



Focus Group Facilitation

Findings Report

Overview



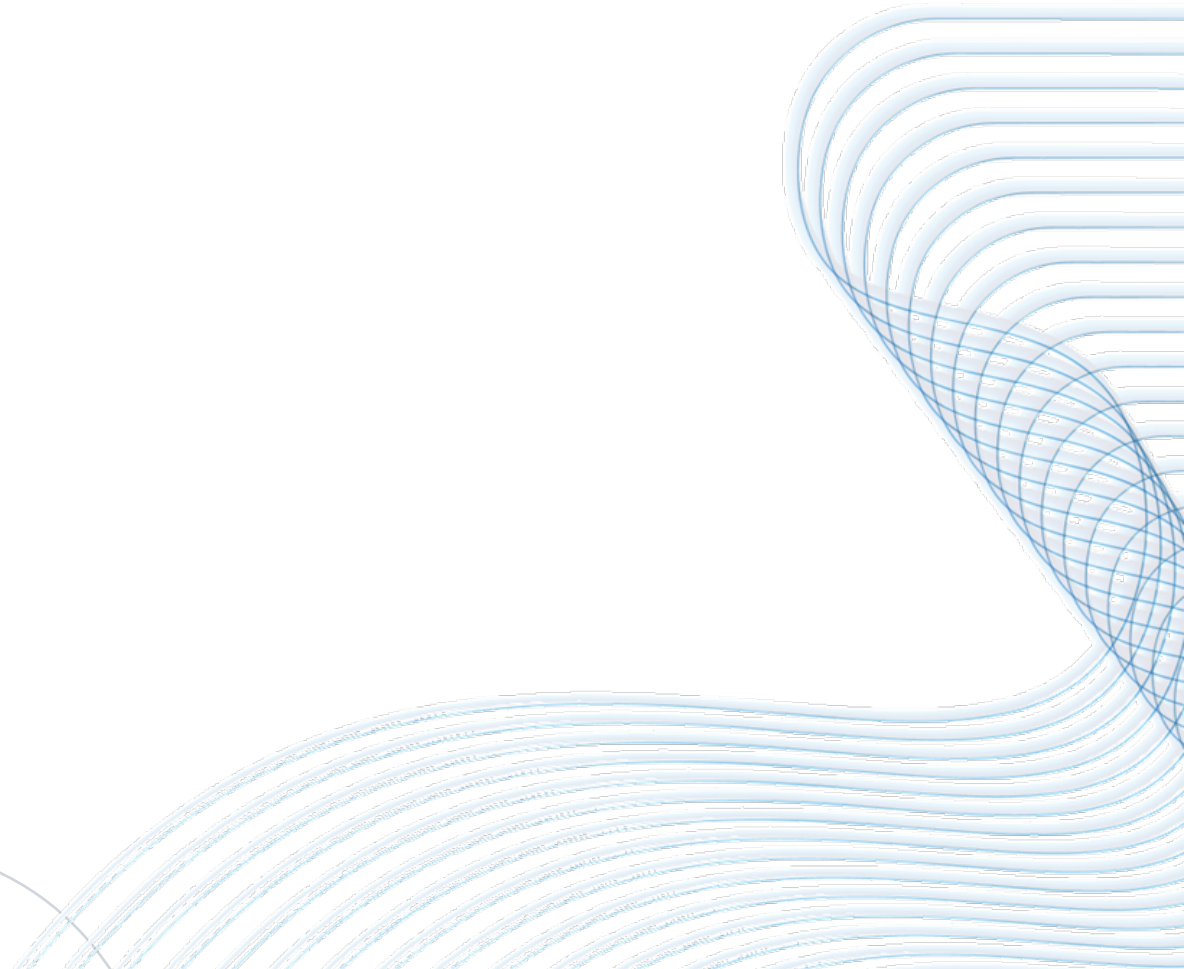
To **assess overall performance**, the District sought qualitative feedback from representatives of the 24 owner communities, and other stakeholders it serves.

- Stakeholder surveys
- Three in-person focus groups





Surveys



Survey findings

Feedback from surveys is in the report document.

