SAWPA

SAWPA COMMISSION
REGULAR MEETING MINUTES
AUGUST 18, 2026

COMMISSIONERS PRESENT	Mike Gardner, Chair, Western Municipal Water District Gil Botello, Vice Chair, San Bernardino Valley Municipal Water District David Slawson, Secretary-Treasurer, Eastern Municipal Water District Jasmin A. Hall, Inland Empire Utilities Agency Denis Bilodeau, Orange County Water District [via – zoom]
COMMISSIONERS ABSENT	None
COMMISSIONERS PRESENT; NON-VOTING	Fred Jung, Orange County Water District [via – zoom] T. Milford Harrison, San Bernardino Valley Municipal Water District [via – zoom]
STAFF PRESENT	Karen Williams, David Ruhl, Dean Unger, Erika Beyer, John Leete, Alison Lewis, Sara Villa, Natalia Gonzalez, Joel Osuna-Williams, Linda Kim, Shavonne Turner, Zyanya Ramirez, Ciara Soto, Emily Fuentes, Ian Achimore, Rick Whetsel, Olivia Burgess, Daniel Vasquez
OTHERS PRESENT	Julie Riley, Lagerlof, LLP; Leighanne Kirk, Eastern Municipal Water District; Nick Kanetis, Eastern Municipal Water District; Arijanto Instandar, Inland Empire Utilities Agency; Kevin O'Toole, Orange County Water District; Adekunle Ojo, San Bernardino Valley Municipal Water District; Ashley Spradlin, Western Municipal Water District; Valerie Amezcua, City of Santa Ana; Tom Lindsey, Yorba Linda Water District; Charles Gardiner, Catalyst Group; Linadria Porter, Catalyst Group; Ed Ramirez, Michael Miller

1. CALL TO ORDER

The Regular Meeting of the Santa Ana Watershed Project Authority Commission was called to order at 9:30 a.m. by Chair Gardner on behalf of the Santa Ana Watershed Project Authority, 11615 Sterling Avenue, Riverside, California and Commissioner Bilodeau at 601 N. Ross Street, Room 327, Santa Ana, California

2. ROLL CALL

An oral roll call was duly noted and recorded by the Clerk of the Board.

3. PUBLIC COMMENTS

There were no public comments.

4. ITEMS TO BE ADDED OR DELETED

There were no items to be added or deleted.

5. CONSENT CALENDAR

A. APPROVAL OF MEETING MINUTES: AUGUST 4, 2026

Recommendation: Approve as posted.

MOVED, to approve the Consent Calendar as posted.

Result:	Adopted by Roll Call Vote
Motion/Second:	Botello/Slawson
Ayes:	Bilodeau, Botello, Gardner, Hall, Slawson
Nays:	None
Abstentions:	None
Absent:	None

6. WORKSHOP DISCUSSION AGENDA

A. SAWPA STRATEGIC PLAN DEVELOPMENT

Charles Gardiner provided a presentation titled *SAWPA Strategic Plan Development*, contained in the agenda packet on pages 15-53.

Mr. Gardiner presented the draft strategic plan and implementation framework, outlining the purpose, structure, and intended role in guiding SAWPA's priorities and operations over the next five to ten years. He reviewed the planning process, which included an organizational assessment, workshops, working sessions, and community input, and highlighted key areas for improvement, including clarifying SAWPA's role, prioritizing high-value activities, and strengthening organizational alignment and accountability. He also reviewed the proposed vision, mission, and organizational values, emphasizing their importance in guiding the organization's culture, decision-making, partnerships, and future direction. The Commission was invited to provide feedback and identify any needed adjustments before the strategic plan is brought forward for approval in September.

Commissioner Botello suggested replacing the word "clean" with "safe" in the draft Vision statement. He noted that "clean" does not necessarily convey the concept of safety and that much of the organization's work, including efforts related to total dissolved solids (TDS) and water quality, is focused on ensuring that water is safe for use. Other Commission members expressed agreement with the proposed change, noting that "safe" was appropriate and that they had no significant concerns with making the revision.

The Commission continued its discussion of the proposed vision statement, specifically considering whether the phrase "for generations to come" should instead be replaced with "for the future." Commissioner Hall suggested that "the future" may be a simpler and more concise alternative. However, Commissioner Botello expressed support for retaining "generations to come," explaining that the phrase more directly emphasizes people and communities rather than potentially referring to businesses, organizations, or other entities. The concept of generations may carry particular significance for stakeholders, including Native American communities, where consideration of multiple future generations is an important cultural concept. Following the discussion, the preference was expressed to retain the existing "generations to come" language.

