

WHAT'S IMPORTANT?

A REPORT ON PROGRAM PRIORITIZATION IN POLK COUNTY

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INTRODUCTION

The basic challenge facing Polk County – and most governments across the nation – is that resources remain constrained as a lingering effect of the great recession while costs continue to rise. As a consequence, budgets are increasingly challenged, and as the old budget adage goes, as there’s not enough money to do everything, how do you decide what to do?

Governments answer that question differently. Often the answer is across-the-board cuts, to do a little less of everything; that is tantamount to rebalancing a family budget by cutting everything – entertainment, vacations, food, housing – equally. Some base decisions on political criteria, or who yells the loudest. Although public opinion is critical in allocation issues, the loudest voices may not reflect that opinion. And many defer the decision, relying on budgetary gimmicks such as accounting shifts, borrowing for operating expenses, freezes, and use of fund balances.

For the long term, the only strategy that will result in a continued ability to provide those services that people want, and are willing to pay for, is to continue to evaluate and reevaluate those services provided. From an administrative side, this means an ongoing effort to increase the efficiency through which services are provided; from a policy side, this means an ongoing effort to identify which services should be provided and at what level.

The County Board is the only entity that can make policy decisions. Absent its direction, the role of administration (and of management in general) is to implement all programs as if they were of equal priority. As a result, such prioritization exercises as discussed in this document will be essential both next year and for the foreseeable future.

PRIORITIZATION METHODS

There are several approaches to prioritization. One of the most common is for a policy-making body to set broad goals such as environmental protection, public safety, quality of life, and so forth and then for agencies to somehow score programs on these and other indicators. One such approach has become institutionalized in what is called results-based budgeting, where other indicators include whether a program is mandated, changes in demand for services, cost recovery, and so on. The issue with such approaches, however, is that most programs were designed to meet one or more of these criteria, especially broad criteria like quality of life, hence using these to prioritize programs is relatively useless. Even results-based budgeting uses simple scores as weights, i.e. each criterion is ranked on a scale from one to four, and aggregates them to come up with an overall score, which is arbitrary almost by definition.

A strength of county government in Wisconsin is in its committee system, where each department is assigned to a committee comprised of elected board members and in many cases members of the public. A committee system allows for a greater input on policy issues than would otherwise be possible by a full county board; a committee can therefore be a valuable resource for a county board in prioritization efforts. The approach applied in Polk County is to leverage the committee system in providing knowledge of programs, for the committees to be a resource for the full county

Board. In addition, instead of simply offering broad criteria and goals – such as public safety – the County Board is asked to rate programs directly based on criteria they themselves develop. As a consequence, instead of a mechanistic calculation the rating becomes an exercise in real policy evaluation.

BACKGROUND, COUNTY BOARD PRIORITIZATION

In the last two prioritization exercises, the County Board to scored programs directly on a five point Likert scale, ranging from critical importance to not important. The first implementation of this approach was in a survey of the County Board in 2011. This scoring was based on the County's strategic plan, adopted several years ago, and on a reevaluation of the County's comprehensive plan adopted late in 2009. Using that scoring, the highest ranked programs were singled out for special attention, where possible offering the County Board the option of expanding the programs and the lowest ranked programs were singled out for review, with four of the lowest priority eliminated by 2013.

A criticism of the 2011 prioritization exercise was that there was not the opportunity to ask questions or discuss many of the issues in evaluating programs. As a result, some Board members stated they were uncomfortable in evaluating programs with which they were unfamiliar. In addition, as all (100+) programs were evaluated, the list grew rather lengthy, as very small programs were evaluated along with very large programs. Finally, the 2011 exercise also incorporated an assessment of program effectiveness which, although valuable, diverts from the overall objective of the exercise. Effectiveness is in fact largely a management task, to produce improved results or to reduce costs or, ideally, both.

To lay the groundwork for the 2013 prioritization, each department was asked to review its strategic plan with its governing committee in the summer of 2012. With the 2013 budget, each department was also asked to identify every program in that budget along with its objective and performance indicators. Finally, in the spring of 2013 each department was also asked to review each of these programs with their governing committees so as to ensure committees were knowledgeable about these programs and could be a resource for the County Board.

To facilitate a shorter session, all programs (save a few) that did not receive levy support were dropped and a number of programs that are similar in nature and implemented by the same department were consolidated, e.g. all Information Technology programs were combined under just one program. This had the effect of reducing the number of programs to be evaluated from over 100 to 43 without excessively limiting the opportunity for input.

