

EFFICIENCY REPORT FOR THE VERMILION COUNTY CONSERVATION DISTRICT

APPROVED BY THE CONSERVATION DISTRICT'S
COMMITTEE ON LOCAL GOVERNMENT EFFICIENCY
ON OCTOBER 16, 2024



1.Purpose

The Vermilion County Conservation District (“VCCD”) formed its Committee on Local Government Efficiency on May 17, 2023, to study efficiencies and report recommendations regarding those efficiencies and increased accountability pursuant to 50 ILCS 70/1, *et seq.* (the “Committee”).

2. Committee Membership

The Committee consisted of the following individuals:

Randy Johnson

Michael Gast

Mike Arbuckle

Jessica Augustson

Cristin O’Shaughnessy

Todd Harris

Ken Hannan

3.Committee Meetings

The Committee met as follows

Friday, September 27, 2024; 4:30 p.m. Kennekuk County Park Education Center 22296 Henning Rd, Danville, IL 61834.

Friday October 11, 2024; 4:30 p.m. Kennekuk County Park Education Center 22296 Henning Rd, Danville, IL 61834.

Wednesday, October 16, 2024; 5:00 p.m. Forest Glen Preserve Gannett Education Center, 20301 E. 900 N. Rd, Westville, IL 61883.

Minutes of these meetings are available on the VCCD website or upon request at the VCCD administrative office.

4. General Overview of Governing Statutes, Ordinances, Rules, Procedures, Powers, Jurisdiction

The VCCD was established by a referendum initiated and approved by the voters of Vermilion County in 1966. All Illinois conservation districts, including the VCCD, are governed by the Conservation District Act, 70 ILCS 410/1 *et seq.*

Having a separate and distinct taxing body for parks, recreation, and conservation within the local community, which operates apart from general purpose governments, is extremely beneficial to the community for many reasons, as detailed further in this report.

- **Appointed, non-partisan, non-compensated board.** The VCCD is governed by a board of Five Trustees. Trustees must reside within the boundaries of the Conservation District and are appointed by the Vermilion County Board to a term of five years. Each year the VCCD is appointed one new trustee to replace the outgoing trustee's completion of a five-year term. Pursuant to state law, trustees serve without compensation.
- **Accessible and focused representation.** Having a dedicated board to oversee these essential facilities, programs, and services provides the community with increased access to their representatives and allows those representatives to remain focused solely on those facilities, programs, and services. This is contrasted with general purpose governments where elected representatives are responsible for broad oversight on a wide range of issues. This special purpose benefit is particularly advantageous when it comes to budget and finance oversight.
- **Increased transparency.** Having a dedicated unit of local government to provide park and recreation services also improves the relationship between the VCCD and its residents because of the transparency and openness related to the board and VCCD operations. Having detailed agenda and action items allows taxpayers to be better informed about the inner workings of their local government. When individual units of government are responsible for providing specified services like conservation districts, transparency is increased because action items and budget procedures are more detailed. Additionally, these items and budgetary decisions are subject to more scrutiny by locally elected officials than is the case with larger, multi-purpose governments with a multitude of departments.

Protection of revenues. Because the VCCD is a separate unit of local government, the revenues it generates can only be used for conservation district purposes. This assurance is contrasted with general purpose governments like cities, villages, and counties that provide a multitude of services such as fire, police, public works, economic development, etc., where revenues that are generated specifically for

parks and recreation can be expended on these other services with limited, if any, input from voters.

- **Protection of assets.** Public parks and other real property owned by the VCCD is held in trust for the residents of the VCCD
- **Providing the Community More with Less.** The VCCD does more with much fewer funding options. Unlike other units of local government that receive direct state funding, and income, sales, use, motor fuel and other numerous taxes, 60% of the VCCD's revenues come from a modest portion of a resident's overall property tax bill. In fact, despite its limited funding options, the VCCD's share is only less than 2% of the local tax bill, depending upon which municipality the home/property is located in.
- The VCCD is required to follow all state laws that govern Illinois municipalities as well as the Illinois Conservation District Act.
- The VCCD complies with the Open Meetings Act
- The VCCD complies with FOIA regulations
- The VCCD has a staff-maintained website with updated information for the public to access VCCD rules, regulations, ordinances, fees, how to obtain permits, board meeting agenda, and board meeting minutes.
- The VCCD has a Facebook page that the public can ask questions and receive VCCD news and updates
- The VCCD has a quarterly newsletter that is distributed free of charge to persons who sign up to receive the newsletter.