Feedback largely supports sentiments expressed during the focus group sessions.

Pre-focus group survey

Sought feedback on knowledge of and sentiments toward the District.

Post-focus group survey

Sought feedback on executive director search, and any lingering feedback from attendance of a focus group session.

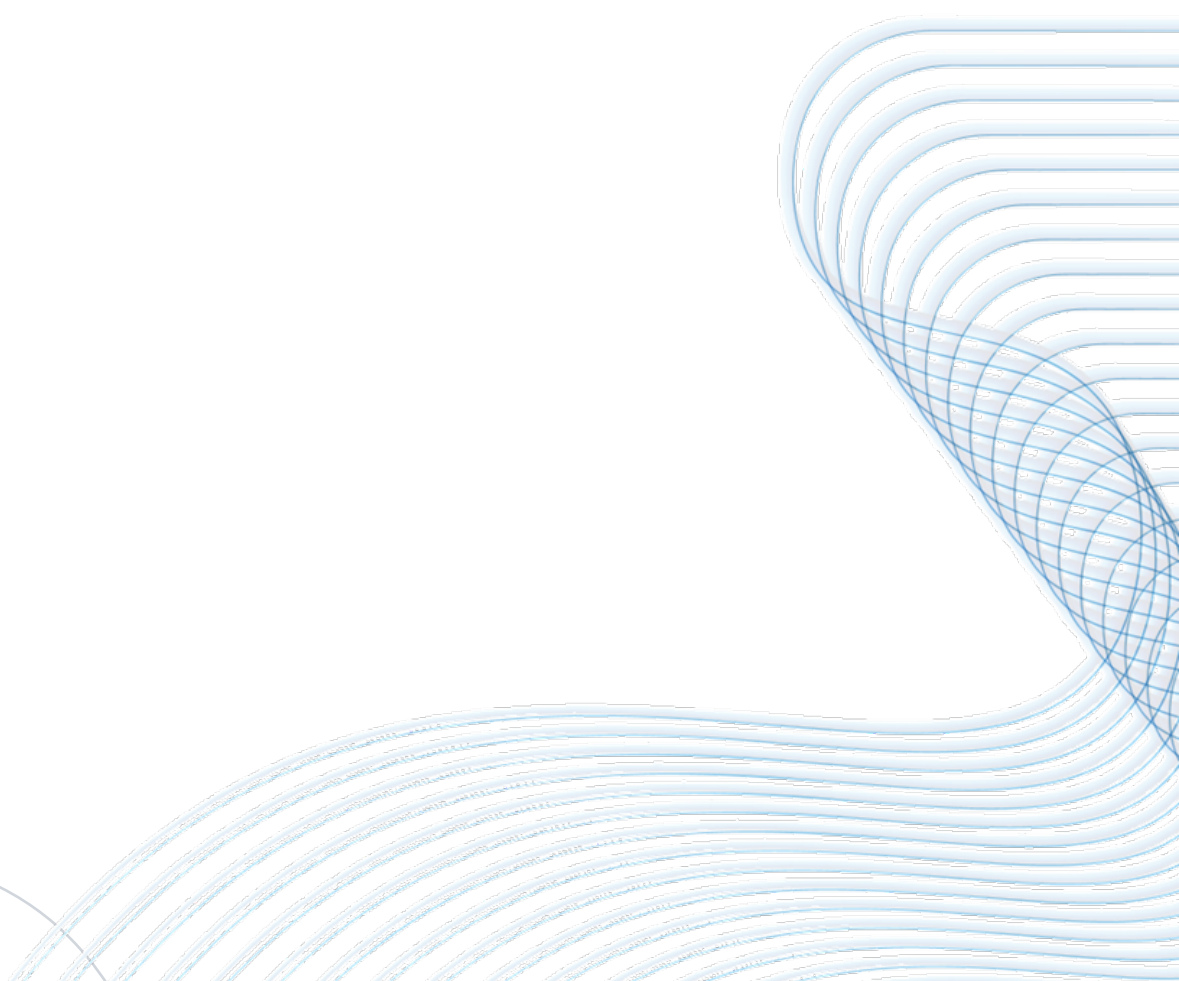
Combined survey

Sought feedback on knowledge of District processes, executive director search and sentiments toward the District and areas of concern.





