Shared Resource Needs of Conservation Districts in Washington State

Developed by the WACD Shared Resources Workgroup

May 7, 2024

Introduction: Conservation Districts in Washington state have grown from employing a single part-time staff person to over a dozen employees per district in the past three decades. As conservation districts have grown so has their need for operational support in the realm of legal services, human resources, information technology, and more. The Shared Resources Work Group was formed from the adoption of Resolution 2022-08. The Workgroup was tasked with engaging the Association's membership to address the need and opportunity for expanded shared resources and services for the following areas:

- Human Resources
- Legal Counsel
- Information Technology
- File/Data Management and Archiving (paper and electronic)
- Financial Consulting for Software, Processes, and Policies
- Grant Writing
- Capacity Building
- Training and Education

Based on that work, WACD shall develop a list of next steps that shall include the following items:

- Funding options for the support of best practices and compliance for Districts, including:
  - Grants;
  - Budget requests;
  - The creation of a 501(c)(3) to support District training, infrastructure, education, and capacity, and facilitate discounted shared resources.
- Opportunities to fund a part-time position to assist with setting up resources and services that Districts could use at a discount.
- A list of the most needed resources that can be shared.

The Work Group is made up of 12 Conservation District Managers/Executive Directors: Renee Hadley, Walla Walla County CD; Becca Hebron, Foster Creek CD; Casey Lowder, Pine Creek CD; Linda Lyshall, Snohomish CD; Heather McCoy, Whidbey Island CD; Loren Meagher, Central/Eastern Klickitat CDs; Sarah Moorehead, Thurston CD, Mark Nielson, Franklin and Benton CDs, Zorah Oppenheimer, Clark CD; Brandy Reed, Whatcom CD; Ryan Williams, Cascadia CD. The Workgroup's membership also includes 1 SCC Regional Manager, Jean Fike. The

Workgroup currently receives staff support from Heather Wendt, WACD's Director of Development and Engagement.

Background: The Shared Resources workgroup began meeting in March of 2023. The workgroup identified access to legal services as a priority. Given the unique nature of districts, access to legal counsel familiar with special-purpose districts was viewed as important.   On September 18, 2023, the WACD Board of Directors voted to retain CSD Attorneys at Law as General Counsel for WACD. CSD Attorneys at Law is the law firm used by the Spokane Conservation District, they are familiar with what a conservation district is and how it operates. CSD Law also works with other local government entities such as ports, and fire and rescue districts. The WACD retainer also provided one hour of free legal consultation to districts in good standing. Additional time can be secured at a reduced cost to CDs. The WACD Legal Service Fund was created as a line item in the WACD budget to support this service to districts.

In the fall of 2023, the Shared Resource Workgroup surveyed conservation districts to determine their needs around operational support. 21 Conservation Districts responded to the survey. Of those that responded, the next highest need indicated was for Human Resource services, followed by Information Technology support, File and Database Management, Grant Writing and Fundraising, Capacity Building, Contracting and Procurement, and Training and Education.

Q16 To determine which topic the Workgroup focuses on next, please rank the topic you need the most assistance with (1) as the highest need to (7) the topic you need the least assistance with.

