

# *Staff Paper*

**Role of County Commissioners:  
Policy Making v. Administration and  
Serving on Statutory Boards and Commissions**

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No. 92-95

Revised December 1994



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**Summary: "Defines the responsibilities of county commissioners and discusses roles as policy makers versus administrators" 9 pgs.**

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## **Role of County Commissioners: Policymaking vs. Administration**

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*Toiling, rejoicing, sorrowing  
Onward through life he goes  
Each morning sees a task begin  
Each evening sees it close.*

Longfellow's **Village Blacksmith**

### **Introduction:**

Longfellow obviously wasn't describing the task of county commissioners, for commissioners often respond that the tasks confronting a county commissioner, especially a new county commissioner, at times appear insurmountable and never ending. About the time commissioners appear to have resolved one policy issue or crisis, another issues comes to the forefront, such is the nature of being a county commissioner. County government can best be described as Gil Wanger, former legal counsel to the Michigan Association of Counties use to state, as a "patchwork quilt comprised of a mix governments within governments." The mix of county departments, agencies, commissions and boards patched together through state enabling statutes that evolved over time combined with a mix of funding sources (local, state and federal) creating a high degree of interdependency for which county commissioners are to provide policy oversight.

### **Legislative Role of Commissioners**

A county board by state statute assumes several key responsibilities: adopting and monitoring a balance budget; adopting resolutions and ordinances which address health, safety and welfare policy issues confronting a county; establishing or discontinuing programs;

hiring non-elected department heads and county administrator/coordinator/controller; setting salaries or wages of county officers, department heads and county employees; making appointment to boards and commissions; and determining the number of personnel assigned to each department under the county boards authority. In the case of elected county officers, Michigan courts have ruled that county officers are co-employers with the county board meaning that wage negotiations for employees assigned to a department headed by an elected county officer is a joint responsibility.

The county board by state statutes is charged with the responsibility to develop, adopt and maintain a balanced budget for the general fund, special revenue funds and debt service funds. Through the budgeting process, the county board exerts its' policy influence in determining the programmatic direction of the county since within the budgeting framework the county board establishes the number of personnel assigned to each department and the wage. However, the county board does not operate within a vacuum due to the budgeting process requires substantive input from cost center managers (department heads and agency directors). In order to fulfill their policymaking roles it is imperative that county commissioners understand the goals and function of each county department, their funding sources and current programming efforts. Commissioners are urged to visit individually with departments or provide a forum for department heads to address the county board early in the budget year (January or early February) for expressed purpose of gathering information about each department, time consuming yes, but most critical to assuming a policymaking role. A necessary but not sufficient condition to policymaking is understanding the unique nature of the structure of county government and the responsibilities of each cost center. An additional condition for policymaking is gaining insight to the emerging trends and issues confronting the county both financial as well as programmatic. Such insights can only be gained through

active listening to the individuals charged with the responsibility of carrying out the day-to-day operations of county government.

### **Policymaking v. Administration**

Perhaps the most difficult challenge for county commissioners is the separation of policymaking roles versus administrative roles. The mixing of roles often leads to conflict between the county board and department heads. The day-to-day operation of county department and agencies is the responsibility of the elected and appointed officials. Conflict arises when county policymakers attempt to become involved in administrative detail. Commissioners should resist the urge to become micro-managers such as questioning each expenditure or action engaged by a cost center manager. As long as elected and appointed department heads are fulfilling their responsibility within the parameters established by adopted board policy and enabling state statutes, and departmental/agency expenditures remain within the allocated budget, county commissioners should refrain from interference. That is not to say that commissioners abdicate their oversight responsibilities.

Administrative oversight of departments and agencies fall into the realm of appointed or elected county administrative personnel, if a county has established such a position, and Board Commissioner committees. It is advisable from an operational standpoint that each department/agency be assigned to a standing board committee for administrative and programmatic oversight. The trend in county government is towards fewer board committees with five to seven committees appearing to be a reasonable number. According to state statute, the county board is required to have a finance committee, all other committees are established by past practices and the expressed needs of the county. In addition to the

finance committee, committees may evolve around the following functional groupings: *health and human services; public safety and courts; physical and economic development; and county administration and finance.*

The rationale for the groupings is to aggregate agencies and departments with similar functions together for both budget development and programmatic monitoring. Due to the many interdependencies in county government, changes in staffing, appropriations and program thrusts impact not only the office in question but related offices. For example, if the board responds to the sheriff requests for additional road patrol officers, the action will often result in additional traffic for district court and the prosecutors office. Without taking into account the secondary impacts of the board's action in responding to the sheriff's request for additional personnel, the board may well set in motion a series of additional budgetary requests from the courts and prosecutor to address workload increases. Therefore, evaluating budget center requests within the context of functional groupings permit the board to assume a macro perspective in policymaking and decision-making.

## **Roles and Responsibilities of Individuals Serving on Statutory Boards and Commissions**

### **Introduction**

The county board of commissioners in each Michigan county has the statutory responsibility of making various appointments to boards and commissions. Each statutory board or commission varies in terms of: the duties of the individuals appointed; the length of the appointment; compensation received; the time of the year in which the appointment is made; and whether county commissioners may serve as members on the board or commission (this provision is set by state statute).

