

April Swenby is Sand Hill River Watershed District administrator

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April Swenby doesn't intend to fill the former administrator's size 12 shoes. "I can't fill Dan's shoes so I'll have to make my own shoes," Swenby said.

After Dan Wilkens retired on Dec. 31, Swenby was hired as administrator of the Sand Hill Watershed District.

"Dan and I had a good relationship over the past 17 years. He has been preparing the district for transition. I learned a lot from him. Now I'm excited for the next decade," Swenby said.

"I'm not looking to change something that's already working well. The district's direction and focus is good I want to continue building for the future. We are here to manage water and work for and represent taxpayers in the watershed district," she said.

"The economic benefit from all the good drainage the district has initiated over the years for our communities is immeasurable," she continued.

Although about 90 percent of the land in the district is used for agricultural or agriculturally related purposes, "Just because you're not a farmer or into agriculture doesn't mean you don't benefit from drainage," Swenby said. The watershed district works to reduce flooding and improve water quality throughout its jurisdiction.

Sand Hill River Watershed District extends from Fosston to Neilsville. The district encompasses 495 square miles, almost all in Polk County, with a small part in Mahnomen and Norman County.

The area includes the entire drainage basin of the Sand Hill River.

The average width of the basin is eight miles and it is approximately 55 miles



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long.

The Sand Hill River originates in Sand Hill Lake, located about four miles south of Fosston.

Two miles west of Climax it empties into the Red River of the North.

"Everything that drains into the Sand Hill River is our jurisdiction," Swenby said.

For example, she said, the district has worked on sediment basins. While the West Polk Soil and Water Conservation District administers the program, the watershed helps fund them.

Swenby hopes to continue the smooth flow of cooperation with good relationships with East and West Polk Soil and Water Conservation Districts

Swenby said the restoration efforts on the Sand Hill River west of Fertile have helped reduce sediment in the river and have the added benefit of allowing fish to move up the river.

Drop structures were taken out for fish passage by the Army Corp of Engineers.

"Four more riffles will be added this summer," Swenby said.

Like the watershed itself, the district gets input from several sources.

The district's board of managers - Swenby's boss - consists of chairman

Stuart Christian, vice chairman Dan Vesledahl, secretary JJ Hamre, treasurer Clayton Bartz and Roger Hanson.

The managers are appointed, not elected, by county commissioners

"We have an advisory committee made up of landowners from each county - Mahnomen, Norman and Polk," Swenby said. "They get together to talk about the job our board managers are doing. They have the power to make recommendations to the county commissioners."

"We have good stewards in our district. I am grateful for the network of people I have gotten to know since I've worked for the district," Swenby said.

It was perhaps serendipitous that she went to work for the watershed district.

She received a diploma in word processing technology from the Northwest Technical College in 1999.

Twelve years later, she enrolled at Moorhead State. She graduated with honors in 2011 with degrees on computer software and information technology with an emphasis on accounting.

She went to work as a bookkeeper/web-designer for Multi-County HRA in Mentor.

"In 2001, I was working fulltime in housing and I was looking for something part time because we wanted to start our family," Swenby recalled.

Her husband, Aaron, works with Willard Swenby doing concrete work in the summer and construction in the winter.

Naomi Jagol, who had been employed by the district, moved on to another job.

In addition to general office work, Swenby spent almost three years digitizing

40 years worth of watershed records. "It was all ditch and project records. I had read every document, scan it, research and post it according to date and time," she recalled.

Swenby also designed and maintains the website sandhill-watershed.org.

When Wilkens announced that he planned to retire, Swenby considered applying for the administrator's job.

"We had lot of discussions at home as to how this will affect family and our kids," Swenby said. Lexi is 17, Aubree 15, Ally is 12 and Noah nine.

"We knew I would have to attend meetings, conferences and be away from home but the kids and Aaron encouraged me to go for it," Swenby said

She applied for the position and the board of managers agreed to hire her.

The job description was revised to focus on public information and give taxpayers the opportunity to be well informed," Swenby said.

The administrator has complete financial responsibility and accountability. "It involves dealing with tax levies and grants and seeing they are allocated appropriately according to Minnesota Statutes," Swenby said.

"Some of the projects we're looking ahead include ditch improvement projects on the west side of Fertile and redetermining the benefits on a ditch system on the east side in the Bear Park area," Swenby said.

"Most of ditches are in compliance with the new Minnesota state buffer law, but we're working toward 100 percent compliance, updating rules and regulations for the permitting process," Swenby said.

The job involves more flow that ebb. The Sand Hill River still flows under the ice and, come spring, water will be flowing throughout the watershed.