

# Minnesota Counties



A quarterly publication of the Association of Minnesota Counties.

## Ramsey County Commissioner Mary Jo McGuire Elected NACo Second Vice President

Ramsey County Commissioner and Association of Minnesota Counties (AMC) Second Vice President Mary Jo McGuire was elected National Association of Counties (NACo) Second Vice President during their annual conference in Prince George's County, MD, on July 12.

"I just wanted to take a moment to thank all of you for your support during my campaign," McGuire wrote in an email to her Minnesota supporters following the election. "From your words of encouragement to volunteering to spend time at my campaign booth at the NACo annual conference, the support that I have received from so many of you in my home state means the world to me and I cannot thank you enough."

**SUMMER  
2021**

July

August

September

VOLUME 65, ISSUE 3



Members of the Minnesota Delegation celebrated McGuire's election at the NACo Annual Conference on July 12.

McGuire's election puts her on track to become NACo's president in July 2023. As a member of NACo's Executive Committee, McGuire will help steer the overall direction of the association in concert with its Board of Directors.

NACo's mission includes uniting county officials to advocate for county government priorities in federal policymaking; promoting exemplary county policies and practices; nurturing leadership skills and expand knowledge networks; optimizing county and taxpayer resources and cost savings; and enriching the public's understanding of county government. ■



Members of the NACo Executive Committee include (above, from left to right) Past President Gary Moore (Judge-Executive, Boone County, Ky.), President Larry Johnson (Commissioner, DeKalb County, GA), First Vice President Denise Winfrey (Commissioner, Will County, IL), and Mary Jo McGuire (Commissioner, Ramsey County, MN).

## Minnesotans Appointed to Other NACo Leadership Positions

With more than 60 in-person and 20 virtual delegates, Minnesota counties were well represented at this year's National Association of Counties (NACo) annual conference in Prince George's County Maryland. Minnesota is a 100% membership state and all 87 counties are members of NACo.

Congratulations to the following Minnesotans selected for national leadership roles by NACo President Larry Johnson:

- Joe Atkins, Vice Chair, Dakota County, Telecommunications and Technology Steering Committee
- Toni Carter, Ramsey County, Subcommittee Chair, Juvenile Subcommittee, Justice and Public Safety Steering Committee
- Tarryl Clark, Stearns County, Chair, Telecommunications and Technology Steering Committee, and Vice Chair, Rural Action Caucus (RAC)
- Angela Conley, Hennepin County, Vice Chair, Large Urban County Caucus (LUCC) Steering Committee
- Bob Fox, Renville County, Vice Chair, Agriculture and Rural Affairs Steering Committee
- Judson Freed, Ramsey County, Subcommittee Vice Chair, Homeland Security Subcommittee, Justice and Public Safety Steering Committee
- Marion Greene, Hennepin County, Vice Chair, Immigration Reform Task Force
- Trista Matascastillo, Ramsey County, Vice Chair, Veterans and Military Services Committee
- Mary Jo McGuire, Ramsey County, Vice Chair, Arts & Culture Commission, and Vice Chair, Programs & Services Standing Committee
- Susan Morris, Isanti County, Subcommittee Vice Chair, Medicaid and Indigent Care Subcommittee, Health Steering Committee
- Terry Ocana, Chippewa County, Vice Chair, IT Advisory Council
- Victoria Reinhardt, Ramsey County, Subcommittee Chair, Air Quality Subcommittee, Environment, Energy and Land Use Steering Committee, and Vice Chair, Resilient Counties Advisory Board
- Richard Sanders, Polk County, Subcommittee Vice Chair, Highway/Highway Safety Subcommittee, Transportation Steering Committee
- Vance Stuehrenberg, Blue Earth County, Vice Chair, Rural Action Caucus, and Vice Chair, Transportation Steering Committee
- Lisa Weik, Washington County, Subcommittee Vice Chair, Ports Subcommittee, Transportation Steering Committee

If you'd like more information about how to get involved, please contact Julie Ring, AMC Executive Director, at [ring@mncounties.org](mailto:ring@mncounties.org). ■

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## Happy Summer!

