

WATER RESOURCES PLANNING — ARE YOU READY?

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ABSTRACT

Oakdale Irrigation District (OID) is a 72,345 acre irrigation district located in the northeast foothills and valley floor of the San Joaquin Valley of Central California. In late 2004 OID embarked on the development of a Water Resources Plan (WRP) with a subsequent adoption of the Plan in June 2007. The planning document and subsequent environmental review took nearly two and half years to complete. Oddly enough, the time spent developing the WRP was just about equal to time spent positioning OID to begin the planning process, hence the point of this paper. Water resource planning is not something one should embark upon lightly. It is an expensive process to do correctly; it is demanding in its time and energy commitment from the district; it is politically risky or at best politically challenging, depending on your local situation, if the groundwork is not laid properly.

There are a number of elements a General Manager and/or an irrigation district Board of Directors should consider, or be aware of, prior to investing substantially in such a planning effort. Without a good understanding of the critical path elements to get to a successful implementation of the WRP a district could spend a sizable amount of money and staff time on a planning effort that ends up becoming largely un-implementable.

This paper will discuss experiences learned at OID regarding its efforts in implementing a successful Water Resources Plan.

INTRODUCTION

“Fail to plan, plan to fail”, is a saying that has been around for quite awhile. It’s a good saying and in 6 words captures the essence of where irrigation districts should be, or need to be, with respect to planning their water futures.

OID took on the effort to plan its water future in 2004 with the release of a Request for Proposals to develop a Water Resources Plan. Years before getting to that point however, there was a concerted effort by the board of directors and general manager to identify and assess some critical path hurdles. Those hurdles included:

- Laying the Foundation
- Constituents
- Board
- Management
- Employees

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PRE-PLANNING YOUR PLANNING

Strategic Business Plan-Laying the Foundation

Planning an irrigation district's water future is just a subset of its overall business plan. A business plan is the foundation from which subsequent planning efforts should evolve. Until an irrigation district board and its general manager are in sync in the identification of their key business objectives any attempts at ancillary planning outside that need are at risk of being unsuccessful.

Case in point: OID had embarked on and developed the following planning documents since the early 1980's; a Master Plan for System Improvements in 1983; a Water Conservation Master Plan in 1991; a Groundwater Management Plan in 1995; and an Agricultural Water Management Plan in 2000. While good money and good intentions were the basis for each of these planning efforts, none of these planning efforts were ever implemented. Why the lack of success? Generally, systemic limitations in the organization's culture precluded it from moving forward as is outlined below.

In May 2002 OID embarked on the development of a Strategic Business Plan. There were lots of reasons to embark on yet another planning effort, all of which are captured in the *Forward* of the *Strategic Business Plan*;

“There were several reasons for the preparation of this plan at this time. A new General Manager and relatively new Board wished to refocus the organization on the strategic issues affecting its future. For many years high turnover both in management and at the board level had produced confusion and inconsistent directions in the minds of the staff and the public. New financial resources have recently become available to carry out expanded plans. Before plunging into the future, the board felt that a review of the organizations direction and purpose was needed. Also importantly, OID's traditional methods of water delivery, management and customer service may need to be updated or adjusted going into the future. Multiple types of customers, and customer needs, changes in best farming practice that require less water and management of pollutant runoff, and new water resource management responsibilities may require OID to reevaluate their historical practices.”

As further stated in the *Forward*;

“The confusion of the past years has diminished the motivation and ability of the staff of the organization to plan and accomplish longer term objectives. OID staff is well aware of their internal handicaps and of the worn out state of OID facilities. Better vision, purpose and morale must be restored before strategic objective can be accomplished. This is the biggest challenge for the new leadership.”

During the development of the Strategic Business Plan there was an identification of the weaknesses of the “old” district and, more importantly, a path forward to correct those weaknesses. Input into the performance measures, vision and goals for OID came from the Board, management, its staff, and more importantly, the public. The end product from this one year effort in conducting employee interviews, public interviews, water customer interviews, Board workshops, news articles and the like resulted in a product that had both organizational and public support upon completion.