As part of good governance and implementing best practices in the management of day-to-day operations, the VCCD has also adopted the following ordinances, rules, policies, and procedures:

ORDINANCE NO. 89

AN ORDINANCE SETTING FORTH THE RULES AND REGULATIONS GOVERNING THE PUBLIC USE OF DISTRICT PROPERTIES AND PROVIDING FOR A PENALTY OF VIOLATIONS THEREOF.

Personnel policy that provides policy and procedures for staff.

The VCCD is required to have an independent audit completed at the end of each budget year.

5.List of Shared Services and Partnerships

The VCCD works diligently to provide the best possible programs, services, and facilities to our community at the least possible cost. One of the many ways the VCCD achieves this goal is by partnering with school districts, other units of local government within or near the community, the State, non-profit organizations, and for-profit corporations. Below is a comprehensive list of the current partnerships, agreements, and other relationships that assist the VCCD's mission of delivering the best possible services at the least possible cost to our community.

1. Other intergovernmental agreements with other park districts, forest preserve districts, conservation districts, or municipal recreation agencies

- Champaign County Forest Preserve District
- Urbana Park District

2. Intergovernmental agreements with other units of local government

- Vermilion County Highway Department easement for roadway improvements
- Village of Muncie use of property for softball field
- Vermilion County Sheriff Department Lake Patrol

3. Intergovernmental agreements with the State of Illinois

- Illinois Department of Natural Resources for the purchase of land for the Kickapoo rail trail and development.
- Illinois Department of Natural Resources Fisheries pond management

4. Partnerships or other interrelationships with non-profits

- Vermilion County Conservation Foundation
- Middle Fork Audubon Society
- Friends of the Kickapoo Rail Trail
- Danville Area Visitor and Convention Bureau
- Vermilion Advantage
- Pheasants Forever
- Kiwanis
- Rotary

5. Informal cooperation with other units of local government which save taxpayer dollars by eliminating redundancy

- Outdoor school program that serves all Vermilion County schools and some out of county schools. The program celebrated its 50-year anniversary in 2024. In the 50 years the program has served over 60,000 Vermilion county and out of county students.

- Traveling naturalist program that has VCCD education staff travel to Vermilion County Schools to provide education presentations.
- Illinois Department of Natural Resources, the VCCD shares a boundary with Kickapoo State Park and occasionally collaborates on projects and issues as a result of being neighbors.
- Village of Oakwood maintenance of KRT in Village
- Village of Muncie maintenance of property in Village
- Village of Fithian maintenance of property in Village
- University of Illinois Extension Master Gardeners

6. Other Examples of Efficient Operations

Use of volunteers. One way in which the VCCD reduces the burden on taxpayers is through the use of volunteers. Last year, 65 individuals volunteered 355 hours of service to the VCCD.

Joint purchasing The VCCD participates in joint purchasing cooperatives pursuant to the Governmental Joint Purchasing Act (30 ILCS 525/0.01 *et seq.*) thereby saving taxpayer dollars through economies of scale. These include vehicle and equipment purchases.

Vermilion County Conservation Foundation. Last year, the Foundation, provided the VCCD with over \$200,000 in funding and volunteer hours which help alleviate the burden on taxpayers.

Reliance on Non-Tax Revenue. Unlike most local governments that rely on a wide range of sales, use, and income taxes, the VCCD is not permitted to assess these types of taxes. Additionally, although the VCCD is an economic engine for the community and generates much revenue for the state and our community in the form of sales, and motor fuel taxes, the VCCD does not receive any of these revenues. Also, unlike Illinois cities, villages, counties, and school districts that received billions of dollars in direct financial assistance from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), the VCCD did not receive any such direct federal aid. The VCCD also does not receive state funding under the Local Government Distributive Fund (LGDF), General State Aid (GSA), or Motor Fuel Tax Fund that these same cities, villages, counties, and school districts receive through the State budget.

Instead, the VCCD provides all of the programs, facilities, and services to the community with a very modest amount of property taxes and from **non-tax sources** such as program registrations, and other user fees as well as private donations and grants.

25% of the VCCD revenues are from user fees collected from camping, lake passes, building reservations, hunting fees, summer camps, farming operations, etc.

7. Transparency to the Community

The following information about the VCCD may be obtained by citizens on the VCCD website, Administration Office, and County Clerks office:

- Annual tax levy
- Annual budget and appropriation ordinance

The following information may be obtained by citizens on the VCCD website and at the Administration Building.

- Board of Trustees Agenda and minutes
- Tentative budget and appropriations
- General use and regulations
- Ordinances
- Resolutions
- Calendar of events
- Employment- job postings and applications

Additional information available at the VCCD Administration Building:

- Recordings of public meetings
- Personnel policy
- Lake Mingo Dam operation and safety manual
- Lake Mingo Dam engineering report (required every 3 years)
- Bylaws

The VCCD offers residents many opportunities to provide feedback. These include:

- The Board of Trustees meet each month. Residents may provide public comment at every meeting.
- The VCCD's annual Budget and Appropriation Ordinance is available in tentative form at least 30 days prior to its adoption at an open meeting of the VCCD board.