By Rich Sve, Lake County Commissioner and AMC President

Over the July 4th holiday, many from our family gathered to celebrate Independence Day. Food, yard games, and reconnection filled the weekend. Katie, an "adopted" family member called her mother at 10:00 a.m. on July 4th, put her on speaker and said, "Let's hear it mother!" And across the phone came the music for our National Anthem and her melodic voice singing the refrains of the Star Spangle Banner. We all rose, placed our hands over our hearts and began our country's celebration.

One of the highlights of that weekend was observing nieces, nephews, cousins, and grandchildren playing in and near the lake: Lucas with his toes barely touching the water, Gavin and Emma running in until knee deep and then screaming while running back, Henry and Abbie wading along the dock until the water touched their chins, and then there is the intrepid Amelia. Amelia would stand on the first board of the dock waving her arms and instructing all to clear a path. Then like an Olympic broad jumper she would sprint full tilt down the pier and launch herself through the ether in attempts to achieve the perfect "cannonball."

The past few months have felt similar for this commissioner, and those at AMC. As our counties and country has begun to recover from the pandemic, we found ourselves with our toes touching the water but unsure if we were ready to commit to the next steps. As more state restrictions were lifted, we waded in a bit deeper. Counties opened their doors and county boards reunited in their board rooms. AMC staff began returning to the office.

Plans and decisions of when to return to in person meetings soon rose to the top of the AMC agenda. With District Meetings scheduled to be our first attempt, our chins touched the water.

At AMC District 1's meeting on June 2, we had a foot on the dock and were waving to clear a path. For many of us, this district meeting was the first time to reconnect in person with our colleagues from around the region. There were some tentative fist bumps, many handshakes, and numerous hugs. I was happy to attend all district meetings this spring, where I was able to hear firsthand about the challenges counties have faced during the past months, and the innovations that have resulted. I was able to meet many of our newly elected commissioners, and in the final district meeting in Otter Tail County, I even reconnected with five commissioners who were part of my new commissioner class of 2009. One unique highlight was performing a wedding while on the tour. Julie Ring said, "This has to be a first, the AMC president performing a wedding for an AMC past president on a county board meeting day!" As usual, I believe Julie is correct. It was truly an honor! Thank you, Chris and Amanda!

With the experience of District Meetings under our belts, more than 60 Minnesota delegates travelled to the National Association of Counties' (NACo) Annual Conference in Prince George's County, Maryland, and another 20 county representatives joined the conference virtually. The positive energy in Prince George's was palpable. The conference included great policy committee discussions (I sit on the Environment, Energy, and Land Use committee as well as the NACo Broadband Task Force), remarks from high-ranking administration officials and members of Congress, and even a visit by Vice President Harris. But it was the connections to colleagues across the country that really stood out. Minnesotans were particularly upbeat, as we worked in support of Second Vice-President Candidate Commissioner Mary Jo McGuire from Ramsey County. Commissioner McGuire's booth was always buzzing with laughter and conversation, as Minnesotans invited county officials from across the country to learn more about Mary Jo. Everyone in the Minnesota delegation worked hard (thank you all!) and shared in the success of the campaign, but no one worked harder than Mary Jo. Having Commissioner McGuire in the leadership of NACo will elevate Minnesota perspectives, and also connect Minnesota counties to the best ideas from across the nation. Congratulations Mary Jo— you ROCK!

The day after returning from NACo, I joined the AMC staff in leading our County Government 201 training for newly elected county officials, who were meeting in-person for the first time. I was pleased to finally have longer conversations with these new colleagues, as we connected over meals and between conference sessions. There's no doubt that we have another engaged and dynamic group of county officials joining the AMC family!

After so many months of only meeting with people via Zoom from my home, the past two months have been a whirlwind of activity. Looking forward much more is scheduled; Board of Directors strategic planning retreat in August, Fall Policy conference in September, then back on the road for Fall District meetings, with the culmination of our work for 2021, the AMC Annual Conference.

