

NPRWD Comprehensive Operations Assessment & Analysis Observations & Recommendations

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Purpose of the Assessment: The purpose of this project was to give a non-legal, and non-financial Operations Assessment & Analysis of NPRWD. The assessment's objective is to discover NPRWD's current Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats. Additionally, the Consultant will include suggested recommendations corresponding to the organization's current state.

INTRODUCTION

Background: North Prairie Regional Water District's mission is to deliver a reliable supply of safe, affordable, high quality water to our members; provide exceptional service to our members; and keep informed of water issues that could affect North Prairie Regional Water District due to technology, regulations, funding or political decisions. The District has approximately 4600 members spread across Ward, McHenry, northern McLean, western Pierce, western Sheridan, and western Mountrail Counties. GPBG was contacted, and ultimately hired, to give the Board an unbiased assessment of its current operations, personnel, policies and procedures, and member sentiment.

Scope of Assessment: GPBG was hired to get the perceptions of the state of NPRWD through the eyes of its Board Members, Staff, and customers. GPBG also assessed NP's Management and Personnel related policies and procedures.

Methodology: GPBG collected data from Board Members, Employees, and Customers. Data was collected by conducting:

1. Face-to-face (either in-person, phone, or video call) interviews with all Board Members.
2. Face-to-face (either in-person, phone, or video call) interviews with all Staff.
3. Electronic Employee Feedback completed by all employees.
4. On-site visit to NPRWD office in Minot to witness day-to-day normal business operations.
5. In-person Customer Focus Groups.
6. Electronic Customer Feedback Survey.

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OBSERVATIONS

Governance: Board of Directors

Composition and representation.

The NPRWD's Board is composed of 6 individual District Directors, representing their District of residence, and 1 Member at large.

Meeting effectiveness and decision-making processes.

The Board meeting follows first the directives of the North Dakota Century Code as it applies to political subdivisions of their type, then By-Laws and lastly, the general protocols of Roberts Rules of Order in their decision-making process and attempts to maintain meeting effectiveness.

GPBG had an opportunity to witness several board meetings. The meetings are posted ahead of time, per ND Open Meetings Open Records regulations. Ineffectiveness occurs when the At Large board member attempts to interject items that are not relevant to the current Agenda item or current motion. These interjections lead to wasted time for all involved which leads to resentment and ineffective governance.

To our knowledge, once elected to the board, there is no formal/structured "New board member onboarding/orientation process," nor do new board members receive any type of Governance or industry-specific training.

A Board Member Policy Manual/Handbook has been drafted and is currently being reviewed by legal council with the expectation of its release and adoption by the board.

Adherence to governance best practices.

We have observed and, actually taught, the following as often referenced as "best practices" amongst Boards such as NPRWD:

The only actions and decisions binding on the Board of Directors are those that are taken by official action when the Board is in legal session.

Board members must represent unconflicted loyalty to the interests of the, in this case, NPRWD.

The Board Members may not attempt to exercise individual authority over the organization except as explicitly set forth in Board policies. Board members' interaction with the manager/chief executive officer or with staff must recognize the lack of authority in any individual Board member or group of Board members except when authorized or directed by the Board when it is in legal session.

The Board in a 5 to 1 vote adopted a Code of Conduct/Ethics to govern the behavior of Board members especially when the Board was in session. Sadly, this usual and customary process of board's has not been universally applied since its adoption, i.e. this code needs to be, when such a violation occurs, referenced and enforced by any attending Board member while the board is in legal session up to and including censuring a Board Member(s) who violates the tenants of the Code.

Since NPRWD is acknowledged as a "Political Subdivision," it is subject to all the rules commonly referred to as Open Meeting and Open Records. As such, the public and staff are entitled to attend, but are not allowed to participate in the proceeding unless recognized and/or requested by the Chair. It has been observed and noted that the General Manager has routinely engaged in exchanges, often heated, with an individual Board Member without such invitation from the Chair.

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Governance: Board of Directors

Transparency. (Types of open communication between NPRWD members and Board/staff.)

Most Boards Members have adopted an open-door policy to receive contacts from constituents. A monthly Message from the Board is sent electronically to constituents who can receive such, not all constituents have supplied email addresses. Hence it is posted on the website and on NPRWD's Facebook site. There is a prescribed protocol whereby Board Members with concerns contact the President before making staff contact. The Staff are requested to follow a similar protocol of notifying the General Manager first so she can alert the President to the request. The General Manager regularly ignores this protocol for her own concerns hence her staff follow suit.

Of the board meetings GPBG attended, video live stream was being conducted by an individual not affiliated with NP.

Accountability. (Are there clearly defined roles for each board member? Describe the oversight that is in place to ensure operational effectiveness.)

There are no formal Board Member job descriptions, but a sample has been distributed. A Code of Conduct was established and adopted by a 5 to 1 vote within the last 2 years. The dissenting voting Board Member has refused to acknowledge not following the Code of Conduct whether in the meeting or outside the Board Meeting Room. This rogue type of attitude and behavior has caused significant disruption and actual meeting chaos, to the degree that said member has been censured by the other 6 Board Members meeting in regular session.

