

So You Want to Be a County Commissioner?

A publication of the Association of Minnesota Counties.

Citizens depend on county government more today than ever before. This makes it especially important that county commissioners not only be qualified for the office, but dedicated to it as well. This overview is intended to explain some of the responsibilities of a county commissioner and answer some of the questions you may have during your first few months in office.

County Commissioners in Minnesota

County Commissioners in Minnesota come from a variety of backgrounds: teachers, farmers, business people, lawyers and homemakers have all been elected as county commissioners. Each brings to the office his/her personal expertise and individual areas of interest. Once in office, most county commissioners find they must build on these interests.

There are many state and federal laws, rules and regulations that affect what counties can and cannot do, as well as the why and how of the way they *must* do it. In addition, changing county needs must be dealt with and weighed in relationship to county budget constraints and resources.

To stay current with topics/issues facing your county, be sure to:

- Read the information provided to you by your county auditor, administrator, department heads and others.
- Read the *Minnesota Counties* newspaper and AMC UPDATE, published by the Association of Minnesota Counties (AMC).
- Attend meetings sponsored by AMC and the National Association of Counties (NACo).
- Talk to your state and federal representatives, as well as your constituents.

The better informed you are, the better decisions you will make as a county commissioner.

Some Powers and Responsibilities of the County Board

- Provide for law enforcement and correctional services in the county.
- Plan and provide for parks, playgrounds and other recreational facilities.
- Build and maintain storm water collection systems and drainage ditches.
- Develop and enforce building codes.
- Store, purify and distribute water.
- Provide for the protection of the general health and welfare of county residents.
- Promote economic and industrial development.
- Administer and provide human services and income maintenance programs.
- Undertake comprehensive planning, zoning and development controls.
- Provide emergency management.

*Because some other county officials are elected directly by the people of the county, county commissioners cannot directly control all county policies. Even though the county board has budget oversight for these offices, county commissioners have little say in how they operate. County commissioners (as well as citizens) need to understand that their power is limited in this way. Some of the other elective offices of county government are county attorney, county auditor, county treasurer, county recorder, county sheriff and coroner. Also, school systems in Minnesota operate independently of the county government; the county commissioner does not exercise control over its local school districts, school board or school tax levy.

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Minnesota's counties
to achieve public
service excellence.**

Some of the Problems Facing County Government Today

Mandates

As a new commissioner, one of the first things that you will discover is that many decisions affecting your term of office have already been made. One reason for this involves the issue of mandates.

Mandates are legal requirements imposed by federal and state governments. Local government mandates are often passed without funding by state and federal lawmakers. In these cases, local governments may have to pay the cost of implementing the mandate. Some examples of unfunded mandates are those setting requirements for waste management, pollution control, treatment of prisoners, providing court-appointed legal representation for those citizens who cannot afford it, voter registration, public health, welfare and social services, and training for various licensed personnel.

When commissioners begin working on the county budget, many of the expenditures have already been determined by mandates that must be met by certain deadlines. Because the end-of-year budget must balance, only a portion of the budget is left to pay for everything else that county citizens want. Make sure you know what is legally mandated by the state and federal government before promising to eliminate certain programs and services—the decision may not be yours to make!

Revenue Sources

Raising the revenue to pay for all the services that county government performs is one of the biggest challenges facing county commissioners. Citizens often expect government to deliver more and better services to meet challenging community needs but they are rarely enthusiastic about paying the bill. Because raising taxes is never popular, counties are always looking at ways to spread the tax burden by expanding their sources of revenue or finding new ones to keep up with increasing demands. Minnesota law limits the opportunities that counties have to raise revenue, so commissioners are not always free to take any approach that seems attractive. The county property tax accounts for about 38 percent of all county resources. At the same time, commissioners need to find ways to conduct government business more efficiently and eliminate waste so that tax dollars are spent wisely.

Liability

County commissioners can be held personally responsible for official actions they take. For example, a commissioner could be sued in response to injuries resulting from the enforcement of a county policy or custom, even when the policy is carried out in good faith. The good news is that, when proper procedures are followed, the likelihood of public officials winning such liability suits is excellent.

A good approach to minimize this problem is to learn the basic procedures for reducing or eliminating the possibility of successful suits against the county or its officials. The Minnesota Counties Intergovernmental Trust (MCIT) and the Association of Minnesota Counties provide opportunities to attend workshops on this subject. Written materials on this subject are available as well. And don't forget to go to your county attorney with questions and concerns!

Minnesota counties face many varied issues on a day-to-day basis. These issues range from controlling the county profits, tax levy and how to deliver social and human services.

When you look at the types of services that counties choose to provide, you see that no two counties provide exactly the same set of services.

Rather, each provides its own unique mix of a broad range of services, including street maintenance, garbage pick-up, landfills, hospitals, libraries, parks and recreation, police and fire protection and water and sewer facilities.

For some counties, providing such services is relatively new and reflects the shifting and expanding responsibilities counties and county commissioners must undertake.