Answered: 20   Skipped: 1
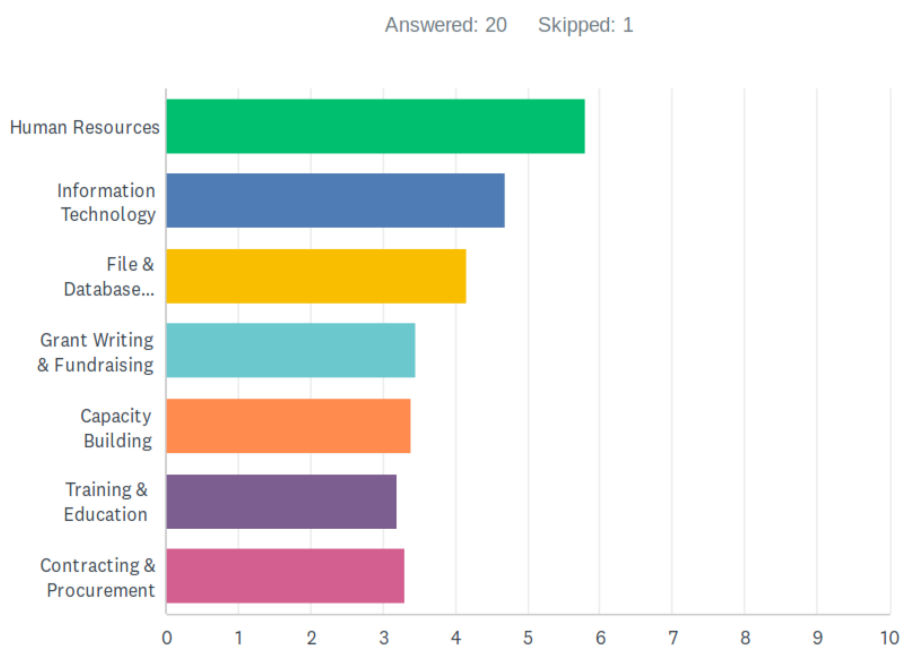
Human Resources

Districts have a wide variety of Human Resource needs, including policy development, compliance with laws, benefits management, and improvement, and the creation of job descriptions and announcements to name a few. When surveyed on what type of resources would best address their HR needs 15 out of 20 respondents indicated that access to a shared HR specialist would best meet their needs and 13 out of 20 respondents indicated that a compiled list of self-serve resources would be beneficial.
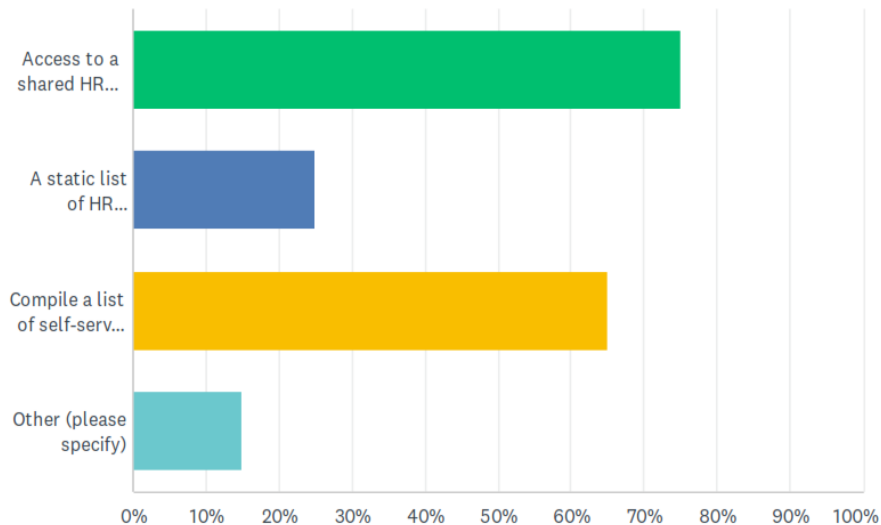

Information Technology (IT)

District Information Technology needs include computer set-up and maintenance, email services, software management, etc. When surveyed on what type of resources would best address their IT needs, 12 out of 16 respondents indicated that access to a shared IT specialist would best meet their needs. 8 out of 16 indicated that they would be interested in entering into an interlocal agreement with another CD. Another 8 out of 16 indicated a compiled list of IT consultants CDs can contract with would be beneficial.
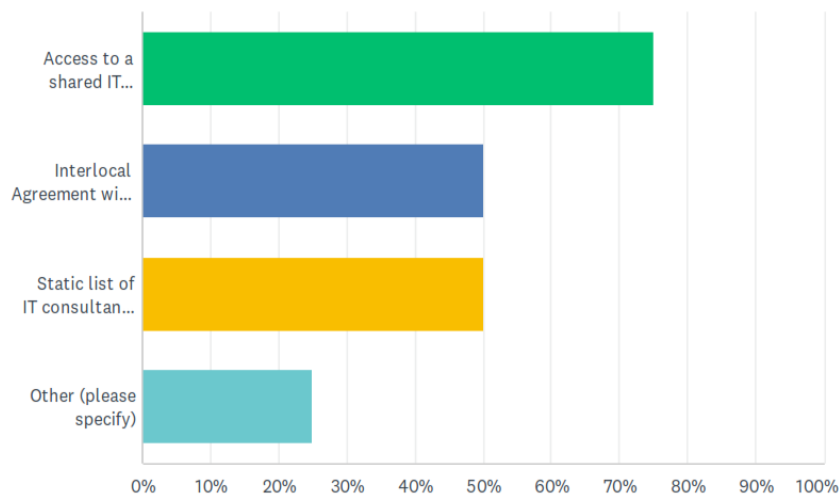
File and Database Management