Barring any setbacks, our path for the sprint down the dock is clear, and like Amelia, I am positive this run toward our goals will succeed in producing a perfect "cannonball!" ■



## Association of Minnesota Counties

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## New Investment in Minnesota's Local Public Health System

By Sarah Reese, Polk-Norman-Mahnomen Community Health Services Administrator; Polk County Public Health Director

The Local Public Health Association is proud to share that there were numerous accomplishments throughout this legislative session that will improve public health in Minnesota, including several sources of funding to support the work of local public health. Much of the discussion during the 2021 session focused on infectious disease, and in particular, the COVID-19 response and related needs. Since every response is local first, local public health officials from across the state graciously appeared during legislative hearings to discuss their local role in responding in their communities. The legislative accomplishments include:

- **Local Public Health Grant:** The grant was increased by \$7 million per year for local public health and \$500,000 year for tribal public health. The Local Public Health Grant is one of the state's main investments in local public health's state-mandated services. It provides local governments local control to direct dollars to public health priorities specific to their communities. This funding was added to the base, meaning it will be available moving forward.
- **New Local Public Health Funding Distribution Framework:** A new funding distribution framework was established that will dedicate \$6 million per year to community health boards and tribal governments for projects to build public health capacity, pilot new models for providing public health services, and improve the state's public health system. The distribution framework for the funding will be planned throughout the next several months by the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) and the State Community Health Services Advisory Committee. MDH will receive \$1.5 million/year to assess the public health system and oversee the distribution of funds. MDH is also required to compile a report to the legislature on recommendations for changes to the organization and funding of Minnesota's public health system, due in 2023. This funding was added to the base, meaning it will be available moving forward.
- **Statewide Health Improvement Partnership (SHIP):** Although initial proposals called for cuts to SHIP funding, SHIP funding was sustained at the current rate.
- **Tobacco and Vaping Prevention** – The state is increasing investment in tobacco and vaping prevention by \$4 million per year.
- **Asthma Prevention:** Benefits for asthma in Medical Assistance were enhanced to allow for coverage of in-home visits for children with asthma, coverage of products that reduce asthma triggers, and referral to follow-up educational services.
- **Home Visiting Grants:** Funding for home visiting programs was increased by \$1.5 million per year, over the next three years.

In total, there is \$26 million per biennium in new funding to support the work of local public health. We want to recognize members of the Health and Human Services Committees in both bodies, and particularly Committee Chairs, Senator Michelle Benson and Representative Tina Liebling, for their leadership in ensuring historic levels of new investment in local public health.

We are looking forward to continued partnership with our local public health agencies, county leadership, the State Community Health Services Advisory Committee, the Minnesota Department of Health, and legislative leaders to continue to strengthen and innovate in Minnesota's local public health system. ■

It's time to recognize and celebrate the creative and innovative ways that counties have responded to the unprecedented challenges of the past year.

AMC's Annual Awards are an excellent opportunity to celebrate the accomplishments of county staff and programs that found new ways to deliver essential services and serve citizens despite all of the obstacles faced during the past year.

*Submit nominations to honor individuals or programs in the following categories:*

Outstanding Service  
County Achievement  
County Conservation  
Economic Development



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**Nomination Deadline: Friday, October 22, 2021.**

Awards are presented at the AMC Annual Conference in December.

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# MCIT Board Announces Dividend

The MCIT Board of Directors weighed a number of financial factors during its June 11 meeting to determine that a \$12 million dividend was appropriate this year.

The discussion occurred following a comprehensive actuarial review of MCIT's reserves and claims experience, completion of the annual audit and year-end report on the performance of MCIT's investment portfolio. Although the actuary's analysis considers factors such as past claims development, administrative expenses and reinsurance costs, dividends have primarily been a reflection of the performance of MCIT's investment portfolio.

During the past several years, the board of directors has given special attention to investment income and the impact of reserve changes on MCIT's bottom line. As the topic of a dividend was discussed this year, board members reflected on key factors influencing their decision to release funds in 2021.

## 2021 Dividend Decision

At the conclusion of the 2020 audit, MCIT's net income (which includes an unrealized gain in investment) decreased from 2019.

Approximately \$1.4 million of the decrease occurred in the workers' compensation division with an additional decrease occurring in the property/casualty division in the amount of \$193,000. With this information, the board was positioned to announce a \$12 million dividend in 2021, which breaks down per division as follows:

- Workers' compensation division: \$11 million
- Property/casualty division: \$1 million

## Dividends Continue

Since 1991, MCIT has consistently returned fund balance to members when MCIT's actuary has determined that a dividend is actuarially sound and fiscally prudent. To date, MCIT has returned a total of \$366 million to members.

Held to the strict investment requirements of Minnesota Statutes, Chapter 118A, the changing economy will continue to affect MCIT's portfolio, particularly as investments mature and are reinvested in instruments that return a lesser yield.

