

Minnesota Counties



A quarterly publication of the Association of Minnesota Counties.

AMC Board Enthusiastically Supports McGuire's Run for NACo Second Vice President

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Ramsey County Commissioner and Association of Minnesota Counties (AMC) Second Vice President Mary Jo McGuire is running for the position of National Association of Counties (NACo) Second Vice President. The AMC Board of Directors unanimously passed a resolution supporting McGuire's candidacy at their March 19, 2021, meeting (see below).

County governments are facing unprecedented challenges on the front line of critical public health and safety efforts, McGuire says, and the National Association of Counties (NACo) is an important resource.

With over 25 years in elected office – 16 years as a Minnesota State Legislator and in her ninth year on the Ramsey County Board – McGuire says she's learned that whether you are from a rural, urban, or suburban community, counties want the same thing: resilient, vibrant, and healthy counties.

Mary Jo for NACo
McGuire
Leading Together

"I've dedicated my time, energy, and passion to service and believe that my strengths make me uniquely qualified to lead us through this together," McGuire said.

Minnesota counties can support McGuire by registering to participate in the NACo Annual Conference in July, either in person or virtually, and voting in the election.

To learn more about the campaign, visit maryjomcguire.com. ■



A RESOLUTION

Affirming the Association of Minnesota Counties' enthusiastic endorsement of Commissioner Mary Jo McGuire's candidacy for the National Association of Counties' second vice-president.

WHEREAS, Commissioner McGuire has a long history of public service, exemplified by her 16 years of service in the Minnesota State Legislature and 8 years serving District 2 of Ramsey County; and

WHEREAS, Commissioner McGuire has profound knowledge of the vast array of county government services through her membership and leadership of numerous county and regional committees including the Ramsey County Legislative Committee, the Suburban Ramsey Family Collaborative, the Active Living Ramsey Communities, the Twin Cities' Metropolitan Council's Transportation Advisory Board, the Mosquito Control Commission, the Ramsey/Washington Recycling and Energy Board, and the Association of Minnesota Counties' Public Safety and Education & Research Committees; and

WHEREAS, Commissioner McGuire is an active participant and dedicated supporter of the Association of Minnesota Counties ("AMC"), serving several years as AMC's Secretary/Treasurer and currently serving as its Second Vice President; and

WHEREAS, Commissioner McGuire is a committed member of the National Association of Counties ("NACo") serving as a member and in leadership roles in numerous committees and commissions including the Justice and Public Safety Steering Committee, the Program & Services Committee, and the Healthy Counties Advisory Board; and

WHEREAS, during her campaign for AMC's Second Vice President, Commissioner McGuire, traveled the entire state, authentically connecting with commissioners and their communities, celebrating their uniqueness while establishing shared goals and opportunities for unity; and

WHEREAS, Commissioner McGuire is a one-of-kind leader whose joy, pragmatism, thoughtfulness, and sincerity have made her a proven advocate for her constituents and AMC; and

WHEREAS, emerging from this difficult year, Commissioner McGuire's compassion; enthusiasm for fellowship; and determined nature will be a unifying force to effectively lead NACo into the future; now, therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED, the Association of Minnesota Counties enthusiastically endorses Commissioner Mary Jo McGuire's candidacy for the National Association of Counties' second vice-president.

March 19, 2021

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Transitioning Out of the Pandemic Brings Opportunities to Do Some Old Things in a New Way

By Rich Sve, Lake County Commissioner and AMC President

One year ago, handshaking ended abruptly, and was replaced with the awkward and unfamiliar fist or elbow bump.

Throughout our lives, social etiquette has dictated that we shake hands for any number of reasons and circumstances. Even in grade school, many of us were taught the proper etiquette (which has seemed to have eroded with time) of shaking a person’s hand.

Like most of you, I have shaken hands all my life, but two handshakes are forever burned into my memory. The first: I had just returned home from tech school. Bob, a lifelong family friend, stopped by the house and upon seeing me extended his hand and welcomed me home. This affected me in that it was the first handshake I had received from an adult treating me as an adult.

The second: My dad had driven me to the airport in Duluth and accompanied me to the gate and we waited together for boarding. I was flying to Louisiana for a job interview and possibly beginning my employment immediately. When it was time to board, my father extended his hand and gave me a firm handshake wishing me his best. This has stayed with me as it was the first time we ever shook hands. The memory of his gesture is indelible.

Today, we find ourselves preparing for the gates of social interaction to open.

Counties are discussing the next steps toward reopening closed doors and offices. In Lake County, we are considering what workforce practices, implemented during our COVID-19 closure, we may wish to continue. Elected officials, administration, and department heads are working through this complex analysis.

We have all discussed or attended workshops on staff retention and incentives for attracting and retaining employees. The experts advise a comprehensive review of county policy as well as serious evaluation of the expectations of an upcoming generation of workforce. Personally, I believe this is the time and opportunity to implement work schedule flexibility and alternatives to the traditional ways we have operated our counties. Due to the pandemic, we have been thrust into changes in operations and now have a clearer vision of what unconventional county management would look like as well as its functionality. Perhaps we will find these models are not efficient for counties, but as my mom always said, “how will you ever know unless you try?”