APRIL 23 PRIORITIZATION SESSION

A special meeting of the Polk County Board was scheduled for April 23, 2013, to undertake the prioritization exercise. Bob Kazmerski, with the University of Wisconsin Extension Service, served as a facilitator and provided the background presentation and technology needed to collect responses.

The central question used for evaluation was: "What do your constituents value in County programs, especially for the future of Polk County?" At the outset of the meeting, Board Members were asked to offer criteria that could be used to determine this value on the part of their

constituents. These criteria included quality of life, environmental protection, adequate living wage jobs, efficiency, transportation system, tourism, economic growth and a number of others.

Using these criteria, prioritization was conducted in real time, with an opportunity for discussion and questions before each program was ranked. Again, a five-point Likert scale was used, interpreted as follows:

Ranking Scale

Rating	Value
1	Critical importance
2	Very important
3	Important
4	Somewhat important
5	Not important

From these raw data, a mean or average calculated that was used to determine the overall score. These scores can be interpreted in the same manner as the initial ranking, meaning a program with a rating of 2.5 can be said to be between very important and important. A standard deviation was also calculated and, from the mean, a coefficient of dispersion (the ratio of variance, or standard deviation squared, to the mean). The higher the coefficient of dispersion, the greater the disagreement in ranking among County Board members. The following tables show scores by program order, by priority ranking, and by coefficient of dispersion.

NOTE: NONE OF THESE RESULTS SHOULD NECESSARILY BE TAKEN AS THE PERSONAL OR POLITICAL OPINION OF ANY OF THE COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS. PARTICIPANTS WERE ASKED DIRECTLY TO CONFINE THEIR ANSWERS TO THEIR IMPRESSION OF THEIR CONSTITUENT'S BELIEFS, SPECIFICALLY ANSWERING THE QUESTION "WHAT DO YOUR CONSTITUENTS VALUE IN COUNTY PROGRAMS, ESPECIALLY FOR THE FUTURE OF POLK COUNTY?" AND WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF THE CRITERIA DEVELOPED AT THE BEGINNING OF THE APRIL 23, 2013 SPECIAL MEETING. ANY OTHER INFERENCE IS THEREFORE INAPPROPRIATEE.

Table 1
Priority Scores by Department

Program No.	Program	Mean	Standard Deviation	Coefficient of Dispersion
1	Administration: Public Financial Management	1.43	0.66	30.6%
2	Administration: General Management and Board Support	1.65	0.78	36.4%
3	ADRC-Aging Program	2.78	1.17	48.9%
4	Buildings: Maintaining parks & lake access	2.87	1.10	42.1%
5	Buildings: Building Maintenance	2.00	0.80	31.8%
6	Buildings: Solid Waste and Recycling program	2.91	1.44	71.5%
7	Clerk of Court: Case Filing and Jury Mgmt	2.13	1.18	65.3%
8	Corporation Counsel	1.87	0.97	50.1%
9	Corp Counsel: Child Support	1.65	0.93	52.9%
10	County Clerk: Licensing	2.83	1.11	43.9%
11	County Clerk: Election Administration	1.43	0.99	68.6%
12	County Clerk: Support services for the Board	2.13	1.14	61.0%
13	District Attorney: Criminal cases	1.96	0.82	34.7%
14	District Attorney: Victim/witness program	2.48	1.04	43.5%
15	UW-Extension	2.65	0.93	32.9%
16	Employee Relations programs	2.61	1.12	47.9%
17	Highway: Road construction	2.26	1.10	53.1%
18	Highway: Road maintenance and repair	2.26	1.18	61.2%
19	Human Services: Economic Support	2.78	1.24	55.4%
20	Human Services: Behavioral Health	2.87	1.39	67.5%
21	Human Services: Family and Children's services	2.22	1.24	69.5%
22	Human Services: Adult protective services	2.48	1.27	65.6%
23	Information Technology	2.13	0.92	39.7%
24	Land Information: Zoning	2.52	1.31	68.0%
25	Land Information: Survey and GIS	2.78	1.04	39.1%
26	Land Information: Planning	3.09	1.24	49.8%
27	Land & Water: Runoff and animal waste mgmt	2.61	1.23	58.3%
28	Land & Water: Lake protection	2.17	1.15	61.3%
29	Law Enforcement: Field services	2.04	0.93	42.2%
30	Law Enforcement: Emergency communication & management	1.65	0.71	30.9%
31	Law Enforcement: Jail Division	2.61	0.99	37.4%
32	Medical Examiner	2.35	0.93	37.2%
33	Public Health: basic	2.78	1.00	35.8%
34	Public Health: Home Care	3.13	1.42	64.8%
35	Public Health: Birth to 3 program	2.78	1.00	35.8%
36	County Treasurer	2.22	1.04	49.0%
37	Veteran Services	1.78	0.74	30.4%
38	Golden Age Manor	3.26	1.48	67.5%
39	West Central Regional Planning	3.65	1.34	48.8%
40	Information Center	3.35	1.61	77.7%
41	Economic Development Corporation	2.78	1.59	91.3%
42	County Fair	2.61	1.20	54.8%

