovation multi-farm project
- ◆ Winter program
- ◆ NEW Public demonstration days
- ◆ Implement NRCD projects (NEW: increase their capacity to deliver)

3. Salinas growers are perceived as proactive, engaged, efficient.

- ◆ Tangible demonstrations of their efforts
- ◆ Link current practices to stewardship
- ◆ NEW Document outcomes of trainings, and publicize
- ◆ NEW Communicate with the regulatory agencies (get agency representatives onto project sites)
- ◆ NEW Tours of farms and project sites

4. Members of the community understand conservation and the RCD, and are inspired to help achieve our goals.

- ◆ Redesign website
- ◆ NEW Understand gaps in ag education/work with schools/kids (farm day, watershed explorers)



- ◆ **NEW** Provide information to municipal residents
- ◆ Bring public officials/other people to farms to show projects.
- ◆ Create a regular flow of information (newsletters, events, tours)

The group then discussed how to evaluate other new opportunities in the context of the strategic focus areas. A strategy screen for new opportunities includes the following questions:

- Does the project leverage visibility?
- Does the project leverage other funding?
- Is the project controversial or counter-productive to other goals?
- Is the project worth our effort?
- Does the project align with other work?
- Is the project critical to the community right now?

What will it take?

The group then focused on how the RCD will approach implementation of the new activities and strategies. The primary focus areas were on outreach/communications activities and the development of new revenue streams.

Outreach/Communications

Paul provided information that the primary implementation for the educational outreach activities will be in the workplan for the new half time employee. Paul himself anticipates taking on the outreach to community leaders and partners to discuss alignment of RCD efforts and projects with their priorities. The board can play key roles in introducing Paul and helping him make connection (examples included the Kiwanis, California Women in Ag, and Cattlewomen's Assoc.).

The board discussed its role in overall outreach planning. Board members concluded that the staff should initiate the development of an outreach plan, gathering initial input from the entire board (who are we reaching? What is the message?) then working with the Outreach Committee to refine the plan. Once a plan is in place, board members may take on roles in the implementation. The group also discussed the possibility of hiring an outside contractor to assist in the development of an outreach plan.

New Revenue Streams

Retreat participants discussed three primary new revenue streams with the potential to deliver significant impact for the RCD.

Fee for Service Engineering



The board discussed questions related to the possibility for the RCD to establish a fee-for-service engineering arm. Key questions included:

- How can the RCD ramp up slowly into a new arena (e.g. hire a half time design-focused engineer/hydrologist with grant and project funds, and create an enterprise plan to fill the other half of their time)?
- Is competition with the private sector an issue? Should the RCD offer services on a sliding scale?
- Can EQIP ‘Technical Service Provider’ funds be used to fund the RCD’s engineers?
- Would the new employee need to have an engineer’s stamp?
- What are the insurance and liability implications?
- Could the RCD find and hire an additional engineer?
- Are there models in other RCDs?

The group decided to charge Paul with creating a business plan to answer the questions, examine the feasibility of the idea, understand the “lay of the land,” and present to the board a draft plan to build a self-sustaining line of business that can help speed up engineering services for farmers. Paul would work with the RCD Program Engineer on this.

Irrigator trainings

The board discussed the possibility of transitioning the newly grant-funded irrigator training program into a long-term business line with the RCD providing trainings to growers for a fee. Participants suggested that the program would be most successful if it also incorporated a public relations aspect to help the growers message about efficiency and qualify for Central Coast Vineyard Team ‘SIP’ Certification (for example). Key questions included:

- Is there an agency connection that could help with continued funding?
- Is the demand stable?
- Would it evolve into a “train the trainers” model where growers would then train their own irrigators?
- Are there enough new customers?

The current project team was charged with exploring the concept and the market to have something in place by the end of the current three year grant.

Fundraising from individuals

Before discussing fundraising, the participants did an exercise where each participant asked another to support the RCD. Key talking points that emerged from the “asks” included:

- Farmer-led
- Non-regulatory



- Over 40 years old
- Not-for-profit special district (donations are tax deductible)
- We rely on grants and contributions will help us achieve _____
- Do you care about _____? Then you care about us.
- Youth education (appeals to a general audience)
- Conserve soil, water, wildlife (Santa Cruz RCD has a good message platform)
- Support to independent farmers, who are stewards of the land
- Balanced
- Inland to Peninsula
- Clean water + farmland = long term investment
- Most wildlife habitat is on farms
- Water goes to the bay – from the Salinas River. (watershed message)
- Ag impacts everyone's life
- Arundo project is a huge success – it benefits everyone.

The group discussed the possibilities and challenges of fundraising from individuals. The conversation centered on what would need to be in place for fundraising to be successful. Comments included:

- Staff skills
- Fundraising systems
- Board support (similar to BBQ)
- Outreach and visibility
- Commitment of time, energy and resources
- Clear benefits to donors (donor acknowledgement and rewards)
- A concrete outcome for donors to support—a concept
- Messaging that helps people see the RCD as a priority

Amy asked if the group might be interested in focusing on one project, such as the education work, as a way to begin fundraising. The group was open to considering that approach.

The group agreed to use the annual BBQ as an anchor point for the development of a fundraising strategy. The event can include sponsors, in-kind donors, messaging of the RCD and any specific programs that would be supported, and a more systematic approach to asking for donations.



The group also discussed board members exploring with larger agricultural enterprises, the possibility of more significant support. This would require the ability to communicate the community impact of the work. Participants mentioned the idea of cultivating the next generation of farmers as a powerful message.

Board duties

Finally, the group discussed how the board will support aspects of the strategic direction as well as general board duties.

The board discussed that they that previously identified the need for a board development committee to focus on recruitment, orientation, and training for board members. Joanna agreed to help Paul organize the board development committee. A few ideas and targets were discussed for possible new board members, with geography and expertise as key considerations.

The group also discussed the need to create accountability for board and staff to follow through on commitments made in the strategic planning process. Paul agreed to work on developing a calendar for the year with key duties and due dates included; and to provide follow up reminders to Board members about their commitments (possibly electronic calendar reminders). The group also discussed regularly reviewing their commitments at the board meetings. Amy offered a model of an agenda where past-month and coming-month commitments are highlighted on the agenda or board packet cover sheet.

Retreat conclusion and next steps

Amy closed the retreat with a review of the next steps.

- Solid Ground will provide a retreat report and draft strategic direction, along with a three-year planning template.
- The board will review and refine the strategic direction.
- Board and staff will share the strategic direction with stakeholders to continue the conversation.
- Where appropriate, staff and committees will create detailed plans to support the strategic direction.

The retreat closed with a round of appreciations.

Retreat attendees

RCDMC Board Members: Benny Jefferson, President; Rebecca King, Vice President; Joanna Devers, Treasurer; Brent Plemmons; Linda Ferrasci, Emily Paddock. RCDMC Staff: Paul Robins. Facilitator: Amy Stork, Solid Ground Consulting.