Counties exhibit variation in the procedures adopted for soliciting nominations for appointments to the various boards and commissions. The policy and procedures utilized by the county board of commissioners should be contained in the **Board's Rules and Procedures** adopted annually which provide the framework for the county board's ministerial function of county government. It is advisable that the county board include in their **Board Rules** an calendar of appointments, the specific procedure for appointment and the type of compensation (if any) designated for the various appointments. The appointment calendar is chronological listing of the dates and boards/commissions to which appointments need to be made. The procedure for making the appointments is a combination of state statutory requirements and the adopted procedures of the county board. Boards and commissions requiring citizen participation, individuals other than county board of commissioners, requires a designed plan for seeking nominations. Some counties actively seek citizen nominations by advertising in local media for all the appointments to be made during the year. A pool of potential nominees is garnered from the community, either through citizen self declared

interest or nomination by others. Counties have found it useful to solicit written information about the nominees, this can be accomplished through the use of a nomination form filed with the county clerk or designated county individual such as board of commissioner chair, administrator or board secretary.

The process of appointing interested individuals to the various boards and commissions must be a well thought out and planned process. Appointments to merely fulfill the statutory requirement leads to long run problems. Individuals appointed who view who reluctantly accept an appointment and do so out of a sense of obligation versus interest and commitment to the county and the board to which the appointment is being made will tend to be less than productive contributors in their advisory role. What makes a good candidate for appointment? While no one set of criteria can be totally inclusive and capture all the criteria deemed important in serving on a board or commission, a few general principles can be set forth.

Potential nominees to boards and commissions should have an interest and be willing to become knowledgeable about the particular board or commission for which they have expressed interest or have been nominated. The county board and administrator can have on file relevant information relating to each particular board and commission to which the county board of commissioners make appointments. A well defined statement which lays out the roles and responsibilities for each advisory board and commission would be most useful to individuals being considered or expressing interest in a particular appointment. Beware of individuals who have an "axe to grind" with a particular agency or commission. Hidden agendas of individuals can, in the long run, be disastrous to the agency or commission to which the individual is appointed. Problem appointments will tend to end up in the lap of the county board, often after the damage has been done.



## **Roles and Responsibilities**

The roles of individuals appointed to various boards and commission vary depending on the statutory nature of the appointment. Some board or commission appointments serve only in an **advisory capacity** while other positions may be both **advisory and policy management**. The statutes govern the nature of the role of the board or commission. Since variation is present, the need to develop a well defined statement of roles and responsibilities and have available prior to the appointment is imperative. The purpose of this brief discussion is not to go into each board and commission and define the roles and responsibilities but to address the differences between **advisory and policy management**.

Appointed board and commission members have the responsibility to become familiar with the goals and objectives of the agency, state statutes which guide the operation of the agency and the financing arrangement of the agency. Some agencies have a complex financing arrangement with federal, state and local funds involved. Diligence in developing a knowledge base of the financing arrangement is important if the board member is to fulfill his or her role as a contributing member to the advisory body. More discussion on financing will be addressed in a later section of paper.

Boards or commissions which are advisory in nature function as a sounding board to the agency director or management personnel. The board member is appointed to solicit feedback from the community and to advise the management staff on such issues as program priorities, the success of the agency in meeting stated objectives and to provide assistance to management staff in addressing issues and concerns which may develop in relationship of the agency functioning in the community. Separating an advisory role from a policy management role is a fine line which may have to be defined by mutual agreement between the board and

management staff. The internal day-to-day management and operation of an agency is not the function of an advisory board unless the management staff solicits input. If the operation, management and performance is below desired levels (assuming we know what those levels are), the advisory body has an obligation to provide feedback to the management staff and actively seek resolution of the deficiencies.

Boards or commissions which have both advisory and policy management responsibilities such as hiring the agency director, performing evaluation of management, approving contracts and are required to approve and review budgets, requires a more active role on the part of appointed board members. Such boards or commissions require the appointee to gain an in-depth understanding not only of the financing arrangements but of the operating policies and guidelines which contribute to the operation of the agency. However, the day-to-day management of agency remains with the management staff. Interlopers to the daily operation and management are seldom welcome and often resented by management staff. Board members need to be clear about their role and such clarity can only be gained through active discussion of the entire board with management staff.

### **Advocate or Advisor?**

Board of commission members appointed to a board or commission to which the county board allocates county resources to, often find themselves in a conflict over whether to be an advisor or advocate. The tendency to become an strong advocate for the agency and argue strenuously with county board members over appropriations levels at a time when the county is attempting to reduce expenditures in other areas places the commissioner at odds with other board members. The role between county policymaker and advocate can be a confusing distinction which requires county commissioners to constantly assess their position.

When is it appropriate to be an advocate and when to assume the role of county policymaker? Unfortunately no clear line of distinction exist. However, board of commissioners appointed to boards and commissions as such assume their advisory role as a county policymaker. They are charged with the responsibility of representing the interests of the county and the county board of commissioners and to report back to the county board on a regular basis (preferably in writing). County boards may want to adopt a policy requiring commissioners, serving on various boards and commissions to provide written reports to the county board chair. Such written reports provide a historical record, avoids misunderstanding often involved in verbal reports and can provide continuity to future board members appointed to the same board. While it is expected that individuals appointed to the various boards and commissions will display some degree of advocacy for their particular agency or commission to which they are appointed, balancing the two roles, county policymaker and advocate, needs to be constantly reassessed.

### **Doing Your Homework**

The most frequent criticism of board members by management staff is that board members do not due their homework and come unprepared to meetings. The issue is a two way street, management staff have the responsibility to provide information ahead of time to their advisory bodies, board members must take the time to become familiar with the agency, its challenges, problems and programs. In addition, gaining operational knowledge of the financial condition is paramount to becoming an effective board member. It is advisable that management staff take time to provide in-service training to new board members and not assume that the new appointees will gain the understanding by osmosis. Advisory board members tend to be busy people, an management staff are in a position to assist the appointed representatives gaining familiarity with agency's operation.