



**Metropolitan Water
Reclamation District
of Greater Chicago**



2026 – 2030

MWRD STRATEGIC PLAN





It's a new dawn along the Chicago River as the MWRD embarks on its next five-year Strategic Plan to provide a new era of water environment improvement.



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LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT



On behalf of the MWRD Board of Commissioners, I am pleased to present the MWRD’s 2026-2030 Strategic Plan. While this landmark document sets out our future course, it took many years of collective work in our past to reach this stage.

The precursor to this plan from 2021-2025 laid the groundwork for us to target new goals and metrics that build off our mission to protect our water environment. Now it is time to look further into the future with these initial goals in mind, while adapting to a changing climate, emerging trends, and new demands to keep our region thriving.

As we move forward on this plan, we embark on our next five-year mission outlined by new objectives and initiatives that can be tracked through continuing progress. This important roadmap incorporates both the results of public surveys and the MWRD’s mission in protecting public health and the area water environment. Through financial and operational strengths, sustainable and innovative processes, external resources and a thriving workplace, this plan will establish how the MWRD can meet new goals in resource recovery, climate and energy resilience, and best position the agency for years to come.

This plan emphasizes core infrastructure and forward-looking resilience with priorities on wastewater treatment and stormwater management. The priority areas of this plan include:

- ▶ Long-term infrastructure sustainability to support future demands and regulatory compliance.
- ▶ Addressing flooding by increasing local partnerships and expanding stormwater management projects.
- ▶ Ensure compliance, focus on contaminant source control, and continue to protect Lake Michigan.
- ▶ Optimizing operations for efficiency and sustainability, preparing for climate/energy resilience, and integrating new technologies such as artificial intelligence.
- ▶ Reducing energy, exploring more water reuse initiatives, recovering costs, and generating revenue.
- ▶ Addressing talent recruitment/retention, building a diverse, skilled workforce, and investing in training.
- ▶ Effective community engagement through infrastructure planning, building trust, and enhanced communication.

On behalf of the MWRD Board of Commissioners, I welcome you to not only read this plan but take part in it, by considering the MWRD’s mission and taking ownership of your own water environment. We all play a role, and as we like to say: Teamwork makes the dream work.

Sincerely,

Kari K. Steele
President, Board of Commissioners



2026–2030

MWRD STRATEGIC PLAN

ABOUT THE MWRD

The Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago (MWRD) is a progressive unit of local government responsible for treating wastewater and managing stormwater in Cook County, Illinois. As new challenges emerge, the innovative work of the MWRD continues to evolve to benefit the water environment, ensuring services are reliable, equitable, sustainable, and cost effective.

Our Purpose: Protect drinking water

The MWRD was formed in 1889 by the state of Illinois as the Sanitary District of Chicago to protect Chicago's drinking water source: Lake Michigan. Officials sought a way to prevent sewage and pollution-filled Chicago and Calumet Rivers from flowing into Lake Michigan.

The MWRD built a system of canals, channels, and waterway improvements that reversed the flow of water away from Lake Michigan and towards the Des Plaines River, where it flowed into the Illinois River and eventually the Mississippi River.



The MWRD protects the source of drinking water in Lake Michigan by treating the region's wastewater and capturing floodwaters and stormwater runoff.



The MWRD's vision extends hundreds of feet below ground through the Tunnel and Reservoir Plan, working to reduce flooding, improve water quality in Chicago area waterways and protect Lake Michigan from pollution.

A wonder of engineering, science, and innovation

While reversing the rivers helped to protect Lake Michigan, much more needed to be done. The MWRD developed wastewater treatment technology and built seven water reclamation plants. To collect and convey sewage to those plants for treatment, the MWRD built 560 miles of intercepting sewers.

The MWRD proactively adopted initiatives to protect the region's waterways, such as pollution control programs and enforced standards for industrial discharge into the collection system. The MWRD processes approximately 450 billion gallons of wastewater each year, releasing high-quality water into the rivers and canals and recovering resources like biosolids, nutrients, energy, and water.

Transformational tunnels and reservoirs

The MWRD's Tunnel and Reservoir Plan (TARP) is a system of deep, large diameter tunnels and vast reservoirs. TARP reduces flooding, improves water quality in Chicago area waterways, and protects Lake Michigan from pollution caused by sewer overflows. TARP includes four tunnel systems totaling 110 miles of deep tunnels and

three reservoirs: Majewski, Thornton, and McCook. Since the first tunnels went online in 1981, sewer overflows have drastically decreased, and water quality has improved, as seen by the thriving and diverse local fish populations. When completed, TARP will have a total capacity of 17.5 billion gallons for combined sewage.

Stormwater, flood resilience, and green infrastructure

As the stormwater management authority for Cook County, the MWRD partners with communities on various projects. The MWRD has worked with municipalities and other agencies to identify, develop, fund, and build projects to mitigate regional and localized flooding.

From the program's inception through October 2025, MWRD has completed nearly 300 Stormwater Projects benefiting nearly 19,000 structures. The green infrastructure projects completed by MWRD

and our partners provide more than 24.4 million gallons of stormwater storage. Green infrastructure helps reduce flooding with nature-based methods by holding rainwater where it falls. Effectively managing stormwater requires planning and public engagement with every community. Watershed Planning Councils help facilitate that engagement between the MWRD and communities. Flood resilience takes all of us.