Last year, the AMC Blue Ribbon Committee on County Government Operations documented many of the ways that county operations changed during the pandemic. The final report of the committee and other resources are now available on the mncounties.org website. These resources might spur ideas for counties who are considering new ways of doing business into the future.

Just like in our counties, the AMC board and staff are discussing the transition back to in-person meetings and operations. While most AMC staff have worked primarily from home during the past year, there has been some presence in the office throughout the pandemic. There are plans to begin a more formal transition back to the office in June and July. AMC Executive Director Julie Ring plans to work with staff throughout the summer on options that allow for remote work and other flexibility, while still meeting our members’ needs.

Perhaps most importantly, the AMC board has been making plans to transition back to in-person meetings and events. The current plan is to hold the ten spring district meetings in-person as well as an eleventh “Zoom” district meeting to accommodate those unable to physically attend their district’s meeting. Also, there will be a stand-alone legislative summary, via Zoom, from our AMC staff prior to the district meetings. Our gatherings will follow all state and CDC guidelines.

I look forward to traveling throughout the state to be with you at your district meetings.

While we may not be ready for handshakes and hugs (how strange that will seem?!), I am positive these renewed relationships, and reconnections will continue to stay with me, just like the ingrained handshakes of Bob and my father. ■



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A Note from LPHA's Chair

By Sarah Reese, Polk-Norman-Mahnomen
Community Health Services Administrator;
Polk County Public Health Director

Our Local Public Health Agencies serve all citizens pre-birth until death. We have a pulse on health issues within our communities and strive first to promote optimal health and prevent negative health impacts. From everyday health challenges to leading in COVID-19 response, we are on the front lines of protecting health in our communities. Local public health has spent all last year focused on COVID-19 response. This response has revealed the need for increased investment and renewed focus on our local public health infrastructure.

Besides responding to COVID-19, local public health fulfills several other key roles mandated by state statute including:

1. Assure an adequate public health infrastructure – Every three to five years we complete a Community Health Assessment to identify local health priorities through community input and develop community health improvement plans to address identified needs and monitor progress.
2. Promote healthy communities and healthy behaviors – We track data and look for emerging trends to identify the leading causes of death and disease and implement strategies based on the needs of our communities, such as ensuring access to healthy foods during the COVID-19 pandemic.
3. Prevent the spread of infectious disease – This key role mandates our responsibility in COVID-19 response. We monitor immunization levels and perform outreach to high-risk groups, run immunization clinics, deliver essential services to those in isolation or quarantine, and investigate outbreaks of various diseases such as COVID-19, tuberculosis, or measles.
4. Protect against environmental health hazards – This role is expansive and includes implementing childhood blood lead case management guidelines and abating public health nuisances. Some local agencies also have delegation agreements with state agencies for licensing, inspecting and enforcement of food, pools, and lodging establishments, the Safe Drinking Water Act, and the MN Clean Indoor Air Act.
5. Prepare for and respond to disasters and assist communities in recovery – We are charged with developing and maintaining response and recovery plans to address needs during and after disasters and emergencies, including infectious disease threats such as COVID-19 or natural disasters such as floods or tornados.
6. Assure the quality and accessibility of health services – This role includes identifying gaps in health services. For example, if someone isn't able to access a COVID-19 vaccine through other sites, we would fill that role or help them identify a location. We also implement strategies to increase access to healthcare.

In addition to these state mandated roles, local public health plays other key roles in their community. We build partnerships and convene community members, work on emerging issues such as mental health and substance use disorder, provide family home visiting services to support new parents and babies, and deliver WIC services to ensure families and their babies get a healthy start in life.

Unfortunately, over the past 15 years, we have seen a slow crumbling of our local public health infrastructure. This has led to dire consequences to our most vulnerable populations. Local public health services are funded by a combination of federal, state, and local dollars and many of our funding sources have been reduced over the years. Unstable, siloed funding compromises the capacity of local health departments to respond to current and emerging health threats.

To support sustained public health infrastructure, the Local Public Health Association (LPHA) is pursuing a number of policy priorities at the Capitol that support our infrastructure including:

- Investing in and Strengthening Minnesota's Local Public Health Infrastructure - LPHA supports a significant, statewide increase in funding for the local public health grant.
- Responding to COVID-19 and High Consequence Infectious Disease - LPHA supports policy and funding resources that enable strong local public health COVID-19 response, including community education and outreach, case investigation and contact tracing, testing, essential services, and vaccination.
- Promoting Healthy Communities - LPHA supports maintaining stable, statewide funding for the Statewide Health Improvement Partnership (SHIP) at \$35 million per biennium to help Minnesotans live healthier, longer lives, and continue to drive down state health care costs.

Flexible funding is crucial to our local public health system, as many state mandates and core public health services are not well supported by categorical grants. It allows local governments to direct dollars where they are needed most to better address the diverse needs and local public health priorities of Minnesota communities.

