
Introduction: Congratulations on Being Elected County Commissioner...Now Get To Work!

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Congratulations! You have been elected county commissioner. You may be feeling like the dog that caught the bus: exhausted, overwhelmed, and asking yourself, “now what?” You can take comfort in the fact that you are not the first newly elected county commissioner to ask this question. In fact, as a county commissioner you will undoubtedly ask yourself variations of this question throughout your tenure in office. Whether you are dealing with a new state mandate or a seemingly impossible local issue, you will often ask yourself, “What do I do now?” There is no standard answer to this question. As a member of a Board of County Commissioners you have broad legislative discretion and “home rule” authority to determine what is right for your county. And with that, comes great responsibility. The responsibility with which you have been entrusted as a county commissioner will test every capacity of your compassion, your intellect and your character. This book is intended to help you be the most effective county commissioner you can be—which is what your community deserves and needs now more than ever. You will not find here a theoretical treatise on governing; this is practical guide, a “field manual,” intended to help you navigate this unique and challenging environment called county government.

Making the transition from candidate to county commissioner is your first of many daunting challenges. It probably seems a bit unfair that just when you were getting the hang of being a candidate, now you have to become an effective county commissioner—and quickly! Gone are the days of the 30-second sound bite solutions that are the friend of the political “outsider.” Your messaging about the change that you would bring to the county commission, whether it was positive or negative, worked. It brought you the overnight distinction of being an insider, “one of them.” Your first instinct may be to continue to campaign, to distance yourself from your colleagues on the Board of County Commissioners. However, the qualities it took to be an effective campaigner are much different from those required to be an effective commissioner.

Being an effective county commissioner requires endless prodding, compromise, and political skill to balance different points of view on your board in order to get anything done for your community. You are now one member of a team of five or seven (or more in just a couple of exceptions in Florida). You will soon experience one of the unique dynamics of being a county commissioner. That is, in very short order, the general public’s individual perception of you will diminish, and you will inherit the larger attitude that people associate with your county commission—good or bad. Even veteran commissioners sometimes do not fully appreciate this because of the tendency (that we all have) to surround themselves with a relatively small universe of people who like and support them, who share their political ideologies, and who are much closer to the finer nuances of local politics and personalities than most. You may have been an effective campaigner by railing against government or by inspiring voters with uplifting messages about your leadership. However,

campaign season is over! Your focus should turn immediately to making your county commission better, which will in turn make you more effective both on the board and in the eyes of the public.

The good news is that there is arguably no other level of government where one well-equipped elected official can have a greater positive influence and generate more dramatic results than at the local level. The bad news is that the stakes have never been higher. County governments today face unprecedented challenges. As *a political subdivision* of the state, county governments are more directly impacted by the significant challenges facing the state than any other government. Florida is in a constant state of “reform” with the rules of the game for county governments continually changing as solutions to chronic problems like the state’s antiquated tax structure remain elusive. A recent cover story from *Time Magazine* entitled “Florida, The Sunset State?” may have described it best:

We've got a water crisis, insurance crisis, environmental crisis and budget crisis to go with our housing crisis. We're first in the nation in mortgage fraud, second in foreclosures. Our consumer confidence just hit an all-time low, the citrus industry, battered by freezes and diseases; the Florida panther, displaced by highways and driveways; the space shuttle, approaching its final countdown. New research suggests that the Everglades is collapsing, that our barrier beaches could be under water within decades, that a major hurricane could cost us \$150 billion. We do wish you were here, because attracting outsiders has always been our primary economic engine, and our engine is sputtering. Population growth is at a 30-year low. School enrollment is declining. Retirees are drifting to the Southwest and the Carolinas, while would-be Floridians who bought preconstruction condos in more optimistic times are scrambling — and often suing — to break contracts. This is our dotcom bust, except worse, because our local governments are utterly dependent on construction for tax revenues, so they're slashing school and public-transportation budgets that were already among the nation's stingiest.¹

In addition, in your county there will be an unlimited array of competing and often conflicting issues unique to your community that will contend for limited resources and will ultimately require county commission action. You and your fellow commissioners will go to great lengths to weigh the issues, values, and perspectives of the community to attempt to reach what is in the *public interest*. Unfortunately, determining the public interest is difficult if not impossible when dealing with most issues of public policy. This is due simply to the fact that people hold very different beliefs, interests, and preferences. To make the aggregation problem still more difficult is when you consider that voters—individually and collectively—even in relatively homogeneous populations can have drastically different political preferences that contradict one another. Fulfilling one interest requires that another interest be denied or at least temporarily set aside. Thus, there is no one public interest, but many public interests. The most difficult task of the county commission will be to consider as many of these interests as practical and determine a clear mandate for county government policy.

The most common and difficult example of weighing contradictory public interests is the taxpayers’ strong and explicit demand for lower taxes that coexists with the continuing demand for more spending for their favorite county programs. Of course, when you compile all of the interests, there is no county program that is not either mandated by the state or someone’s favorite program. Attempting to satisfy both conflicting demands is where county commissions and their professional staff will spend an inordinate amount of their limited time. It is important for you as a county commissioner to appreciate that, at worst, public policy is determined not by doing what is best for the community, but by doing what a few people who make the most noise want.

The paradox that drives this unfortunate outcome is the worst kept secret in all of government. That is, “citizens who take an active role in a political issue are those with a personal stake in the outcome. Citizens who will benefit only from better or more efficient government seldom make their voices heard. The result often times is that political pressures and ultimately political

decisions are made, which tend to be self-serving for those personally affected and involved.”² Truly balancing public interests, those which are shouted from the lectern at county commission meetings as well as those which have not been voiced, is critical because it promotes the *public trust*—which is the foundation for everything you do as a leader in county government. Without it, citizens will not give the assent needed for commissions to truly lead and achieve meaningful progress in your communities.