Districts are required to organize, track, store, and dispose of records according to state law. This includes website and social media records. When surveyed on what type of resources would best address their File and Database Management needs, 12 of 18 respondents indicated that access to a shared Database Management specialist would best meet their needs. 6 out of 18 respondents indicated that a compiled list of outside consultants and software options would best fit their needs.
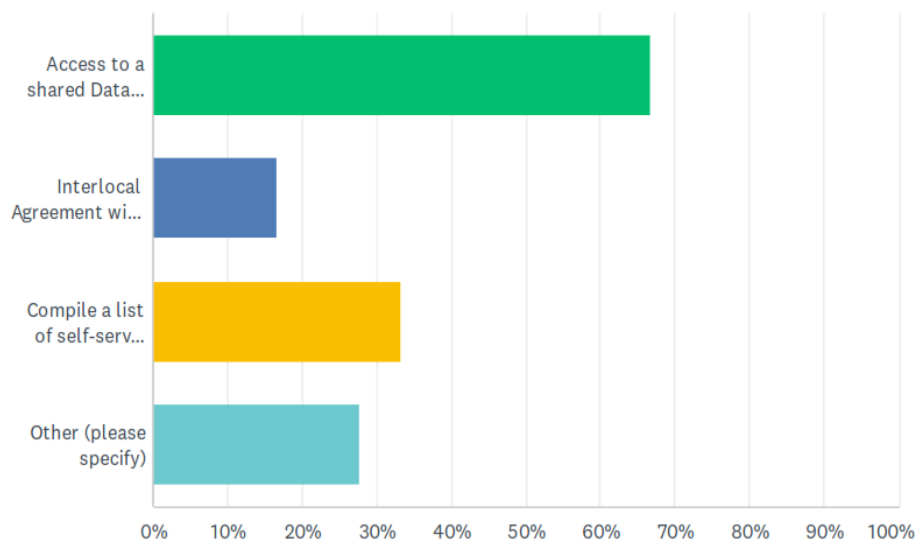

Grant Writing and Fundraising

Districts continue to be primarily grant-funded. 9 of the 15 respondents indicated that a list of consultants and freelance writers would best fit their needs. 8 of the 15 respondents indicated that access to a shared private grant writing consultant would be helpful.
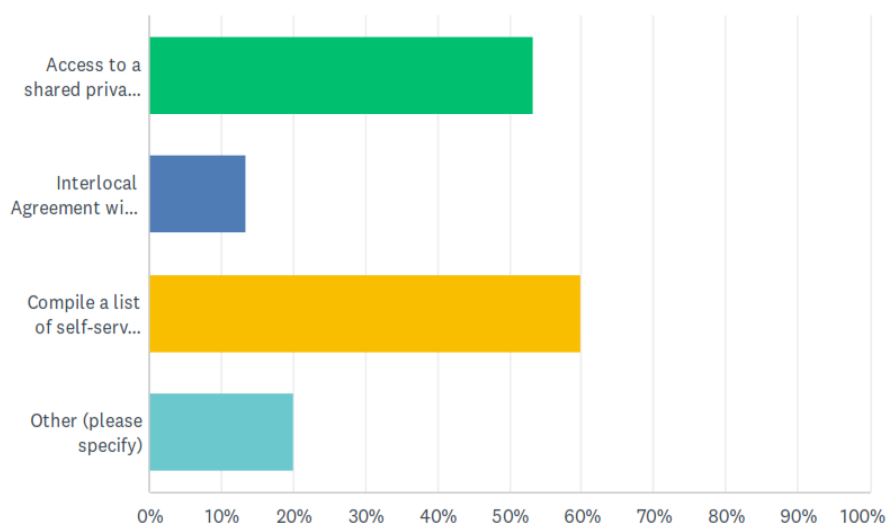
Capacity Building