Investing in our infrastructure will improve COVID-19 response now and enable a stronger response to the next pandemic. We are thankful for the expertise and commitment of our members and the ongoing support from AMC and other affiliate organizations. We look forward to moving on to a new phase of COVID-19 response and making this year and next, healthy, and productive. ■



Congratulations to Minnesota's Recent Graduates of NACo's High Performance Leadership Academy

More than 40 individuals from Minnesota counties participated in the NACo Leadership Academy, a 12-week online program that empowers front-line county government employees with fundamental leadership skills. Across the nation, 812 county employees participated.

- Scott Schulte, Commissioner, Anoka County
- Rhonda Sivarajah, Administrator, Anoka County
- Charlene Sturk, Recorder, Beltrami County
- Sam Hansen, Administrator, Brown County
- Kelly Hotovec, Information Systems and Technology Manager, Brown County
- Robert Santaella, Assistant Zoning Administrator, Brown County
- John Schotzko, Veteran Service Officer, Brown County
- Brandon Wortz, IT Network & Systems Administrator, Brown County
- Lauri Ketola, Attorney, Carlton County
- Michelle May, Auditor/Treasurer/Coordinator, Chippewa County
- Dennis Wilton, Assistant Director, Enterprise Services, Chisago County
- Jamie Halverson, Human Services Director, Clearwater County
- Donna Torkelson, Auditor/Treasurer, Cottonwood County
- Josh Holte, Solid Waste Administrator, Hubbard County
- Brian Ophus, Social Services Director, Hubbard County
- Kirsten Gloege, Social Worker, Lac qui Parle County
- Christine McCarthy, Environmental Services Director/Planning and Zoning Administrator/Solid Waste Officer, Lake County

- Alisa Jacobsen, Assessment Specialist, Lake of the Woods County
- Steve Schmitt, Commissioner, Meeker County
- Ashley Langanieri, Veteran Service Officer, Olmsted County
- Katie Miller, Senior Property Tax Specialist, Olmsted County
- Kathryn Smith, Elections Manager, Olmsted County
- Nancy Thomas, Assistant Controller, Olmsted County
- Luke Turner, Security and Access Supervisor, Olmsted County
- Jennifer Herzberg, Auditor, Pennington County
- Kent Bombard, IT Specialist Sr., Pine County
- Ryan Findell, IT Manager, Pine County
- Jackie Koivisto, Human Resources Manager, Pine County
- Kersten Kappmeyer, Coordinator, Pope County
- Rae Eden Frank, Environmental Health Supervisor, Ramsey County
- Calla Jarvie, Library Director, Rock County
- Bobbie Shafer, Community Corrections Supervisor, Sherburne County
- Catherine Piepho, Treasurer/Finance Director, Steele County
- David Brummel, Deputy Director, Public Health and Environment, Washington County
- Jill Timm, Public Health Program Manager Senior, Washington County
- Lee Kelly, Administrator, Wright County
- Becky Accettura, Project Manager, Association of Minnesota Counties
- Ryan Erdmann, Member Engagement Coordinator, Association of Minnesota Counties
- Matt Freeman, MACSSA Executive Director, Association of Minnesota Counties
- Kari Oldfield, LPHA Executive Director, Association of Minnesota Counties
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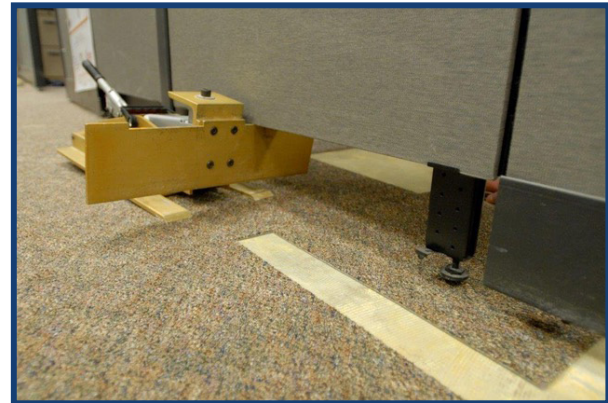
Congratulations to all of the individuals who completed the program. To learn more about the Academy, visit www.naco.org/resources/education-and-training/naco-high-performance-leadership-academy. ■

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MCIT Board Leadership Changes for 2021

The first order of business for the MCIT Board during its organizational meeting of the year Jan. 8 was the election of officers.

Executive Director Robyn Sykes facilitated the election of the board chair. Recognizing his tenure and experience, board members made quick work of re-electing **Sherburne County Commissioner Felix Schmiesing** as board chair. This is Schmiesing's third year serving in this capacity.



Felix Schmiesing

The departures of Don Diedrich, former Polk County commissioner, and Dick Downham, former Cass County commissioner, left the positions of vice chair and secretary-treasurer vacant. Looking to fill these roles, the board called upon the next most tenured members to serve.



