Association of Minnesota Counties

County Government 101

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Let’s Talk Counties!
In 1849, Territorial Governor Alexander Ramsey proclaimed that Minnesota would be governed by the same laws as Wisconsin.

- The first Minnesota counties were Benton, Isanti, Ramsey Wabasha, and Washington established on October 27, 1849.
- 57 of the present 87 counties were established during the territorial period that ended in 1857.
- Lake of the Woods County is the youngest Minnesota county, established on November 28, 1922.
County Government Organization

• Cooley Doctrine
  Counties can do anything not prohibited by state/federal government.

• Dillon Rule
  Counties can only do things expressly granted by the state.

Minnesota is a Dillon Rule state
Counties were organized to be administrative agencies of the state as well as local governments.

- Counties are a local government unit meeting the needs of the community.
- Counties serve as an administrative arm of the state by providing services on its behalf.
County Role Today

- Corrections
- Economic Development
- Elections
- Library Services
- Hospitals and Nursing Homes
- Housing/Homelessness
- Human/Social Services
- Law Enforcement
- Public Health
- Planning and Zoning
- Parks and Recreation
- Solid Waste Management
- Water Quality
Elected County Officials

- County Sheriff
- County Attorney
- County Auditor
- County Treasurer
- County Recorder
Counties by the Numbers

- 87 counties
- 447 county commissioners
  - 81 boards have five county commissioners.
  - 6 boards have seven county commissioners.
- Total county expenditures per year range from $13.51 million to $2.46 billion (2022 estimates)
In Minnesota, counties derive most of their funding from property taxes and state and federal sources.

- Fees, fines, forfeitures, sale of public lands, investments, and special assessments are generally minor revenue sources.
- Most counties receive between 30 and 50 percent of their revenues from property tax collections. All property except that owned by governments, churches, charitable institutions and certain other tax-exempt entities, is subject to the “ad valorem” property tax.
What does a pie have to do with property taxes? Learn the two things that directly affect how much people pay.
Basic Responsibilities of Commissioners

- Attend all required meetings of the Board & assigned committees.
- Accountable to your district and the larger constituency of the county.
- Accurately represent policy to public.
- Gather information before making decisions.
- Be constructive in problem solving.
- Maintain high level of ethical conduct.
Board Roles & Responsibilities

• County commissioners, county administration, department heads, and staff have different responsibilities.

• The County Board serves primarily in a governance – or legislative – role.

• Administration, department heads and staff serve in an operational and advisory role.
County Board Sets Policy

- Related to the overall mission and purpose
- Requires vision
- Longer-term
- Addresses key issues
- Strategic development
County Board Sets Policy

Plans
• Comprehensive, strategic, capital improvement, parks, farmland preservation, transportation etc.

Policies
• Ordinances, resolutions, policies.

Budgets
• Determines what services are provided, how they are funded, and the level of funding.
Administration Oversees Operations

- Implementation of policies and strategies
- Day to day operations
- Related to operational functions
- Addresses department or individual issues
- Requires attention to detail
- Requires specialized knowledge and/or training
Policy (Board) = “What” and “Why”

Administrative/Operations (Staff) = “Where” and “When” and “How”
Example

Policy (Board)

• “What” – Should the county establish a bike trail system?
• “Why” – Will the trail system benefit county residents?

Operations (Staff)

• “How” – How will we build and maintain the system?
• “When” – When will we build the system? (implementation timeline)
• “Where” – Where will the system be located?
Types of Governance

**Fiduciary Mode**
- How are we doing to date?
- Are we in compliance?
- Anything wrong?

**Strategic Mode**
- What should we be doing?
- Where are we going?
- What’s the plan?

**Generative Mode**
- What are the new possibilities?
- What’s coming next?
- What are the new questions?
Effective board operations are based on **mutual understanding and respect** for each other’s position and viewpoint.

Effective board members **support the majority’s decision** once a final decision has been made. Only the **board as a whole** has authority over governance, individual commissioners do not.

Effective board operations **promote the public’s best interests** and its confidence in the decision-making process.

Effective governance will include **long term strategic planning** and a shared vision of what the county looks like, and how it functions in the future.
Focusing Attention on the Right Things

- What results are we trying to achieve?
- How would we know if we were achieving them?
- What strategies are we using to achieve those results?
- Are these strategies working?
- What do we need to do differently to achieve those results?

**If you as Board members aren’t asking these questions, who is?**
Board Authority

• Authority rests at the board level.
• Individual county commissioners do not have independent authority, unless delegated by the full board.
• Individual commissioners do have leadership responsibility.
Effective Leadership

- Model the way – set an example for others.
- Inspire a shared vision.
- Challenge the process for positive outcomes.
- Enable others to act.
- Maintain a positive work environment for county staff.
- Hold others accountable to promote the best interests of the county over personal goals or ambitions.
Building Relations with All Levels of Government

Good governance requires relationships

- **Local level** – with all your fellow community and elected leaders
- **State level** – with your legislators and statewide elected leaders
- **Federal level** – with the White House, federal agencies and departments, House and Senate elected leaders and their staff and Supreme Court
Thank You!

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