Capacity building is defined as 'whatever is needed to bring an organization to the next level of operational, programmatic, financial, or organizational maturity, so it may more effectively and efficiently advance its mission into the future'. 8 of 16 districts responded "Other" to this question. The "Other" category included comments surrounding needing funding and the assistance of a consultant to evaluate staffing and workload levels. 7 of 16 respondents indicated a list of consultants and on-line resources would be beneficial.
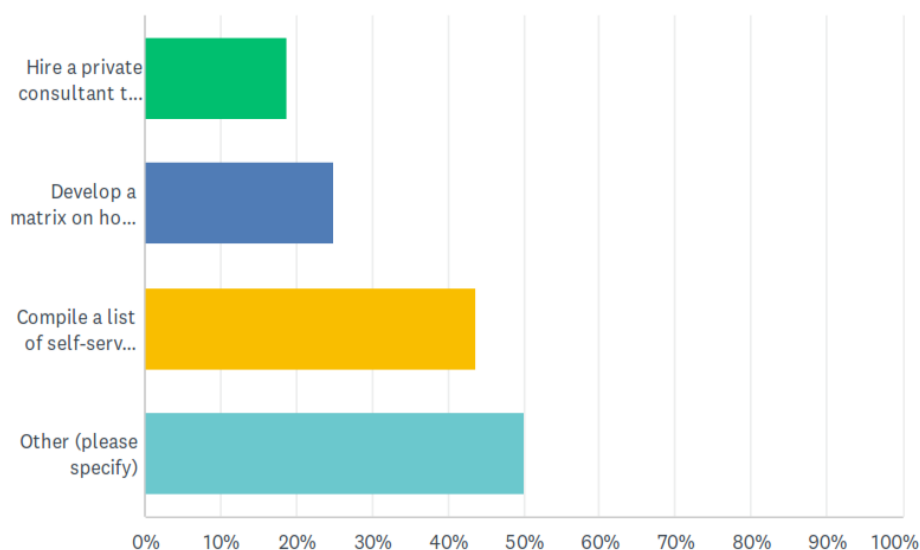

Training & Education

Districts have unique needs when it comes to training. While CDs have access to resources through NRCS, the CTD, and WADE, more training is needed. 12 out of 17 respondents indicated that their three highest training need areas were: Financial / Accounting, Grant Management, and Procurement / Contracting.
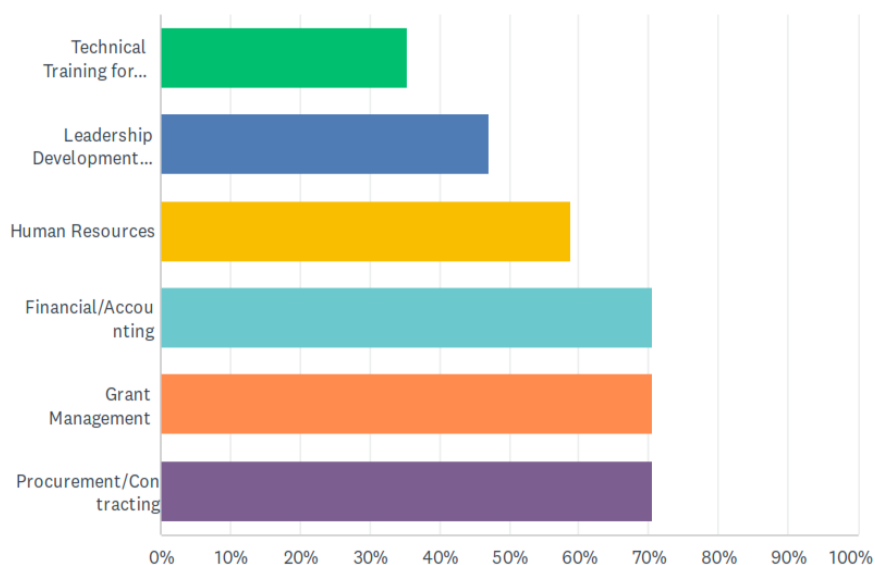
Contracting and Procurement