Ron Antony

Board members cast unanimous ballots for **Yellow Medicine County Commissioner Ron Antony** and **Stearns County Auditor-Treasurer Randy Schreifels** to the positions of Vice Chair and Secretary-Treasurer, respectively. This is the first time each has served as an officer of the MCIT board.



Randy Schreifels

Committee Assignments Determined

Following the election of officers, Schmiesing made the annual appointment to MCIT board committees. Committee appointments for 2021 are as follows.

- **Claims Committee:** Antony; Schmiesing; Schreifels; and alternate Don Wachal, Jackson County commissioner.
- **Personnel Committee:** Antony; Kevin Corbid, Washington County administrator; Schmiesing; and Wachal
- **Governance Committee:** Antony; Corbid; Jack Swanson, Roseau County commissioner; and Marcia Ward, Winona County commissioner
- **Audit Committee:** Kirk Peysar, Aitkin County auditor; Schmiesing; Schreifels; and a vacant seat as of March 1.

During 2021 the MCIT Board of Directors holds its regular meetings the second Friday of the month. The agenda for MCIT board meetings are posted to MCIT.org under the About MCIT tab. The agenda is posted a week before each meeting. Approved board minutes are also posted on the MCIT website.

Members are encouraged to contact MCIT Executive Director Sykes (rsykes@mcit.org or 1.866.547.6516, ext. 6408) with questions regarding board or committee meetings or other board issues. ■

Focus of Each MCIT Board Committee

The MCIT Board of Directors has four committees that focus on specific issues facing the organization:

- The claims committee meets with staff and defense attorneys to review claims and ratify defense strategy on large claims.
- The governance committee meets to discuss modifications to MCIT's coverage document, bylaws and joint powers agreement if needed.
- The personnel committee oversees MCIT's personnel administration, including issues related to employment, salary, benefits and personnel issues.
- The audit committee meets with MCIT's independent audit firm to discuss the annual audit process, reviews any issues of concern and previews the results of the annual audit prior to its presentation to the full MCIT board.



MCIT Welcomes New Board Members

The last MCIT Board of Directors vacancy was filled by appointment during the Feb. 12 board meeting. Becker County Commissioner Ben Grimsley takes the seat previously held by Don Diedrich, who retired from his Polk County Commissioner position last year.



Ben Grimsley

Grimsley joins Roseau County Commissioner Jack Swanson and Washington County Administrator Kevin Corbid as new board members for 2021. Swanson won election to the board during the 2020 MCIT Annual Meeting Dec. 8. Corbid was appointed at the Jan. 8 meeting as the Minnesota Association of County Administrators (MACA) representative.



Jack Swanson

Corbid previously served on the MCIT board as a county auditor until he became the Washington County administrator in 2020. The MCIT Bylaws provides for one county administrator or coordinator on the board, a seat held by Eric Nerness, former Hubbard County coordinator, until the end of 2020. ■



Kevin Corbid

New Members Value Opportunity

Each new MCIT board member participates in a full day of orientation to the organization and his role as a board member.

At the conclusion of his orientation, Swanson remarked: "For as long as I have been a commissioner, I have recognized MCIT's value to counties. However, it was not until going through this orientation that I fully appreciated the history of MCIT. This program has evolved from a small staff that delivered services to members using service providers with expensive contracts to an organization that now relies on the expertise of its staff.

"This change in MCIT's business model has allowed the Trust to more quickly respond to members' needs with the added benefit of reducing operating expenses that saves money for taxpayers. The fact that MCIT has been able to retain 100 percent of its membership year after year demonstrates the level of satisfaction counties and other members have with MCIT."

Corbid graciously accepted the opportunity to return to the board saying, "I have many colleagues within MACA who would bring great experience and perspective to the MCIT board. MACA recognizes the value of having a county administrator serve on the MCIT board. Our knowledge of the day-to-day operations of a county can inform and educate board discussions and decisions. As the MACA representative, it is also my role to ensure that administrators understand the mission of MCIT and how we can further that mission."

Becker County Commissioner Grimsley is looking forward to his orientation and first board meeting, which is March 12.

He says, "I have a lot to learn, but I enjoy a challenge. My initial focus will be to understand how MCIT works, which means having an understanding of its finances. MCIT is a professional organization, and I am excited about having the opportunity to serve the counties and other groups that are members of the Trust." ■

Hennepin County Wins 2021 Finnegan Freedom of Information Award

Hennepin is the first county in Minnesota to win the John R. Finnegan Freedom of Information Award. The award is given annually by the Minnesota Coalition on Government Information (MNCOGI) to a person or organization that demonstrates the value of freely available information and its power to effect change.

The award was given jointly to the county and the Mapping Prejudice project at the University of Minnesota (<https://mappingprejudice.umn.edu/>) for the producing the nation's first comprehensive map of historic racial covenants. That map raised public awareness around the world and impacted public policy in Minnesota.