Why this matters

The importance of MWRD's wastewater treatment and stormwater management is emphasized throughout this Strategic Plan. Clean water improves the quality of life for all. With the treatment of wastewater, the reduction of sewer overflows, and partnering with communities to create green infrastructure and other flood

mitigation projects, the region's water quality has improved, enhancing the habitats for fish, birds, and other wildlife. Healthier waterways provide avenues for people to connect with nature along the rivers and canals, creating a "second waterfront" for residents.



Children enjoy the Grissom Elementary School playground where the MWRD and Space to Grow partners installed a permeable play area that captures rainfall. Space to Grow has transformed over 40 schoolyards to build nearly 9 million gallons of storage capacity.

To learn more, visit mwrld.org.



PLANNING PROCESS OVERVIEW

The Metropolitan Water Reclamation District’s planning process combined inclusive engagement, data-driven analysis, and disciplined governance to produce a practical, forward-looking Strategic Plan.

The Steering Committee first conducted a review of our identifying elements and prior plan accomplishments. We then invited input from employees, partners, and the public. These responses were considered to synthesize insights from the feedback to assist with prioritizing strategic objectives under each Pillar. Working groups then drafted the key results to be sought under each objective, and executive leadership ensured their clarity, feasibility, and alignment with the MWRD’s vision, mission, and values. This process positions the MWRD to deliver measurable progress across critical priorities in 2026-2030.

1

Initial assessment

Review of Vision, Mission, Values, Pillars, and the 2021-2025 Strategic Plan’s accomplishments, key performance indicators, and lessons learned.

2

Stakeholder engagement

Surveys completed by the Board of Commissioners, employees, and external stakeholders; feedback highlights included hundreds of public and employee responses, with Board of Commissioners’ input reinforcing core functions and preparedness for the future. See the appendix for more details on survey feedback.

3

Working groups formation

Four pillar-based teams utilized the survey insights to identify objectives and priority outcomes (“key results”), guided by SMART criteria and ownership expectations.

S

SPECIFIC

M

MEASURABLE

A

ACHIEVABLE

R

RELEVANT

T

TIME-BOUND

4

Draft framework development

Integration of vision, mission, and values with proposed pillar objectives, key results, measures/targets/time frames, and initiatives.

5

Executive review

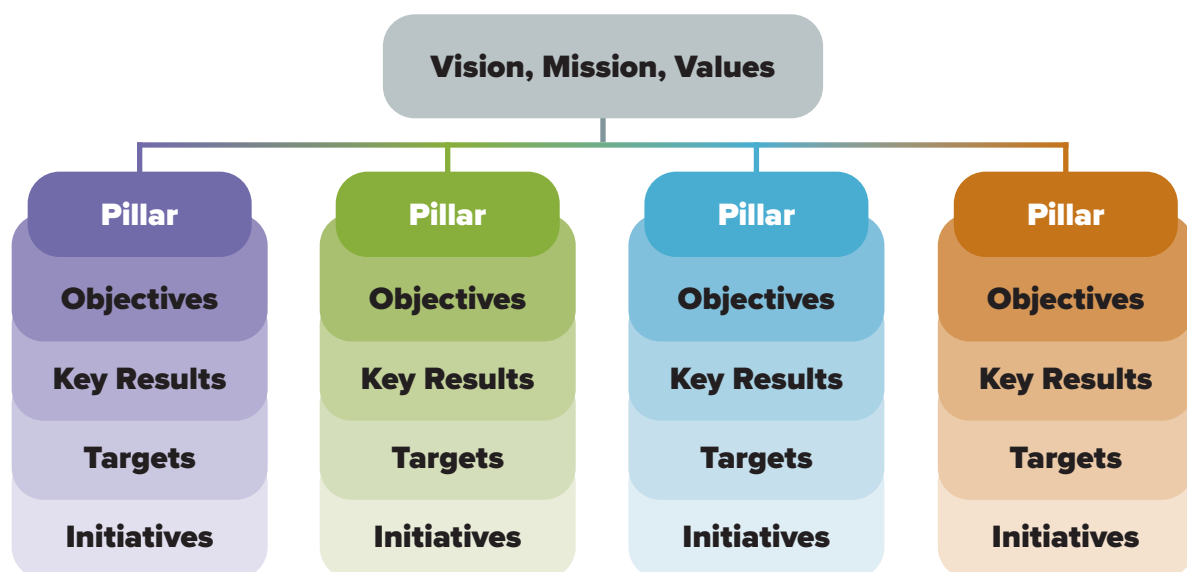
Leadership reviewed working group submittals to strengthen clarity and impact.



From implementing new technology and developing science to installing green infrastructure and managing climate change, the MWRD prides itself on engaging the community it serves when creating the future initiatives that drive the Strategic Plan.

MWRD Strategic Plan Architecture

To build a solid strategic plan, the anchor concepts of Vision, Mission, Values, and Pillars must first define who the organization is; these long-term strategic elements are the identity of the organization. It is only on this firm foundation that strategic plans can be built to guide next steps. This architecture ensures all parts of the plan are aligned and set up for success.





WHO WE ARE: VISION, MISSION, AND VALUES

We began our 2026-2030 Strategic Plan build-out by first reassessing our identifying elements. The Steering Committee updated our vision with a commitment to a more hopeful future, while the mission was updated to bring us back to the essence of our original purpose. Meanwhile, our values were reaffirmed.

