

History of the Polk County Board of Supervisors

This spring the Polk County Board of Supervisors appointed an ad hoc Organizational Committee to study the organization, structure, and responsibilities of the county board. It was felt this is an appropriate time for changes if any are needed. The recent hiring of a county administrator changed the responsibilities of the board. In addition, the decennial census findings will likely change the boundaries of county board districts, as [some](#) areas in the county have grown, while others have not. Further, some citizens have asked that we consider the size of the county board.

The Organizational Committee began meeting this summer to address its assigned tasks. The first issue the committee will look at is the size of the county board. [In the interest of public education and transparency in government, the committee decided to share with the public through press releases those many factors that guide the board's size: the requirements of state statutes, the cost of the county board, the effects of reducing the size of the board, and a comparison to other boards in Wisconsin and neighboring Minnesota. We plan five press releases.](#) The committee decided to start by examining the board's history.

Wisconsin became a state in 1848, and Polk County was organized in 1853, [although geographically it was much larger than it is today.](#) During the second half of the 19th century Polk County's borders were changed and the various towns organized until in 1898 the 24 towns and four villages—St. Croix Falls, Osceola, Amery, and Clear Lake—were the municipalities of Polk County. Town chairmen and village presidents [comprised the 28-member county board.](#) At that time the [board](#) held only one meeting per year, in November, but met for five consecutive days. After trying various sites for the county seat, [the board chose](#) Balsam Lake, as it was centrally located and within a day's buggy ride for everyone.

The number of supervisors stayed the same until 1903, when one more was added representing the Village of Frederic and making the total 29. The number increased [again](#) in 1904 when [the Village of Centuria](#) sent a member to the board, now totaling 30 members. Balsam Lake and Luck Villages were represented by 1905, increasing the total to 32 members. A supervisor representing the Village of Clayton joined the board in 1909, [giving the board](#) 33 members. The Village of Milltown came on the board in 1910. The board stayed at 34 members until 1921, [when it was increased to 36;](#) Dresser Junction gained a member, and Amery chose to be a city and thus gained an additional supervisor [because](#) they had two wards. Polk County's board stayed at 36 members for the following 36 years, but the [once-a-year meeting was no longer enough.](#) Occasionally, special sessions were necessary, [and so in 1936 the board began meeting twice a year, in May and November.](#)

More changes came in 1940. The Official Proceedings book now shows the county supervisors to be [separately elected positions and no longer the city mayor or village presidents for the incorporated municipalities.](#) However, the town chairmen continued to represent their towns on the county board.

In 1958, St. Croix Falls chose to become a city with two wards, and so one more supervisor was added to the county board. The board now totaled 37 members. This is the point where the county board had its largest number of supervisors. Polk County's population at that time was approximately 24,800 people so there were about 688 people per supervisor, although there was not equal representation. Today, each member of the county board represents about 2,000 people.

The issue of unequal representation was addressed by the Wisconsin Supreme Court in 1965. The court decided each member of the county board must represent an equal number of constituents. District lines were to be drawn according to population rather than simply by municipality borders. In addition, the size of the county board was also dictated by population. Thirty-one members was, and is yet today, the maximum number of supervisors for a county with a population between 25,000 and 50,000. Thus, the following year, Polk County's board size was reduced to 31 members from 31 equally populated districts. A supervisor was elected from each district.

Spring and fall sessions continued with an occasional special session for two more years, but by 1969 another change was made. The board started having four regular sessions per year: a Report Session in February; Spring Session in April; Summer Session in August; and Fall Session in November. Sessions continued to be more than one day long.

The county board chose to reduce its size further in 1974. Now there were just 17 districts but there were 23 supervisors. Six of the districts had two supervisors each. Board size changed again in 1982, to 21 supervisory districts with 25 board members. Once again, four of the districts had two supervisors each. During this time meetings grew to six regular sessions per year.

The present board size, 23 members from 23 districts, began in 1992. The number of meetings gradually increased to what we have now, 11 full board meetings per year (there is generally no meeting in February) which are several hours long and held in the evening. Committees and boards meet once or twice a month, depending on the amount of work to be done. Supervisors are also appointed to many other boards and committees throughout the county, district, and state, resulting in more meetings on a regular basis. After the 2000 census, the county board decided to stay at 23 members, finding it was a very workable number of supervisors, considering the number of committee meetings each must attend.

The issues that confront Wisconsin's county boards are significant. The boards are units of local self-government, yet are also the providers of services for the state. The question is how do we deliver good public services while, at the same time, recognize that our financial resources are not unlimited. County board members face many difficult decisions, especially in these times of a faltering economy.

The next issue will address why Wisconsin has such large county boards.

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