During the discussion of the organizational value of people and professional growth, Commissioner Hall asked what considerations were included under this value, including investment in staff, fostering a culture of learning and collaboration, and opportunities for training and innovation. Commissioner Botello suggested that "professional development" would be more appropriate than "training" when describing the organization's commitment to its staff and Commissioners. The discussion emphasized investing in people through leadership development and professional growth as key components of supporting employees and strengthening the organization.

Commissioner Botello continued regarding the importance of SAWPA's organizational values and their role in guiding the organization's work. It was noted that the values were developed following earlier discussions regarding the mission and vision, with the Commission recognizing that the values should represent more than statements about organizational identity. The values are intended to provide a practical framework for how the Board, staff, and organization conduct their work and make decisions. The importance of clearly communicating the meaning behind each value, including leadership and initiative, was emphasized so that the values can guide organizational actions and expectations. It was further noted that the values can help explain to stakeholders and the public not only what SAWPA is doing, but also why it is undertaking particular activities. The discussion emphasized that the values should be meaningfully incorporated into the organization's work rather than serving as a supplemental or symbolic component of the strategic plan.

Mr. Gardiner reviewed the proposed strategic priorities and initiatives, which had been refined through collaboration with member agencies, staff, and other stakeholders. The strategic plan was organized around three primary priorities, with the discussion focusing on regional convening, coordination, and integration as a core SAWPA function. Key initiatives included managing watershed information and decision support, facilitating regional collaboration on water quality and watershed resilience, and coordinating regional funding strategies. Proposed activities included PFAS and salinity coordination, regulatory compliance, watershed and ecosystem resilience, forest and fire resilience, sediment management, and improved regional funding positioning. Mr. Gardiner noted that additional discussion would be needed to clarify SAWPA's role in watershed resilience and ensure coordination with other agencies, and he invited the Commission to provide feedback on the proposed priorities and initiatives.

Commissioner Botello expressed appreciation for the presentation and noted that the proposed strategic plan effectively captured the essence of SAWPA's regional convening role. He asked whether Mr. Gardiner or members of his staff had observed any of SAWPA's task force meetings to gain a better understanding of how the organization's collaborative processes function in practice. Commissioner Botello specifically highlighted the Basin Monitoring Program Task Force as an example of a highly successful and well-attended task force.

Commissioner Botello explained that the task force has been effective because participants are respected, diverse perspectives are considered, and all input is given thoughtful consideration. He suggested that having a member of Mr. Gardiner's staff observe a task force meeting could provide valuable insight into the group's dynamics and help illustrate why participants are engaged and why the task force is able to accomplish meaningful work. He noted that such an observation could provide an opportunity to see SAWPA's regional collaboration model in action and potentially inform further refinement of the strategic plan. Mr. Gardiner acknowledged the suggestion and indicated that staff had some familiarity with the task force through prior meetings and presentations.

Mr. Gardiner noted that SAWPA has a strong and well-established history of collaboration on water quality, supported by task forces, roundtables, and established work plans. This history was identified as a model for effective collaboration. However, watershed resilience efforts were described as less certain, with more work needed to establish a similar framework and apply the successful water quality model to watershed resilience.

Chair Gardner discussed the need for SAWPA to approach watershed resilience efforts carefully to avoid overlapping or conflicting with the legal responsibilities of existing watermasters in the region. While integrating resilience as a broader strategic objective was viewed positively, concerns were raised about lowering the priority of water quality. Water quality has historically been a key focus for SAWPA and should remain a high-level strategic priority rather than being incorporated under another goal.

Chair Gardner acknowledged that SAWPA's priorities will continue to evolve over time but emphasized the importance of maintaining the established water quality focus so it does not become overlooked. Unlike newer strategic areas that may require development, the water quality program is well established and should focus primarily on maintaining and strengthening its existing foundation.