Contracting & procurement requirements can be extremely burdensome, particularly for smaller districts. When surveyed on what type of resources would best address their Contracting and Procurement Management needs, 10 of 15 respondents indicated that access to a shared Contracting & Procurement specialist would be their preference. 7 out of 15 respondents indicated that a compiled list of static resources would meet their needs.
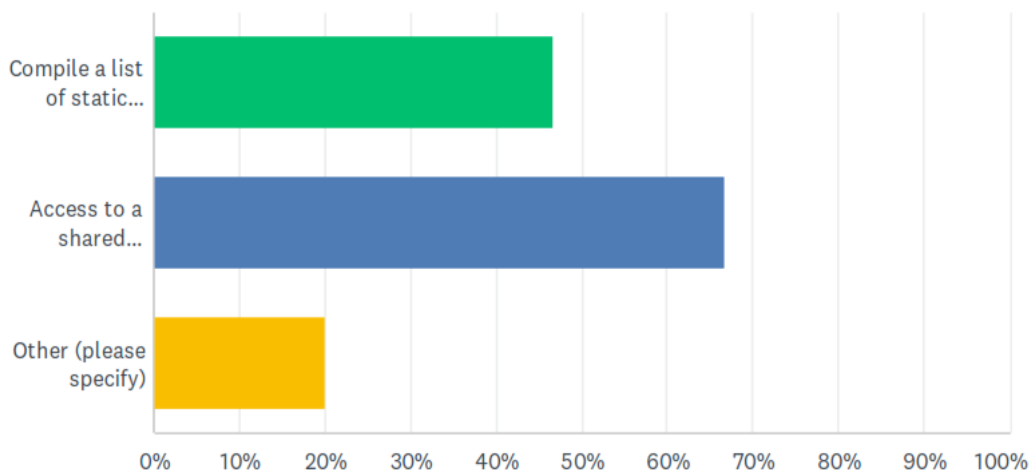
Proposed Solution Matrix:

Resource Need	Solution(s)	Suggested Next Steps	Status
Legal Counsel	Law Firm on Retainer	WACD provides free & reduced services to CDs.	Completed
		WACD will work with Enduris to educate CDs on other available resources.	In Progress
Human Resources	Access to a Shared HR Specialist	WACD will work with Enduris on discounted HR Services.	Proposed
		Seeking Funding / Resources for a shared specialist	Proposed
	List of Self-serve Resources	WACD will work with MRSC on CD Specific Resources	In Progress

Internet Technology	Access to a Shared IT Specialist	WACD provides free & reduced services to CDs.	Proposed
File & Database Management	Access to a Shared Database Mng. Specialist	Seeking Funding / Resources	Proposed
	List of Self-serve Resources	Workgroup to Develop List	In Progress
Grant Writing	Compile a List of Consultants and Freelance Writers	Workgroup to Develop List	In Progress
	Access to a Shared Grant Writer	Seeking Funding / Resources	Proposed
Capacity Building	Consultant to Assess Workload, Funding and, Staffing Levels	Workgroup to Develop List	In Progress
Training & Education	Financial & Accounting	WACD will work with SCC, WADE, Enduris, and, MRSC to provide training opportunities.	In Progress
	Grant Management		
	Procurement & Contracting		
Contracting & Procurement	Access to a Shared Contracting and Procurement Specialist	Seeking Funding / Resources	Proposed
	List of Static Resources	Workgroup to Develop List	In Progress

Conclusion:

In conclusion, the operational support needs of conservation districts continue to grow as district programs grow to address the natural resource concerns of their communities. WACD and SCC have limited capacity and funding to meet the operational support needs of CDs. Districts are subdivisions of state government and as such they should have access to state-sponsored resources or be provided with sufficient funding from the legislature to procure the operational support services they need.

References:

WACD Resolution 2022-08

Shared Resource Workgroup Survey

Shared Resources Needs Matrix

WACD Legal Services Fund Memo