News Release

County Leaders Unveil 2020 Legislative Agenda

Protecting Counties from DHS Financial Errors, Funding Roads and Bridges, Improving DHS Transparency, and Increasing Funding for Community Supervision Top Counties’ Priorities for 2020

ST. PAUL, MN – Today county leaders with the Association of Minnesota Counties – as part of their “County Day at the Capitol” – unveiled their top legislative priorities for the 2020 Legislative Session, which includes protecting counties from Department of Human Services (DHS) financial errors, funding roads and bridges through the bonding bill, improving DHS transparency, and increasing funding for community supervision.

Department of Human Services Financial Errors

For years, counties have been working in good faith with DHS to be responsible stewards of the federal dollars allocated by the department to administer federal programs. The Association of Minnesota Counties (AMC) opposes any efforts to place the financial obligation on counties to reimburse DHS for its own billing errors.

“Any surplus dollars should be used by the legislature and the governor to reimburse the federal government for any payment and billing miscalculations by the state,” said La qui Parle County Commissioner Todd Patzer, First Vice-President of AMC. “Counties should not be expected to be financially responsible for errors by the Department of Human Services because we are not at fault and have no ability to plan or prepare for these unexpected costs.”

Governor Tim Walz spoke to AMC’s annual conference morning session and addressed this issue saying “My commitment on IMD to hold the counties harmless is absolutely unwavering.” IMD (Institution for Mental Disease) refers to the category of Medicaid repayments that the state has to make to the federal government for substance abuse services and for which the state is seeking repayments from counties.

Counties are committed to working alongside DHS to get the state funding necessary to reimburse the federal government.

Bonding for Local Road and Bridge Programs
AMC supports a robust bonding bill that includes funding for transportation-related programs, including the Local Road Improvement Program and the Local Bridge Replacement Program.

“Taking care of our roads and bridges is a basic priority of government,” said Anoka County Commissioner Scott Schulte, Past President of AMC. “Minnesotans expect us to keep our roadways safe, relieve congestion, and provide infrastructure that can withstand Minnesota’s harsh winters.”

The 2018 Bridge Annual Report identified 9,565 deficient bridges on the local system. Local governments have prioritized over 900 deficient bridges for replacement over the next five years with an estimated total replacement cost of over $500 million. The Minnesota Department of Transportation has requested funding at $100 million in General Obligation bonds for each the local road and the local bridge program. Both programs are funded from a variety of sources – local, state, and federal funding helps to improve infrastructure statewide – and these two programs have had enormous success over the years.

**DHS Procurement Transparency**

The Department of Human Services has contracted with organizations called county-based purchasing entities to provide healthcare services on behalf of persons eligible for low-income state and federal healthcare programs (such as Medical Assistance, MinnesotaCare, General Assistance Medical Care, and senior care programs) on a pre-paid basis. These organizations are groups of county boards who choose to purchase or provide such healthcare services together.

In recent years, DHS has attempted to eliminate county-based purchasers and replace them with managed care organizations that lack connections to local communities.

In February of 2019, DHS decided to conduct a procurement process relating to healthcare services for people within counties eligible for Medical Assistance and MinnesotaCare program even though the statutorily-required procurement was not scheduled until 2020. The result was that county-based purchasing entities were told by DHS they would not be offered a contract to provide health services or that DHS would impose health plans on counties that were specifically not chosen by the county boards. While DHS eventually decided to forgo the 2019 procurement process, the process could repeat itself in 2020.

“Children, seniors, and those with disabilities depend on counties to provide these critical healthcare services. The department’s procurement process lacks transparency as to how county input is evaluated. Those who deliver these important services and those who depend on them deserve to understand how these decisions are being made by the Department of Human Services,” said Pope County Commissioner Larry Lindor, Secretary-Treasurer of the AMC.

AMC supports an improved procurement process that better reflects counties’ voices and expertise. The existing process lacks transparency in how county input is evaluated and weighted, does not allow for a meaningful evaluation of plan performance, and makes no allowance for locally-driven initiatives such as county-based purchasing.

**Community Supervision**

Minnesota’s county-based probation systems have been underfunded for nearly two decades. Increased funds are needed to support the basic functions of this system. In addition, policy changes related to pre-trial assessment of defendants and supervised released of those no longer incarcerated are likely to increase caseload pressure for local county agencies as well as requiring additional community support measures for justice involved individuals.
“We need the legislature to increase funds for community supervision of individuals released on probation,” said Ramsey County Commissioner Mary Jo McGuire, Second Vice-President of AMC. “By providing more resources on increasing evidence-based practices that address risk factors associated with repeated criminal conduct, we can reduce recidivism and improve public safety.”

The services provided by county probation agents are critical for meeting the needs of our criminal justice system. AMC supports the integration of evidence-based best practices into the discipline of corrections supervision and decision-making.

**County Day at the Capitol**

Today’s “County Day at the Capitol” features 275 county commissioners and officials from nearly every Minnesota County. These county officials are scheduled to meet with state legislators – including key committee chairs and caucus leaders – to advocate for the 2020 Legislative Session priorities.

“Minnesota counties are the arms and legs of government. We carry out the functions mandated by the state and federal governments. Today, we come together unified across ideological and regional lines to advocate for our shared priorities on behalf of the taxpaying residents of Minnesota’s 87 counties,” said Lake County Commissioner Rich Sve, President of the Association of Minnesota Counties.

The Association of Minnesota Counties is a voluntary statewide organization that assists the state’s 87 counties in providing effective county governance to the people of Minnesota. The association works closely with the legislative and administrative branches of government in seeing that legislation and policies favorable to counties are enacted. In addition, the Association provides educational programs, training, research and communications for county officials.

###