Mr. Gardiner emphasized the need to establish measurable outcomes for water quality and watershed resilience, noting that while water quality measures are well established, additional work is needed to develop metrics for watershed resilience and define SAWPA's role in reporting on watershed conditions and progress. He also reviewed the Inland Empire Brine Line priority, which remains largely unchanged and focuses on system reliability, capacity, infrastructure condition, and regulatory compliance, supported by established planning and management initiatives. Finally, he reviewed the Organizational Excellence priority, which is intended to strengthen SAWPA's alignment, agility, performance, and leadership through measures addressing strategic planning, employee development and retention, knowledge transfer, fiscal responsibility, and funding diversification. The discussion emphasized maintaining organizational stability and ensuring SAWPA has the structure and resources necessary to achieve its strategic priorities.

Commissioner Botello expressed support for the work presented and asked whether written recommendations would be provided to the Commission as part of the process. Specific organizational considerations raised included revisiting the previously deferred Assistant General Manager position, considering whether the General Manager role should be structured as an Executive Director position, and evaluating SAWPA's human resources structure and its relationship with staff and the Commission. He emphasized that these organizational recommendations would be valuable to include in the final process, even if they are not incorporated directly into the strategic plan.

Mr. Gardiner explained that the strategic plan would be supported by an implementation framework identifying activities to be planned and budgeted over the next two to three years. Organizational needs, such as the HR function, would be evaluated through a collaborative process with the Commission and member agencies rather than through predetermined recommendations. He noted that, given SAWPA's size and unique structure, several approaches could be considered, including dedicated staff, consultants, or coordination among member-agency HR personnel, with further evaluation needed to determine the most appropriate approach.

Mr. Gardiner agreed that the organizational considerations discussed should be developed into recommendations for the Commission. Staff will further develop near-term initiatives following the meeting, including items already identified in existing work plans as well as new initiatives that emerged during the strategic planning process. He also agreed that potential changes to the General Manager/Executive Director role should be evaluated through a clear presentation of the respective pros and cons for Commission consideration.

Emily Fuentes discussed changes to Strategic Priority 1, noting that the number of strategic initiatives had been reduced from five to three. A request was made to more explicitly incorporate education and outreach within the revised initiatives. Mr. Gardiner explained that the initiatives were consolidated to simplify the framework and that communication, outreach, and regional positioning were intended to be addressed through a broader watershed-wide communications strategy. The group agreed that the language could be refined to make the education, outreach, and communication components more explicit, recognizing their importance to regional awareness, collaboration, and securing funding.

Mr. Gardiner reviewed the proposed Implementation Framework, which is intended to provide clear processes and guidance for implementing the strategic plan while maintaining value to SAWPA and its member agencies. The framework would address planning, budgeting, resource allocation, evaluation of new initiatives, performance management, reporting, and periodic review, with an emphasis on clear accountability, resource alignment, funding transparency, and adaptive management. He outlined a process for evaluating new initiatives based on regional need, SAWPA's role, participating entities, funding, staff capacity, and required approvals. The discussion also addressed performance measures and reporting, including developing clearer outcomes for water quality and watershed resilience and tracking progress through work programs, budgets, and annual reports. A draft framework was expected to be shared with member agencies later in the month, with a revised version anticipated for Commission discussion in September.

Commissioner Botello expressed strong support for the plans and management tools document and commended its development. He recommended changing the proposed strategic plan review period from approximately 5–10 years to 3–5 years, noting that a longer timeframe could create an unintended perception that there is ample time to implement the plan. He also praised the concept of an annual strategic plan report card and suggested that more frequent reviews would help keep priorities current as board composition and organizational needs change. Staff acknowledged the recommendation and agreed to revise the timeframe to 3–5 years.

Mr. Gardiner agreed that the strategic plan refresh should remain within the proposed 3–5-year framework. He further explained that the Implementation Framework is still being refined and is intended to address concerns regarding SAWPA's direction over the past decade by establishing clearer boundaries, processes, and expectations. The framework would clarify how initiatives are developed and implemented and provide regular opportunities for staff to report to the Commission on progress and coordination with member agencies.

He outlined the next steps for the Strategic Plan and Implementation Framework. Staff is identifying existing work plan commitments, developing and confirming plans and participants for new coordination initiatives, and incorporating lessons from the strategic planning process that should carry forward. Additional work will be completed to refine performance measures. Staff will review the materials with general managers and planning managers later in the month, with the goal of returning with a finalized Strategic Plan and Implementation Framework. The Implementation Framework will serve as guidance for near-term initiatives, which will be included as appendices to the presentation.

