

"Changes and Challenges Facing Local Government in Wisconsin"

*A Briefing Document by the Local Government Center for
UW-Extension's Political Effectiveness Team*

As UW-Extension's lead programming unit responsible for both orienting new as well as supporting continuing local government education around the state, the Local Government Center offers the following set of contemporary changes and challenges facing local government operations.

∞ County Board Downsizing and County Committee Reorganization

With the passage of recent legislation (January 2006), county boards now have the authority to reduce the number of supervisory districts once between decennial censuses. The legislation also granted citizens the authority to use the petition and referendum process to require county boards to reduce the number of districts.

At least five counties were required to reduce the size of their boards by significant numbers after referenda were passed. An additional three county boards took action on their own to reduce the number of supervisory districts, in large part, to limit the reduction that might have been imposed by a petition/referendum.

A reduction in the number of supervisors, has meant that, with no change in the number of committees, the remaining supervisors must assume a larger number of committee assignments. In other words, there are fewer supervisors available to cover the existing number of committee slots.

Many counties have responded by reorganizing their committee structures—creating “super committees” that encompass the oversight of several departments.¹ Extension offices may find that their oversight committee is no longer the Agriculture and Extension Education Committee. Rather, the committee has become the Environment and Land Use Committee with oversight responsibility over the Office of the Register of Deeds, Parks and Natural Areas acquisition activities, Land Information Office, and the Planning, Resources, and Land Management Department, in addition to the Extension Department, as has occurred in Ozaukee County.

As the oversight responsibility for any one committee expands, it is likely that the board members will find it necessary to focus on bigger picture issues—policies, strategic and

¹ Counties that have recently undertaken administrative restructuring have not done so exclusively in response to downsizing. Some have downsized in response to a change in their administrative leadership, others have done so as a means of focusing the board's attention on governance issues rather than on management matters.

long-term planning, establishing goals, developing criteria for measuring progress toward goals, and evaluating the administrator or department head—and less on management and administration. Some board members may feel uncomfortable and ill prepared for this change in focus. In addition, the compensation structure for board members may need to change as they spend more and more time on county business.

∞ **Changing Relationships Between County UWEX Offices and their Boards**

Extension educators may need to deal with a likely reduction in formal “face time” with committee members. In many counties, individual educators report to the A&EE Committee monthly. If the Extension department becomes just one of many departments reporting to a standing committee, it is unlikely that each Extension educator will be given a slot on the monthly agenda. Educators will need to develop new ways of communicating impact on a regular basis.

Extension educators may find increased opportunities to explore possible collaborations with county departments that fall within the same standing committee.

The Extension Department Head may experience an increase in the burden to represent the good work of all the educators in the office. This assumes that the Extension Department Head is the one who is “invited” and attends the monthly meetings of the standing committee.

Depending upon the county departments that are combined with Extension under the oversight of the standing committee, some Extension educators may feel more “aligned” with the “companion” departments than other educators. In the Ozaukee County case noted earlier, CRD and ANRE educators may feel more aligned with these other departments than the 4-H Youth Development and Family Living Educators. “Misaligned” educators may need to establish lines of communication with other standing committees that more closely link to their educational programs.

Extension educators could have a role in assisting county boards through the restructuring process.

∞ **Shifts Toward “Professional” Administrators**

Recently, especially over the past two years, there has been a significant shift in the form of county government in Wisconsin. A movement toward the employment of a professional administrator under the County Administrator form of government and away from the Administrative Coordinator form of government where the duties of Administrative Coordinator are frequently filled by the part-time chairperson of the County Board of Supervisors appears to have occurred concurrently with the downsizing of county boards. Based on a purely unscientific observation and discussions with county officials making or considering such a change, it appears the need for professional management based on increasing populations and complexity of county government is a driving force. Over the past four years, Iowa, Sheboygan, Chippewa, and Dodge counties have all made the

transformation. Jackson County has discussed such a change of government and Washington County is currently discussing the possibility. Consideration of a change of government form invariably necessitates the inclusion of the county's CNRED faculty to provide educational information related to the three options for county government. Local Government Center specialists have also provided information papers and direct presentations in several instances in support of these political decisions. As local government continues to struggle with increased demand for services, shrinking revenues, increasingly complex state and federal mandates, and intense media scrutiny, this trend may well continue for the foreseeable future. Such a trend provides both CNRED county faculty and the Local Government Center an opportunity to be of tremendous assistance to county government in its efforts to find the optimal form of government for local circumstances. The challenge for Extension will be to provide the best possible information regarding the three available forms of county government without advocating for a particular form. The Local Government Center maintains information on its web site directly related to this issue: <http://lgc.uwex.edu/CoTrng/Forms%20of%20County%20Government-revised.pdf> and http://lgc.uwex.edu/CoTrng/wi_county_government_structure_mar08_new.pdf

∞ A Re-examination of Roles and Responsibilities

Changes in Wisconsin local government, combined with current and looming financial stresses, have mandated a re-examination of the roles played by and responsibilities of both staff and elected officials. Staff is finding itself in the new role of "innovator" to find methods of continuing to provide quality services despite decreasing resource streams.