Hennepin County board chair Marion Greene says, "This project's use of open data to identify restrictive discriminatory covenants to property deeds is a great example of using open data to educate the public on institutional racism that has impacted the way our communities look and feel today." In accepting the award, she thanked MNCOGI and county staff for their contributions, and the Mapping Prejudice project "for asking Hennepin County to be the first project of this kind in the nation."

Hennepin County was a pioneer in providing open access to deeds. A decade ago, the county spent \$3 million to scan the entire collection of deeds, then added RecordEASE software giving people online access. But deeds are tricky and not everyone can make sense of them. Staff in the Recorder's Office helped the Mapping Prejudice team learn those tricks and begin their analysis.

A mix of technology was used to produce identify and map racial covenants across the county. One million deeds filed from 1910 to 1955 were downloaded to hard drives and taken to the University. There, they were processed using OCR (Optical Character Recognition) and read by computer looking for racial terms like Negro, African, Japanese, and Caucasian. That process nominated 38,000 deeds as potentially racist. Those deeds were distributed to 3,000 volunteers who read them and transcribed those confirmed having racist language. Deeds with covenants were passed to a geographic information system which used the county's digital parcel map to produce map showing the spread of this racist practice.

Ultimately, the Mapping Prejudice project found and mapped 24,000 racial covenants across the county. That story has been spread broadly, starting with local newspapers and electronic media. Twin Cities Public Television created Jim Crow of the North, "one of the most powerful and impactful" documentaries ever produced by that station. You can find the documentary online here: <https://www.tptoriginals.org/learn-about-minneapolis-history-of-racial-covenants-in-jim-crow-of-the-north-full-episode/>.

Public awareness grew in other ways too. The Mapping Prejudice website has attracted nearly 200,000 unique visitors since counting began in 2018. Those visitors have logged one quarter-million sessions and made one half-million separate page views. Project staff has made 300 public presentations, both virtual and in-person, reaching thousands more people.

Along with public awareness came changes in public policies. In 2019, the state legislature passed a law allowing owners to legally "discharge" those covenants. Minneapolis created a new 2040 Plan that eliminates single-family zones and opens the city to multi-family homes. Ramsey County has stepped forward and will be the second county to have fully mapped covenants.

Following the George Floyd killing, press from the around the nation and globe have used Mapping Prejudice to help people understand the history of racism in Minnesota. Stories have appeared in the Los Angeles Times, the Atlantic, Le Monde, USA Today, Toronto's Globe and Mail, BBC Brazil, and elsewhere. And Jim Crow of the North is now circulated by PBS nationally.

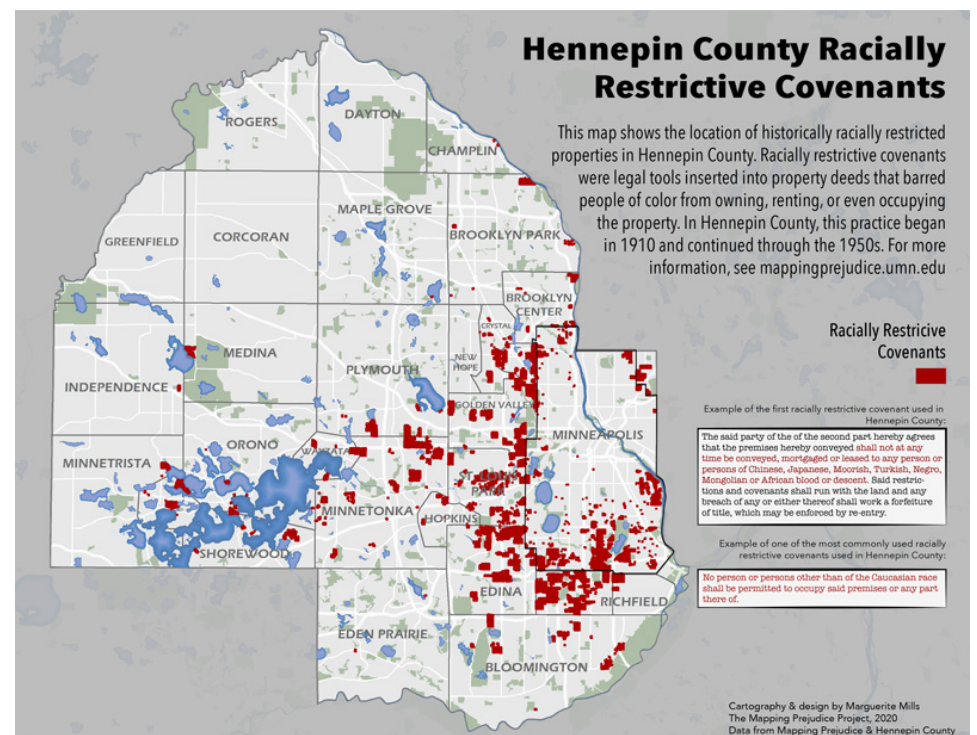
Mapping Prejudice director Kirsten Delegard says, "Hennepin County recorder staff are heroes who played a critical role in allowing us to create a new co-creative mapping process that is helping people all over the country understand structural racism and the history of housing discrimination in the United States. Their dedication to open records and public access has been exemplary."

