

Cost of the County Board

Wisconsin State Statutes dictate the compensation of county board members, saying that a member's compensation is to be paid on a *per diem* basis and must be paid on actual board meetings attended by each supervisor. Since county boards in Wisconsin are quite large, it is easy to assume the cost of such large boards is also very high. Comparing Polk County's board to a county board in Minnesota where the boards are quite small proves the opposite to be true. Minnesota counties pay more for their boards than Wisconsin. Chisago County, our neighbor across the river with a population of just over 50,000 in 2008, pays about \$270,000 per year for their board, while Polk County's average annual cost over the past 12 years is \$152,000.

The average annual compensation for a Polk County supervisor is about \$3,000. Once again comparing Polk to Chisago County, each of the latter's five commissioners averages \$50,000 per year. The difference in compensation arises from the much greater time commitment required of the Minnesota board members. In addition to their compensation, Chisago County Board members also get single-coverage health insurance and retirement benefits. Mileage reimbursement for both boards is the same, the current federal rate of 50 cents per mile. Chisago County also provides offices for their board members.

In Wisconsin, according to the statutes, counties with a population of less than 500,000 may elect to pay members an annual salary through approval by a two-thirds majority of the board. In Polk County, two board members receive a small annual salary in addition to their *per diems*; the county board chair receives \$5,000 and the first vice chair receives \$1,000. There is no salary compensation for the second vice chair. All board members receive a \$100 *per diem* for each county board meeting attended. Scheduled and attended standing committee meetings pay each member \$60 whether they are a citizen member or a county supervisor. Other committees, seminars, or conventions pay \$40. If a county board member has more than one committee meeting in a single day, the total compensation for that day is limited to \$100.

Salary and mileage reimbursement are the two largest items in the county board budget but they are not the only costs. Membership in Wisconsin Counties Association for 2009 was just over \$10,000. Office items such as copies, telephone, computer, postage, and various small items are included in the \$152,000 cited above. Not included in the county board budget is the personnel cost for administrative support provided by the county clerk's office.

Under no circumstances may county boards adjust the compensation of their members or officers during the course of those members' term. The present compensation amounts were determined in 2000. Before each spring election for county board members, the sitting board is to consider compensation changes for the upcoming board. During the past five terms the county board has elected to stay at the same rate of compensation.

The time commitment for county board members in Polk County and Chisago County should also be considered when looking at costs. The county tax levy and number of committee and other meetings are quite similar, but Polk County is dividing the responsibilities among 23 members and Chisago County among five. However, attending meetings is only one part of the time commitment. In Wisconsin, those many hours a board member spends **outside of meetings** – reading, investigating, writing, talking with constituents, etc. – are not compensated with dollars. Ask a board member why they ran for this political office and you'll hear various answers, but never for the financial compensation. There is a different compensation, however difficult it is to put into words. Serving one's community is part of it, but it also simply gets darned interesting to be a county board supervisor!

The next article will address the effects of changing the size of our county board.

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