## MCIT Remains Fully Funded

MCIT does not want to retain funds not necessary to the operation of MCIT. In announcing a dividend, the board is mindful of the need to ensure that the program remains fully funded and is in a position to respond to unexpected events that could affect the fiscal health of MCIT.

This requires maintaining adequate levels of funds to mitigate current and future risks of revenue shortfalls or unanticipated expenses, so as to prevent needing to assess members for operational shortfalls.

In all its decisions, the board remains vigilant in retaining sufficient funds to ensure that the Trust is fully funded and able to pay all claims and costs associated with its operations.

Members will receive notice of their specific 2021 dividend in late July. Dividends will be paid to members in November.

### Dividends Reflect Claims, Investments

Workers' compensation and property/casualty rates reflect the cost of paying for expected losses and covering MCIT operations. No consideration is built into the rate-making process that contemplates building a surplus for the purpose of ensuring a dividend.

The decision to provide a dividend reduces the amount of money available for investment, which may eventually affect MCIT's ability to return a dividend to members.



## 2022 Rates Influenced by Cost of Reinsurance, Claim Trends

As work continues on establishing the cost of coverage for 2022, MCIT's actuary delivered the annual rate analysis to the MCIT Board of Directors July 9. With the backdrop of increasing reinsurance costs, continued development of jail and law enforcement claims, and the uncertain effects of the pandemic on member operations, Scott Anderson of Actuarial Advisors provided his 2022 rate recommendations for both the property/casualty division and the workers' compensation division.

Rates for individual lines of coverage are applied to each member's unique exposure base, determining their individual costs of coverage.

### Property/Casualty Rates Increase

Anderson's look at the individual coverage lines of property, auto, inland marine, general liability, public employees liability and law enforcement liability resulted in a recommended 6.1 percent aggregate rate increase, down from a 12 percent increase for 2021. Rates among individual coverage lines vary.

Public employees liability and law enforcement liability will see mild rate increases, 4.9 percent and 0.5 percent, respectively, for 2022 due to the trend of adverse development primarily in the area of jail and law enforcement claims. These lines saw a combined 54 percent rate increase in 2021, suggesting that risk management efforts and the impact of reduced jail activity during the pandemic have helped flatten the recent volatile history.

Notably, property coverage continues to trend unfavorably. MCIT's catastrophic weather and physical damage losses, coupled with the increased cost of property reinsurance for 2021 resulted in a rate increase of 20.9 percent for property coverage in 2022. Anderson reminded the board that this line of coverage was also affected by the reinsurer's requirement to increase MCIT's portion of each covered claim from \$500,000 to \$1 million and further excluding reimbursement for auto physical damage arising from a property loss such as a hail or wind storm or fire from the treaty.

The results of Phase III of MCIT's three-year property appraisal project will be included in the cost of coverage in 2022. Contributions will reflect revised building values established in this phase, which was cut short last year due to the pandemic, impacting 16 counties and their affiliated members in the southern third of the state.

Property contributions will also reflect a 5.8 percent increase applied to building values and a 1.8 percent increase applied to building contents and property in the open values for members' covered property, a result of an annual study designed to ensure that scheduled values keep pace with the cost to replace damaged property. This year's analysis was influenced greatly by the increased cost in labor and building materials due to the pandemic.

According to Anderson, rate decreases are appropriate for general liability, auto liability and inland marine. In spite of the property/casualty aggregate rate increase for 2022, property/casualty rates have decreased by 17.2 percent since 2005.

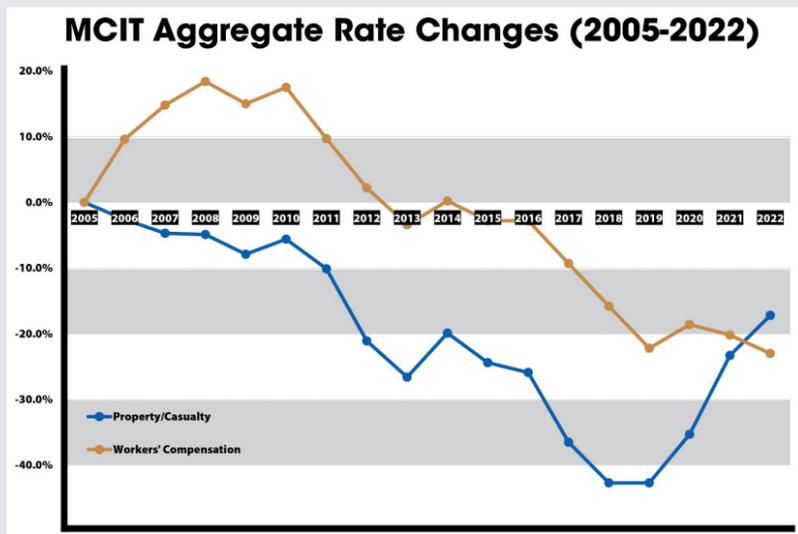
### Workers' Compensation Rates Decrease