Hennepin County itself continues to push forward. It has added links from its Property Recording website (<https://www.hennepin.us/propertyrecording>) to the Mapping Prejudice database of confirmed racial covenants and to Just Deeds Coalition (<https://justdeeds.org/>) of city attorneys who will provide assistance in discharging them. It has eliminated the filing fee for the document discharging racial covenants. The Board has directed the Recorder to add a notice of potential discriminatory covenants to the county's tract index for all properties suspected of having them. It created a new Public Search version of its RecordEASE software that allows free access to all county indexes, a move that will help property owners request downloads of their documents from the Recorder's Customer Service desk.

In addition to the recorder's office, the Surveyor's Office is also mentioned in the award because it supplied the parcel map base. Both offices are in the county's office of Residential and Real Estate Services.

Hennepin County is proud of its work around open deeds and has put itself forward as a candidate for a 2021 Achievement Award from NACo, the National Association of Counties. Achievement awards are meant recognize innovative county government programs and inspire other counties to replicate the best of them.

The Finnegan Award is named for John R. Finnegan who was editor of the St. Paul Pioneer Press and a tireless advocate of freedom of information. Finnegan was involved in drafting Minnesota's Open Meeting and Data Practices laws. He was elected to the national Open Government Hall of Fame in 2011. ■



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Are Employee Recognition Awards Taxable?



By Melanie Ault,
DDA Human Resources, Inc.

Congratulations! Your employee has been with the county for 5, 10, or 15 years – a nice accomplishment! Maybe you recognized their achievement by allowing them to choose something from the reward catalog or gave a gift card to a favorite shopping venue.

Employee recognition awards should be uplifting and celebrated, but they can sometimes turn sour when the employee learns that their paycheck will be smaller with extra taxes taken out. Can that be avoided? Yes, a blend of IRS and state safeguards can help keep your employee feeling valued and not economically harmed.

General Rule: Presume everything is includable as the employee's taxable gross income unless something in the IRS allows it to be excluded.

Achievement Awards can be Excluded from Taxation

If tangible personal property ("things," like a t-shirt or clock, but not cash or a cash equivalent) is given either as a length-of-service award in 5-year increments, or as a safety award, then its value can be excluded from income. Awards for these two reasons are considered achievement awards and must meet certain conditions to be tax exempt. Awards for other reasons will be taxable.

The IRS guidelines:

- Must be awarded as part of a meaningful presentation.
- Conditions and circumstances of giving the award cannot be disguised as pay.
- Cannot be cash, cash equivalent, a vacation, meals, lodging, theater or sports tickets, or securities; however, an arrangement to select items from a limited array of pre-selected, employer pre-approved items is permitted.
- Excludable amount is the employer's cost.
- Excludable amount cannot exceed \$1,600 for the employee for the year in qualified plans not favoring highly compensated employees (otherwise, the limit is \$400 for the year).

However, the exclusion doesn't apply to the following awards, and they would be taxable:

- A length-of-service award if the employee received it for less than 5 years of service, or if the employee received another length-of-service award during the year or the previous 4 years.
- A safety achievement award for a manager, administrator, clerical employee, or other professional employee, or if more than 10% of eligible employees previously received safety achievement awards during the year.

Formal, Employee Recognition Program

In advance of expending any monies, it is best to take formal action to adopt a written, employee recognition program for awards in 5-years of service achievement increments, and/or for safety awards. The recognition program is usually established by a resolution authorizing the expenditures as part of the program. Be modest in your expenditures. Minnesota Statutes, Section 15.46, allows counties to establish, fund, and operate "a program of preventative health and employee recognition services."

(Note: "Preventative health" or "wellness" programs have some different features and requirements than "employee recognition services," especially if an employee leaves mid-year.)

The State Auditor has issued guidance, "Employee Recognition Programs and Events." It speaks to needing a written program, with clear wellness and/or recognition objectives, approved by the county board who determines what amounts can be expended. For guidance, the State Auditor looks to what is allowed and prohibited by the state's programs. Do not pay for spouses or third-party guests to attend the recognition event, and of course, alcohol is not permitted.

If an employer instead wants to recognize employees in a manner that is taxable, then they should be prepared for greater complexities, and should first consult with the State Auditor.

Remember that employees need appreciation along with recognition. ■

Subscribers can access a sample written Employee Recognition policy in the Knowledge Base at www.amcddahrsupport.com.



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MACO Names Kari Aanenson to Honor Roll, Presents Awards to Outstanding Members



Kari Aanenson

The Minnesota Association of County Officers (MACO) named Kari Aanenson, the former Norman County Recorder, to its Honor Roll at the MACO 2021 Virtual Conference held February 17-18, 2021. The Honor Roll is the highest honor awarded each year by the MACO organization. The president of MACO presented the Honor Roll award to Aanenson to recognize her outstanding service as the MACO Historian and for her contributions to the Minnesota Association of County Officers. The Honor Roll has been given annually since 1996.