Focus groups



What we did

- ✔ Gain perspective of experiences with the District and its staff
- ✔ Understand perceptions of the District: work, programs and staff interaction
- ✔ Assess trust of the District, particularly its leadership and staff
- ✔ Determine priorities, areas of concern and views on issues
- ✔ Identify suggestions for improvement for the District



Focus group participants

6 attended

Owner community leadership

Consisting of mayors and city administrators

7 attended

Owner community staff

Consisting of wastewater utility and administrative staff from owner communities

10 attended

Stakeholder groups

Consisting of governmental officials from other agencies and non-profit organizations





Executive Director search



Themes

A **full report** of the Executive Director-related feedback was provided separately to the Commission Executive Search Subcommittee. This information, combined with staff and Commission feedback, was used to develop an updated Executive Director job description.



Ideal skillsets + traits

- Strong collaboration and communication
- Outreach, partnership, relationship-building
- Transparent decision-maker
- Inclusion of outside groups and owner communities



Partnership and relationship building



Financial background



Master planning and capital experience



Engineering experience not required



Understanding of/respect for political process in communities

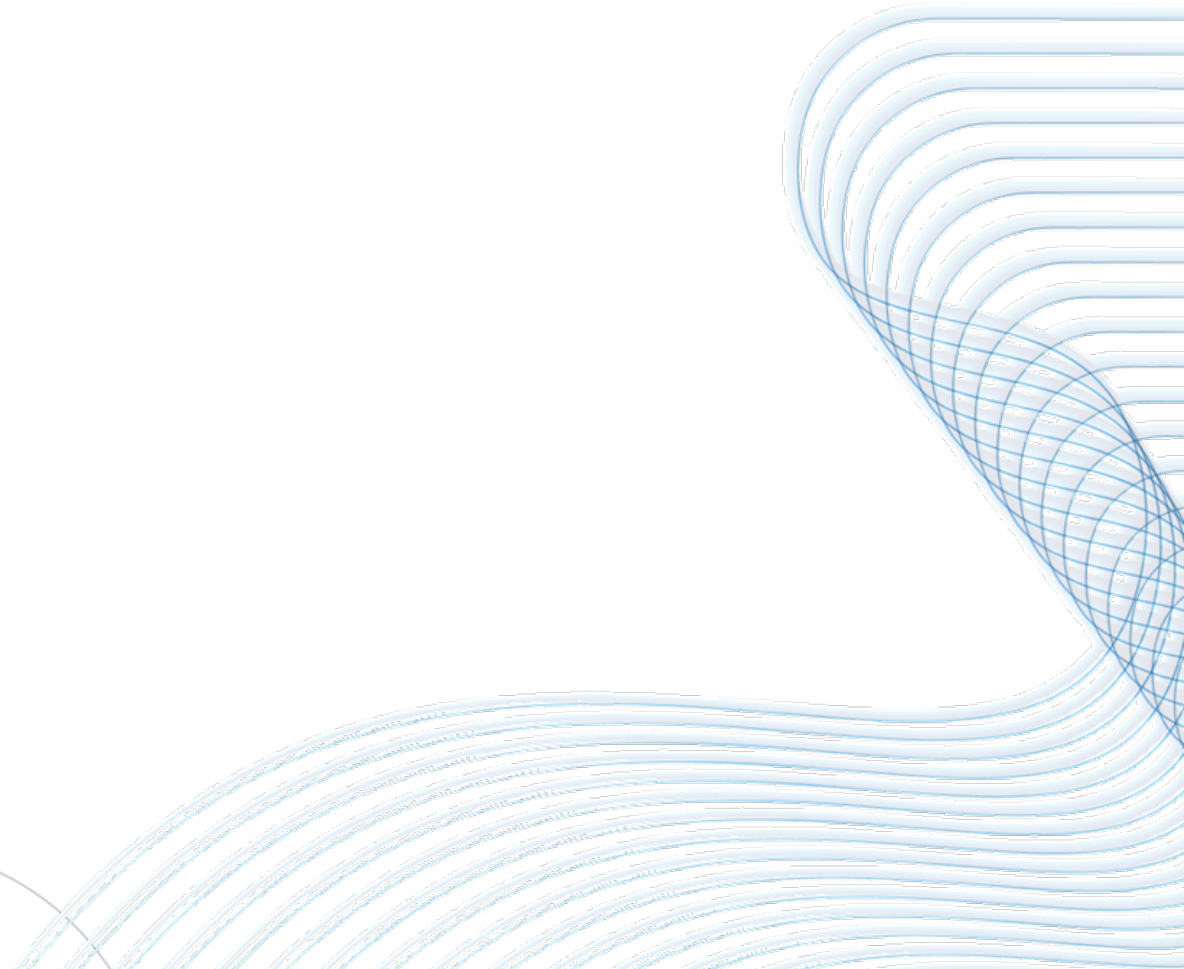


Owner community, stakeholder and public participation in hiring process

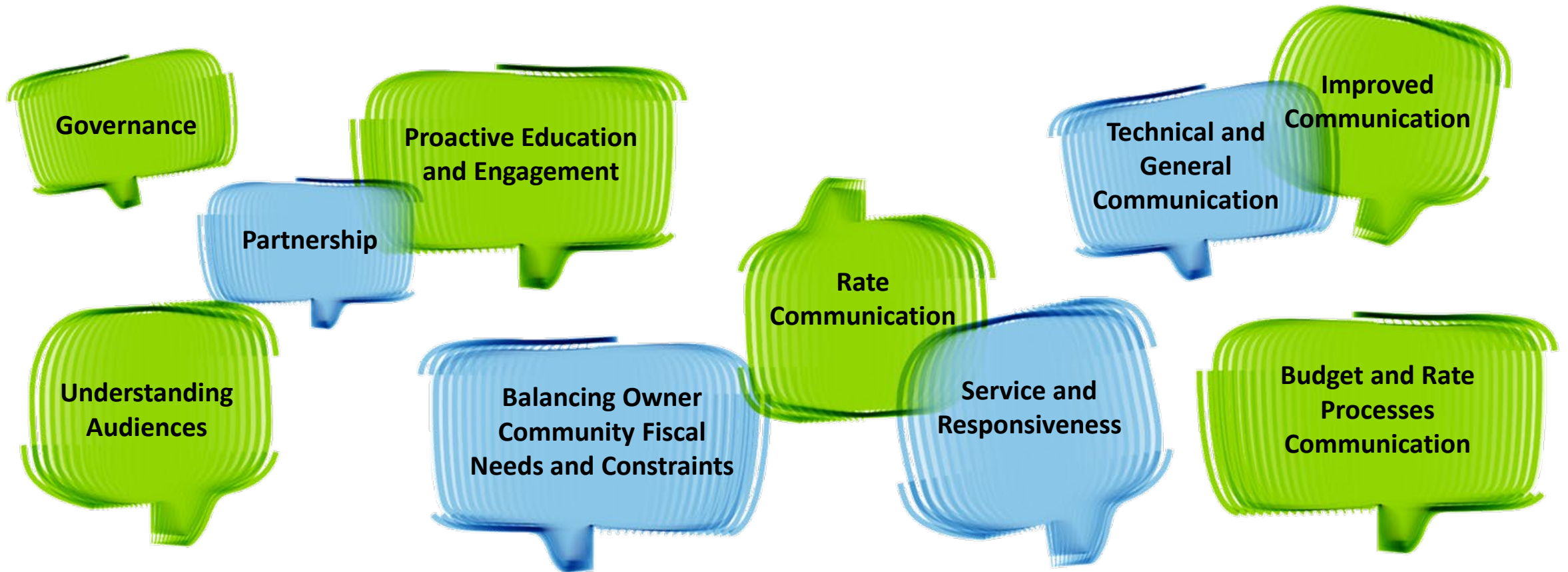




Findings



Key themes



Quotes were used to highlight and give context to key themes discussed in the report. Quotes were edited for space and clarity in this presentation, but the full versions are available in the report



Key theme

Service and responsiveness

All focus groups conveyed a **generally positive impression** of the District and its service to owner communities and stakeholders.