VISION: What we want to achieve in the future

To champion clean water and sustainable communities.

MISSION: What we do today

To protect Lake Michigan and public health, improve our water environment, and build flood resilience.

Values

- ▶ **Excellence** We believe excellence is a never-ending journey to exceed the expectations placed upon us as individuals and as an organization.
- ▶ **Respect** We create an atmosphere of open communication that rewards commitment and performance and is responsive to the needs of our employees and communities.
- ▶ **Innovation** We endeavor to foster a culture of creativity to find solutions to the operational and environmental challenges facing us to build a more resilient region.
- ▶ **Safety** We are dedicated to safeguarding our greatest assets, our employees, as well as the environment and our communities.
- ▶ **Inclusivity** We strive in all areas of our work to treat people in a fair and just manner, to have a workforce and work practices that reflect the diversity of our region, and to ensure the full participation of all groups in our programs and services.
- ▶ **Accountability** We are responsible to the people we serve, the people we work with, and the environment we share.

Water cascades over the MWRD's sidestream elevated pool aeration station in Blue Island, pumping up to 50,000 gallons of water per minute. This waterfall adds oxygen to improve water quality and protect aquatic life in the Cal-Sag Channel. ▶

With our identity firmly established, we proceeded to identify the areas in which we must succeed to fulfill our mission and thrive as an organization —
these are our Pillars.





OUR CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS: THE FOUR PILLARS

Strategic pillars serve as the foundational supports of any strategic plan. They are the core areas of focus that hold up the long-term vision, ensuring that every initiative, investment, and decision aligns with what matters most. Much like the architectural pillars that support a building, these strategic pillars provide stability and coherence; they help us stay grounded in our purpose while giving us the flexibility to adapt as circumstances evolve. They also help us prioritize, guiding us toward opportunities that support our mission and away from distractions that do not.

As we progressed through the planning process, four areas emerged as the primary areas of focus. This update to our Pillars reflects a desire to streamline our strategy to become more efficient through cross-pollination of ideas across the entire MWRD. The new structure also better supports changes to not just operations but also organizational culture to create lasting improvements. Additionally, we identified the specific functions and services that each Pillar encompasses while also recognizing that a given five-year plan may focus on only certain elements based on current landscape or conditions.





Wastewater & Stormwater Management *Core Operations*

This pillar refers to the MWRD's core, everyday operations that protect our water environment, namely, wastewater treatment and stormwater management. These services protect public health, improve water quality, reduce flooding, and keep essential systems running. This pillar includes Permit Compliance, Regulatory Readiness, Combined Sewer Overflows Reduction, the Tunnel and Reservoir Plan, Flood Mitigation, Stormwater Master Plans, Intergovernmental Agreements, and the Green Infrastructure Program.



Business Resilience *Support Functions, Present-focused*

This pillar refers to administrative and support functions that enable the MWRD to maintain efficient and effective business operations. It focuses on providing a public service that is reliable and reflects the processes, systems, and safeguards that keep the organization operating effectively. It includes Fiscal Management (budget administration, procurement/contracts, cost management, grants), Risk Mitigation & Management (cybersecurity, internal controls, insurance, preventative measures), Business Continuity, Legal Matters, Customer/Constituent Service (incident report/response), and Stakeholder Engagement (education, public sentiment).



Resource Development & Management *Tangible and Intangible Assets*

This pillar refers to employee development and efficient resource and asset utilization. This pillar aims to make the most of our people, facilities, funds, knowledge, and relationships to deliver sustainable value. It includes Human Resources (recruitment, development, retention, succession planning), Resource Recovery, Capital Improvements & Maintenance, Resource Allocation, Hard Assets (buildings, equipment), Cost Reduction/Recovery, Intellectual Property, and Institutional Knowledge Management.



Proactive Evolution *Future-focused*

This pillar refers to intentional efforts to continually improve the MWRD and prepare for what the future may bring. It includes the Climate Action Plan, Funding Partnerships, Innovation, Research Partnerships, Creative Problem-Solving and Prevention, and Artificial Intelligence/ Emerging Technology.



WASTEWATER & STORMWATER MANAGEMENT

This pillar refers to the MWRD’s core operations that protect our water environment: wastewater treatment and stormwater management. In the next five years, we will focus on finding the best way to balance the requirements of the wastewater treatment process with the wellbeing of our residents while endeavoring to reduce contaminants and pollutants from entering our waterways. We will also reinforce our efforts towards resilient flood mitigation for the long term.

Pillar Objectives

- 1 Protect public and aquatic health.
- 2 Create lasting solutions for flood resilience.

VOICES FROM OUR COMMUNITY

The MWRD’s extensive infrastructure is critical to meeting the stated goals. With such expansive infrastructure that has been in place for decades, investing in maintenance is key to providing reliable, cost-effective service to system users.

— Strategic Plan Survey Participant



In its work to reclaim water, the MWRD is constantly evolving to meet new challenges through innovation and infrastructure upgrades that allow the MWRD to raise its water quality standards and meet stringent NPDES permit requirements.