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Staff Operations

Organization Structure and Roles.

As of January 24, 2025, NP employs eleven people. A General Manager overseeing all staff and held accountable by the board. The organization has two divisions, Office and Field. The Operations Manager oversees 5 Field Staff, a Mapper/Locator, and one part-time Meter Reader. The Office Manager reports to the GM and oversees an Administrative Assistant/Receptionist and a part-time office helper.

The current General Manager has indicated her desire to retire after over 15 years sometime in 2025. Her contributions to the success and evolution of the Water District are profound and too numerous to catalogue. But, her leadership in taking the Organization from the status of a small cooperative type organization to that of an Eight-Million-dollar political subdivision is a strong indication of her impact. The search for, selection and employment of her replacement is hampered by a vague timetable of her anticipated departure.

Her abilities to network with funding sources, regional, state and national organizations have had a profound impact on the financial and organizational expansion of the District.

From the beginning of her tenure the General Manager has had to rely on her management style, which is best characterized as autocratic, and was born of the necessity that she had to make due with a very small staff all of which reported to her directly. The culture of her management style has remained static throughout her tenure. That condition continues, supported by the fact that both the Board and the staff indicated that the organization needs additional office and field staff. Additionally the current turnover rates of both office and field staff seem to indicate that the management culture of the administration needs to be reviewed and modified. The current evolving employment pool of candidates, in our opinion, necessitates the need for an adaptation to the autocratic cultural style currently in place.

We were unable to locate and review any written instrument usually and customarily described as a current Job Description. That written job description deficiency extends to all the staff positions we interviewed.

The vast amount of District and industry knowledge, contacts and related data possessed by the current General Manager is staggering and undocumented in written form for future reference by her successor.

The current General Manager is extremely protective of the District, its products, services, procedures and staff. This is witnessed by her proclivities to engage in confrontational exchanges, usually with a specific Board Member, during Board meetings we observed.

Although a noble endeavor, she frequently blurts out her opinions without appropriate acknowledgement or recognitions from the Board President. This is contrary to her status as a guest and resource person at the Board meeting.

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Staff Operations

Effective Employees.

To our knowledge, there is not a document/formal onboarding and orientation process for new hires. New hires and current employees are provided with on the job training. There are manuals available in the office on how to operate operations software programs. Cross training is done extensively with Field Staff due to the fact that all Field Staff will eventually be "on call" and therefore must know the basics of both treatment and servicing out in the field. Field staff need specific certifications (determined by the Health Dept, population and size.) NP have Level 3 treatment operators, a Level 2, etc. On-going training throughout the year from ND Rural Water and other industry organizations. ND Health Dept puts on training as well. Field staff must study specific manuals to pass their certification within the industry. According to the GM, there are clear roles documented for the GM and Ops. Manager; we were unable to physically observe them. Otherwise the other position do not have written Job Descriptions. NP does not have specific metrics used to hold the employee accountable to performing their duties. Field Staff are expected to write all activities done throughout the day in daily log books. There is an 8AM daily meeting with all employees. This has served to be very critical for communication, teamwork, and effectiveness. GPBG is not aware of any specific written out processes or documentation the GM uses to ensure operational effectiveness, besides her intuition.

Qualified Staff.

NP Field Staff need to have certain certifications and training requirements to do their job. NP does not have enough people to meet demand; short in both the office and field staff. To our knowledge, there are no required certifications or training requirements for office staff. Employees need to learn industry-specific terminology before they are allowed to answer the phone. On the job training is going on constantly from Teresa. New employees go to the treatment plant and also out in the field so they understand NP's business to the best of their abilities. A majority of employees requested more industry-specific (specifically water treatment and testing) training opportunities in response to the survey question, "What areas would you like more training or skill development?"

Ongoing Training.

Regular training is provided to field staff to maintain their certification. 100% of employees surveyed either Agreed or Strongly Agreed to the question, "NPRWD encourages employees to pursue personal and/or professional development opportunities. But, to our knowledge, we did not see any structured program to track the completion of or progress towards professional development skills in office staff.

Employee Retention.

The most tenured employee has 15 years, the least tenured employee has less than one month. From our conversations with NPRWD personnel, "All positions are hard to find and even more difficult to retain." Surveyed employees mention "significant turnover in staff" and "most field staff employees are 2 years or less employed here."

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Financial Stability

Sustainable funding.

NPRWD has Board properly structured rates that cover operational costs, capital improvements, and reserves for emergencies. These properly structured rates are based upon the work of Grand Forks Consultant, Sarah Sesselman. Ms. Sesselman is a civil engineer. At the request of NPRWD, Ms. Sesselman prepared a comprehensive software program which forecasts future issues and consistent rate increase recommendations. Her software program has demonstrated extraordinary accuracy and proven its effectiveness time and time again. Unfortunately, Ms. Sesselman suspended her services to the Board and the Water District citing consistent disrespectful and acrimonious behaviors displayed by a single Board member with the perceived intent to impugn her personally and professionally. Causing further harm, an individual Board Member repeatedly objects publicly and on social media to actions taken by the Board in regular session in regards to NPRWD finances which causes considerable damage to NPRWD as a whole, creating an atmosphere of fear and hostility among board members, staff, and members.