“They’re extremely intelligent people that work there. They know what they’re doing. So, from that perspective, we’ve had a very positive experience.”

- Owner Community Leadership

“... I think everybody very much supports the overall mission of water quality and very consistent with those things.

- Owner Community Staff



Key theme

Improved communication

Participants felt the District should provide **clear and transparent communication** about their plans, goals and objectives including an explanation of the “why” behind:

- Future budgets
- Infrastructure projects
- Sustainability initiatives

“ I think the problem with the budget issue is not only the timing, but it's the explanation of why...I'm not going to say we succeed at this all the time, but are asked to provide the why to our council and our community, as to why we're charging whatever we're charging for services.”

-Owner Community Leadership



Key theme

Governance

Interpreted as the **desire to better understand relationships between the owner communities, appointing bodies and District commissioners**, as well as commissioners reporting back to appointing bodies.



“*The [owner] communities, their only authority, actually appoint the three commissioners. And our commissioners really don't get back to us that much either on stuff.*”

- Owner Community Leadership

“*...maybe it is the board that needs to report back to the cities and villages and the cities and villages need to report it to us, right? Madison has its liaisons that probably report it back...getting the same information because it should be the same across all platforms.*”

-Owner Community Staff



Key theme

Balancing owner community fiscal needs and constraints

The owner communities and staff want the District **to recognize their unique needs and constraints**, particularly concerning funding and rate management.

They believe owner communities should be **seen as customers and investors** in the District.

“*Being sensitive to the financial issues that we're all dealing with as municipalities... if we kept that 8% increase there ... there's going to be some major pushback...*”

-Owner Community Staff

“*...our infrastructure's at 60, 70 years old, so everything is coming to the end of its life or needing the expansion ... if MMSD is asking for the money first ... we still have to do our end as well, and the ratepayers are getting it from every angle right now.*”

-Owner Community Staff



Key theme

Proactive public education and engagement

Desire to **reinstate regular meetings and interactions** between the District, owner communities and stakeholders

Request to **provide educational support on topics of concern** for owner communities to share with their residents.

” *And I do think maybe this went away during the pandemic ... It was a couple of times a year, where they'd invite community stakeholders to come in and learn more about the operation.”*

-Owner Community Leadership

” *They have put out ... public outreach, simple YouTube-type things in the past ... Things that are easily shareable to the public. And maybe they're just a meme or YouTube or whatever the current social media thing is to share.”*

-Owner Community Staff



Key theme

Proactive public education and engagement

Owner communities and stakeholders see **similar issues regarding public education and engagement and would like to deepen partnership with the District** on these topics.

Also, **desire to see updates about regulatory changes.**

“... there's a lot of noise, a lot of chatter, a lot of updates from County, everybody else. But what is important for us in our roles, running the municipalities that our residents that we need to know about.”

-Owner Community Leadership

“...more of a regular update in terms of what's looming on the horizon ..., always the 800-pound gorilla in the room in terms of knowing what ... if it's from EPA or DNR ... what's the next thing coming that we know we're going to need to deal with?”