KEY RESULTS SOUGHT

1

Success in protecting public and aquatic health will be reflected by:

- ✓ strategic optimization to sustainably provide compliance with current environmental permits including an enhanced biological phosphorus removal process at the Calumet, O'Brien, Hanover Park, and Egan WRPs;
- ✓ expanded efforts to reduce emerging contaminants such as PFAS and microplastics in wastewater streams; and
- ✓ improved wastewater and collection system asset reliability.

Measures of Success will include:



normalized data points on the wastewater treatment process

TARGET: Create Baseline for Egan WRP by 3/31/27



number of partnerships to reduce emerging contaminants

TARGET: Create Baseline by 6/30/27



reduction in number of emergency repairs due to asset failure

TARGET: Create Baseline by 6/30/27

WHY THESE MATTER

Improving these targeted metrics will help us be more effective in protecting our waterways and consistent in providing services to our residents.

2

Success in creating lasting solutions for flood resilience will be reflected by:

- ✓ expanded assessment of flood risk across our service area;
- ✓ increased flood mitigation participation at the local and regional level; and
- ✓ increased external funding for additional stormwater projects.

Measures of Success will include:



increase to stormwater storage volume throughout our service area

TARGET: Year-over-year 10% increases to cumulative stormwater storage volume through partnerships starting in 2026



increase to Master Agreements with regional agencies

TARGET: Year-over-year increases to number of Master Agreements with regional agencies starting in 2026



increase to number of partnerships

TARGET: Year-over-year 15% increases to number of partnerships starting in 2027

WHY THESE MATTER

Increased storage capacity will reduce stormwater runoff in local systems during storms, and collaborations with regional agencies will bring multi-beneficial projects across Chicagoland.



BUSINESS RESILIENCE

This pillar refers to administrative and support functions that enable the MWRD to maintain efficient and effective business operations. In the next five years, we will focus on strengthening our ability to conduct business under normal, varied, and extraordinary circumstances; making more data-informed spending decisions; and doing more with our dollars. We will work to ensure we remain reliable and accountable to our taxpayers.

Pillar Objectives

- 1 Safeguard business continuity.
- 2 Bolster financial efficiency.

VOICES FROM OUR COMMUNITY

[It is important for the MWRD to address] challenges in knowledge exchange, including knowledge silos . . . and loss of specialized knowledge as workers retire.

— Strategic Plan Survey Participant



Visitors flock to the MWRD's Mainstream Pumping Station to learn how the MWRD manages the McCook Reservoir. Every year the MWRD hosts thousands of tourgoers to educate them on the MWRD's work and how everyone plays a role protecting the water environment.

KEY RESULTS SOUGHT

1

Success in safeguarding business continuity will be reflected by:

- ✓ reinforced operational continuity and alignment with the evolving business landscape;
- ✓ strengthened accountability and redundancy for critical processes; and
- ✓ improved agency resilience and readiness for effective response to emergencies.

Measures of Success will include:



progress in updating, validating, and improving administrative, operating, and emergency procedures

TARGET: Progressive completion of Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) review and update, with full completion by 12/31/27

WHY THESE MATTER

SOP updates will help ensure consistent and quality service at all times.

2

Success in bolstering financial efficiency will be reflected by:

- ✓ broadened conscientious spending; and
- ✓ improved work unit productivity.

Measures of Success will include:



expansion of project valuation methods

TARGET: 100% of projects exceeding \$5 million utilizing total life cycle analysis valuation by 12/31/27



improvements to resource efficiency accomplished

TARGET: Year-over-year decreases in work unit cost of selected processes starting in 2027

WHY THESE MATTER

Consistent efforts to lower total costs through optimization will promote continued smart and efficient spending of tax dollars.



RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT & MANAGEMENT

This pillar refers to development, utilization, employment, and leveraging of resources and assets. In the next five years, we will focus on the beneficial reuse of biosolids, energy, and high-quality effluent reinforcing our workforce, and deepening our partnerships, all to enhance shared, long-term value.

Pillar Objectives

- 1 Advance resource recovery and reuse.
- 2 Cultivate a workplace that appeals to and retains existing employees.
- 3 Inspire highly qualified candidates to join the MWRD.
- 4 Foster mutually beneficial relationships with external stakeholders.

VOICES FROM OUR COMMUNITY

[The MWRD must] build partnership[s] with our stakeholders to educate on how jointly we can support efforts to maintain our waterways [to be] safe from pollution and fight climate change.

— Strategic Plan Survey Participant



Native plants are sprouting at Corkery Elementary School where the MWRD and Space to Grow partners are expanding permeable schoolyards filled with vibrant play areas.

KEY RESULTS SOUGHT

1

Success in advancing resource recovery and reuse will be reflected by:

- ✓ increased phosphorus recovery and reuse via beneficial use of biosolids;
- ✓ increased use of recovered renewable energy; and
- ✓ increased beneficial reuse of non-potable treated effluent for use in irrigation, commercial, and industrial applications.

Measures of Success will include:



amount of phosphorus recovered

TARGET: Progressive increases to phosphorus capture to a minimum of 90% by 12/31/30



amount of generation and use of biogas and electricity

TARGETS: Progressive increases to utilization of biogas to a minimum of 95% by 12/31/29; 10 million kWh of onsite-generated electricity used per year by 12/31/28



number of pilot studies initiated/completed on non-potable water reuse

TARGET: One pilot or demonstration project on non-potable water reuse identified/developed by 12/31/27

WHY THESE MATTER

Removing more phosphorus from our effluent allows us to better protect our waterways, while reusing energy from our treatment processes reduces our impact on the environment and our reliance on/costs from third-party energy providers.