Turning attention to the workers' compensation division, Anderson reported that because of continued favorable loss trends and claims management practices, a 2.8 percent aggregate rate decrease is warranted for 2022.

Anderson advised that generally, workers' compensation rates are trending downward industrywide, and MCIT is following that trend. MCIT's rate decrease, however, is tempered to account for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) claims, arising primarily from law enforcement and jail operations. PTSD claims continue to be a factor for the program, both in terms of frequency and severity.

The impact of the pandemic and specifically the work-from-home order was a discussion point with the board. Anderson advised that although claim frequency was reduced as a result of large-scale working from home, his analysis deliberately minimized that impact as a one-time event in the interest of maintaining rate stability for the program.

MCIT, continued on page 7.



Although the rate for each payroll class code does not vary among members, the cost of workers' compensation coverage is influenced by the individual member's experience modification factor, or "mod factor." This is a reflection of an individual member's claims losses compared to the average of loss experience of all members.

The board's adoption of a 2.8 percent rate decrease brings the overall rate reduction in the workers' compensation division to 23 percent since 2005.

### Renewal Notices Mailed Later This Month

MCIT will mail renewal notices to members no later than Aug. 21 as required by MCIT Bylaws. Members who have questions regarding their 2022 contribution should contact their MCIT underwriting technician. ■

### Auto Deductibles, Ratings Change in 2022

Auto physical damage deductibles and rating structure will change for the 2022 renewal. As part of ongoing underwriting practices, MCIT engaged its actuary to analyze MCIT's historical auto claims data.

The changes are comprised of three components:

- Raising the minimum auto comprehensive and auto collision deductibles to \$500 and \$1,000, respectively.
- Establishing revised deductible offsets in the rating formula at all deductible levels.
- Realigning auto rates for each auto type based on each type's actual loss frequency and severity.

The purpose of these changes is not to increase the amount of contribution a member is charged for auto physical damage coverage but, rather, appropriately to allocate the contribution by vehicle type based on loss history.

Realigning the auto physical damage rating base will affect all members with scheduled vehicles. The actuarial study showed that generally law enforcement vehicles are loss leaders (both frequency and severity). Since the rating base was last modified, the value of these vehicles and cost of their equipment has significantly increased. As a result, the cost to cover them will rise for 2022. Conversely, with the exception of busses, the rates charged to cover all other auto types—for example light, medium and large trucks, and passenger vehicles—will decrease between 10 percent and 32 percent for 2022.

Several factors influence the cost of auto physical damage coverage, including the type of vehicle and corresponding rate, the deductible chosen, and any program rate adjustment based on MCIT's annual rate analysis.

For 2022, there will be a 16.8 percent increase for auto physical damage coverage due primarily to squad vehicle contact with animals and a 14.3 percent decrease in auto liability coverage rates.

## Extension Works With Communities to Help Them Thrive



By Bev Durgan  
Dean, University of Minnesota Extension

One of the joys of a Minnesota summer is attending a county or community fair.

Did you know that county fairs bring in tourists and their money from out of town? Or that most fair-goers say their favorite activities are seeing animals, enjoying food and beverages, and watching Extension 4-H events?

Those are just a few of the findings from a recent collaboration between Extension and Beltrami and Pine counties to study the economic and other impacts of county fairs. The counties' fair boards asked Extension to help them understand how their fairs could be improved for participants, visitors and vendors.

The fairs research is a great example of how Extension conducts research and education with Minnesota communities and organizations to help them thrive. Extension's collaborative work can be tailored to helping counties on a small scale, like this research, or it can be part of ongoing, larger-scale programs like 4-H, where communities prepare their young people to become the next generation of leaders.