Efficient Billing and Collections.

Per GPBG's interviews with the Board and staff, NP has reliable systems to ensure timely revenue collection and minimal delinquency. NP has an extraordinarily low delinquency rate and very little bad debt.

Access to Grants and Loans.

NP has been able to secure funding for infrastructure projects, especially in underserved areas. NP has received approximately 42.5 million in grant monies in the last 10 years.

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Infrastructure Maintenance and Planning

Preventive Maintenance Programs.

NP's goal is to be proactive instead reactive when it comes to servicing regular infrastructure to avoid costly breakdowns. NP staff look at the pump stations physically once per week. The treatment plant is manned every day. Sat. and Sun is 4 hours per day. Gate valve inspections twice per year. Constant documentation. NP operates with the Dept of Health's specifics for maximum capacity sustainability.

Capital Improvement Plans.

According to the GM, NP has a Long-term plan for upgrades and replacement of aging infrastructure; a 3, 5, and 10-year CIP plan is in place. As mentioned above, a Grand Forks Consultant, Sarah Sesselman, a civil engineer, prepared a comprehensive Asset Management software program which forecasts future issues and consistent rate increase recommendations which has demonstrated extraordinary accuracy and proven its effectiveness time and time again. Unfortunately, she suspended her services to the Board and the Water District citing consistent disrespectful and acrimonious behaviors displayed by a single Board member with the perceived intent to impugn her personally and professionally.

The Board and staff have indicated that the absence of a usual and customary Strategic Plan has a debilitating impact on the capacity to measure progress, a successful year, or the opposite.

A capital improvement plan has been created on paper, but it is not regularly reviewed or referenced to or by the Board. Our current Board circumstances require the Board to focus an inordinate amount of Board meeting time focused on minor or trivial topics to the exclusion of major items such as Infrastructure Maintenance and Planning and Strategic Planning.

Adoption of Technology.

NP uses modern tools like GIS mapping, SCADA systems, and leak detection Technology. As long as NP utilizes its SCADA systems as they should, they'll be able to see the trends ahead of time and take action before problems occur.

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Customer Focus

Education and Outreach.

To our knowledge, NP does not currently offer Education and/or Outreach opportunities to help customers understand water conservation, rates, and district Operations. NP does have water conservation tips on their website. The GM mentioned that they have tried a few community education events in the past but they were poorly attended so they did not continue. But, the GM is very much in agreement that we need to educate our community about the precious resource water, where it comes from, and that it's not automatic.

Community Engagement.

Customers can call or email NP at any time.

To our knowledge, there are currently not effective processes or opportunities for customers to provide feedback or get involved. With this lack of effective community engagement, an environment where mistrust can thrive is easily created (and one that NP is currently facing.)

Responsive Customer Service.

Upon our interview with the GP, it was agreed upon that this is an area that NP could improve. As concerns come in, per the Board's direction, every concern is supposed to be directed specifically to the GM. The GM is to document the customer issue/concern, actions she has taken, and record her response and/or any actions taken. All of this information is then to be reported to the Board President. As of this assessment, this process has not been followed as effectively as expected.

Regulatory Compliance

Safe Water Standards.

To our knowledge, NP water is consistently within the required range. NP consistently exceeds the quality of Minot municipal water.

Timely Reporting.

NP ensures accurate and punctual submission of reports to regulatory agencies by providing required documentation to regulatory bodies promptly upon request. NP follows all regulatory reporting requirements as required.

Emergency Preparedness.

NP has plans in place for natural disasters, contamination, or major equipment failures. NP has an Emergency Preparedness manual.

Ethical Practices

Fairness and Integrity.

NP has policies and consistent application of rules for all customers. There is also a NP Employee Handbook adopted in 2021. The handbook as it is currently is adequate. NP would benefit from a thorough handbook review and update.

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Customer Perspective

Summary of Customer Findings.

508 customers were contacted by phone to ask if they'd be willing to participate in an in-person Focus Group and/or take the online Customer Feedback survey. Approximately 40 total members participated in the Focus Groups. 154 customers completed the online customer feedback survey. Here are a few key takeaways from the customer perspective study:

