

# **Douglas County**

# **Organizational Study**



**Report on County Board Size  
and Form of Administration**

**October 2006**

## **STUDY GROUP APPOINTMENT**

On May 18, 2006, the Douglas County Board of Supervisors authorized the formation of the “County Organizational Study Group” to examine issues related to board size and form of county administration.

The need for study evolved from two recent developments:

1. A new Wisconsin law went into effect in January 2006. The law allows adjustments in county board size once between redistricting driven by the U.S. Census population count. Under the law, the Board can choose to decrease its size or citizens can petition to place the issue before voters.
2. A suggestion by the Douglas County Taxpayers Association for the County to review and consider a potential change in the structure of the County’s form of administration (i.e. Administrative Coordinator vs. County Administrator vs. County Executive).

The following individuals were appointed to the Study Group:

Carol J. Johnson, Co-Chair  
(26th District)  
10719E County Road B  
Lake Nebagamon, WI 54849

Kevin Peterson  
2016 Hill Avenue  
Superior, WI 54880

Bernie Hughes  
11 F Hayes Court  
Superior, WI 54880

David Podratz, Co-Chair  
810 East 2nd Street  
Superior, WI 54880

David Minor  
205 Belknap Street  
Superior, WI 54880

**ADVISORS:**  
Susan Sandvick (Advisor)  
Douglas County Clerk  
Courthouse Room 101  
1313 Belknap Street  
Superior, WI 54880

Kay Johnson (21st District)  
14072E Johnson Road  
Brule, WI 54820

Bobbi Lenz  
6530 Ogden Avenue  
Superior, WI 54880

Fariba Pendleton (Advisor)  
UW-Extension  
Courthouse Room 107  
1313 Belknap Street  
Superior, WI 54880

Jack Sweeney (16th District)  
1601 East 6th Street  
Superior, WI 54880

Frank Ingram  
2935 S. Wadena Avenue  
Superior, WI 54880

Nick Baker (5th District)  
P.O. Box 274  
Superior, WI 54880

Geoffrey Wendorf  
2350 Ohio Avenue  
Superior, WI 54880

Study Group Secretary  
Pam Tafelski  
County Clerk’s Office  
Courthouse Room 101  
1313 Belknap Street  
Superior, WI 54880

David Olson  
1501 - 22nd Avenue East  
Superior, WI 54880

Charles McCann  
16679 S. Eagle Point Rd.  
Minong, WI 54859

Staffing for the Study Group, educational research, and resource materials were provided by Fariba Pendleton, UW-Extension, Sue Sandvick, Douglas County Clerk, and Pam Tafelski, County Clerk's office.

### **STUDY GROUP MISSION**

The Study Group developed and approved the following mission statement at their first meeting on May 30, 2006:

*“To examine and research options regarding County Board size, county government administrative form and functions and to make preferred recommendations”.*

### **STUDY GROUP MEETINGS**

The Study Group met bi-weekly on May 30, June 13, June 27, July 18, August 1, August 15, August 29, September 12, and October 3, 2006.

### **STUDY GROUP RESEARCH AND REVIEW OF MATERIALS AND RESOURCES**

At the August 1, 2006, meeting, Jayme Sellen, Wisconsin Counties Association, addressed the group about “lessons learned from other counties”.

Steve Koszarek, Douglas County Administrator, addressed the group regarding county administration on June 27, 2006.

Sue Sandvick, Douglas County Clerk, presented the redistricting process on June 13, 2006.

Fariba Pendleton, UW-Extension gathered and presented the Study Group with the requested information and available relevant materials during the time period that Study Group met.