-Owner Community Staff



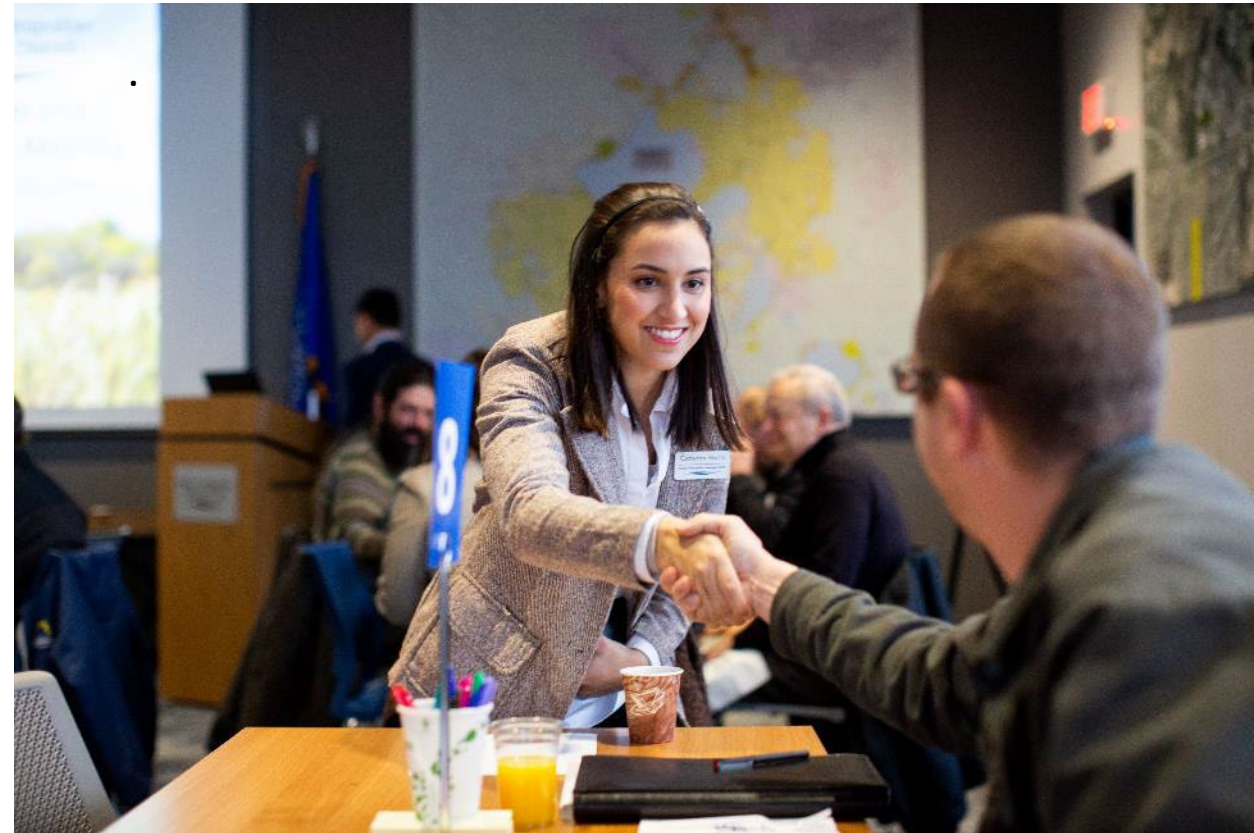
Key theme

Partnership

Participants expressed the need for **a two-way partnership** with the District.

Intentional outreach and collaboration with owner communities would significantly strengthen relationships and foster progress.

Enhanced communication is **necessary to gain deeper insights and perspectives** on the District's future planning priorities.



Key theme

Partnership (cont.)

“ I think making a very conscious effort to not only open up the communication, but to align those review procedures so they're more in sync, I think would be a big deal.”

-Owner Community Staff

“ We have to figure out a better way to make this work, and that doesn't include just being told how it is and to deal with it... It needs to be more interactive and inclusive of concerns, to make sure that we can be partners and not one-sided...”

-Owner Community Leadership



Key theme

Understanding audience

Multiple communication channels are needed for the various audiences, based on the timing and needs of each audience.

Owner community staff and some stakeholders need more technical communication and planning conversations with the District, while owner community leadership requires higher-level planning and cost explanations.



I think they have to determine who their target audience is for each piece of communication, because there's the elected officials, there's the administrators, there's the bodies that appoint the commissioners, there's the ratepayers."

-Owner Community Leadership



Key theme

Understanding audience



There is **desired recognition that owner communities [and other organizations] are not the sole audiences of the District;** each community is made up of thousands of residents.