Additionally, at least one public hearing is held prior to final action, and notice of the hearing is published in the newspaper at least one week prior to the hearing.

- The VCCD's annual property tax levy is approved at an open meeting of the VCCD board in accordance with the Open Meetings Act. The VCCD follows all public notice and hearing requirements under the Truth in Taxation Law prior to the adoption of this annual tax levy. The VCCD's corporate fund is limited to taxing at ten cents for every one hundred dollars of the county EAV.
- Residents may contact or request information from the VCCD by phone at 217-442-1691 or email at vccd@vccd.org

8. Benefits and Services

The VCCD serves the entire community from the youngest child to the oldest adult and all ages in between. It does so in a variety of ways.

1. Facilities

The VCCD offered the following facilities to the community last year:

- **Forest Glen Preserve:**
 - 2000-acre park
 - 150,000 annual visitors
 - 42 site RV campground, electric, sewer, water and shower house available
 - 20 site tent campgrounds
 - 4 Registered Illinois State Nature Preserves
 - More than 25 miles of hiking trails
 - 5 rental facilities
 - Education Center
 - Nature Center
 - Pioneer Homestead
 - 4 ponds
 - Access to Underwood Cemetery
 - 220 different species of birds documented
- **Heron County Park**
 - 50-acre park
 - 24,000 annual visitors
 - 950' floating board walk
 - 30' observation tower
 - 1-mile nature trail
 - Picnic Shelter

- **Kennekuk County Park**
 3000-acre park
 225,000 annual visitors
 120-acre Lake Mingo
 More than 10 miles of hiking trails
 2 Registered Illinois State Nature Preserves
 9 rental facilities
 4 ponds
 4 marshes
 Borders Middle Fork National Scenic River
 Concrete canoe ramp accessing Middle Fork River
 Education Center
 District Administration Building
 Pioneer Cemetery
 Higginsville Cemetery
 Access to Dodson Cemetery
 200 different bird species documented
 400 different species of wildflowers documented

- **Kickapoo Rail Trail**
 Biking/Walking trail 1.8 miles
 10,000 annual visitors
 Trail expanding an additional 10 miles in 2025

- **Lake Vermilion County Park**
 7-acre Park
 100,000 annual visitors
 2 lane boat ramp access to Lake Vermilion (only public lake access)
 1000-acre Lake Vermilion (owned by Aqua Illinois, recreation access leased by VCCD)
 20 slip courtesy docks
 50 space truck/trailer parking lot
 Picnic Shelter

2. Programs

The VCCD offered the following programs last year.

- 32 off-site programs (Traveling Naturalist, Summer Library Program, Civic group presentations, etc.) with 1750 approximate participants
- 23 on-park single-day school programs (Project Success, Maple Syrup Field Trips, Scout Programs, Day visits) with approximately 660 participants
- 24 weeks of Outdoor School at Kennekuk and Forest Glen with approximately 1100 students

- 18 public programs (Maple Syrup Fest, Guided Hikes, Spinners and Weavers, Spring Bird Migration, Rev War, Pioneer Craft Day, Thanksgiving at the Cabin, BHHA Holiday Open House) with an estimated attendance of 4500.
- 14 summer camp programs with 275 participants
- Holiday Lights display nightly in December at Bunker Hill Historic Area
- Maple Syrup production, production 30-150 gallons of syrup each year on site
- Maple Syrup Open House
- 40 years of Conservation Olympic Program. Vermilion County sixth grade students participate in educational/competitive program to strengthen students' knowledge concerning our natural heritage.

3. Additional Services

The VCCD provided the following additional services to the community.

- The VCCD has 14 facilities that are available to rent by the day for picnic, reunions, celebrations, and weddings.
- Every year the staff respond to numerous inquiries via phone, email, text, and social media, with regards to wildlife and conservation issues.

4. Other Benefits

While the VCCD is a special purpose district, its impact to the community is multi-faceted and far reaching. For example, the VCCD's parks, recreational programming, and other opportunities improve the community's overall physical and mental health and wellness, thereby reducing health care costs. The VCCD's open space and trees help improve air and water quality and mitigate flooding. Studies have shown that communities with access to parks and open space can increase home values. Homes selling near parks are generally more desirable for home buyers.

9. Recommendations for Increased Accountability and Efficiency

1. Intergovernmental Fees and Charges

One opportunity for efficiency would be the elimination of fees and charges assessed by other units of government. Such fees and charges, and the bureaucracy that accompanies them, inhibit the VCCD's ability to deliver programs, facilities, and services at the least possible cost.