Throughout the above mentioned meetings, the Study Group reviewed many resources including, but not limited to:

1. History and Background of County Government in Wisconsin.
2. Wis stats. 59.51 Board Powers and 59.52 County Administration.
3. Wisconsin Counties Association History of County Services and County Government Funding.
4. Douglas County Board Budget for the last 3 years.
5. Douglas County Board reimbursements by Supervisor annual reports for the last 3 years.
6. Douglas County Standing and Special Committees Structure (including current membership, mandated or not, meeting frequency, and compensation.
7. Committees, Boards, and Commissions required by the State Statute.
8. Compensation Comparison of Wisconsin County Supervisors (County by County).

9. County population, county board size, per capita spending, and constituent representation comparison of all 72 Wisconsin counties and comparison of 16 Wisconsin counties of similar size to Douglas County.
10. Comparison of per diem and pay of Minnesota counties (including county population and commissioner compensation).
11. St. Louis County administrative expenses and full-time commissioners' salary (2006 budget).
12. Douglas County population data, supervisory districts, and map of each district.
13. Douglas County Redistricting Process (2001).
14. Douglas County Organizational Chart.
15. List and tenure of Wisconsin county executives, administrators, and coordinators (County comparison).
16. Key characteristics of administrative options
17. The Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance Study Examining County Organization and Relationship to Spending.
18. The Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance Options for County Government.
19. Wood Communications Group Government Services, Spending, and Taxes Study.
20. Wood Communications Group "The Public Voice on Local Government Services Study."
21. Majority Report of the Fond du Lac County Ad Hoc Committee on Board Size (August 2006).
22. Draft Study Group Recommendation by Dave Podratz.
23. Written recommendations by Frank Ingram.
24. Numerous State and local newspaper articles related to the Study Group's work.
25. Miscellaneous materials submitted by various individuals.

All meeting agendas, minutes, this report, and a variety of related resources are available through [www.douglascountywi.org](http://www.douglascountywi.org) or by contacting UW-Extension or County Clerk's offices.

## **BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

During the time of statehood, the New York model of larger county boards of supervisors was chosen for Wisconsin, based on a series of court decisions. The other popular model (Pennsylvania model/constitution) for county government was a commission of small boards that are part-time or full-time paid commissioners. Originally, in Wisconsin, counties served a mostly administrative function. Today, counties in Wisconsin provide services on behalf of the state government, such as record keeping, courts, health and human services, road maintenance, emergency government, and land conservation.

Douglas County operates under a County Board/County Administrator form of government. The County Board represents and is responsible to the public. Basic county board functions include: involve, represent and be accountable to the public; set policies; provide services; develop and approve budgets and levy taxes; oversee county operation; regulate and cooperate with other government entities.

The governing body of the county is the county board of supervisors. Supervisors are elected from geographical districts, not at large. After each decennial census, county boards are required to draw

up new district boundaries based on a uniform number of residents per districts. The maximum number of supervisors allowable for each board is prescribed in Sec. 59.10 (3) Wisconsin Statutes and is based on the latest census population for each county.

Douglas County's population is 43,870. Currently, supervisors are elected in 28 districts to two-year terms. The maximum allowed number of supervisors for Douglas County is 31.

The County Administrator is the chief administrative officer of Douglas County and is responsible for coordinating all administrative and management functions of the county government. The County Administrator appoints and removes department heads (subject to county board confirmation), submits the annual budget, and answers to the county board of supervisors.

### **DOUGLAS COUNTY BOARD SIZE RECOMMENDATION**

At the August 29, 2006 meeting, the County Organizational Study Group arrived at a recommendation outlined in this document regarding the county board size. Key considerations for arriving at their recommendation included:

