

Water Conservancy District election to fill 4 seats

By Ollie Reed Jr. / Journal Staff Writer

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A diversion gate that feeds the acequias in the North Valley is pictured. The Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District operates and maintains many miles of laterals, ditches, canals and drains used to convey water to and from cropland. The district is holding a board election June 6. (Jim Thompson/Albuquerque Journal)



The view looking over the wheel for the gate on a diversion channel in Corrales. (Jim Thompson/Albuquerque Journal)

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A June 6 election for four Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District board positions will determine the personnel charged with juggling the district’s varied responsibilities the next few years.

The conservancy district serves 11,000 irrigators, delivering water to 70,000 acres of cropland along 150 miles of the Rio Grande from Cochiti Dam in the north to the Bosque del Apache Wildlife Refuge in the south. But board members also make decisions that affect drainage, flood control, fish and wildlife and recreation.

“People who don’t irrigate think they don’t get any value from the conservancy district,” said Glen Duggins, a Lemitar farmer who serves as vice chairman of the district board of directors. “But they forget about flood control. Right now the river is running high. If it were not for the conservancy district, we would not have a Downtown (Albuquerque).”

Seven members serve on the MRGCD board – three from Bernalillo County; one each from Sandoval, Socorro and Valencia counties; and one in an at-large position. Board terms are four years. Positions at stake in this election are two of the Bernalillo County seats and the Socorro County and Sandoval County seats.

Seven candidates – two each in three contested races and one who is unopposed – are on the ballot. Incumbents Karen Dunning, who holds one of the Bernalillo County seats, and Derrick J. Lente of Sandoval County are running. Incumbents Adrian Oglesby of Bernalillo County and Chris Sichler of Socorro County are not seeking new terms.

To be eligible to vote, people must own property in the area benefitted by the conservancy district. It is those people, even those who are not irrigators, who pay the taxes that provide operating funds for the district.

Absentee voting in this year’s election commenced on April 27 and continues through June 3. Early voting starts Monday and continues through June 3.

Here’s a look at the candidates as they appear on the ballot.

Position No. 3 – Bernalillo County

Karen Dunning

Karen Dunning is seeking her third term on the board. The Los Ranchos de Albuquerque resident is self-employed and does environmental assessments for housing developments. An enthusiastic walker, Dunning made her first run for a board seat in an effort to make sure the MRGCD kept access to irrigation ditches open to walkers.

“I have seen (the board) emerge as a much more professionally run organization focused on long-range planning. A majority of us believe climate change presents a real threat and that we need to keep up on the scientific information, need to change the way we do things so we do them more efficiently.”



Pat McCraw

Pat McCraw lives in Albuquerque’s South Valley, where she keeps two horses, 10 goats, two chickens, a donkey and a spotted mule. She said she buys 600 bales of hay a year.

“I’m running because I care a lot about the district. I have attended (MRGCD) meetings for more than 14 years, and I feel the district is pushing farmers aside and not getting them the kind of service that they need. If you use the ditches to irrigate, you are keeping the bosque wet in the desert and creating a lot of greenery that is good for habitat, particularly bird habitat.”

Position No. 4 – Bernalillo County

Joaquin Baca

Joaquin Baca is unopposed in his bid to succeed Adrian Oglesby. Now a resident of Downtown Albuquerque, he grew up in Belen, where his life was unavoidably connected to the bosque. He is employed as a hydrologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service but notes he will not vote on board matters related to federal contracts and actions.

“I want to balance the needs of the irrigators with (efforts) to bring people to the river. I’m a scientist running for elective office and that gives me an opportunity to serve my community in a way that is meaningful and gives to the greater good. We live in a desert. We just got out of a drought. We have to plan.”

Position No. 6 – Socorro County



James Lee Martin

James Lee Martin was born in Las Vegas, N.M., grew up in Socorro and now lives on six acres in Lemitar. He retired from New Mexico Tech as a construction supervisor, has served on the Socorro County Commission, in the New Mexico House from 1976 to 1984 and in the New Mexico Senate from 1984 to 1992.

“I am really impressed with how hard the farmers work. I have a little bit of knowledge of how the processes work, and I just want to keep the ditches clean and the water flowing. The (middle Rio Grande valley) is a beautiful place. I would like to see it used for generations. I want to keep the valley green.”



Valerie Moore

Valerie Moore lives on a 26-acre farm in Lemitar. She and her late husband managed ranches throughout New Mexico and Arizona. She has served on various boards, has been a 4-H leader and is a construction volunteer for Habitat for Humanity.

“I’m very passionate about supporting farmers. The most important thing is to keep the water moving and our crops alive. We have to consider the long-term consequences. We have plenty of water this year, but when the lean times come we need to make sure we have enough. There are better ways to do things, better ways to make use of the water.”

Position No. 7 – Sandoval County



Derrick Lente

Derrick J. Lente of Sandia Pueblo is completing his second term on the MRGCD board and serves as its chairman. He was also elected last year to the New Mexico House of Representatives. Lente and his daughter operate a farm and ranch, growing alfalfa and raising Black Angus cattle.

“During my tenure (on the board) I have seen it evolve into transparency, accountability and become a true water leader in the state. How we manage our finances and improvement of infrastructure – dams, levees, canals, gates – are our biggest challenges. We are in changing times. We have to be much smarter in how we deliver water.”



Orlando Lucero

Orlando J. Lucero is a Bernalillo resident who retired after 50 years of teaching – biology, history, government, Spanish, English as a second language – from the kindergarten through college levels. He is also a farmer, raising a variety of fruit trees in his orchard.

“I would like to see more ditch maintenance but also care taken to maintain habitat. I would like to see more education for kids in agriculture, more kids going into farming. But I’d also like to see more people taking advantage of nature, people jogging, horseback riding and watching birds on the ditches.”

MRGCD election

June 6 is Election Day for four positions on the Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District Board of Directors. Polls will be open from 7 a.m.-7 p.m.

Absentee voting has already started and early voting will begin Monday.

For a list of polling places and other election information, go to www.mrgcd.com.

Contact the writer.