2

Success in cultivating a workplace that appeals to and retains existing employees will be reflected by:

- ✓ increased employee development opportunities and participation;
- ✓ improved employee sentiment on workplace culture; and
- ✓ improved employee satisfaction with work-life balance.

Measures of Success will include:



employee survey response scores across a variety of workplace topics

TARGET: 5% year-over-year increases in job satisfaction survey favorability score starting in 2028

WHY THESE MATTER

Improvements in employee job satisfaction boosts morale, improves productivity, and ensures that our talented employees remain focused on providing the best possible service to our communities.

(continues on p. 18)

3

Success in inspiring highly qualified candidates to join the MWRD will be reflected by:

- ✓ increased interest in employment at the MWRD; and
- ✓ greater success in filling vacancies.

Measures of Success will include:



number of applicants and candidates interested in working at MWRD
TARGET: Overall 10% increase in job applications over five years



position fulfillment rates
TARGET: Average of 20% increase over prior eligible list for fulfillment in hard-to-fill classifications by 12/31/30

WHY THESE MATTER

Increased interest in working at the MWRD ensures that the organization has a talented, high-quality pool of applicants for the 240 different job titles necessary to accomplish our mission and provide award-winning services to the taxpayers.

4

Success in fostering mutually beneficial relationships with external stakeholders will be reflected by:

- ✓ increased public engagement on flood resilience strategies;
- ✓ increased engagement and participation by Environmental Justice (EJ) communities
- ✓ increased public awareness, understanding, advocacy, and trust in the MWRD's mission; and
- ✓ expanded participation by eligible small and diverse firms in MWRD contracting.

Measures of Success will include:



amount of community participation in various MWRD programs
TARGET: Increasing trend of EJ community participation over five years



number of local collaborations
TARGET: Increasing trend in number of established partnerships/collaborations over five years



number of new active firms in our vendor pool
TARGET: Progressive increases each year to the number of MBE/WBE/VBE firms identified through MWRD outreach activities and subsequently listed on an approved Utilization Plan or Commitment Form, to a minimum of 25 firms over five years

WHY THESE MATTER:

Increased engagement in these areas translates into projects that better match what residents need, partnerships that stretch public dollars further, and contracting that is more inclusive and competitive.



Municipal leaders join the MWRD, the Illinois Department of Natural Resources and the South Suburban Mayors and Managers Association, Nov. 5, 2025, for a Government to Government Workshop at the Hazel Crest Ballroom in Hazel Crest, Ill. The workshop was convened with mayors, trustees and other municipal representatives to address flooding and strengthen intergovernmental coordination across local, county and state agencies.



PROACTIVE EVOLUTION

This pillar refers to intentional efforts to continually improve the MWRD and prepare for the future. In the next five years, we will focus on our work processes and building our stamina to meet future financial, climate, and regulatory changes.

Pillar Objectives

- 1 Continuously improve operations and processes.
- 2 Strengthen financial agility to navigate increasing costs.
- 3 Build robust resilience across environmental and regulatory fronts.

VOICES FROM OUR COMMUNITY

We cannot control the rest of the world [on climate change], but we can control ourselves. Being a part of the solution instead of just passively allowing a problem to continue is vital.

— Strategic Plan Survey Participant

The MWRD distributes thousands of rain barrels each year to Cook County residents at discounted prices to promote water conservation and water reuse. ►



KEY RESULTS SOUGHT

1 Success in continuously improving operations and processes will be reflected by:

- ✓ increased efficiency in the goods/services acquisition process;
- ✓ increased efficiency in business processes; and
- ✓ a strengthened culture of continuous improvement among management.

Measures of Success will include:



improved workflow of business processes

TARGET: Progressive review of critical business processes, with completion by 12/31/27



amount of reduction in cycle time of business processes

TARGET: 10% reduction in cycle time of Request for Proposal procurement process by 12/31/27

WHY THESE MATTER

Streamlined processes will increase efficiency and optimize the use of our resources.

2

Success in strengthening financial agility to navigate increasing costs will be reflected by:

- ✓ greater diversity in the revenue portfolio;
- ✓ controlled expenditure growth in the Corporate Fund;
- ✓ appropriate fee structures; and
- ✓ a sustained capacity to issue debt as necessary.

Measures of Success will include:



efforts to expand our revenue portfolio

TARGET: Completed analyses of four new revenue options by 12/31/30



control of expenditure growth

TARGET: Annual ratio of expenditure growth rate to revenue growth rate of less than or equal to 1 by 12/31/30



progress on updating our fee structure

TARGET: 100% of fees reviewed and updated or reaffirmed by 12/31/28



our limited tax debt service ratio

TARGET: Annual ratio of Limited Debt Service to Debt Service Extension Base limit of less than 90% at year-end starting in 2026

WHY THESE MATTER

Increasing our non-tax revenues and decreasing our expenditures allows us to avoid asking for more from our taxpayers despite rising costs, while controlling our limited tax debt service ratio lowers interest cost and increases capacity to meet the needs of the Capital Improvements Program.

3

Success in building robust resilience across environmental and regulatory fronts will be reflected by:

- ✓ a reduction in our carbon footprint;
- ✓ increased organizational consideration of climate impact and resiliency in decision-making;
- ✓ preemptive preparedness to meet potential new regulations; and
- ✓ increased innovative solution generation re: climate risk mitigation, energy, and compliance resilience.

