Forms of County Government and Officials You Should Know

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Oregon counties have two forms of organization. First, “general rule” counties operate with an at-large elected Board of County Commissioners (BOCC) and elect the Sheriff, Assessor, Treasurer, County Clerk, County Surveyor and District Attorney. Most general rule counties have three commissioners. Second, “home rule” counties are governed by a county charter and generally provide for five Commissioners elected in a non-partisan ballot—four by districts and one at-large. The Sheriff and District Attorney generally are elected, but the rest of the offices elected in the general district county structure are appointed by the BOCC in home rule counties. Oregon has nine home rule counties.

Twelve less-populated counties in Eastern and Central Oregon have what is called a County Court structure with an elected County Judge who functions as the chair of the County Court and two elected commissioners. This is a variation of the general rule structure. Generally, commissioners are elected for 4-year terms, though County Judges may be elected for 6 years. The positions are staggered in their election cycle for continuity.

Many counties, especially the home rule counties, have a strong county administrator. This individual serves at the pleasure of the Commissioners and directs the day-to-day operations of county government. The administrator often will direct the process for budget preparation and can have a major influence on the ultimate shape of that budget. In some counties, the chief fiscal officer and/or treasurer (sometimes the same person) performs this role.

The county counsel is a key part of the county management team. In some counties, the district attorney fills that role. In other counties, there is a separate appointed office of county counsel. County counsel advises the commissioners and the other department heads about their legislative or administrative actions. The office will draft ordinances and contracts, defend the county if it is sued, review all legal notices, and generally work tirelessly to keep the county from legal complications.

When a service district is proposed, county counsel is the key individual in the development of any ballot language and in guiding the commissioners in actions they might take to create the district. Once the district is formed and funded, the county counsel becomes counsel for the district. Budget actions (such as resolutions to adopt a budget) generally are reviewed and approved by counsel prior to being approved by the commissioners; the counsel also reviews real estate activities performed on behalf of the district.

An Extension Staff Chair should have good working relationships with the fiscal officer, the treasurer, the clerk and the elections officer.
Budgets and building relationships

In 18 of the 35 Oregon counties currently funding an Extension program, the Extension budget dollars come primarily from the county general funds. These funds are composed of tax revenues from the general county tax base and incidental funds not legally earmarked for other purposes. Your adopted budget is a statement (as determined by the County Commissioners and their budget committee) of the importance of the Extension program to county residents in comparison to the other competing demands for general fund dollars. Because most county departments perform state-mandated services like property tax assessment and tax collection (for all taxing governmental and school units in the county), road construction and maintenance, law enforcement and jail management, land-use planning, elections, property deed recording, and surveying/map management, the amount of discretionary dollars in any given budget year is small. Non-mandated services include parks, senior services, libraries, economic development and other social services. All counties have statutory health and mental health responsibilities (for which they receive state dollars), but counties may choose not to provide these directly and contract them instead (i.e. “pass-through” those state dollars).

Mandated services generally have some specific responsibilities attached to them but also will have a much larger set of public expectations against which the commissioners must balance other competing claims for limited resources. For example, there are specific requirements that the Sheriff’s Office serve subpoenas and run a jail, but there is nothing in statute saying how many road deputies are needed or how old the deputies’ vehicles can be. However, county risk and liability must be managed effectively and that (plus public pressure) often directs where resources go once the basic mandated requirements are funded.

As of late 2006, there are 18(?) Extension Service Districts in Oregon. These districts also have county commissioners as their governing body, but funds generated by a Service District tax base is required to be spent to support that county’s Oregon State University Extension educational mission. The District, at the discretion of the governing body of Commissioners, can choose to levy less than the District’s maximum tax rate allows.

It is important to note that what best constitutes the Extension educational mission for each county is somewhat flexible and is a matter for negotiation between the Staff Chair, the Commissioners, and the Oregon State University. This is true of Service District and general fund Extension structures. As Staff Chair, you must help shape the conversation within your county and with the University.