- In recent years, several counties minimally changed their board size. Douglas County reduced its board size from 30 to 28 (to ease the redistricting process); Dane County from 39 to 37; Kenosha County increased its size by one member from 27 to 28, and Waukesha County downsized from 35 to 25. On the ballot in November 2006, Wood County voters will decide on downsizing from 38 to 19 and Price County from 21 to 13. (Price County referendum to go from 21 to 7 members failed in April 2006)
- The average county board size in Wisconsin is 25. The average constituency level per county board member in Wisconsin is 2,282. Douglas County Board Supervisors each represent an average of 1,561 constituents.
- There is not yet an example of a Wisconsin county making a drastic change in board size (e.g. cutting by more than half). Being the first to do so carries risk. It may be better to wait until other counties gain experience.
- There is little evidence that smaller county boards reduce county spending. A study performed in 2003 by the Wisconsin Taxpayer Alliance concluded that "the nearer the county board is to its legal maximum, the lower county spending is relative to similar-sized counties." The same study indicated that as a board increased its size by one, per capita spending would decrease by \$8 to \$10. Much county spending is mandated or "passed through" by state and federal programs.
- In order for the board to reduce its size, the long and sometimes costly process of redistricting has to be done. If approved via referendum, this would not become effective until 2008. Redistricting is done based on the most recent federal census, in this case the 2000 U.S. Census. The census indicates where the population lives within the county in order to draw new district lines. The 2000 U.S. Census does not reflect the current actual distribution of the population in the county. By law, every ten years counties have to

redistrict using the newest federal census numbers. The last redistricting was done in Douglas County in 2001 and the Study Group recommends not spending the time, county staff resources, and money redistricting in 2008, when it is mandated that redistricting occur again in 2011.

- While comparison between states is difficult as counties have different functions, Douglas County spends less per capita on 28 county board supervisors expenses than does St. Louis County which has 7 Commissioners.
- A very small county board would likely require full time supervisors who would be full time “politicians” and be more likely influenced by special interests. Compensation would need to be higher. For example, commissioners in St. Louis County receive a salary of \$50,592 year, and have significant staff expenses. Douglas County supervisors receive \$3,000 annually, a stipend of \$25 per meeting (\$35, if committee chair), and mileage reimbursement. Reducing the size of the County Board may increase the administrative costs of the County Board.
- A smaller number of county supervisors could be more accountable on particular decisions.
- A large county board is more conducive to participating in activities such as town/village board meetings, and is more likely to be diverse in backgrounds and experiences. They may have a broader perspective on issues than a small board.
- Full-time supervisors may be able to spend more time on the major complex issues compared to part-time board members.
- Lack of competition for county board seats is a concern. With a smaller board there may be more competition. However, Pepin, Florence, and Bayfield Counties have a total of 37 seats, of which only one seat was contested in all three counties.
- The higher the number of constituents in a district, one might assume the greater the representation and accountability by the county board member. Actually, the less population per district, the more likely constituents are to personally know the elected officials and hold them to higher standards.
- A smaller board with full-time supervisors may be more accessible because of regular office hours and office location.
- Diversity of backgrounds and experiences is often lost with smaller board.

**COUNTY BOARD SIZE RECOMMENDATION**

Therefore, after fact finding analysis and in-depth consideration of all available data and information, the following recommendation was acted upon by the County Organizational Study Group at the August 29, 2006, meeting:

1. Maintain the Douglas County Board at its current size of 28 members until after the 2010 census.
2. County board size should be reconsidered during the normal redistricting process following the 2010 census.
3. A formal written report on this Study Group’s work should be made available as a public record, and submitted with the recommendation to the Douglas County Board.

Roll call vote taken and passed with 10 Yes, 1 No, 2 Absent.

**DOUGLAS COUNTY GOVERNMENT ADMINISTRATIVE FORM**

At the September 12, 2006 meeting, the County Organizational Study Group arrived at a recommendation regarding the administrative form of operation in Douglas County. The group considered the following issues:

