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Public comment on draft of MWRD's 2021-2025 Strategic Plan

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[Begin Public Comment]

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comment on the 2021-2025 Strategic Plan for the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago (MWRD or District). As an organization committed to cultivating sustainable and equitable planning in the Chicago region, the Metropolitan Planning Council (MPC) realizes the value in defining ambitious, clear, and achievable goals. We also realize this plan is intended to be a living document that Commissioners have committed to update each year. We applaud MWRD's efforts to engage a broader constituency in the plan development process, including experienced consultants, community members, and all levels of district staff.

This draft plan is a clear indication of the District's commitment to realizing the aspirational title, Utility of the Future. Implicit in this designation by the Water Environment Federation, National Association of Clean Water Agencies, and other national coalitions is the requirement to be continuously identifying and tackling the biggest challenges—those that pose risk not only to a utilities' operational capacity or relevance, but also to the livelihood of the communities and people it serves. The past year has demonstrated that the playbook for excellence in world-leading wastewater utilities, like MWRD, has irrevocably changed. Change is here to stay, and the ability to adapt and adjust course will mark the utilities, and regions, that thrive in well into the future.

To meet this new reality, MWRD must embrace an ambitious agenda that improves our region's viability. Specifically, this strategic plan must boldly address two converging crises in order for MWRD—and the region—to achieve their fullest potential. These crises are:

- The accelerating **impacts of climate change**; and
- **Racial injustice** that persists in our nation and region, perpetuated by public systems, policies, and investments.

To meet these challenges, we urge the District to revise the draft plan in three critical ways:

- Clearly **Envision the MWRD of the future**.
- **Center Racial Equity** in all Strategies.
- Cultivate **Meaningful Community Partnerships** and Engagement.

In the following sections, we share our team’s insight into how MWRD might address each of these concerns in this draft, and in annual updates. Each section includes a concise list of recommendations that we think are essential changes to the initial strategic plan.

Clearly Envision the MWRD of the Future

The current vision statement is notable because it anchors the ambitions of the utility to what it has historically and is currently doing well. While we celebrate this excellence, we do not believe that doing more of the same is a trajectory for being a world-class district when this plan expires in 2025. *We challenge MWRD to articulate an ambitious Vision—one that inspires today’s staff, and attracts the workforce, community partnerships, and ecosystem of innovators who will tackle the big challenges ahead.*

Consider the vision statements from three peer utilities:

- Washington, D.C. (DC Water) - “We will be known for superior service, ingenuity and stewardship to advance the health and well-being of our diverse workforce and communities.”
- Seattle (Seattle Public Utilities) - “COMMUNITY Centered, ONE Water, ZERO Waste”
- New York City (New York City Department of Environmental Protection) - “Our vision is to be a world class water and wastewater utility, while building a sustainable future for all New Yorkers.”

Each statement draws on the excellences of current operations, while articulating a future state that is ambitious, yet achievable, in the plan timeline. To get started, it may be helpful to consider the following questions:

- What problems are our customers (e.g. municipalities) raising today that they did not when the last business plan was created five years ago?
- How can we improve the level of service across our entire service area in an equitable manner? Are there ways we can address structural inequities created through past investments?
- Where is our workforce struggling to deliver the highest quality service or product? How must we evolve to turn these issues into opportunities at the end of this plan?
- What new challenges are emerging (e.g. internal vs. external, local vs. national) that we are best suited to address? Are there challenges that we might be able to evolve to meet?
- What is our relationship to the communities we serve? How might these relationships evolve to meet the challenges ahead?
- What types of partners will we need to meet these challenges? How can we cultivate new partnerships?

We recognize and celebrate the excellence of MWRD, from workforce to operations to tackling big projects—and especially for the peer-recognition and awards for leadership in the industry. We believe that to retain this status, innovation must be embedded at all levels of the organization, and in all engagements and partnerships.

Recommendations for final draft:

- Revise current Vision statement to articulate an ambitious Vision
- Include starting points (baseline) data for all strategic targets (baseline and stretch)
- Include distinct baseline and stretch targets for all measures and strategies
- Align greenhouse gas emissions reduction targets to proposed federal targets
 - Stretch target – Set reduction levels from 1990 levels
- Articulate short (two-year) and long-term (five-year) impacts for each strategic goal

Center Racial Equity in all Strategies

MWRD has laid the groundwork for what could be transformational efforts to cultivate racial equity across the service area. Project-level efforts like the Space to Grow partnership, Stormwater Partnerships, Stormwater Trading Pilots, and the designation of Disproportionately Impacted Areas, are critically important. We believe that for these and other efforts to reach full potential, MWRD's strategic plan must center equity in all areas of work: from people, to projects, to the places it serves. *We challenge MWRD to include racial injustice as a trend or concern, alongside the Circular Economy and Climate Change, and revise current measures of success and targets to center racial equity.*