Embedded in the Strategic Business Plan was the development of a Water Resources Plan. With the foundation block for the water resources planning being laid the next challenging hurdle could then be addressed.

Constituents

OID has a 300,000 acre foot water right to the Stanislaus River. OID began selling, through water transfer contracts, 41,000 acre feet of that water to municipal and environmental recipients beginning in 1998, about 4 years prior to the developing its Strategic Business Plan. During that 4 year period, as a result of those transfers, there were 3 General Managers that had come and gone, 2 successful recalls of Board members and one Board member who ran for re-election and lost. To say the least, water is a controversial subject in the OID water service area.

The public vetting during the development of OID’s Strategic Business Plan went a long way in testing the waters regarding the public’s willingness to discuss all aspects of water issues. The thoroughness of the needs assessment of OID as it related to protecting its water, its financial needs, infrastructure rebuilding and modernizing needs, etc, went a long way in informing the public. This process was not done well for the original water transfers and the resultant turmoil of this shortcoming was a benchmark lesson for the new Board and General Manager. There was not a desire to repeat the mistakes of the past.

Constituent buy-in is essential for any actions of an irrigation district contemplating enhanced management, planning or transfers of water. Taking the time to build that buy-in via a non-threatening format, such as development of a strategic business plan, is a great opportunity for an organization to build bridges within the water community. While one won’t be able to lead all the horses to water to drink, the object is to be in a position that if one or two kick, it won’t hurt too badly.

For purposes of the remainder of this paper we will assume that the idea of constituent involvement and participation will be a central focus of all related actions involving water. Whether it is plan development, vision or mission changes, or implementation of measures that change the water culture for your district the public involvement is critical.

THE THREE LEGGED STOOL

Typically, the organization chart for an irrigation district has the Board of Directors at the top of a pyramid. Next on the pyramid are the General Manager and legal Counsel(s). Underneath that layer comes a management team followed by the general workforce and bulk of employees. Conceptually, lay the pyramid on its back and place the Board at one point, the GM and his management team at another point and the employee component at the last remaining point. This vision will be used later in the discussions.

Assessing the End Game

The end game for development of a water resources plan is its implementation. So there are two actions necessary here; one is development of the plan; and the other is the plan's ultimate implementation. At some point an irrigation district needs to ask itself, if it develops a plan does it have the means to implement the plan? If the answer is no, you're not ready, nor should you begin the planning effort.

As pointed out earlier, OID had no problem generating plans from 1983-2000; it had a problem implementing them. Generally, a plan's failure to be implemented is the result of a weakness in one or more of the stool legs envisioned earlier. Both "development" and "implementation" subjects will be discussed further in each of the following subjects.

The Board Leg of the Stool

Generally, public policy moves forward on a majority vote at the irrigation district governance level. Not surprisingly, that's the same number of votes it takes to discharge a General Manager (GM). The point here; the idea of water resources planning, the idea of changing the "water culture" in an irrigation district, if not done correctly, can have a downside for management. A GM needs to assess the readiness of a Board of Directors to tackle what could be a difficult subject matter politically, both as it relates to development of the water resources plan and its implementation. There will be some very hard choices that need to be made by this collective body and that ability to make those hard choices should be up front and center as an irrigation district moves into planning its water future.

The advantages of promoting the development of a Strategic Business Plan are twofold. One advantage is that it's an easy sell to the Board and public. Businesses need business plans and the benefits afforded during the business plan's development with respect to information gathered outweigh the cost of the business plan by a significant multiplier. A second benefit is that it affords the GM an opportunity to assess and flesh out the sensitivity of a Board of Directors in many subject matters, not just water resources. That understanding can go a long way to test the Board's stomach for change.

OID went into the development of its Strategic Business Plan on a 2-2-1 swing vote by its Board of Directors. One new director, not sure of the purpose for the planning effort thought it was a good idea for the money spent. The outcome, a year later, was a strong

3-2 vote to move forward in implementation of change in many business arenas for OID, including the planning of its water future.

The Management Leg of the Stool

The management team at an irrigation district is comprised of the General Manager (GM) and his Management Team. The Management Team is usually comprised of Department Heads over a variety of operational segments of an irrigation district, which at OID today include Finance, Engineering, Contracts, Construction & Maintenance (Support Services), and Water Operations.