- Comparison of administrative options

<b>TOPIC</b>	<b>EXECUTIVE</b> <i>Section 59.17, WI Stats.</i>	<b>ADMINISTRATOR</b> <i>Section 59.18, WI Stats.</i>	<b>ADMINISTRATIVE COORDINATOR</b> <i>Sec. 59.19, WI Stats.</i>
<b>How created</b>	Board resolution, petition and/or referendum	Board resolution, petition and/or referendum	Board resolution or ordinance
<b>How chosen</b>	Spring election every four years (nonpartisan)	Appointed by majority vote of county board	Appointed by majority vote of county board
<b>Qualifications</b>	U.S. citizen, 18 years of age, county resident	Training, experience, education	Elected or appointed county official. Other qualifications set by board.
<b>Source of Power</b>	State statutes	State statutes	Limited state statutes 7 resolution/ordinance
<b>Removal</b>	By Governor for cause	By board majority	By board majority
<b>Budget Authority</b>	Prepares & presents to board	Prepares & presents to board	Only as authorized by board
<b>Veto Board Actions</b>	Yes	No	No
<b>Dept. Heads</b>	Appoints (subject to board confirmation). Removes at pleasure	Appoints (subject to board confirmation). Removes at pleasure	No authority unless granted by board
<b>Advisory Committees Administrative Boards</b>	Appoints & removes (subject to board confirmation unless waived or made under civil service)	Appoints & removes (subject to board confirmation unless waived or made under civil service)	No authority unless granted by board
<b>Coordinate Depts.</b>	Yes	Yes	Only management functions not assigned depts. By ordinance or law

- A County Executive is the chief officer of the county and runs departments much the same way a strong Mayor runs city government. An Executive can veto county board actions (ordinances, resolutions, and appropriations). The county board can override the Executive's veto on a 2/3 vote of its members. The county board acts like a legislature in this model. "The most powerful tool a County Executive has, is the power of veto", stated a Study Group member, and urged the rest of the group and county board to give this option serious consideration.
- There are 11 counties in Wisconsin with Executives. The first one was created in 1962 in Milwaukee County, and the most recent one in 2006 is Portage County.
- Prior to 1998, the Douglas County Board Chair was the chief administrative officer for the county, with all administrative/personnel decisions approved by the County Board. In March of 1998, Douglas County hired its first Administrative Coordinator, and in July, 2003, the position was changed to County Administrator.
- While the group recognized the current Administrator's effectiveness, some were uneasy about connecting the position to a specific individual. Statements such as "things are going fine now, but what if there is a different person in that position who does not work well with the County Board and departments?" was brought up as a concern several times.
- It was suggested that if the current management system is working well, there should be a written "best practices" report for the next administrator.
- One might assume that the County Administrator has 28 County Board members to satisfy and thus statements such as the County Administrator is not a politician, could be a myth.
- One study group member stated: "Things are going well. If it isn't broken, why fix it?" In contrast, another member stated that things can be improved and he does not believe everything is going so well in terms of the county government operation.
- A County Administrator is hired by the county and is not someone who is concerned about being re-elected. The County Executive might pass the buck to the County Board on controversial issues fearing not being elected again.
- A County Administrator could be removed from the office by majority vote of the County Board vs. the County Executive can only be removed by the Governor for cause.
- Roles and responsibilities of the County Executive and County Administrator are basically similar. It is important to have someone with experience and skills to run the day-to-day operation of the county.
- Douglas County had issues with retaining the Administrative Coordinators in the past, but it appears changing to the County Administrator option is now working better for the county.



- The administrative position itself could work with either appointed or elected individuals. Either could succeed or fail.
- The election for the Executive occurs in the spring, which typically has a low voter turnout. A candidate could be elected to the position with a small voter base.
- The County Executive having more control over spending and financial issues could be advantageous to the operation of the county.
- Obtaining a qualified individual to run and be elected as an Executive was noted as a concern. In addition, there might not be continuity after a four year learning curve, if the person is not re-elected.

### **DOUGLAS COUNTY FORM OF ADMINISTRATION RECOMMENDATION**

The Study Group recommends Douglas County retain its current administration model of County Administrator, to be revisited and studied following the 2010 census, and that this recommendation be included in the Study Group's official report, utilizing the same format as the recommendation on the size of the County Board.

Roll call vote taken and passed with 8 Yes, 2 No, 3 Absent.