Elected officials have to re-examine their role in relation to the staff, the elected body in which they are a member, and in relation to their constituents. Of particular note over the past few years is the need for clarification of role of County Supervisors. Both county CNRED faculty and Local Government Specialists have been frequently asked to provide presentations on the roles and responsibilities of elected officials and their relationships to county department heads, with a special emphasis on the authority of Constitutional officers and their relationship to the county board. The formal presentation (<http://lgc.uwex.edu/program/ppt/CoGovtFormsFunctions1.ppt>) on this topic produced by Local Government Center specialists has been presented at two County Officials Workshop series as well as to numerous county boards at the request of county Extension faculty. Additionally, the presentation has been requested by such other organizations as the Wisconsin Counties Association and the Badger State Sheriff's Association. The focus appears to be that roles need to be clarified to produce and enhance a positive working relationship that focuses on efficiency, effectiveness, and a long-term strategic vision. County supervisors are better understanding their need to become the visionaries and strategic thinkers versus the hands-on supervisor role they have often attempted to play in the past.

Only very recently this need has also been identified for municipalities, to which the LGC specialists produced a municipal version of the presentation. That presentation is now being given by at least one county CNRED educator. Continuing to assist local government

officials and staff in understanding and clarifying their roles will be a continuing educational challenge for the Local Government Center and county CNRED educators.

∞ A Renewed Focus on Strategic Planning

County boards enact many community plans, such as comprehensive plans, to help communities realize their vision of tomorrow. Also, county boards enact supporting plans, such as capital improvement plans, to take active and strategic steps in implementing those community plans.

However, a strategic plan by the county board is very different. It is a plan developed by the board to make explicit its values, purpose, and goals for the near future. Broad action steps are often listed and an annual period of evaluation included to assess successes and needed changes. The county board strategic plan is informed by its community plans, citizen input, departments, all stakeholders, trends, and key issues confronting the county.

County board strategic plans help plot a future course for the board to more effectively meet current and future needs of communities and the board itself. Agreement on the board's mission, values and goals enhance policy discussions on more specific issues because there is a general understanding of what is important. Communication on policy issues is more to the point, and not bogged down in disagreement over values or goals. It is easier to request and track information, stay informed, and seek expertise within departments and outside parties. And, finally, because many county board members are citizen volunteers with little government experience, the board's strategic plan often includes action steps to support board members, such as basic training, county orientations, staffing needs, and specific skill training in areas of parliamentary procedure, conflict resolution, decision-making, etc.

Above all, strategic plans for county boards are for county boards in guiding them in their course and supporting their efforts. In some important ways, it is the measure established by the county board by which it wishes to evaluate progress and also to be evaluated by current and future citizens.

In so far as UWEX County Offices can assist in the county boards with the strategic planning process, providing information and resources throughout the process, and assisting boards and departments with evaluation, county boards will highly value Extension. To the extent that county boards can take a longer view of the future and a broader view of the present, the county budget process will be less reactive and more thoughtful. In addition, this bird's eye view better allows boards to see the process and system of many related programs and thus, boards may see the value of prevention and early intervention programming that is not currently so apparent.

∞ Outcome-Based Performance and Management Systems

Another change being forced upon Wisconsin's local governments is the need to improve their efficiency and financial management skills. The revenues are simply not there to continue increasing spending to meet all of the demands for service without intense financial management and prudent decision-making. State shared revenues have been reduced and are unlikely to be increased in the foreseeable future; the recent problems with mortgages and the housing market will decrease property values and property tax revenue with them; and citizens are becoming increasingly unwilling to accept increases in property tax levies. One potential solution is to enact a system of performance measurement followed by a performance or outcome-based budgeting system. Such systems help local officials effectively analyze their programs allowing them to make changes, shift resources, and optimize the used of their revenues. Performance measurement and outcome-based budgeting also mandates the formulation of a strategic plan which, when integrated into a performance measurement system and outcome-based budgeting, sets the standards and clarifies the vision for the local government for coming years.

In response to a need stated by county CNRED faculty, Local Government Center specialists, in a collaborative effort with UW-Oshkosh and UW-Madison faculty, produced both an introductory (<http://lgc.uwex.edu/Finance/FM7PerformSummary.ppt>) and instructional (<http://lgc.uwex.edu/Finance/FM8PBB.ppt>) presentation on performance measurement and outcome-based budgeting, followed by a detailed handbook. The challenge for Extension will be to not only find effective methods for delivering these materials to local government but also to instruct county CNRED faculty how to not only teach the material but to assist in monitoring the systems and programs when enacted in local governments within their respective counties.