The past 17 months have brought all of us many unexpected challenges. As county leaders across Minnesota plan for their communities' futures, Extension is ready to work together. ■



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# Ending a Past Practice



By Melanie Ault, DDA Human Resources, Inc.

A binding past practice can come when the collective bargaining agreement (CBA) clearly says something different than what you've been doing or is stated vaguely but consistently implemented in one way. When and how can the employer change the practice?

A binding past practice is a prior course of conduct consistently applied in response to a recurring situation or circumstances and is regarded by both employer and union as the correct and required response. Such a practice applied over time can become binding on the employer and the union. A past practice could be anything, from allowing free parking to combining paid and unpaid breaks. What happens when either the union or the employer wants to halt or change the practice?

## Binding Past Practice Elements

All must be met:

- **Clarity and consistency:** Unequivocal; uniform response given a specific set of circumstances.
- **Longevity and repetition:** Has gone on for a long period of time, occurring multiple times rather than just once.
- **Acceptability:** Accepted by the parties as the correct and customary way.
- **A consideration of the underlying circumstances:** The practice is a result of a particular set of consistent underlying circumstances.
- **Mutuality:** Both parties know the practice exists and accept it.

## Ending a Past Practice

Commonly, to end a past practice, place the union on notice during an appropriate timeframe, by clearly communicating that the county intends to end the past practice at the expiration of the current CBA.

- **Timing:** Provide notice upon opening contract negotiations with the union and before the CBA expires, of the intent to end a past practice.
- **Clear Written Notice:** In the county's opening contract negotiations proposal, include written notice of the county's intent to stop/change the practice following the expiration of the CBA. The elements of acceptability and mutuality no longer exist. If needed, propose alternate language.

This process and timing allow the union the opportunity to negotiate to continue the past practice, or to bargain differently with the knowledge that the practice will no longer continue. Keeping good notes regarding negotiation proposals and discussion at the table are important in case the matter goes to arbitration.

## Clear CBA Language

When the CBA language is clear but not been followed, give proper clear, timely, specific notice of intent to follow the clear CBA language at the end of the current contract. To maintain the practice, the union must negotiate new language to incorporate the practice. If that is unsuccessful, then the practice may end and the clear contract language will apply.

## Ambiguous CBA Language

If the CBA language is ambiguous and the longstanding practice clarifies or gives meaning to it, the practice became the interpretation of the ambiguous language. Timely notice can be given to the other party of intent to stop the practice; however, if the other party does not agree to a language change, the practice does not stop.

## Options Outside of Bargaining Season

If the county identifies a binding past practice that needs to change, but the CBA is settled, there are a few approaches to try. If a practice is costly, clearly incorrect, or it is contributing to a compounding problem, pursue a timely correction.

- **Approach the union and determine their willingness to enter into a clarifying Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) that, considering a new discovery, the practice needs to be changed.** Craft the MOA to state that the practice will cease on a future date (e.g., next pay period, next month). The county acknowledges one practice has been applied, but that the county has now identified the law or rules apply differently, and the practice therefore needs to cease. The union understands the change in practice, and is in agreement with the change.
- **During the next round of bargaining, negotiate language,** e.g., "The parties agree that the county may take whatever reasonable steps are deemed necessary to comply with the provisions within the CBA, state law, and/or federal law." This language may support the county in more easily implementing a future correction, if necessary.
- **If the practice at issue is contrary to law, review the savings clause in the existing CBA.** It probably states that by administering the CBA, the county cannot not abide by state or federal law, and if anything conflicts with law, then that part of the CBA is not enforceable. It may allow reopening the CBA for the sole purpose of conforming with law. This would allow for the county to add/modify/remove specific language into the CBA to abide by law.

Find helpful materials on labor relations and past practices in our Knowledge Base at [www.amcddahrsupport.com](http://www.amcddahrsupport.com). ■

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# MACO 2021 Legislative Wrap-Up

By Troy Olsen, MACO Lobbyist, and  
MACO Legislative Committee Co-chairs:  
Michael Stalberger (Blue Earth County),  
Julie Hanson (Scott County), Amber Bougie  
(Hennepin County), Betti Kamolz (Brown  
County), Debby Erickson (Crow Wing County)



Legislating and influencing the legislature from a distance was again a major challenge this year due to COVID restrictions.

