

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 of 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** a calendar of appointments, the specific procedure for appointment and the type of compensation (if any) designed for the various appointments. The appointment calendar is a 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, require 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 lead to long run problems. Individuals appointed 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 makes 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, in the long run, can 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 commissions 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 same 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 this paper.

Boards and 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 to 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, require 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 the 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, often find themselves in a conflict over whether to be an advisor or advocate. The tendency to become a strong advocate for the agency and argue strenuously with county board members over appropriation 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 exists. 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, avoid 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 the 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 do their homework and come unprepared to meetings. The issue is a two way street. Management staff has 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 takes time to provide in-service training to new board members and not assume the new appointees will gain the understanding by osmosis. Advisory board members tend to be busy people, and management staff is in a position to assist the appointed representatives gaining familiarity with the agency's operation.

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