“*They look at us as individuals, but we're a collection of 10,000, 20,000, 30,000 people ... no connection or understanding ... for those individuals to receive their services. They just expect the bills to be paid.*”

-Owner Community Leadership



Key theme

Technical and general communication

Across all groups there was a **feeling that the District is staffed by experts** with extensive expertise and knowledge.

From a **communication perspective, participants would like to have more alignment conversations** with the District.

“...they've been very responsive from a technical perspective, and they're more than willing to push information out to us because it makes their job that much easier as well.”

-Owner Community Leadership

“...it does feel like things have gotten more siloed and we're not able to collaborate.”

-Stakeholder



Key theme

Technical and general communication

Communication and involvement in conversations about the Districts' sustainability, strategic and capital improvement planning is desired to explain to community members what projects the District is working on and why they are important.

“...understanding ... sustainability plans, strategic plans, capital improvement plans. It doesn't have to be way deep in the weeds, keep it relatively high level is fine, but just making sure that member communities and their constituents are aware of what the goals and objectives are, where they're heading, where they are now.”

-Owner Community Leadership



Key theme

Budget process communication

Owner community leadership and staff **indicated that budget and rate information has come to them historically very late.**

They **feel unprepared** due to the timing of the information they receive



...the budget issue, the timing of it has been ongoing for about three years now, and because of the size of the increases, it's raised the significance of the timing. I have suggested to staff before, that they really queue people in May or June when they're developing their budget."

-Owner Community Leadership



Key theme

Budget process communication

Participants **expressed concern about approving their budgets based on assumed District rates.**

There was **consensus that the District needs to provide the highest possible rate as early as possible to act as a placeholder** for the owner community's budgeting processes.



Key theme

Budget process communication (cont.)



...trying to coordinate our own internal capital improvement planning process with what's going on with them.

...They just don't line up all the time and it causes a little bit of a hiccup just from a financial management for us at the city level.”

-Owner Community Staff



...If you think of it in a year cycle, maybe from January till about [May] is when they say, ‘This may not be on our capital plan, but this is our long-term vision...’ And then as we get into the summer months, that's when they need to start at least communicating to ... communities. ‘Here's the number, and it might be the worst-case scenario number, and we're going to work back from that to hopefully get to a number that's more reasonable.’

-Owner Community Leadership



Key theme

Rate communication

There is a **desire for the District to help owner communities justify and communicate that the rate increases are an investment for the future.**



“ I’m ... out working with the end user ... bill goes up, they see me out, that question comes to me...I don't really have anything to tell them when that question comes up.”

-Owner Community Staff

“ People get the bill they say it's an expense, well, it's an investment and it's an investment for a service. You get something for that dollar. Helping us make that explanation ... help them as well as us, I think too. ...give us the reason why...”

-Owner Community Staff



Key theme

Rate communication

Provide **clear and consistent communication to justify rate increases and align with strategic and capital goals and timelines.**



“...If there is a 10% increase, why? ... info that would be helpful for the District to explain to individual municipalities...”

-Owner Community Leadership

“...if there are areas where they're trying to save money, ... treating us like a customer and investor saying, 'Hey guys, look, it's expensive, we understand that. We try to maintain quality of ... try to control those costs and keep them between the goal post.’”

-Owner Community Staff



Key Takeaways



Participants expressed general **satisfaction** with the District's responsiveness, service to the area and its stewardship of water resources.