Measures of Success will include:



reduction in greenhouse gas emissions

TARGET: 60% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions from 2005 baseline by 12/31/30



expanded efforts to prepare for climate threats

TARGET: Update of Climate Action Plan by 12/31/27



evaluations of emerging regulatory issues

TARGET: Six emerging regulatory issues evaluated over five years



increase in innovative ideas for resilience

TARGET: Progressive increases to number of teams/ideas on climate, energy, and compliance resilience via a competition, to a minimum of 60% increase by 12/31/30

WHY THESE MATTER

Increasing our awareness, consideration, and proactive action relating to climate impacts and regulatory changes will allow us to continually provide essential services to our service area despite any challenges ahead.





LOOKING AHEAD



As we embark on the journey mapped out in the 2026-2030 Strategic Plan, we do so with confidence, purpose, and optimism.

This Strategic Plan is a commitment to improve the quality of life for our communities and protect our vital water resources for generations to come. This will be accomplished by aligning our efforts to the Pillar Objectives established in this Strategic Plan. The Strategic Plan is a living document that includes initial targets, with the clear understanding that additional targets will be developed as we move forward.

We pledge to improve the quality of life for the communities we serve by being proactive, innovative, and bold, adding to the legacy of MWRD visionaries who reversed the Chicago and Calumet Rivers to protect the water quality of Lake Michigan, constructed wastewater treatment plants and conveyance systems, and conceived and implemented TARP. Through the dedication of our staff and the support of our partners, we will turn our Strategic Plan's objectives into achievements.

Please stay tuned to mwrdd.org/strategic-plan for updates.

Sincerely,

John P. Murray
Executive Director

◀ *The sun rises over Stickney Water Reclamation Plant as the MWRD outlines the next five years through a landmark planning process to define the vision, mission, values and priority pillars that keep the MWRD on a sustainable and successful path for decades to come.*

2025 MWRD SURVEY

To inform development of the Strategic Plan, the MWRD conducted a wide set of surveys to assess current conditions, organizational priorities, and external expectations related to each Strategic Pillar.

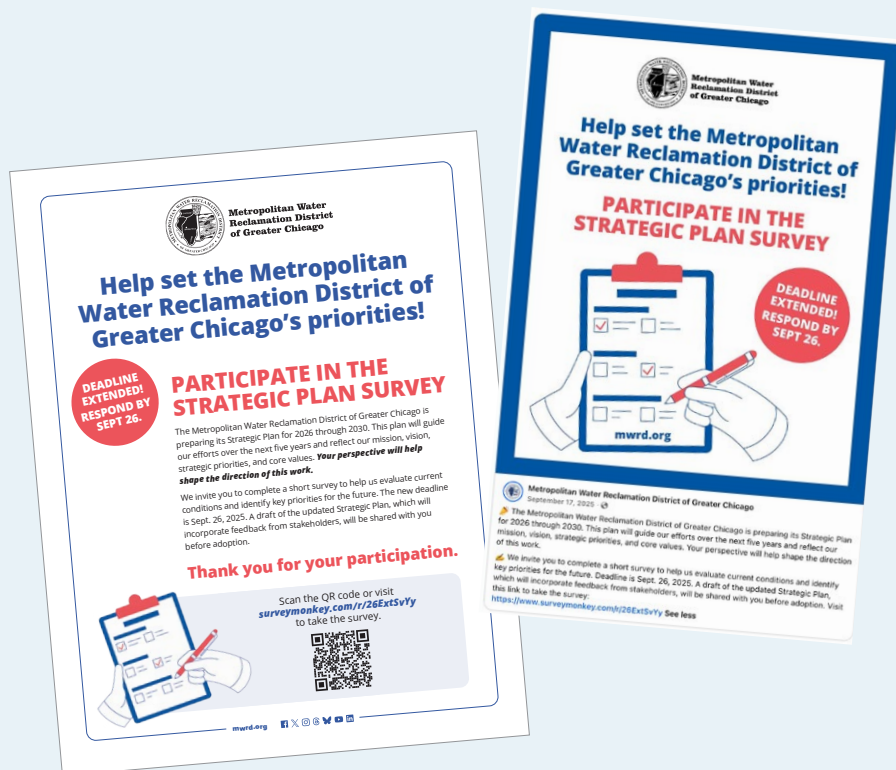
The Board of Commissioners were asked to identify priority areas for the MWRD, with responses emphasizing the importance of the MWRD's core functions while underscoring the need for long-term preparedness and adaptability. Meanwhile, employees responded to an internal staff survey focused on current conditions, operational challenges, and future priorities; they ranked infrastructure investment, workforce improvements, technology and process modernization, and financial planning at the top of their list.

The Executive Team survey asked department heads and managers to complete a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis to evaluate internal capabilities and external pressures affecting the organization. The results pointed out that our internal strengths are our people, financial discipline, and operational excellence, while our internal weaknesses lie in our hiring process, enterprise systems, and aging infrastructure. Externally, we have opportunities in emerging technology and

strategic partnerships, while we must prepare to face risks from financial uncertainty, new regulatory pressures, emerging contaminants, and climate change.