Though the Capitol Complex remained physically closed to the public during the legislative session, MACO was active on legislative issues as opportunities allowed. MACO members and the legislative team frequently provided technical information to legislators during individual Zoom meetings.

Both the House and Senate advanced election administration bills in 2021. The two proposals were ideologically and politically as far apart as one could imagine. With so many controversial election-related issues being discussed and due to the turbulent political atmosphere surrounding election issues, MACO's legislative team agreed that remaining above the fray of much of the discussion by limiting MACO's involvement was best.

In addition to working on legislative priorities, MACO often weighed in to play defense. This was the case when MACO/MCRA worked to oppose a provision to add a surcharge to mortgage and deed recordings as a revenue source for SWCDs. The provision did not become law.

MACO representative Mike Stalberger also met with the House Taxes Committee Chair to discuss the additional complexities of creating a Minnesota Property Taxpayer Day for Truth in Taxation meetings as well as to educate the Chair about the administrative challenges of adding additional information to TnT notices. The final tax bill did not contain a Minnesota Property Taxpayer Day but did contain provisions requiring county auditors to add a great deal of information to TnT notices.

Here is an update on the progress of some of MACO's legislative priorities:

- **Appropriate funds or establish a grant program for clean-up and maintenance expenses counties are required to pay regarding abandoned tax-forfeited properties.** MACO supported an AMC provision allowing counties to use 100% of tax-forfeited property sale proceeds for correcting blighted conditions and/or remediation of these properties. Ultimately the provision was not included in the final funding bill that passed during the special session.
- **Support increased fees for transactions to cover all costs for the services now being performed at deputy registrar offices.** Though the legislature did not pass a fee increase to benefit deputy registrars, the final transportation funding bill contains language to authorize and fund an independent review of MNDRIIVE, including examining workload changes for deputy registrars and driver's license agents. The expectation is that adjustments will be made in the 2022 Legislative Session based on the study.
- **Allow local deputy registrar offices to offer expanded services to customers such as local online purchases, by-mail transactions, or kiosk services.** Legislation directing the Department of Public Safety to implement a process for self-service kiosks for motor vehicle registration renewals also was included in the final transportation funding bill. While details still need to be worked out, this is a significant step forward for deputy registrars.

MACO supports efforts that simplify, modernize, and make the operation and administration of county government services more efficient. MACO members are committed to providing effective services related to property tax administration, elections, licenses/registrations, vital records, and recording. They look for any opportunity to work toward these objectives. Our members and membership represent many of the administrative sides of county government and enjoy a healthy relationship with legislators as subject matter experts. Some of our legislative priorities also overlap with the work of AMC's Blue Ribbon Committee on County Government Operations, and our associations will continue to collaborate on those efforts. We look forward to working with AMC and other groups at the Legislature to further these important items. ■

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# Bringing New Voices to Citizen Advisory Committees

By Michael Williams, PhD, Stearns County  
Administrator, MACA Secretary



## Citizen Advisory Committees

County government often includes citizen boards, commissions, committees, and task forces to advise county government (hereinafter referred to as advisory committees). These advisory committees make recommendations on issues relating to policies directly impacting the community, in addition, to the welfare and quality of life in the county. County advisory committees are created because of state and federal legislation, agreements with other governments and agencies, and local needs. The volunteers serving on these committees provide a valuable inter-relationship between the citizens of the county and its government.

Advisory committees are established to serve a variety of functions. The fundamental purposes for utilizing committees in support of county government are:

1. To ensure full representation of the citizens of the county, in its diversity, in county decision making processes.
2. To ask residents to help define community standards and norms.
3. To provide technical expertise in certain areas.
4. To provide an independent sounding board for issues, ideas, and policy matters.
5. To make recommendations to the county board and county staff.
6. To meet requirements of state law.

In Stearns County, examples of these committees include the Planning Commission, the Board of Adjustment, the Dairy Advisory Committee, the Park Commission, the Feedlot Review Committee, the Human Services Advisory Committee, the Community Corrections Advisory Board, and the Mental Health Task Force. The county board appoints individuals to these advisory committees on a regular basis. Each committee has specific staff assigned and designated to support its function. The function and reporting relationship to the Board will vary from committee to committee and from county to county.