This item is to receive and file; no action was taken on agenda item no. 6.A.

7. NEW BUSINESS

A. INTERNSHIP PROGRAM ENHANCEMENTS AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT (CM#2026.47)

Zyanya Ramirez provided a presentation titled *Internship Program Enhancements and Workforce Developments*, contained in the agenda packet on pages 69-82.

The discussion focused on SAWPA's current internship program and opportunities to enhance its role in regional workforce development. The current program provides paid, temporary part-time internships for students enrolled in accredited educational institutions, with interns generally eligible to work up to 960 hours per fiscal year and appointments lasting up to 18 months. Commissioners expressed strong support for the program and noted the value it provides by giving students practical experience, professional networking opportunities, exposure to the water industry, and skills that may not be available through classroom education alone.

Intern, Ciara Soto provided several recommendations to strengthen the internship experience, including creating a structured onboarding program, establishing clear learning goals at the beginning of each internship, providing mentorship and regular check-ins, and developing department-specific capstone projects. The capstone concept would allow interns to identify or work on a meaningful agency need throughout their internship and present a completed project or recommendation at the conclusion of their assignment.

Commissioners supported the idea of creating projects that provide value to SAWPA while also giving interns a tangible professional accomplishment for their resumes.

Ms. Ramirez also discussed expanding the program beyond individual internships to provide interns with a broader understanding of the Santa Ana River watershed and the region's water agencies. Proposed enhancements include exposing interns to member agencies, conferences, site visits, meetings, and other professional opportunities so that interns leave SAWPA understanding not only the organization but also the broader water industry and potential career opportunities within the watershed. There was also interest in having interns work collaboratively on projects and develop communication, presentation, leadership, and other professional skills.

A significant portion of the discussion centered on SAWPA's potential regional role in workforce development. Rather than duplicating internship programs already offered by member agencies, SAWPA could serve as a connector and coordinator, helping students understand the range of careers available throughout the watershed and creating a pipeline of future water professionals.

Commissioners suggested maintaining relationships with former interns, connecting them with member agencies, and creating opportunities for continued networking and professional engagement after their internships end.

The commission also discussed expanding outreach and recruitment. Suggestions included partnering with college career centers, engineering and other academic departments, professional organizations, and student newsletters. Commissioners further recommended considering one or two paid high-school internships alongside college-level interns. This could help students explore potential careers and majors earlier while introducing them to the water industry. Particular emphasis was placed on exposing younger interns to field operations, since the water industry requires not only engineers and administrative professionals but also skilled workers in operations and other technical fields.

Commissioner Botello noted that Riverside and San Bernardino counties may have workforce-development resources and youth internship funding that could potentially support an expanded program. Staff were encouraged to explore partnerships with county workforce-development organizations and other funding sources. At the same time, commissioners cautioned that expanding the program would require appropriate structures for supervision, training, handbooks, and support for both interns and supervisors, particularly if SAWPA pursues externally funded workforce-development programs.

Overall, the commission expressed strong support for the internship program and encouraged staff to continue developing enhancements based on the feedback received. The discussion reinforced the idea that SAWPA can play a unique regional role by connecting students with the watershed, member agencies, and the broader water industry while helping develop a pipeline of future water professionals.

This item is to receive and file; no action was taken on agenda item no. 7.A.

B. UPDATED PROCUREMENT POLICY AND PURCHASING AUTHORITY (CM#2026.48)

Karen Williams provided a presentation titled *Procurement Policy and Purchasing Authority*, contained in the agenda packet on pages 109-116.

Ms. Williams presented an updated Procurement Policy and Purchasing Authority, noting that the policy is reviewed every three to five years and that the current policy was at the end of that review period. The proposed update is intended to strengthen documentation and internal controls, clarify how purchasing authorization limits apply to amendments and change orders, improve consistency in competitive procurement and sole-source documentation, and add practical public-agency procurement tools such as cooperative purchasing. The existing purchasing authorization limits would remain unchanged, including Commission oversight for expenditures above $100,000, so the update would clarify and strengthen controls without increasing delegated purchasing authority.

The revised policy would establish additional day-to-day financial controls, including requirements for cash receipts to be submitted to Finance within five days, prohibitions on splitting credit card transactions to circumvent the $2,000 limit, and requirements for itemized credit card receipts. Personal purchases, gift cards, and cash advances would be prohibited, while check requests could not be used to bypass procurement or purchase-order requirements. Purchase orders would generally be required before funds are committed unless an authorized exception applies.