In addition, an External Stakeholder survey was distributed to non-governmental organizations, assist agencies, tenants, industrial users, local governments, emergency contacts, and members of the general public via social media; it generated hundreds of responses. While some survey responses reflected interests beyond the MWRD's funded mandates for wastewater treatment and stormwater management, a significant portion aligned with the MWRD's core responsibilities.

Common themes emerged from the survey responses; these insights, along with staff observations and expertise, were used to shape the strategic plan to be both mission-focused and forward-looking, ensuring the MWRD remains resilient, efficient, and prepared to serve the region over the next five years.





Water Quality, with pollution and contaminant control, was highlighted by both internal and external stakeholders. Our response will take place under the Pillars of **Wastewater & Stormwater Management** and **Resource Development & Management**. We will continue to focus on protecting public and aquatic health through excellent wastewater treatment practices along with strengthening service reliability and pollution/contamination prevention. We will also step up efforts in phosphorus recovery and reuse.



Another significant area of concern was **Flooding/Stormwater Management** along with **Climate Change and Resilience**; these related topics were noted across all stakeholder types surveyed. Our **Wastewater & Stormwater Management** and **Proactive Evolution** Pillars will address this concern. In addition to continuing to provide proven solutions and exploring new opportunities for flood resiliency, we will also continue to expand knowledge among residents and businesses so that they can also take actions to mitigate flooding in their communities.



Internal stakeholders from the Board through management and staff agree that **Business Operations** is an integral part of the MWRD's success. This area is undergirded by the pillars of **Business Resilience** and **Proactive Evolution**, which address existing and anticipated needs, respectively. In this Strategic Plan, we will prioritize ensuring business continuity so that we can continue to provide reliable service to Cook County through fair and foul weather. We will also explore opportunities to optimize our financial position to improve our financial efficiency and prepare for future needs as costs increase. And finally, we will foster a culture of continuous improvement for faster productivity, more accurate results, and increased value to our stakeholders.



Employees and Management both pointed to **Recruitment and Retention** as a major internal challenge. All internal stakeholders recognized strong competition for talent and a potential loss of institutional knowledge as our current workforce retires. Under the **Resource Development & Management** Pillar, we will place a more focused effort on expanding interest in joining the MWRD and in providing value-added development opportunities for our existing employees.

2021–2025 STRATEGIC PLAN ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Strategic Goal: Resource Management

Objective 1: Protect public health and area waterways.

- ▶ Achieved 100% permit compliance in 333 of 336 IEPA reporting periods from 2021 through 2024.
- ▶ Five WRPs extended NACWA Peak Performance Platinum Awards.
- ▶ Stickney WRP increased its compliance streak to five years of Gold recognition, making it eligible for a Platinum award in 2025.
- ▶ Held Annual Regulatory Radar meetings and Capital Update meetings to support informed planning and the capital plan.
- ▶ Negotiated a chloride source control program for Kirie WRP service area to shift emphasis from end-of-pipe limits to upstream control strategies.
- ▶ Continued participation in the DuPage River Salt Creek Workgroup through the Hanover Park and Egan WRPs to help determine realistic limits.
- ▶ Led significant pilot studies on biological phosphorus removal at Calumet, O'Brien, and Egan WRPs.
- ▶ Conducted a full-scale demonstration of enhanced biological phosphorus removal in Tank 1A at the Hanover Park WRP to improve water quality and support planning for upcoming regulations.
- ▶ Maintained a leadership role in national and regional water quality initiatives, contributing data and operational insights to nutrient reduction, biosolids optimization, and emerging contaminant frameworks.

Objective 2: Recover and reuse resources.

- ▶ Began a design-build project for the installation of a combined heat and power (CHP) system at the Egan WRP to beneficially reuse digester biogas to produce electricity and recover heat.
- ▶ Installed new boilers at the Hanover Park WRP to optimize biogas utilization for process heat and to improve energy efficiency.
- ▶ The Ostara system has matured, and incremental improvements have been implemented to optimize phosphorus recovery and stabilize biological processes while balancing chemical use and energy demands.
- ▶ As of year-end 2024, the MWRD has received approximately 1.85 million gallons of high-strength organic material at Stickney WRP from inception of the Resource Recovery Ordinance. This additional carbon load is introduced into the Stickney WRP influent to enhance biological phosphorus removal.
- ▶ Completed a multi-year Energy Neutrality Study, which developed conceptual plans to achieve energy neutrality at one WRP by 2030 and agency-wide neutrality by 2035. Staff are currently reviewing the plan's recommendations for feasibility and integration into the Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) to enhance organizational resiliency.
- ▶ Since the Strategic Plan was adopted, MWRD staff have increased tracking of process water usage and MWRD commissioners have adopted a water reuse resolution to support expanded water reuse opportunities for the MWRD.

Strategic Goal: Stormwater Management

Objective 3: Mitigate flooding across Cook County through a proactive, equitable stormwater management program.

- ▶ Began local community partnerships, including:
 - ▶ A multi-benefit flood control project near the confluence of Deer Creek and Third Creek to create 538 million gallons of storage capacity in southeast Cook County.
 - ▶ The Harvey Central Park Stormwater Detention Basin, which will provide flood relief for 209 structures while serving as a dual-use open-water pond and green space.
- ▶ Continued construction of the McCook Reservoir to provide a total of 10 billion gallons of storage capacity at completion.
- ▶ Completed a diversion sewer from the Westchester Pumping Station to TARP to reduce CSOs in Addison Creek.
- ▶ Added 125 projects to the Stormwater Program.
- ▶ Protected over 2,400 structures from flood damage.
- ▶ Created 9.9 million gallons of retention capacity through the Green Infrastructure Program.