Building racial equity will require sustained, coordinated efforts, both inside and outside the utility. As a start, we recommend MWRD develop actionable strategies around the following three themes:

- **Centering restorative justice to account for longstanding disparities in infrastructure.** Equity and Resilience themes should acknowledge the historical patterns of disinvestment that lead to deeply inequitable infrastructure. This involves a commitment to restorative justice. The current definition of equity does not address the core need to reallocate resources to restore past harms.
- **A transparent accounting of the inequities that result from current MWRD practices.** One practical place to start this effort would be to assess the current stormwater programs available across the service area, identify how these are utilized and which contractors benefit, and note which communities are left out.
- **Establishing a pipeline for a new workforce.** The water utility sector, and MWRD, is poised to experience a massive brain drain, given an aging workforce that is nearing retirement age. The District should focus on cultivating a diverse workforce of the future and creating a supportive, inclusive environment that retains and grows its talent.

Recommendations for final draft:

- Include a measure of success that develops a plan for incorporating equity and inclusion into all aspects of District operations.
- Include measures of success that utilize and evolve the Disproportionately Impacted Areas designation within planning, project selection, community engagement, and workforce development.
 - Stretch Goal – Implement an evaluation process for assessing work in Disproportionately Impacted Areas.
- Include specific baseline and stretch targets for Workforce Excellence that incorporate equity and diversity criteria.

Cultivate meaningful community partnerships and engagement

When MWRD received Watershed Management Authority for the region, the utility accepted a new level of challenges, including a new set of stakeholders with unique, local experiences of the problems across the watershed. Some of this knowledge is technical in nature, some experiential; some stakeholders represent sectors such as engineering, public works, and policy development, but many more are the people and organizations living, working, and recreating in the watershed. *We challenge MWRD to deepen its understanding and characterization of community, partners, and stakeholders across the region, and deepen the commitment to meaningful community partnerships and engagement.*

Specifically, we urge MWRD to adopt community engagement goals that actively solicit and cultivate community voice. Doing so will better enable MWRD to meet both of the previous recommendations to create an ambitious vision and embed equity at every stage. We want to stress that the need for engagement is practical as much as it is philosophical: MWRD loses out on valuable feedback and potential partnerships when it fails to engage community members in a robust fashion. In MPC's experience, we have heard from multiple community members who want to partner with MWRD on landholdings for access or for activation. As it stands, MWRD's engagement goals do not offer a pathway to cultivate that feedback.

The community engagement strategies and measures outlined in "Strategic Goal #4: Community Engagement" primarily concern quantitative goals of engagement: increasing use of consistent branding, an increase in requests for educational services, an increase in number of attendees at outreach events, etc. These are all laudable goals. Yet each of these strategies position MWRD as communicating *to* a community that MWRD seeks to engage. Instead, MWRD should be striving to co-design projects, policies, goals, and outcomes *with* community. The region will make more progress in managing our water systems when there is broader understanding of the issues and a growing commitment to partnership among a wide range of stakeholders.

An example may help illustrate. Strategy #2 is "Raise public awareness of the value of MWRD's work and encourage public involvement." That is not an engagement plan, but a marketing strategy: MWRD enters the conversation with a strategic goal of raising awareness about MWRD's value. Engagement, on

the other hand, would involve two-way communication between MWRD and its constituents: MWRD could use this opportunity to solicit feedback from stakeholders and community members about what *they would like to see from MWRD* and how community members define a successful MWRD. The existing success measures for Strategy #2 involve increasing the number of participants who are having a message delivered to them; we recommend instead focusing on how the District can cultivate opportunities for community members to provide feedback on an ongoing basis.

To improve its engagement metrics, we suggest the following elements receive explicit attention in the Plan:

- A co-designed engagement plan. Develop an advisory council of community leaders and residents to help develop an engagement plan, goals, and success metrics. Members should receive a stipend for their work to help MWRD develop strategies for how to partner with community on how to advance their goals under the plan.
- Develop measures of success that account for qualitative improvements in engagement. For instance, MWRD could host focus groups with current vendors and declined vendors to better understand their needs. Additionally, MWRD could develop a survey for customers or municipalities to determine quality of service and opportunities for innovation.

Recommendations for final draft:

- Modify Community Engagement Strategic Goal to “Community Partnership and Engagement” to align with Utility of the Future framing.
- Commit to increasing access to and availability of data and information about district performance and plans.
- Commit to a strategic plan to increasing transparency, accessibility, and removing barriers to public participation in all MWRD activities.

In conclusion, MPC believes this strategic plan can position MWRD to be a world-class water utility for our entire region, if the following opportunities are embedded into this plan:

- Clearly Envision the MWRD of the future.
- Center Racial Equity in all Strategies.
- Cultivate Meaningful Community Partnerships and Engagement.

MPC stands ready to support the district in achieving this vision. Please do not hesitate to reach out with any questions or concerns.

[End Public Comment]