*Today, many governing bodies are considering specific methods to bring differing opinions, backgrounds, and social experiences to citizen advisory committees, adding to the diversity of those citizens participating in local governance.*

## Increasing Diversity on County Citizen Advisory Committees

Increasing diversity is the practice of including people with different opinions, backgrounds (educational degrees and social experience), religious beliefs, political beliefs, sexual orientations, heritage, and life experiences. Thus, diversity includes, but is not limited to, differences in age, racial and ethnic, socioeconomic, geographic, and academic/professional backgrounds.

A diverse advisory committee can more fully represent the make-up of the county itself; bringing together people with different experiences, skills, perspectives, and insights to consider and solve problems. Diversity often increases innovation, creativity, and strategic thinking because teams of people who come from different backgrounds can draw upon their unique experiences and wider range of knowledge to spark new, innovative ideas and better decision-making.

*An active way to bring new voices into your county government is to consider the appointment process and policies surrounding citizen advisory committees. Below are some suggestions to increase diversity on your boards and committees.*

## Actions to Help Achieve Greater Diversity of Citizen Voices on County Citizen Advisory Committees

- **Conduct a review or survey of current appointees to ascertain demographic data.** Whether an actual survey of appointees is conducted, or an anecdotal review is conducted, the board can create a description of members of the committee by committee and in its entirety.
- **Alter application forms.** Develop application forms that allow applicants to self-identify by age, gender, or as a member of another designated minority group, and allow applicants to provide information that will help the appointing authority increase and maintain diversity on committees.
- **Review the make-up of each committee annually before making appointments.** Prior to making an appointment to any advisory committee, have someone provide the board with the names and known demographic data of current members, in addition to that of previous applications and current committee members.
- **Alternate committee chairs on an annual basis.** Part of increasing the diversity of advisory committees includes diversity of leadership of these committees. If the chair of a committee is always the same individual, that person can, knowingly or unknowingly, come to dominate or unintentionally bias the discussions of the committee. This can lead to diluting the viewpoints and representation of the other members of the committee. Most county boards alternate the position of chairperson; and this practice has been very successful for the operation of counties. While everyone who has served as chair has varying strengths, over time, the best practices of each person holding the position have carried forward creating a stronger, more well-run

board. This same practice can increase the strength of advisory committees, as well. Members gain appreciation for the role of chair and its function, as well as learning how to work more collaboratively with other members. Rotating chairs also develops additional skills of members in terms of both leadership abilities and more active participation and involvement in the work of the committee. Those members also are then better equipped to develop into other leadership or advocacy roles within the county or in their own communities.

- **Enact term limits for appointees.** Limit appointees to two terms and, if applicable, eliminate the ability to be reappointed after a defined waiting period. Counties have different policies regarding term limits. Promoting turnover on committees will enhance the Board's ability to appoint more diverse members.
- **Analyze the requirement for specified criteria for some appointees.** Some committee bylaws require appointees to be of a specific profession or establish other specific criteria for occupying a seat on the committee. These requirements might also limit the ability to find diverse candidates. A board can analyze these requirements and make suggestions for change.
- **Expand the membership of committees.** Expanding the number of members of advisory committees can offer immediate opportunity to appoint people with differing views and backgrounds. In addition, it offers a long-term benefit of facilitating more opportunities to add diversity and involvement of a greater number of citizens.
- **Consider diversity targets when making appointments.** While the board may not know everything about potential appointees, when making appointments, the board could consider specific diversity criteria amongst candidates with a wide variety of skills, experiences, and education. If your county committees have a lack of women, or young people, or people of color, then special attention and intentionality could be given to both recruiting and appointing more women, younger people, and people of color. Interested and qualified candidates representing the diversity of the county's population, as well as those voices that increase the diverse make-up of the specific committee, can be encouraged to be appointed based on targets. For example, aiming to have committee make-ups of 50% women by a certain date would be a reasonable target.

## Conclusion

Hopefully, because of the changes such as those mentioned above, your Board and future Boards will improve both their recruitment and appointments efforts, often finding renewed and greater interest of candidates desiring to be considered. By increasing diversity of thought in advisory committees, a county is often seen as more approachable to its residents, more socially and fiscally responsible, and increasingly accessible to a greater number of people, including those seeking employment and county services. Diverse advisory boards can also help mitigate the challenges counties face in engaging marginalized communities. Arguably, a county's mission and values cannot be fully achieved without the voice of all people being heard. ■



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