General Managers usually come to be general managers in one of two ways; they “grow up” in the organization through promotions and advancements to a position of authority (i.e., Department Manager) and at the point the current GM leaves are promoted into the vacated GM position. A second way a GM comes into an irrigation district is via an outside solicitation from the irrigation district. In the former, the GM pretty much knows the professional capabilities of his management team because he has worked with them for a number of years. In the later, a GM generally inherits his management team and has a bit of a learning curve regarding their professional capacities. In either case, the management team needs to be of a technical and professional caliber to both develop and implement a water resources plan. Not having that team in place, or having a less than strong team, is a weakness in the stool analogy.

Assessing both the capabilities and capacity to perform of the OID management team during the development of the Strategic Business Plan was a great help at OID to the new General Manager. The result of the Strategic Business Plan’s development showed that the weaknesses of two existing Department Managers could not be overcome by training or education. While great individuals, who served the past purposes of their employer well, they did not possess the knowledge, skills or ability to move the district forward into or through the technical requirements of implementing a modern day resources plan. Through agreement, they were retired out from the organization, and replaced with individuals with suitable skills.

The Employee Leg of the Stool

The importance of the employee leg of the stool is an often overlooked element to the successful development and implementation of a water resources plan. Much like the Board of Directors and the Management Team, a weakness in the capabilities of irrigation district employees is a recipe for a failure to implement any plan.

An analogy I used often is when the old ditchtenders back in the 1930s were told that they would have to give up their horses and start driving vehicles to make their water deliveries. Many had to go and get drivers licenses, take tests, learn mechanics, etc. to adjust to the change. Similarly, when a thing called a telephone was put in their offices so they could communicate more often and more quickly with not only their supervisors

but with customers, all new adjusts came into being. Those employees either learned these new skills or moved on to other careers.

Today we are at a point no different. Ditchtenders are being told that computers will be installed in their trucks. Many ditchtenders at OID didn't even own home computers but now had to learn a new skill. Accurate gate deliveries, water accounting, SCADA, automated gates, remote site controls, etc.; it is a continually changing process for demands on employee skill sets. Employees either learn to adapt, step up and get additional training, embrace the change, or move on to other careers. For management, the hard part can be the "moving on" piece.

At OID, during the mid to late 1990s, low wages and low hiring standards created an organization ill equipped to meet the challenges of an upcoming and modernizing irrigation district. In 2003, a concerted effort was made to implement change in the workplace, to give employees who wanted to be challenged, who wanted a career, a place to stay. Those employees not interested in such an organization were encouraged to leave. Of the seventy-two (72) employees currently at OID forty-one (41) have been hired during the last 10 years. Nine (9) of the 41 are new positions, six (6) were hired to replace retirements. The resultant twenty-six (26) replacements were employees who "moved on" to find more compatible careers.

Those hard choices back then have made OID a responsive and progressive organization today. The quality of workmanship produced and the caliber of the employees in the work force at OID make it a community asset to Oakdale and earned it Business of the Year in 2010 from the Chamber of Commerce.

CONCLUSION

The coming political and societal climate for water is one that will demand water to be managed at a high level. To get there on the macro level is, or should be, the primary responsibility of those serving in a stewardship role over that resource. In the west, that's generally an irrigation district. To assert that resource management role the development of a Water Resources Plan is an agencies statement regarding its water future. It serves as a public statement that its mission and direction to meet the challenges of the future are sufficiently managed.

The key to successful implementation of a Water Resources Plan have been outlined herein from a case study from the Oakdale Irrigation District. This is a district that has gone through the challenges of building the foundation for change, implementing change and advancing the modernization of its water delivery system. It is hoped the experiences learned and shared within this paper will provide food for thought to those about to embark on a similar journey.

WATER RESOURCES PLAN - UPDATE

As a result of the successful development of its Water Resources Plan, OID went forward in 2009 and bonded for \$32 million to do some large scale water conservation and infrastructure rebuilding projects. Those series of projects will be finished in 2012 and the revenues used to repay those bonds will be funded with water transfer revenues.