- 63% Feel NP's water supply is consistent and reliable.
- 67% say the service they receive from NPRWD is high quality.
- 66% say that when they call the NPRWD office with a question, the NPRWD staff member they interact with is friendly.
- 59% feel the cost of the service is "Expensive." An additional 17% add that, "Base charge is too high" "No explanation of price increases" "Horrible, especially in the summer" "Curb stop is getting expensive." (24% of surveyed members describe the cost for services as, "Affordable.")
- 73% of surveyed customers disagreed or strongly disagreed to the statement, "I trust the NP board."
- 61% of surveyed customers are informed in a timely manner about disruptions in service.
- 59% disagree with the statement, "I am informed in a timely manner about district policies and/or changes."
- 66% disagree with the statement, "I have been given opportunities to provide feedback."
- 69% disagree with the statement, "I receive just the right amount of information from the NP Board regarding Board Meetings, decisions, and events."
- 9 common themes were found when customers were asked, "What improvements would make NP's services worth more to you": "Lower rates/quit raising rates" (27%) "Water Quality" (15%) "Board Transparency/Public Relations" (14%) "Customer Service from the office staff" (12%) "Consistent Pressure" (7%) "Replace aging infrastructure" (6%) "Equity between rural and commercial users" (3%) and "Better notification with outages or work being done on lines" (2%).
- When asked, "What do you dislike or find frustrating about NP's services?" customers responded, "Cost" (25%) "Lack of Transparency from Leadership" (20%) "Leadership" (8%) "Dysfunctional Board" (7%) "Office Customer Service" (7%) "Office Leadership" (6%) "Water Quality" (6%) and "Disorganized Annual Meeting" (5%), "Interacting with office management" (3%) and "Bill coming as a postcard (gets lost in the mail)" (3%).
- Here is what NP Customers expect of the District: "Provide safe, reliable, quality water" (33%) "Transparent and Trustworthy Leadership" (21%) "Affordable Water" (20%) "Friendly, problem-solving customer service" (7%) "Timely communication" (6%) "Proactive decisions to ensure future generations have affordable, safe, reliable, quality water" (5%) "Explanation of rate increases PRIOR to increase" (3%) and "Professionally run board Meeting" (3%), "Equal distribution" (2%).
- If NP customers could change or improve one thing about the water district, they would, "No Changes to Suggest" (23%) "Lower cost/Base rate" (16%) "New Board and Office Leadership" (15%) "Transparent Leadership" (11%) "Timely communication/more communication" (7%) "New Office Manager" (6%) "Improve Water Quality" (5%), "Board election process" (4%), "customer service" (4%) and "Clear up dysfunctional board members" (3%), "Remove Crystal Hendrickson" (3%).
- When asked, "Are there any long-term concerns you have about the district's ability to meet your needs?" Customers responded, "No" (34%) "Cost" (21%) "Trustworthy and Functional Board of Directors" (18%), "Financial Accountability" (14%), "Aging Infrastructure" (12%), "Office Leadership" (7%) "Water Quality" (5%), "Crystal Hendrickson" (2%), "Supply" (2%) and "Expand to people that need water" (2%).

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ANALYSIS

Strengths:

1. Per feedback from NP Customers, NP is fulfilling their mission to, "deliver a reliable supply of safe, high quality water to our members."
2. NPRWD has properly structured rates that cover operational costs, capital improvements, and reserves for emergencies.
3. NP has an effective, structured procedure for Accounts Receivable and handling past due, delinquent accounts.
4. Strong Staff Leadership. NP's General Manager has been vital, especially with her ability to secure funding through grants and loans for infrastructure.
5. Although NP is understaffed, they have a loyal, knowledgeable, and hardworking group of employees that believe in what they do for the members of NP!
6. Per NPRWD's annual audit, completed by Brady Martz, NPRWD has a strong financial foundation.
7. NP's field staff handles outages and other issues in the field promptly and courteously.

Weaknesses:

1. NP's GM has announced her desire to retire. With her goes all of the critical information, processes, funding techniques, etc.
2. NP has other long-term employees with critical and historical knowledge. All organizational knowledge with only a few people is not sustainable.
3. Customer Service / Customer Relations is inconsistent. It can be excellent, or it can be poor. It depends upon who answers the phone.
4. Nonexistent Customer Education / Outreach programs or opportunities.
5. Board of Directors plagued by a single rogue board member with a personal agenda who consistently violates Roberts Rules of Order and Code of Conduct during board meetings and violates the Code of Conduct outside of board meetings.
6. Inadequate amount of staff to perform all duties effectively. (Both the amount of employees and delegation of duties.) Significant staffing, retention, and turnover issues.
7. A majority of surveyed customers either do not trust the NPRWD Board or they feel there is a serious lack of transparency.
8. There is a significant lack in Community Engagement, Education and Outreach. This causes a veil between the organization and its members, which creates an environment fertile for mistrust. The seeds of mistrust are further cultivated by the actions of a specific board member which has now harvested a bumper crop of anger, resentment, and fear among members, staff, and the board.
9. Lack of formal systems to hold staff members accountable.
10. Industry-specific training for office staff is desired by staff but lacking in implementation.

Opportunities:

1. Create and implement a Customer Education/Engagement program. Create a communication mechanism to give customers an opportunity to understand the History, and the Who, What, When, Where, Why and How of NP in order to increase transparency and trust.
2. Customer Service Training is highly recommended.
3. Critical operational and historical NP information must be "downloaded" from the minds of long-term employees and into a mechanism that is known to all throughout the organization as to increase effectiveness and communication throughout the office and with customers.