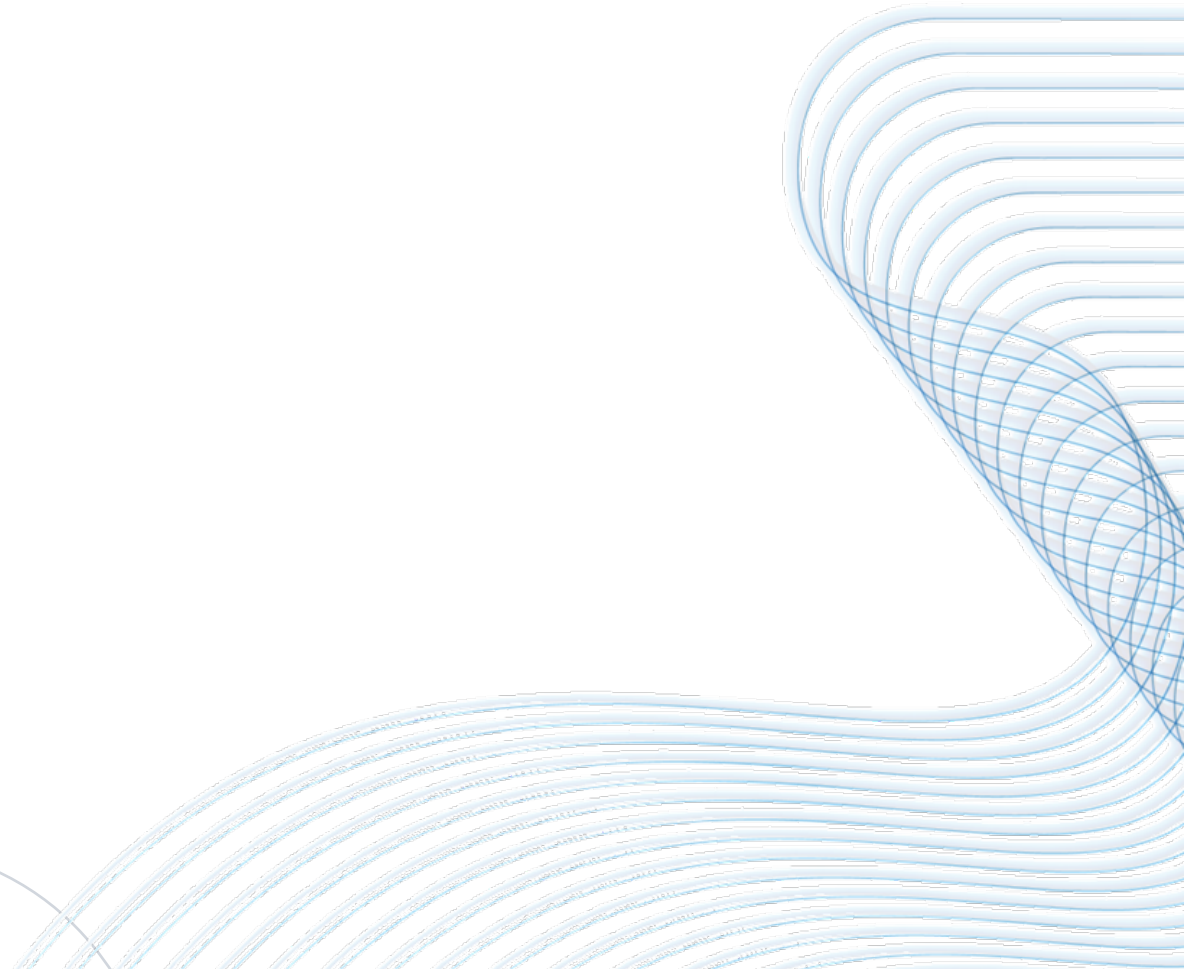
Improvement areas

- Enhance communication with owner communities and stakeholders to be more effective and transparent
- Improve planning and communication around rate increases, incorporating additional input from owner communities and stakeholders.
- In-person partnerships and collaboration with the District is strongly desired





Suggestions for improvement





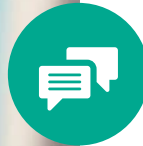
- Develop opportunities for improved budget and rate-setting communications/workshops for owner community leadership.



- Create budget, rate and/or project talking points/materials to convey need and value to owner communities and ultimately residents.



- Host regular meetings with owner communities and stakeholders to discuss topics of interest.



- Evaluate and improve upon communication channels to meet audience needs.



- Establish channels for feedback, such as focus groups and community surveys.



- Increase District communication staff resources to support outreach to owner communities and stakeholders.



Thank you