

Community, Natural Resource and Economic Development Working to Engage and Empower the Ozaukee County Board

Situation

A growing sense of concern among County Board Supervisors, citizens and administrators over the committee structure of the County Board in Ozaukee County led to a number of discussions about how to improve its efficiency and responsiveness. The Ozaukee County Administrative Committee, County Administrator's office and Ozaukee County UW-Extension worked collaboratively to conduct a thorough review of the committee structure in order to propose a draft recommendation to the County Board. As a result of this study, the County Board hoped to achieve more efficient communication and to create a blueprint for reorganizing the board.

The new study was the continuation of a 1999 Organizational Study, which led to many changes, including the implementation of regular inter-departmental head meetings; the creation of the positions of Administrative Coordinator, Finance Director, and County Planner; the elimination of per diem payments; improved orientation for new supervisors; the consolidation of departments and committees; and the creation of a detailed annual budget process.

Response

The Ozaukee County Board Committee Reorganization Study was launched in the fall of 2004. The new study addressed additional concerns that had been raised in recent years, including:

- Does the county have too many committees?
- Would combining committees lead to increased efficiencies?
- What is the best use of County Board Supervisors' time?
- Are policy issues being addressed in a timely and efficient manner?
- What items should be considered during committee meetings?
- What is the appropriate role for public input in the county committee structure?

Research was conducted by contacting other Wisconsin Counties, such as Waukesha, Walworth and LaCrosse. These counties have recently undertaken a similar review and found improvements in their committee structures with a goal of providing better management and policy oversight of their government operations. Additional input was solicited in October and November 2004 through personal interviews with Ozaukee County Board Supervisors, Department Heads, county staff and the Corporation Counsel.

In December 2004, a consensus-building workshop was held to identify and prioritize elements of the reorganization study. In January 2005, a follow-up workshop was used to build consensus on each element of the reorganization plan. Points discussed included the overall committee structure, a second County Board meeting each month to discuss policy issues, four options for selecting committee chairs, the position of a second vice-chair, a proposed monthly meeting schedule and a timeline for implementation.

One objective of the reorganization study was to develop an improved system that would allow for discussion of important public policy issues, removed from the hectic nature of day-to-day business operations. In an effort to address this need, it was recommended that the County Board meet twice monthly, once to consider financial/operational issues and once to primarily consider issues of public policy and long range planning.

The proposed structure would replace the Standing, Statutory, Special, and Elected Committees with six functional committees. Each committee would be empowered to create advisory subcommittees to manage unique issues or satisfy statutory requirements. Citizens are able to participate as members at this subcommittee level. This approach would shift the focus from operational/administrative management of individual departments to considerations of policy, mission, goals, and fiscal performance.

Outcomes

At the January 2005 County Board meeting, Supervisors voted 27-0 to restructure the Board's committees. Each committee would be made up of five County Board Supervisors and each supervisor would only sit on one committee. All committee agendas would be developed two weeks prior to the committee meeting by the County Board Chair, Committee Chair, Administrator and the Department Heads that fall under the committee's oversight. The proposed committees were Administrative, Public Works, Health and Human Services, Environment and Land Use, Aging and Long Term Care, and Public Safety.

In January and February of 2005, the board sought public input and county staff began working with the administrative committee to implement the plan. The new committee structure took effect in April 2005.

As a result of this reorganization, the County Board hoped to improve communication between the Board Chair and committees. The reorganization led to a reduction from 29 committees to 6 functional committees and 10 subcommittees. The switch to a Functional Committee Structure reduced the redundancies that were prevalent in the previous committee structure. There were several previous instances when staff had to go through several committees for a single item, such as the purchase of a computer. There have been significant additional savings due to not having to staff the 13 eliminated committees.

Workshop participants responded positively in evaluations following each meeting. Following the first workshop in December 2004, of 26 respondents, 21 agreed with the concepts reviewed and were in favor of moving forward to implement the concepts addressed at the workshop. Five were "not sure." One participant commented, "Very good interchange of ideas. The day was a winner."

Following the second workshop in January 2005, of 23 respondents, 18 strongly agreed and 1 agreed with the concepts reviewed and were in favor of moving forward to implement the concepts addressed. There were four who gave "no response." Participants commented: "Right on! Moving right along!" and "As usual, great work!" Other comments included:

- "Let's jump in with both feet and continue to evaluate and tweak it as we go. I'd love to see our policy meeting be in this 'in the round' format."

- “It was great to see us move ahead in a short time. I believe we should have our policy meeting with the same environment we used with no business, a circle; it’s more friendly.”

As a result of this consensus building approach, the Ozaukee County Board successfully navigated through a contentious issue. Since the committee reorganization, the County Board and staff have realized additional efficiencies and have restructured county ordinances and created a new policy and procedure manual. Currently, the County Board is working with UW-Extension, Ozaukee County to develop a strategy for 2006 that would increase their capacity as decision makers.

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