Threats:

1. Negative feedback loop needs to be broken: Rogue board member not acting in what is the best interest of NP as a whole, spreading ill-will among members. Members then taking their frustrations out on staff. Staff then having a default demeanor of always being on the defensive which produces poor customer service.
2. Rift between customers and the board causing mistrust.
3. Unexplained pricing structure causing customers to feed into the narrative of the Rogue Board member.
4. Customer base that, from a majority of surveyed customers, do not trust the board.

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PRIMARY RECOMMENDATIONS

Governance Improvements

Recommendations for strengthening Board effectiveness.

1. The Board of Directors needs to immediately form a Search Committee to perform the following:
 - a. Meet with the current General Manager and determine a date certain for her exit/retirement which we suggest would overlap a minimum of 30 to 60 days with the hiring and commencement of her successor. It is strongly recommended that this process be completed well before the June Annual Meeting.
 - b. As a part of the above recommendation, the Board needs to develop and adopt a written Job Description and a series of Board expectations to provide directions to the new General Manager. This would include sharing this report with the new General Manager to provide insight into those expectations.
2. The Board of Directors must complete the adoption of the Board of Directors Handbook and take steps to immediately seek assistance in a uniform Board of Directors training program. Specifically, create a New Board Member onboarding orientation program to include expectations and committee assignments. Assign a Board Member mentor to be a resource to the new Board Member for at least the first 6 months.
3. Shortly after the hiring of a new General Manager and completion of Board Training, the Board of Directors needs to engage in a formal Strategic Planning Session. If necessary an outside facilitator may be engaged to moderate such a session which would result in a series of general Outcomes, Ends, or Results that the Board, by consensus or majority rule agrees with. These agreed upon Outcomes must be given to the new General Manager for which the New General Manager would first create an opinion on viability based on resources available and then create a business plan and budget which contains time specific Goals and Objectives for each Outcome which are regularly reviewed at each regular Board Meeting to measure progress.
4. The Board is not unified at the moment. One specific board member is creating inefficiencies in board meetings and fueling a narrative that creates ill-will from members towards board and staff. As a whole, the Board must hold each other accountable to the adopted Code of Ethics. If one Board member is acting in ways that harms the organization or causes board meetings to be inefficient or ineffective, ALL board members need to hold that board member accountable. For example, if a Board member tries to derail a meeting by trying to discuss an item that is either not on the agenda or no motion is connected with it, then all board members need to say, "You're out of order." and get back on the Agenda or the motion on the floor. In our opinion, when Board Members are in session and observe a behavior which is contrary to their adopted Code of Conduct, they have a moral and fiduciary obligation to individually or collectively confront that behavior and move on.

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PRIMARY RECOMMENDATIONS

Operational Enhancements

Strategies for improving staff collaboration and efficiency.

1. Customer Service Training for any NP employees that take phone calls and/or field questions from customers or the general public. NP's customer service needs to be high quality and consistent (it can't be something that's left up to chance by whomever answers the phone.) In collaboration with the new GM, the consultant highly recommends Customer Service / Customer Relations Training for all staff. The new GM must be held accountable for creating a culture of respect, service, and personal accountability. Any incumbent staff who chooses to not participate in the new culture of respect, service, and personal accountability must be warned, then relieved of their position.

Recommendations for addressing gaps in organizational structure.

1. Job Descriptions for all staff positions (including specific expectations) need to be drafted and approved.
2. Clear roles and responsibilities within the office for operational success must be clearly documented and understood by all staff members. To ensure long-term sustainability, critical organizational information needs to be known by more than just 1-3 long-time employees in the organization. The Who, What, When, Where, Why, and How of NP needs to be documented and shared with all employees so everyone is singing from the same sheet of music and NP is not at risk of losing their ability to serve customers if/when a long-term employee retires.

PRIMARY RECOMMENDATIONS

Customer Service Improvements

Strategies for addressing common customer concerns.

1. An effective process needs to be created to address concerns/answer questions from NP members. This is critical to reestablish trust, be transparent, and build relationships.
2. NP must continue to explore ways it can provide water without raising rates. If rates must increase, a proactive, clear message must be communicated to NP customers.

Recommendations for improving communication and outreach.

1. Create and implement a Community Education/Engagement/Outreach pilot program to create opportunities for helping customers and the community understand water conservation, rates, and district operations. See if there is a NP employee and/or Board member that has the availability and willingness to put together Community Education/Engagement/Outreach events for NP Members and/or the general public. Suggestion: one per month,

Proposals for building stronger customer trust and satisfaction.

1. Severe perception of lack of trust and transparency between NP Customers and Board. A financial statement must be provided at the next annual meeting, as is customary, especially for a public utility. The consultant recommends NP consider hiring a public relations firm with the express intent of rebuilding trust, establishing transparency, and creating an accessible channel for communication.