A full McCook Reservoir captures 3.5 billion gallons of water that formerly flooded central Chicago and 36 suburbs and polluted and overwhelmed local waterways. It takes 12 to 14 days to pump down McCook and the adjoining tunnels, depending on the weather, plant flow and the microbial activity or biology at Stickney Water Reclamation Plant, where the water is sent for treatment.



Strategic Goal: Workforce Excellence

Objective 4: Recruit best-in-class employees.

- ▶ Broadened recruitment reach through:
 - ▶ Collaborations with new associations and agency groups.
 - ▶ Participation in industry-specific groups focused on workforce issues in the water and wastewater sector.
 - ▶ New “Career Spotlight” videos to highlight different jobs at the MWRD.
- ▶ Expanded the pipeline of skilled recruits through new apprenticeship and trainee programs.
- ▶ Began to tap internal employee experiences to inform recruitment strategies going forward.

Objective 5: Develop best-in-class employees.

- ▶ Launched a coaching training program for supervisors and managers.
- ▶ Reinforced the emphasis on continuing education through:
 - ▶ The Continuous Learning Initiative to establish development hours goals for managers and supervisors.
 - ▶ A new development plan section in annual employee performance evaluations.

Objective 6: Retain best-in-class employees.

- ▶ Obtained a better understanding of employee needs through an employee survey.
- ▶ Provided onsite health and wellness center and nursing facilities at the Stickney WRP.
- ▶ Connected employees to information they need through a new intranet.
- ▶ Provided new healthcare cost benefits.

Strategic Goal: Community Engagement

Objective 7: Position the MWRD as a critical community asset, responsive neighbor, and inclusive business partner.

- ▶ Targeted two-way communications through Community Partnership Councils and in environmental justice communities.
- ▶ Received the Spirit of Giving Award for our commitment to empowering students, supporting educational equity, and giving back to the communities.
- ▶ Increased the number of community engagement events year over year.
- ▶ More than doubled our social media reach in followers.
- ▶ Implemented and hosted an annual Small/Diverse Business Summit and quarterly Vendor 101 trainings and Assist Agency Meetings.
- ▶ Digitalized procurement communications and pre-bid conferences.
- ▶ Developed and implemented procedures to continually expand and refine the vendor database and better target vendors.
- ▶ Added over 1,300 new vendors and increased the average number of bidders by 21%.

Strategic Goal: Enterprise Resilience

Objective 8: Proactively expand efforts to strengthen functionality in the face of future events.

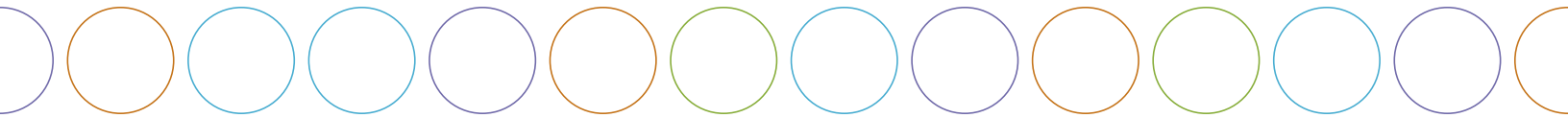
- ▶ Achieved a 39.7% reduction in greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions compared to 2005 levels, surpassing the Strategic Plan 2021–2025 goal of 28% by 2025. From 2020 to date, GHG emissions have been reduced by 21.8%.
- ▶ Recognized by the International Water Association as a top three finalist out of a field of more than 90 international water utilities for our climate action leadership.
- ▶ Continued three consecutive years of renewable energy credit (REC) purchases.
- ▶ Launched an electric vehicle pilot program.
- ▶ Authorized to construct and finance on-site renewable energy projects that power facilities on MWRD property, pursuant to Public Act 103-0299.

Objective 9: Provide cost-effective services.

- ▶ Improved to an AA+ credit rating from S&P Global and maintained AAA credit rating from Fitch to provide lower borrowing costs when issuing bonds.
- ▶ Funded approximately 37% of our 2025 Stormwater Program project costs with grants and cost-share partnerships.

Objective 10: Continuously improve business operations.

- ▶ Reduced permit processing time through the Watershed Management Ordinance Permit Application Submittal System upgrade.
- ▶ Enhanced security and reduced fraud risk by developing a real-time alert feature for vendor financial information changes.
- ▶ Reduced data storage electricity usage by 50% and enhanced analytics, data management, and security with an upgraded data storage platform.
- ▶ Expanded public engagement and accessibility to public meetings by implementing a live closed-captioning solution.
- ▶ Further automated vendor payments and workflows through an Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) invoice processing upgrade.
- ▶ Modernized and streamlined the budget system and annual planning process through implementation of a cloud-based solution.
- ▶ Strengthened time-keeping controls through worktime coding enhancements and biometric authentication.
- ▶ Initiated ERP assessment project to modernize the MWRD systems and processes for the long-term.



2026 – 2030

MWRD STRATEGIC PLAN



mwrdd.org



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