

https://www.newsitem.com/news/local/legislators-address-conservation-district-concerns-over-state-budget/article_d9446938-f307-5e55-a6f6-0f5ee4af5fca.html

TOP STORY

Legislators address conservation district concerns over state budget

By Kevin Mertz The (MILTON) Standard-Journal kevin@standard-journal.com Apr 5, 2019



From left, Northumberland County Conservation District District Manager Judy Becker and Jeff Cole, the office manager of Rep. Schlegel Culver (R-108) pay attention as Rep. Kurt Masser (R-107) speaks during Thursday's conservation district legislative luncheon. Kevin Mertz/The Standard-Journal

SUNBURY — Concerns about the impact Gov. Tom Wolf's proposed 2019-20 state budget could have on conservation districts were raised during the Northumberland County Conservation District's (NCCD) annual legislative luncheon, held Thursday at its local office.

"The governor is proposing to take money out of the Environmental Stewardship Fund," Sen. John Gordner (R-27) told those in attendance.

According to Gordner, money from that fund traditionally has been used to provide grants for the state's 66 conservation districts.

According to information provided by the NCCD, Wolf is proposing to shift the money to cover Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) administrative costs that previously came from the DEP budget.

Gordner said Wolf is also proposing to impose a severance tax, while at the same time eliminating the Act 13 impact fee, which is paid to counties impacted by natural gas drilling operations. Impact fees are also distributed to conservation districts.

“(Wolf has) over committed (funding in the budget),” Gordner said. “It could mean the elimination of programs ... that are funded through the impact fee.”

The governor's office responded to Gordner's concern by issuing a statement that referred to Page 9 of the “Restore Pennsylvania” proposal from Wolf, which states, “The severance tax will not make any change to the natural gas impact fee. The impact fee has assisted local communities where natural gas is extracted to invest in infrastructure, their economies, and the health and safety of residents.”

Gordner later said he misspoke during the luncheon.

Rep. Kurt Masser (R-107) said he wants to work with the governor on the 2019-20 budget. However, he noted that it's a “tough way to start the conversation” when it's proposed to eliminate the impact fee.

Gordner said the state budget is never adopted as the governor proposes.

On May 1, Gordner said budget negotiations will “get serious” between the governor and the Legislature.

Judy Becker, NCCD district manager, said the Pennsylvania Association of Conservation Districts is calling for a 10% increase to the transfer to the Conservation District Fund lines in both the state Department of Agriculture and the DEP budgets.

According to Becker, those line items have not been increased since the 2004-05 fiscal year while expenses for conservation districts continue to rise.

“It is becoming increasingly difficult to fund our operating costs,” she said.

Becker also noted that conservation districts do not want to see Growing Greener Grants eliminated, which could happen if money is taken out of the Environmental Stewardship Fund.

“Growing Greener Grants are one of the primary funding (sources) for getting projects off the ground,” she said. “We don’t want to see that funding going toward administrative costs for state agencies.”

An update on NCCD projects was also provided during the luncheon.

According to information provided by the NCCD, the Warrior Run Watershed has been approved for a readiness phase, which calls for a watershed assessment to be completed this year.

The NCCD will work with the Natural Resources Conservation Service, DEP and potential participants in the watershed to prepare the assessment.

Implementation funds for projects identified during the assessment could be available in 2020.

It was noted that the project is a joint initiative between state water-quality agencies and the Environmental Protection Agency to address agricultural sources of water pollution, specifically nutrients, sediments and pathogens.

Funding is being provided through the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service.

Ryan Cherwinski, NCCD agricultural conservation technician, provided an update on the Kevin Raker Project in Upper Augusta Township.

Cherwinski said Raker operates a cattle operation that has lacked ample space to store manure and feed the animals when the pasture is unfit to graze. There has also been a problem with runoff concerns throughout the pasture, with the runoff flowing into a tributary of the Susquehanna River.

To address the issues, a \$156,108 Growing Greener Grant was obtained, along with a \$112,514 Chesapeake Bay Special Projects grant.

The funds will be used to install a pole-type roof over an existing area that receives heavy use, as well as a new manure stacking area. The roof will be fit with gutter and downspouts, which will eliminate manure-laden runoff.

A roofed concrete barnyard will be constructed to store manure and bedding. The building will have a steel roof and siding, along with gutters and downspouts.

A reinforced gravel cattle walkway and stream crossing will also be constructed, along with grass waterways below culverts.