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SECONDARY RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. The rogue board member clearly has a gift to influence and organize others. The consultant recommends that she use her gift in a way that helps NP as a whole. Although she may believe her motives are positive, her current execution is harming NP as a whole. The consultant recommends that she begins acting in the best interest of NP and its members AS A WHOLE, or she should resign.
2. Severe perception of lack of trust and transparency between NP Customers and Board. A financial statement must be provided at the next annual meeting, as is customary, especially for a public utility. The consultant recommends NP consider hiring a public relations firm with the express intent of rebuilding trust, establishing transparency, and creating an accessible channel for communication.
3. Cost. NP must continue to explore ways it can provide water without raising rates. If rates must increase, a proactive, clear message must be communicated to NP customers well in advance to the rate increase.
4. Either a dedicated, technology proficient Board Member, or, an assigned technology proficient staff member needs to take charge of regular communications to members. Whether it's through social media, website, email, etc. NP needs to increase its communication to members in order to rebuild trust and transparency. Yes, NP posts a message from the board monthly on their website and also posts on their FB page, but the FB link on NP's webpage is not linked to the correct FB page and there are times when the links on the website don't work properly (i.e., clicking on the link for the January "Message from the Board" takes you to an empty page.)
5. NP should livestream their board meetings and have a link on their website so members can watch.

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CONCLUSION

On behalf of GPBG and all of the individuals that had a hand in providing information or producing its contents, we say, "THANK YOU!" for your time, talents, and resources.

We realize we provided a lot of information, some not always easy to hear, but we have learned and believe that you are committed to continuing to provide water to your members and run an effective organization.

We encourage you to prioritize our recommendations, delegate activities when possible, and tackle them one at a time. Change is difficult, and it doesn't happen overnight. But trudging the road of improvement will pay dividends for the Board, Staff, and Customers of NPRWD.

Thank you for the privilege to serve you all!

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APPENDIX ITEM #1

Assessment Interference.

We encountered behaviors that were quite unusual based, upon our experiences, from a specific board member. The firm GPBG hired to conduct the Focus Groups informed us that board member Crystal Hendrickson was found outside the doors of the December 4th focus group. Ms. Hendrickson was not signed up for the Dec. 4th Focus Group session, she was signed up to attend the Focus Group on Dec. 6. When she was asked what she was doing by our hired facilitator, Ms. Hendrickson replied, "Eavesdropping." Ms. Hendrickson then wanted to know how many people were in the room and who they were. The focus group facilitator refused to tell her that information, and asked Ms. Hendrickson if she felt that eavesdropping outside of a NP focus group session was professional behavior. Ms. Hendrickson said it was not, and then left. Ms. Hendrickson then declined to come to the Dec. 6 Focus Group she had signed up for.

Ms. Hendrickson contacted GPBG by email, questioning our reasoning for why/how we do our assessment based upon her assumptions. Ms. Hendrickson's email to us, "I understand you might want to keep these meetings small. But I do not agree with letting board members pick and choose who is invited to attend. NPRWD members feel unheard and ignored. 6 board members will choose 120 people who agree with the status quo (If that many can be found)."

On at least four occasions Ms. Hendrickson initiated ex parte conversations with Roger Krueger, attempting to influence this assessment and/or question its validity. Mr. Krueger advised Ms. Hendrickson that GPBG was hired by the Board, our communications are through the office of the President, and we are not able to serve as her private detective.

Ms. Hendrickson suggested that we interview specific individuals, a former disgruntled employee (Brady Carpenter), Travis Zabloutney, who Ms. Hendrickson describes as, "Teresa's favorite scapegoat" and Susie Moreno whom Ms. Hendrickson said, "Lisa treats her like a second class citizen because she isn't a voting member." Mr. Carpenter went so far as to research and find Roger's private home phone number, call, and leave a message saying, "Ms. Hendrickson recommended I call you because you should hear what I have to say about the illegal and bad practices I witnessed while employed with NP." Mr. Carpenter is currently in litigation with NP, therefore any contact with NP or NP's consultants would be inappropriate ex parte conversations. Mr. Krueger chose not to respond or acknowledge the voice mail.

Ms. Hendrickson clearly was in contact with the members that attended both focus groups on Friday, December 6. Both groups that came into the Focus Group sessions on Friday December 6 seemed to have organized prior to the meeting. They came with notes and almost identical answers/concerns; with the only solution being to get rid of all board members except Ms. Hendrickson. Ms. Hendrickson emailed GPBG on Dec. 7th recapping details pertaining to who was there and what was said, so Ms. Hendrickson obviously spoke with all Friday Focus Group attendees.

We find it highly disturbing that a member of a Board of Directors is going to such lengths to go against the Organization that, as a Board Member, she committed to protect.

When interviewed in-person, NP staff members answered, "No", or unable or unwilling to answer, 56 times out of 160 opportunities (35%.) This high percentage of either No or unwilling/unable to answer questions is disproportionate to our professional experience whereas 5% is the norm.

GPBG was unable to receive items such as Job Descriptions, Procedures Manual, Strategic Planning documents.

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APPENDIX ITEM #2

Board Interview Summary.

The Board of Directors is composed of 7 citizen water users with varying degrees of experience serving on boards of director but each with a passion of doing the "right thing" in the "right way" for the constituent customers of the Water District to whom they feel a fiduciary responsibility personally and collectively. Their functions are guided by; first, they are a political subdivision subject to ridge rules and direction from the ND Century Code; second, they have adopted and follow a formal set of by-laws which dictate rules, protocols and procedures, and lastly, they have chosen to follow the Roberts Rules of Order to provide guidance to their proceedings.