How to Spend Your Time

For most commissioners, the office of county commissioner is a part-time job. Although the salary is consistent with this provision, the actual time spent on commission duties may seem like a full-time job. The number of hours per day or week varies widely depending on your county and the number of committees or organizations you elect to get involved with as a commissioner. Make sure you take time to get acquainted with the various aspects of the job, learning about the issues as well as the day-to-day process, and how to juggle all the new activity in the context of family and job demands. The following are a few important things to spend time on as a county commissioner.

Talking with constituents is a big part of the job.

They call you at home trying to influence your vote on upcoming issues, collar you at the movies to complain about the property tax, or expect you to help them solve a drainage problem on a Sunday afternoon. Being a good county commissioner means being available and responsive to constituents and their needs. After all, they elected you to office and are, in effect, your “bosses.” So plan time to get out in the community and listen to constituents when they approach you with issues and concerns. As an elected representative, you have to make decisions that are in the best interest of the entire county, and keeping up on what’s going on in the county is the best way to help you make informed decisions.

Attending meetings will take time, too. Plan your schedule to allow time for regular meetings as well as special work sessions, special meetings and public hearings. Then make time to attend “unofficial” gatherings in your community, like pancake breakfasts and fish fries.

Gathering information is crucial to making good decisions and being an effective county commissioner. This takes time but is well worth the investment! Make sure you utilize all the resources available to you, including your county staff, other county officials, libraries, professional associations and organizations, and the Association of Minnesota Counties.

Learning about issues and developing reasons for why you support/view issues the way you do is also very important. Always remember that other people have valid reasons for their positions. Once you know where they stand and why, you will be in a better position to discuss the issue, persuade your peers to join you in the vote, and know in which areas you are willing to compromise. Remember that, as a commissioner, you are part of a team and little can be accomplished without the support of others on your team.

Making an effort to communicate with other county officials is worth the time it requires. You have to approve the budgets for all of these offices, and knowledge of their functions and responsibilities will help you get things done in the long run and will help you become a knowledgeable leader.

Communicating with and educating your constituents should be a high priority. Time should be spent working with the media, holding public hearings, maybe even issuing a newsletter to make sure the public knows what you’re doing and why.

Get to know the county administrator or coordinator. This person reports directly to the Board and is responsible for carrying out your decisions. The administrator or coordinator is a vital member of the management team.

Of the different levels of government, local government has the most immediate effect on people’s lives because it’s so close to where they live. Citizens are apt to participate more directly in local government because their elected officials are so readily accessible. This means that you, as a county commissioner, must make sure that you are accessible to constituents. It also means dealing with people’s immediate problems, such as getting a ditch cleaned or pothole filled, in addition to the larger issues of the county.

It is important to remember that your decisions as a county commissioner have a direct impact on county residents. The things that you do will have a noticeable and lasting impact on the county and people will associate you with little community improvements, such as the installation of stop signs on a corner, as well as the problems that were not dealt with, or not dealt with properly. Just remember: make responsible decisions that are in the best interest of your community. That is how to be a true public servant and leader.

County Government as a Business

You may find it helpful to think of government as being similar to a business. A private business has the objectives of operating efficiently, providing consumers with the goods or services they demand, and making a profit. In the same way, a government seeks to operate efficiently and provide citizens with the services they want. While government is not interested in making a profit, it is interested in having sufficient finances to accomplish its goal of providing for citizen needs. The “bottom line” in government is to serve the people, whether rich or poor, sick or healthy, young or old.

In the private sector, if a product line is not popular you can discontinue it and try again with another product. In government, the products—running courts, maintaining roads and streets, and providing social, health and jail services—cannot be dropped just because of “unpopularity.”

In business, decisions can be made quickly and with little dissent. But government is different. In county government the authority to make decisions is often shared with other officials. Citizens also deserve an opportunity to voice their views on public matters. Reaching a compromise that partially satisfies the various segments of the population that have conflicting views on an issue is often the only way to make progress. That process may be inefficient, slow and often frustrating. Nevertheless, no one has found a better way to run a free society.

Minnesota counties are trusted partners in strengthening communities.

AMC is here to help county officials better serve their communities.

The Association of Minnesota Counties (AMC) is a voluntary, non-partisan statewide organization that has assisted the state’s 87 counties in providing effective county governance to the people of Minnesota since 1909. The association works closely with the legislative and administrative branches of government in seeing that legislation and policies favorable to counties are enacted.

AMC provides legislative advocacy, educational programs and training, research and communications for its member counties.

Visit www.mncounties.org for more information on issues that matter most to counties.

Learn More About Minnesota County Government

If you want to know more about county government and your role as a county commissioner, talk with current county commissioners and officials. Also, try to attend meetings of the various departments and organizations that deal with your county.

AMC publishes a bi-monthly newspaper, legislative updates, and fact sheets on important county issues. AMC’s web site at www.mncounties.org holds a wealth of information that can help you in your new role as a county commissioner.

AMC also holds an annual conference, various policy committee, and legislative meetings throughout the year to keep county commissioners informed and educated about county government issues.

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 Association of
Minnesota Counties
www.mncounties.org

125 Charles Avenue, St. Paul, MN 55103-2108
Main Line: 651-224-6540, Fax: 651-6540
www.mncounties.org