Let’s Talk Counties!
County Government 101

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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.
Minnesota is organized under the *Dillon Rule*. This essentially means that counties can only act when explicitly authorized to do so by the state.

The Minnesota county structural model is similar to those found in Wisconsin, Ohio, New York and many other states.
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.
How has the role of counties evolved?

In addition to serving as administrative arms of the state, counties rapidly moved into other areas of government support, including:

- social services
- corrections
- child protection
- library services
- hospitals and nursing homes
- housing

- public health services
- planning and zoning
- economic development
- parks and recreation
- water quality
- solid waste management
Other 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 $6.75 million to $1.9 billion (2019 estimate)
Minnesota Counties by Population

*2015 population estimates from the MN State Demographer
In Minnesota, counties derive the majority of their funding from property taxes and from state and federal grants.

- Fees, fines, forfeitures, sale of public lands, investments and special assessments are other 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 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 Authority

• Authority rests at the board level.
• Individual county commissioners do not have independent authority, unless delegated by the full board.
• County commissioners, county administration, department heads, and staff have vastly 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

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

Policies
• Ordinances, resolutions, policies.

Budgets
• Most important document – determines what services are provided, how funded and the level of funding.
Policy vs. Administration

Policy (Board) = “What” and “Why”

Administrative/Operations (Staff) = “Where” and “When” and “How”
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?
Effective Governance

• 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?
Effective Leadership

Leaders should:

• 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.
Thank You!

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