In our opinion this current Board of Directors lacks guidance in their roles. A Board of Directors Member Board Handbook is under review and may eventually be adopted, but currently there is a lack of consistent and unifying direction amongst the Board. Even the most elementary concept such as the fact that the majority vote of the Board is binding on the entire needs to be revisited regularly along with the fact that the only decisions and commitments of the Board are those made by the Board when it is in legal session.

The Board of Directors adopted a Code of Conduct document on a 5 to 1 vote that binds the Board Members to that code of conduct during Board meeting and when representing the Board. As a cautionary note, it is our opinion that the individual Board Members have a right and obligation to state their opinion on matters before the Board, but they are NOT entitled to their own version of the facts or their truth. Once a vote is taken and the results announced, all Board Members are bound by that majority outcome.

Prior to the current roster of Board Members and approximately two years ago, the Board of Directors seemed to function smoothly and conduct their necessary business in a timely fashion of 1 to 2 hours per meeting. In our professional opinion, having reviewed Board meeting minutes, attending in person or via zoom, 4 Board meetings, at that time a new Board Member was elected by a one vote margin who had and continues to wage a campaign, primarily via social media and personal appearance at the Board meetings, implying and demanding a change to the Board's "improper, possibly fraudulent or illegal actions" which she was and is determined to address and correct. The most obvious current outcome is the Board Meeting now lasting 4 to 5 hours and often including chaotic and acrimonious exchanges frequently outside of the parameters of both the By-Laws and Roberts Rule of Order, requiring legal opinions from the Board's Attorney who attends electronically, or in person, the Board meeting. Additionally, the above referenced Board Member has been censured by Board vote for disruptive behavior during the meeting. She has also been banned by Board action from visiting the offices of the District and/or misrepresenting herself as a member of the staff to the vendors of the District. We could find no evidence or a written or understood, of a Strategic Plan drafted or adopted by Governance to give guidance to Management or staff regarding the ends, outcomes or results they desired for or by any future date. The closest document that was referenced was a study and program written by Sarah Sesselman referencing infrastructure longevity and replacement recommendations. The absence of that Strategic Planning guidance creates a void in understanding of expectations of either the Board or Management and its staff.

NPRWD Comprehensive Operations Assessment & Analysis

Observations & Recommendations

APPENDIX ITEM #3

Focus Group Summaries.

Summary #1

The meeting focused on feedback for the North Prairie Water District. Key issues included poor water pressure, a lack of transparency, and management favoritism. Specific complaints included water outages, unresponsive customer service, and improper land restoration after water line installations. Concerns were raised about the board's handling of financials, proxy voting, and the influence of an attorney at meetings. Suggestions for improvement included better staff training, neutral third-party voting, and limiting the attorney's involvement.

Summary #2

The meeting focused on customer experiences and concerns with North Prairie Water District (NPWD). Key issues included aging infrastructure, water quality, and management challenges. Customers highlighted problems with water pressure, brown water, and leaks. Concerns were raised about the board's leadership, particularly one member's influence and spending habits. The need for better communication and transparency was emphasized, along with the necessity of replacing aging water lines. The discussion also touched on the challenges of serving both rural and suburban areas and the financial implications of maintaining the system.

Summary #3

This focus group for the North Prairie Rural Water District revealed significant concerns regarding management practices and customer service. Key issues included high water rates, a lack of transparency, and allegations of misconduct. Specific complaints included incidents of false water samples, financial mismanagement, and nepotism. One attendee criticized the board for rejecting qualified candidates and the high costs associated with hiring parliamentarians. The group emphasized the need for improved communication, ethical practices, and accountability from the board.

Summary #4

The meeting addressed feedback on the North Prairie Water District (NPWD). Main topics included dissatisfaction with the attorney's management of bylaws and elections, issues regarding donations to local events, and the misuse of the voluntary dollar program. Attendees raised specific complaints about cloudy water, a chloramine smell, and subpar customer service. Some members expressed concerns about the board's defensive stance and lack of transparency, especially during the annual meeting when financial statements were not shared. Recommendations included enhancing communication, following bylaws more closely, and improving customer relations. Additionally, the importance of local legal representation and the effects of water quality on livestock were brought up.

Summary #5

The water was great when they first got rural water, but in the last couple of years, specifically last spring, it has had a foul smell, discolored, and cloudy. The water pressure could be better, but she thought it might be the water lines. She replaced the ones coming into her house five years ago. The water in Anamoose is more expensive (around \$100/month) compared to \$40-50 per month in Drake. However, the water quality is perceived as better in Anamoose. Her family drinks the water without filtering it, but she knows others that do filter it. Other Anamoose customers have experienced brown water when they fill their swimming pools this past spring and summer. Customer Service is generally good, but she has heard of negative experiences from others. Some customers perceive an "attitude" from the water district when customers call about issues; NP Office's response is to say it's not their fault. Her experience with NPRWD has always been favorable. She noted that when she relays a challenge calmly and professionally, the response is good. She shared that residents tested their water and contacted the water district about issues, with mixed results. Some customers received credits on their bills but felt more needed to be done.