It is imperative that Staff Chairs have well-constructed relationships with their commissioners. Commissioners have the right to expect the following:

• Transparency in your budget formulation and management
• Clearly articulated Extension mission and program delivery
• Effective programming that meets the County’s needs
• Communication with them about program results
• A minimum of controversy that reaches their desks as a result of the Extension program
What you should expect from County Commissioners is access to discuss important issues for Extension, a reasonably straight-forward perspective about where Extension fits into their vision for the county, a willingness to engage in programmatic discussions, and a general sense of direction they believe the budget process is heading as they prepare the first drafts.

It is important to schedule visits with the Commissioners and County Administrator to update them about the accomplishments and direction of the county Extension program. Invite them to a staff meeting and/or advisory committee meeting. Involve them in program events as appropriate. Remember, they are often very busy and will appreciate venues that provide them with high impact and high visibility within the county.

Another way to develop and maintain relationships is to regularly participate in county department head meetings. This allows you the opportunity to discuss your program and ask for advice as you see fit. In addition, you will learn about the opportunities and challenges facing the county and where Extension might play a positive role. This takes a lot of time and may not be viewed as appropriate in all cases.

There also are numerous indirect ways to communicate with your Commissioners. Add them to your newsletter mailing lists. Commissioners won’t always read them (and some will never will), but newsletters effectively spotlight your programs. Washington and Clackamas county offices prepare single page update sheets highlighting their Extension programs and a calendar of events. Other counties produce annual reports covering the past year. Visit with your Associate Director and other Staff Chairs for other effective communication tools.

All commissioners and legislators are diligent readers of local newspapers, so positive coverage of Extension efforts in the community is very important. Alert the local paper about newsworthy events, send the paper notices of upcoming meetings, and discuss potential newsworthy activities regularly. Most small, rural county offices have little trouble developing positive relationships with local newspapers, but it is more difficult in larger, urban areas. For news coverage of statewide interest, the news group in Extension and Experiment Station Communications (EESC) on campus can help.

In general fund counties, the county budget committee consists of the Commissioners and an equal number of lay people appointed by the Commissioners. It can be very helpful to have the lay budget committee members knowledgeable of the Extension program in your county. If asked to provide possible names for budget committee members, take the opportunity to provide names of thoughtful people that will serve the county budget process well. The same tools for informing Commissioners and legislators will be helpful for budget committee members.

Your budget committee will have commissioners as an integral part of the group by statute if you are a service district county. Your county may decide to use their regular budget committee for the Extension Service District budget committee or they may ask you for names to designate as the lay members of a separate service district budget committee. They are responsible for the ultimate appointments.
As budgets are developed and presented, the Staff Chair must have an understanding of Extension’s mission and how county dollars further that mission. If you maintain an overall advisory committee, share the preliminary budget for their comments and advice. Extension clientele may wish to be involved in the budget process through direct testimony and/or letters to the Commissioners. You or your advisory committee will want to work with clientele to present a consistent message. Although Commissioners can be asked to serve on Extension advisory committees, most probably would not choose to do so.

Much of the earlier information relates to the development of the county Extension budget also applies to establishing relationships with your state senators and representatives with respect to the OSU Extension Service statewide budget. There are protocols for the kinds of contacts that you as an OSU employee can engage in during the legislative session. Ideally, you will be on a first-name basis with your legislators and they will be reasonably informed of the local Extension program going into the legislative session. Clientele who have close ties to legislators can be effective in conveying information relative to the impacts of the programs and the consequences, positive or negative, about budget levels.

**Elections and the Extension office**

It is inevitable that you as Staff Chair and some of your staff will develop strong relationships with elected officials. However, when performing in any official capacity, you must be firmly neutral. You can contribute to a candidate as a *private citizen*; if the contribution is more than $50, however, it will be reported under your name. You can write private letters to the editor as long as you don’t invoke OSU or your position in the letter. Visit with candidates for legislative and relevant county positions, if they are willing, to describe your county Extension program. Visits from clientele can also be very helpful during the election. All candidates will appreciate honesty, transparency and fair play.

**Conclusions**

Oregon legislative representatives and county government officials are partners in the delivery of county Extension educational programs. They provide our resources and can provide valuable feedback relative to effectiveness and future directions. Every Staff Chair should make it a priority to cultivate good communication with partners and encourage staff and clientele to do the same. A well-orchestrated partnership will improve our educational effectiveness and long-term program stability.