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Testimony presented to Rep. Levdansky's Finance Committee Hearing, with regard to HB 2443 concerning natural gas severance taxes.

By James W. Pillsbury PE, Hydraulic Engineer, Westmoreland Conservation District.

Westmoreland Conservation District – a locally led subdivision of state government, charged with the protection of natural resources in Westmoreland County, including soil and water. We operate under the authority and technical guidance of PA DEP. Each county conservation district has its own projects, programs, and personnel. The leadership of each district is locally controlled and each district sets its own agenda, but all the districts share a common purpose: the protection of our state's soil and water resources.

In the past several years, Westmoreland Conservation District (WCD) has completed many **special projects** with Growing Greener grants and other sources of funding. Our projects are often designed by our own staff and completed by a combination of local contractors & volunteer labor from our 'partner' groups such as Watershed Associations.

Examples of WCD involvement in special projects include:

Agriculture: Countywide streambank stabilization, riparian buffer zones, pasture fencing for rotational grazing, feedlot stabilization, farmyard runoff control.

Dirt & Gravel Road improvements: Countywide program.

Erosion and Sediment Control: Countywide, including a demonstration project at the Westmoreland County Fairgrounds to control runoff from large disturbed areas.

Forestry: Countywide creation of riparian buffer areas, forestry initiatives for land owners, timber harvesting demonstrations.

Stormwater Management: Countywide projects, including bio-infiltration retrofits to parking lots in the City of Greensburg; permeable pavement and street tree retrofit in Vandergrift Boro; permeable pavement parking lot project in New Kensington; rain gardens retrofit in Mount Pleasant; green roof retrofit in Hempfield; permeable pavements in Hempfield; rain garden designs in North Huntingdon & Manor; rain gardens & permeable pavement in Scottdale; parking lot stormwater retrofit in Youngwood.

Stream Habitat Improvement: Streambank stabilization, in-stream deflectors, fish habitat improvement, riparian buffers, sediment control. Countywide, including projects in the Ligonier, Donegal, Mount Pleasant, Hempfield, Greensburg, New Kensington, Lower Burrell areas.

WCD reviews Erosion and Sediment (E&S) control plans and Stormwater Management (SWM) **plans for land development** in the County. In the course of a year we review around 200 E&S plans and around 100 SWM plans. Our staff provides timely processing of permits under agreement with PA DEP, including the NPDES Construction Permits and the Chapter 105 stream encroachment permits. Were it not for our technical assistance to designers & municipalities, review of plans and processing of permits, land development in the County would either be greatly hindered because developers would have to submit plans and permit requests to DEP itself, or development would proceed unregulated and cause environmental harm.

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Westmoreland Conservation District has a regular year-round calendar of **educational programs** and outreach events. Our annual engineers workshop, for example, draws over 200 design professionals from all over southwestern Pennsylvania for a day of technical training in the latest regulatory and design issues. Our quarterly newsletter, *Landmarks*, reaches over 5,000 people with news and updates. Our staff participate in dozens of regional, municipal, and local meetings with various groups to provide input and assistance on environmental issues. At our office campus, we have several thousand visitors each year who view our environmental demonstration projects.

Westmoreland Conservation District has a highly-qualified and experienced **staff**, including our Manager and our Forester both with over 25 years at the District, our Hydraulic Engineer (a registered professional engineer) and our Landscape Architect both with over 20 years of stormwater management experience, our erosion control specialists, our agricultural specialist, and our watershed specialist. This well-respected staff provides thousands of hours of technical assistance to local developers, designers, municipalities, and homeowners annually. Some of our staff members serve on statewide committees to advise DEP in the development of new environmental regulations.

Our volunteer Board of Directors, our Associate Board, and the many **volunteers** we partner with all are well-regarded statewide and even nationwide in the Conservation District field. Each of our major program areas has a volunteer advisory committee to provide advice and input to the Board of Directors and the staff. Volunteers assist with many special programs including our annual Envirothon, part of a state-wide environmental competition for high-school students, in which Westmoreland County teams have won first place at the state level several times.

One of the foundations of the Westmoreland Conservation District's success has been the long-term presence of **secure funding** for our programs and projects. Currently we have over a million dollar budget; of that, only a fraction comes from the State's Conservation District Fund Allocation Program. Most of our funding comes from the County and from public and private grant sources. Secure funding provides for our highly qualified staff and our well-equipped office campus. Secure funding provides for the continuity of our programs and outreach events. Secure funding provides for the ongoing construction of environmental enhancement projects. Secure funding gives confidence to the regulated community, design professionals, our municipal partners, county residents, and our talented volunteers that WCD's presence will continue. Secure funding, in short, is the bottom line of an effective environmental program in Westmoreland County.

Many county conservation districts statewide do not enjoy secure funding. The Westmoreland Conservation District urges the Legislature to act to provide all conservation districts with this basic necessity, for the protection and advancement of the environment in our state.