Governmental units should be discouraged or prohibited from charging more than their out-of-pocket costs associated with the activities covered by a fee that is assessed to another unit of local government with the same taxpayers. Put another way, one unit of local government should not profit by taxing another. Eliminating local permit fees is a way to reduce administrative costs without impacting overall public revenue. Local

government best serves the people when it cooperates and works together. Some communities recognize this and do not charge fees to other units. All communities should be encouraged to follow that model to receive the best results for local taxpayers and to promote governmental efficiency.

2. Inefficiency of Other Governments

The VCCD is also negatively impacted by the inefficiency of the State of Illinois.

- The State of Illinois often passes laws affecting local governments. These laws are often politically driven, and in most cases, exempt the State of Illinois from complying with laws regulating municipalities.
- Laws and regulations passed by the State are often a one size fits all applications and are not always the best application for all regions of the state.
- This Decennial Efficiency report is a prime example of a waste of efficiency required by the State. Instead of VCCD staff serving the public that funds our operations we are spending time having meetings and preparing a report required by the State of Illinois.
- The State of Illinois is continually behind on providing grant application processing and funding, yet they require responses to emails and to provide information requested within 24 hours.
- Most grants are on a competitive basis. This often equates to agencies that have more funds and resources to receive grants instead of agencies with less resources who could greatly benefit from grants

3. Unfunded Mandates

Unfunded state mandates are another cost driver. While the VCCD recognizes that there are benefits to some of these mandates, modifications could help alleviate some of the burden to the VCCD.

- a) Non-resident FOIA Requests.** Often the individuals/businesses submitting the FOIA requests are from outside of the VCCD boundaries, and they appear to be serving a specific agenda, rather than assuring better local government.

Under current law, resident taxpayers end up footing the bill for these non-resident or commercial requests. In order to help alleviate the burden for these non-resident requests the law could be amended to: (1) add a requirement that non-residents identify/explain the purpose of the request for information; (2) add a time limit on how far back a non-resident can request information; (3) staff time and costs could be included in the amount that is reimbursable for non-resident and commercial requests; (4) move back the deadline for non-resident requests 10 business days so that the VCCD does not have to delay services to its residents in order to comply with a non-resident request.

Sunshine laws are supposed to protect taxpayers by allowing them to shed light on any issue that is not exempt from FOIA. However, local government can be burdened by having to drop everything to rearrange priorities to meet FOIA deadlines, particularly if it has limited resources. Since local residents ultimately bear the expense of complying with FOIA, treating resident and non-resident requests differently would be justified.

- b) Criminal Background Checks.** The VCCD does not recommend eliminating this mandate because it is necessary to ensure the safety and well-being of children and other VCCD patrons. However, the State should explore ways in which it could improve the current system and make it less costly for agencies to comply with the law.

The mandate also raises the fundamental question as to why one layer of government is forced to charge its taxpayers to comply with a State mandate when the State made the determination to impose the mandate. Put another way, if the State has determined that criminal background checks are necessary for public safety, the State should assist with compliance.

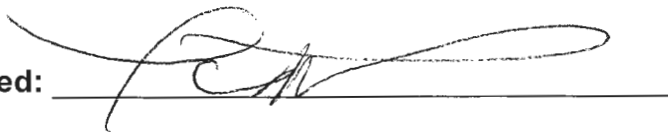
The VCCD recommends studying whether there can be a more efficient background check process implemented through the ISP to reduce the time and expense it takes for background checks. Another suggestion is for ISP to waive the fee for checks on minors or waive all fees for name checks. If there is a "hit" from a name check, the fee could be charged for the more costly fingerprint check. Since it is a state mandate, perhaps the fee structure for agencies should also be reviewed to determine whether the fee being charged exceeds the actual cost of doing the check and, if so, perhaps the ISP could consider reducing its cost to local governments.

- c) Prevailing Wage.** One way to reduce burden on local government staff is to limit the prevailing wage requirement to larger capital contracts. This would free up tracking of the paperwork on small repairs and projects. One reason for creating a threshold requirement is the cost of the administrative burden relative to the cost of the actual project. For example, eliminating prevailing wage on smaller projects, e.g., those less than \$50,000, will result in more local bids and decrease the overall cost for these smaller public works projects.

- d) Newspaper Publication.** The newspaper is no longer the most effective way to provide notice. Websites are cheaper and reach more people. Permitting the VCCD to post the information on its website in lieu of newspaper publications would reduce costs.

Dated: October 16, 2024

Signed: _____

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'P. M.', is written over a horizontal line.