With the level of cynicism in government today, actively promoting the public trust is essential. Even when counties operate at the highest levels of efficiency and transparency, county governments experience a very unique set of perception issues. The most chronic of these perceptions can be generalized by the following description: Anytime the county commission makes a broad policy recommendation or implements a program or policy that specifically benefits an individual or is consistent with their interests and beliefs, that individual is left with the perception that the county “is doing the right thing,” after considering all of the facts, and in the best interest of the entire community. In sum, they are left with a very positive perception. They feel that the county commission “gets it.” Conversely, when the county commission takes a policy direction or implements a program that adversely affects the special interests of an individual or is counter to their specific beliefs, that person is left with the perception that the county commission made the wrong decision, one that did not consider all of the facts and is not in the interest of the community, but was made to satisfy someone else’s special interest.

To address this perception and other frustrations, commissioners may be tempted to just simply adopt the popular refrain, “let’s run it like a business.” This catch phrase can be a good one politically, for a short time, but in practice is problematic. A frustration experienced by many new county commissioners, particularly those who have worked and enjoyed success in the private sector, is the failure of government to conform to their experience or perception of what it takes to run a successful business. Most people would agree that the basics of running a successful business include: the ability to make strategic decisions to position best your company in the market; to deliver the product that (as close to exactly as possible) reflects what your customers wants; and the ability to make a profit at the price point the customer is willing to pay. The happy customer of business does not care about the salary of the Board of Directors or the CEO or the benefits package of the company’s employees.

The business of county government is very different. Can we learn from the private sector? Yes! In fact, it is imperative in this environment for county governments to learn from other high-performing and innovative organizations, those in the public and private sectors. However, compare the aforementioned basics of what it takes to run a successful business and imagine attempting to do so amid just a few of the following conditions unique to the business climate of county government:

- Your customers (citizens) have a large number of diverse wants and needs which are not consistent and often contradict one another.
- The work of your business (county government) is either not profitable or too difficult or another business (the private sector) would be doing it.
- You are not judged by how much money the business makes, but rather by how little you spend.
- There are endless rules and regulations that constrain the flexibility of the business to deploy people, money and other resources—and are intended for that purpose.
- All of your Board of Directors (County Commission) meetings are publicly noticed and probably even televised.
- Every business decision you make is subject to the debate of all of your customers.
- Even individuals whose interests are counter to the success of the business are invited to participate and weigh in on behalf of other public and private interests.

- The Board of Directors of the business likely have fundamentally conflicting views of how the business should be run, and perhaps even what the fundamental purpose of the business should be in the first place.
- Any action of the Board of Directors (any indiscretions of employees, or any imaginable event associated with the daily business operations) are reported and delivered to the home of all of your customers every morning (or immediately through any number of electronic media).

These are just a few of the business conditions that exist for county government. Can you imagine running a successful business in this environment? The dominant principles of equity in the public sector, and profit in the private sector, drive important cultural differences that are key to both fulfilling their distinct missions. Of course, efficiency and effectiveness are keys to the success of “business” in both private and public sector. And as in any business, this book is intended to provide county commissioners with a thorough understanding the inherent complexities, and the unique environment of the business of county government.

To be an effective county commissioner requires no expertise in government or business. In fact, there have been and continue to be county commissioners from all walks of life who lend their unique talents and perspectives to the governing of their county—and whose communities are better because of their service. These commissioners, as well as professional managers and long-time observers of county government, will advise that while commissioners may have different backgrounds, personalities and political philosophies, there are common traits shared by effective county commissioners that include:

- A passion for being the best steward of your county during your time on the county commission—to leave your county better than before you were elected;
- A desire to focus not only on the immediate challenges of the day, but also to have a vision for the future of the county;
- An ability to not only solve problems, but also to add to the problem-solving capacity of your community;
- A recognition that you represent all of the citizens of the county, those who voted for you and those who did not;
- A facility to get things done for your constituents while promoting the collegial nature of the county commission;
- A thorough understanding of the issues before the county commission and an appreciation of the impact of your actions on all of the various stakeholders in the community;
- An adherence to exercising ethical behavior in the performance of your duties and an avoidance of even the appearance of impropriety;
- An appreciation of the role of the professional manager (county manager or county administrator) and an understanding of the separation of executive and legislative responsibilities;
- An understanding of the roles and responsibilities of not only the county government, but also of the state, constitutional officers, city governments, and other general- and single-purpose governmental entities; and
- A commitment to being a continuous learner of what it takes to be a better county commissioner.

While your commitment to continuous learning as a county commissioner may begin with this handbook, it is only an introduction to the wealth of resources and training available to you through the Florida Association of Counties (FAC). It has long been said that, “there is no job

description for being a county commissioner.” And the absence of something as prescriptive as a job description is probably a good thing given the unique challenges of each county. However, this book recognizes that lack of specificity by providing you with the most important information on a variety of aspects unique to Florida county government critical to your effectiveness as a county commissioner. In this edition of the *Florida County Commissioner Handbook* you will learn about the history and evolution of county government, where counties derive their structure and authority, budgeting, financing and operating county programs and services, planning and growth management, intergovernmental relations, economic development and much more. As you begin your journey as a county commissioner, do so with confidence in the conviction that got you elected, and the understanding that you’re not alone. While the challenges facing all counties appear to be greater than ever before, so is FAC’s commitment to your success as a county commissioner in ensuring the viability and sustainability of your county—which is what makes communities work!

NOTES

¹ Grunwald, Michael (July 10, 2008). Florida, The Sunset State? *Time Magazine*. July 10, 2008

² Banovetz, James M. (1998). *Managing Local Government: Cases in Decision-Making*. Second Ed. International City/County Management Association.