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APPENDIX ITEM #4

Customer Feedback Survey Summary.

Brief Electronic Survey Summary (Complete Survey Summary in Appendices):

- 94% receive services at their home/residence. 21% Farm. 10% Business.
- Surveyed customers describe what they like MOST about NP's services as:
 - Reliability (35%), Availability (27%), Water Quality (18%), Not well water (9%), Dependable Service (5%), Customer Service (3%).
- 63% Feel NP's water supply is consistent and reliable.
- 44% describe the taste as Excellent or Good. With the remaining respondents being in the negative with responses of, "Chemical taste/smell," (16%) "Mineral Issues/Build-up," (14%) "Not Good" (13%), "Inconsistent" (10%) or Brown Color (3%).
- 49% have NOT experienced any problems with their water supply such as interruptions or poor quality. The remaining have experience problems in the following categories:
 - Occasional interruptions (21%), Poor Quality (15%), Lower water pressure (7%), and Mineral issues (1%).
- 57% Are very satisfied with the water services provided by the District.
- 67% say the service they receive from NPRWD is high quality.
- 66% say that when they call the NPRWD office with a question, the NPRWD staff member they interact with is friendly.
- 60% would describe the NP office staff as helpful.
- 52% agree that NPRWD makes it very easy to do business with them.
- 54% say the experience they have with NP Field Personnel is positive.
- 64% would recommend NP's services to individuals in need of rural water.
- When asked "What do you like MOST about NP's services, customers responded,
- "Reliable Water" (55%), "Quality Water" (21%), "Customer Service" (12%), "Easy payment system" (6%), "Better than well water" (6%)
- 58% of customers surveyed have confidence in NP staff to provide excellent services.
- 59% feel the cost of the service is "Expensive." An additional 17% add that, "Base charge is too high" "No explanation of price increases" "Horrible, especially in the summer" "Curb stop is getting expensive." (24% of surveyed members describe the cost for services as, "Affordable.")
- 73% of surveyed customers disagreed or strongly disagreed to the statement, "I trust the NP board."
- 61% of surveyed customers are informed in a timely manner about disruptions in service.
- 59% disagree with the statement, "I am informed in a timely manner about district policies and/or changes."
- 66% disagree with the statement, "I have been given opportunities to provide feedback."
- 69% disagree with the statement, "I receive just the right amount of information from the NP Board regarding Board Meetings, decisions, and events."
- 9 common themes were found when customers were asked, "What improvements would make NP's services worth more to you": "Lower rates/quit raising rates" (27%) "Water Quality" (15%) "Board Transparency/Public Relations" (14%) "Customer Service from the office staff" (12%) "Consistent Pressure" (7%) "Replace aging infrastructure" (6%) "Equity between rural and commercial users" (3%) and "Better notification with outages or work being done on lines" (2%).

NPRWD Comprehensive Operations Assessment & Analysis

Observations & Recommendations

APPENDIX ITEM #4 - Cont'd

Customer Feedback Survey Summary.

Brief Electronic Survey Summary (Complete Survey Summary in Appendices):

- When asked, "What do you dislike or find frustrating about NP's services?" customers responded, "Cost" (25%) "Lack of Transparency from Leadership" (20%) "Leadership" (8%) "Dysfunctional Board" (7%) "Office Customer Service" (7%) "Office Leadership" (6%) "Water Quality" (6%) and "Disorganized Annual Meeting" (5%), "Interacting with office management" (3%) and "Bill coming as a postcard (gets lost in the mail)" (3%).
- Here is what NP Customers expect of the District: "Provide safe, reliable, quality water" (33%) "Transparent and Trustworthy Leadership" (21%) "Affordable Water" (20%) "Friendly, problem-solving customer service" (7%) "Timely communication" (6%) "Proactive decisions to ensure future generations have affordable, safe, reliable, quality water" (5%) "Explanation of rate increases PRIOR to increase" (3%) and "Professionally run board Meeting" (3%), "Equal distribution" (2%).
- If NP customers could change or improve one thing about the water district, they would, "No Changes to Suggest" (23%) "Lower cost/Base rate" (16%) "New Board and Office Leadership" (15%) "Transparent Leadership" (11%) "Timely communication/more communication" (7%) "New Office Manager" (6%) "Improve Water Quality" (5%), "Board election process" (4%), "customer service" (4%) and "Clear up dysfunctional board members" (3%), "Remove Crystal Hendrickson" (3%).
- When asked, "Are there any long-term concerns you have about the district's ability to meet your needs?" Customers responded, "No" (34%) "Cost" (21%) "Trustworthy and Functional Board of Directors" (18%), "Financial Accountability" (14%), "Aging Infrastructure" (12%), "Office Leadership" (7%) "Water Quality" (5%), "Crystal Hendrickson" (2%), "Supply" (2%) and "Expand to people that need water" (2%).