In addition to the Honor Roll, MACO presented awards to two outstanding members for their service in 2020, one to a MACATFO member and one to a member from MCRA. Individuals receiving awards are voted on by their peers. MACATFO presented its member of the year to Char Rosenow, Douglas County Auditor/Treasurer. MCRA presented its member of the year to Jennifer Fibison, Olmsted County Recording & Abstracting Supervisor.



Char Rosenow

At its annual meeting and conference, MACO elected Chad Struss, Isanti County Auditor-Treasurer, as its 2021 president. He succeeds Denise Anderson, Rice County Property Tax Administrator and Elections Director. Other newly elected members to the MACO Board of Directors representing regions of the state were Vicki Doehling, Douglas County Elections/Property Tax Administrator, Denise Gaida, Todd County Auditor-Treasurer. Julie Hanson, Scott County Property & Customer Service Manager, and Laura Ihrke, Steele County Auditor, were re-elected to the board.



Jennifer Fibison

The Minnesota Association of County Officers (MACO) is comprised of county Auditors, Treasurers, Records, Financial Officers, and Registrars in Minnesota. All 87 Minnesota counties are members. Two individual associations combine to make up the MACO organization. These individual organizations include the Minnesota Association of County Auditors, Treasurers, and Finance Officers (MACATFO) and the Minnesota County Records Association (MCRA). ■

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Sometimes County Board Inaction is Appropriate

By Michael Williams, PhD, Stearns County Administrator, MACA Secretary

Political polarization and incivility are intensifying in society today, which has included a desire by some advocates to demonstrate that elected officials, as opinion leaders, favor their opinion. As a result, county boards and individual commissioners have been asked to adopt positions on a variety of political and divisive issues that do not directly pertain to county services. Understandably, county commissioners have strong opinions and are prone to action to solve problems and improve their communities. This article suggests that sometimes restraint from action can be the wiser choice.

Research is demonstrating that polarization is intensifying because social sorting is self-reinforcing. In other words, polarization feeds on itself. For example, there is substantial literature that demonstrates that partisanship is correlated with migration to the point that it impacts decisions about where and with whom one will live. In addition, today's technology supports the creation of like-minded "communities" within our personal digital world. We can easily choose to read and view only information that supports our own opinions. The increased polarization within these "echo chambers" can foster dehumanizing language, increased incivility, and extreme ideals.

Partisan polarization combined with incivility and gridlock contributes to the low trust in the federal government. The PEW Research Center finds that not only is the public's confidence in the federal government low; in addition, partisan animosity has increased substantially and trust amongst individuals is shrinking. Seventy-five percent of adults believe that Americans trust in the federal government is declining and 64% believe that trust in each other is shrinking. Over 85% of people feel that those that voted for the other candidate in the 2020 presidential election do not understand "people like me." Many intense partisans even believe the opposing party's policies are "so misguided that they threaten the nation's well-being."

In short, when considering partisan issues, we have become so divided that we do not trust one another. Thankfully, county government remains non-partisan in Minnesota. We even know, from studies by Richard Florida, that "Democratic and Republican residents see very little difference on local issues." Citizens that might very well be divided on national issues are not necessarily divided on local issues. Thus, trust in local government, including county boards, remains high. Further, that high level of trust is critical to social capital, compromise, collaboration, and relationships – critical components to solving local problems.

Recently, commissioners and county boards have been requested to enter the political fray about issues such as the 2nd Amendment and gun control, school choice, immigration and refugee policy, COVID-19 business closures and mask mandates, and other topics that do not directly pertain to county services. These types of issues are incompatible with the regular duties of county boards for at least five reasons.

1. Local governments rely on relationships, collaboration, and compromise to solve problems and provide services. Injecting the partisan divide into local decisions may very well degrade the crucial relationships and trust required to solve local issues. In local government, our relationships are much more important than party and ideology.
2. Local issues are almost exclusively non-partisan – citizen's attitudes about local issues are not shaped by partisan politics or party loyalty.
3. County boards and commissioners typically use their roles to build community trust and healthy relationships rather than contribute to disagreement and bickering.
4. Often, the public is unaware of the limitations of the authority of county government. Proposed resolutions may not have the impact desired or anticipated by its supporters.
5. When county boards, individual commissioners, or county administrators and coordinators and staff meander from their proper roles, things will get messy fast.

What we do in county government is not partisan or overtly political. Local governments do not decide everything with a vote but, rather, operate much more with consensus on community issues. This makes sense because, as Richard Florida found, there is very little difference between the attitudes of Democrats and Republicans on local issues.

No doubt, a single commissioner's political base might agree with a position on a non-county issue; and the entire board might agree with a position on a non-county issue. But why would a board act on an empty proclamation or resolution that will be the cause of any divide in the community? It does not make sense politically or for the common-good.

County boards have responsibilities in numerous policy areas – many of them statutory or mandated - that need not intersect with controversial, partisan issues. To differentiate and define such boundaries, several county boards have adopted policies or guidelines that describe when (or when not) a county board will consider a resolution or proclamation. To use cliché, county boards are formalizing the concept of "staying in their lane" and working within their defined role as county commissions.