The policy would also clarify competitive procurement and vendor-selection procedures. Staff would be required to retain selection rationales, evaluation criteria, and the basis for vendor selection. The policy would provide additional clarification for RFQ qualifications and shortlists, RFP technical approaches and pricing, and best-value selections. If required quotes are solicited but insufficient responses are received, the General Manager could authorize a sole-source procurement with appropriate documentation. The update would also allow cooperative purchasing, enabling SAWPA to utilize qualifying contracts established by other public agencies, and would distinguish requirements for professional services, non-professional services, and public works procurement.

Additional provisions would strengthen change-order and emergency procurement accountability. Cumulative change orders could be permitted when they do not materially alter the original scope, while significant scope changes could require a new procurement. Formal change orders would be required when the approved amount is exceeded by more than 10 percent. Sole-source files would need to document vendor availability and demonstrate that pricing is fair and reasonable. Emergency actions exceeding the General Manager's authority would require subsequent Commission ratification and written documentation. The policy would also add vendor performance evaluation and record-retention requirements, as well as updated restrictions concerning gifts and potential conflicts.

Ms. Williams noted that staff's recommendation is that the Commission approve the updated Procurement Policy and Purchasing Authority.

Commissioner Hall asked whether managers and supervisors receive formal training regarding their procurement authorization limits and responsibilities, including whether employees are required to acknowledge that they understand the policy.

Ms. Williams explained that training is provided whenever the Procurement Policy is updated, and employees have already been trained on the current policy. The upcoming training will focus on the new revisions. Staff clarified that employees are not currently required to sign an acknowledgment confirming that they have received the training, although everyone receives a copy of the Procurement Policy.

MOVED, to approve the updated PRO110 – Procurement Policy & Purchasing Authority.

Result:	Adopted by Roll Call Vote
Motion/Second:	Slawson/Botello
Ayes:	Botello, Gardner, Hall, Slawson
Nays:	None
Abstentions:	None
Absent:	Bilodeau

8. INFORMATIONAL REPORTS
Recommendation: Receive for Information.

A. CASH TRANSACTIONS REPORT – JUNE 2026
Presenter: Karen Williams

B. INTER-FUND BORROWING – JUNE 2026 (CM#2026.49)
Presenter: Karen Williams

C. PERFORMANCE INDICATORS/FINANCIAL REPORTING – JUNE 2026 (CM#2026.50)
Presenter: Karen Williams

D. PROJECT AGREEMENT 25 – OWOW FUND – FINANCIAL REPORT, JUNE 2026
Presenter: Karen Williams

E. PROJECT AGREEMENT 26 – ROUNDTABLE FUND – FINANCIAL REPORT, JUNE 2026
Presenter: Karen Williams

F. FOURTH QUARTER FYE 2026 EXPENSE REPORT
- General Manager
- Staff

Presenter: Karen Williams

G. QUARTERLY INVESTMENT REPORT AS OF JUNE 30, 2026
Presenter: Karen Williams

H. ASSET MANAGEMENT ACCOUNT STATEMENT AS OF JULY 31, 2026
Presenter: Karen Williams

I. STATE LEGISLATIVE REPORT
Presenter: Karen Williams

J. HIGHLIGHTS REPORT
Karen Williams shared that SAWPA staff will be presenting at the AWWEE Conference scheduled for November 4–6. The proposed presentation topic, “Rebuilding Culture and Morale After the Storm,” was selected for the conference program.

K. CHAIR’S COMMENTS/REPORT
There were no Chair’s comments.

L. COMMISSIONERS’ COMMENTS
There were no Commissioners’ comments.

M. COMMISSIONERS’ REQUEST FOR FUTURE AGENDA ITEMS
There were no requests for future agenda items.

9. CLOSED SESSION

There was no Closed Session.

10. ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business for review, Chair Gardner adjourned the meeting at 11:13 a.m.

Approved at a Regular Meeting of the Santa Ana Watershed Project Authority Commission on Tuesday, September 1, 2026.

Signed by:

Mike Gardner

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Mike Gardner, Chair

Attest:

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Sara Villa

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Sara Villa, Clerk of the Board