An important reason for formalizing this type of policy is to not only be fair with every constituency but also with one another. To be successful, all commissioners must adhere to a policy to prohibit action on issues that are irrelevant to county government. In addition, to ensure civility, county boards are considering adoption of codes of conduct for local boards, committees, and commissions. Examples of both policies are available through AMC.

Being nonpartisan will not prevent a county board from confronting controversy or partisan disagreement. But freedom from partisan controversy and the partisan atmosphere enhances the board's trust within the community and increases the board's ability to solve local issues. A county board's effectiveness is enhanced by its nonpartisan nature – let's keep it that way. ■



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Chisago Lakes Delisted Thanks to Cooperative Effort

With North Center and South Center lakes removed from the impaired waters list, Chisago SWCD, NRCS staff continue to work with landowners and community partners to advance positive water quality trends emerging throughout the 20-lake chain.

When the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency removed North Center and South Center lakes from the impaired waters list this spring, Chisago Soil & Water Conservation District (SWCD) staff celebrated a continuation — not a conclusion — of targeted watershed work.

North Center and South Center were two of nine lakes in the 20-lake chain added to the impaired waters list in 2008. Removal requires meeting water quality standards for five consecutive years.

In Chisago County, the accomplishment reflects hundreds of conservation practices implemented over 10-plus years, stretching from lakeshore lawns to farm fields. Landowners' work with the SWCD and its partners has led to improving water quality trends throughout the Chisago Lakes Chain of Lakes.

"All the other lakes where we have water quality trend data are also improving. That's exciting. It's not just one or two lakes," said Jerry Spetzman, Chisago Lakes Lake Improvement District (LID) administrator. "A lot of the projects happening on North and South Center are also happening on the entire chain of lakes."

Phosphorus and chlorophyll-a levels are generally decreasing throughout the chain. Phosphorus feeds the algae that can turn lakes green. Chlorophyll-a indicates the presence of algae. Secchi disk readings, a measure of water clarity, are generally improving.

A targeted watershed demonstration grant from the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources brought five years of dedicated Clean Water Funds to the Chisago Lakes Chain of Lakes starting in 2015. Work accomplished through that grant reduced phosphorus by an estimated 690 pounds a year. One pound of phosphorus can create 500 pounds of algae.

The SWCD has leveraged more than \$1.7 million in Clean Water Funds, including the targeted watershed demonstration program grant, to gain additional dollars for conservation projects affecting the chain of lakes. It secured a Mississippi River Basin Initiative award — dedicated funding from the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) that provided about \$125,000 in assistance. The LID has contributed \$40,000 annually. The St. Croix River Association contributed \$50,000 total. Water quality work gained enthusiastic support from the cities of Lindstrom and Center City.

By the time it wrapped up in 2020, the targeted watershed grant had funded projects involving 43 landowners. Leveraged local, state and federal funds can cover up to 100% of costs. In exchange, landowners agree to a 10-year contract to maintain the practice.



Nancy Moe-Mergens and Mike Mergens worked with Chisago SWCD on a lakeshore restoration that replaced invasive grass with native plants. They never intended to have a beach on their North Center Lake property, but Nancy said it's possible for landowners to incorporate a bit of beach in a restoration. Photo Credit: Nancy Moe-Mergens

SWCD and NRCS staff have continued the watershed-based approach. It starts by identifying pollution hotspots, and then working with willing landowners to implement conservation practices. From earthen structures that curb field erosion to rain gardens that filter runoff, conservation practices implemented throughout the chain of lakes ultimately benefit the St. Croix River downstream.

"It's like a watershed success story. It's great for North and South Center, but it's also great for the entire watershed," Spetzman said.

Chisago SWCD Administrator Craig Mell handles the contracts. SWCD water resources specialist Casey Thiel summarizes data collected through the LID's water quality monitoring program, and works with urban and lakeshore property owners. SWCD resource conservationist Shane Hultman works with agricultural producers. Throughout the watershed, they've become recognized as a resource.

"We're being seen more — and differently than the people who help farmers. Going back 10 years, that's what the SWCD was. There wasn't a direct connection to lake water quality," Thiel said.

The SWCD has applied the targeted approach throughout the county. Staff is assigned to designated watersheds.

"This is the way that we do business. We use that model and it works. We prove every day that it works. From the assessments to applying for the grants to following up with monitoring to doing more assessments — that whole process. It works," Thiel said.

Mell said it can take years to get a commitment from an ag producer. "They need to see it working elsewhere. They need to hear from their farming peers that it works," Mell said.

Dedicated funding makes it easier to align projects with producers once they're ready to proceed.

"It's all of us. It's everyone who lives in the watershed, even people who don't live on (one of the 20 lakes). ... It's all of us together," Spetzman said in summarizing the Chisago Lakes Chain of Lakes effort. ■

Read the full story at www.bwsr.state.mn.us.

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