Table 2
Priority Score Ranking

Ranking	Program	Mean	Standard Deviation	Coefficient of Dispersion
1	Administration: Public Financial Management	1.43	0.66	30.60%
2	County Clerk: Election Administration	1.43	0.99	68.60%
3	Administration: General Management and Board Support	1.65	0.78	36.40%
4	Corp Counsel: Child Support	1.65	0.93	52.90%
5	Law Enforcement: Emergency communication & management	1.65	0.71	30.90%
6	Veteran Services	1.78	0.74	30.40%
7	Corporation Counsel	1.87	0.97	50.10%
8	District Attorney: Criminal cases	1.96	0.82	34.70%
9	Buildings: Building Maintenance	2	0.8	31.80%
10	Law Enforcement: Field services	2.04	0.93	42.20%
11	Clerk of Court: Case Filing and Jury Mgmt	2.13	1.18	65.30%
12	County Clerk: Support services for the Board	2.13	1.14	61.00%
13	Information Technology	2.13	0.92	39.70%
14	Land & Water: Lake protection	2.17	1.15	61.30%
15	Human Services: Family and Children's services	2.22	1.24	69.50%
16	County Treasurer	2.22	1.04	49.00%
17	Highway: Road construction	2.26	1.1	53.10%
18	Highway: Road maintenance and repair	2.26	1.18	61.20%
19	Medical Examiner	2.35	0.93	37.20%
20	District Attorney: Victim/witness program	2.48	1.04	43.50%
21	Human Services: Adult protective services	2.48	1.27	65.60%
22	Land Information: Zoning	2.52	1.31	68.00%
23	Employee Relations programs	2.61	1.12	47.90%
24	Land & Water: Runoff and animal waste mgmt	2.61	1.23	58.30%
25	Law Enforcement: Jail Division	2.61	0.99	37.40%
26	County Fair	2.61	1.2	54.80%
27	UW-Extension	2.65	0.93	32.90%
28	ADRC-Aging Program	2.78	1.17	48.90%
29	Human Services: Economic Support	2.78	1.24	55.40%
30	Land Information: Survey and GIS	2.78	1.04	39.10%
31	Public Health: basic	2.78	1	35.80%
32	Public Health: Birth to 3 program	2.78	1	35.80%
33	Economic Development Corporation	2.78	1.59	91.30%
34	County Clerk: Licensing	2.83	1.11	43.90%
35	Buildings: Maintaining parks & lake access	2.87	1.1	42.10%
36	Human Services: Behavioral Health	2.87	1.39	67.50%
37	Buildings: Solid Waste and Recycling program	2.91	1.44	71.50%
38	Land Information: Planning	3.09	1.24	49.80%
39	Public Health: Home Care	3.13	1.42	64.80%
40	Golden Age Manor	3.26	1.48	67.50%
41	Information Center	3.35	1.61	77.70%
42	West Central Regional Planning	3.65	1.34	48.80%

Table 3
Coefficient of Dispersion Ranking

Ranking	Program	Mean	Standard Deviation	Coefficient of Dispersion
1	Veteran Services	1.78	0.74	30.40%
2	Administration: Public Financial Management	1.43	0.66	30.60%
3	Law Enforcement: Emergency communication & management	1.65	0.71	30.90%
4	Buildings: Building Maintenance	2	0.8	31.80%
5	UW-Extension	2.65	0.93	32.90%
6	District Attorney: Criminal cases	1.96	0.82	34.70%
7	Public Health: basic	2.78	1	35.80%
8	Public Health: Birth to 3 program	2.78	1	35.80%
9	Administration: General Management and Board Support	1.65	0.78	36.40%
10	Medical Examiner	2.35	0.93	37.20%
11	Law Enforcement: Jail Division	2.61	0.99	37.40%
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20	ADRC-Aging Program	2.78	1.17	48.90%
21	County Treasurer	2.22	1.04	49.00%
22	Land Information: Planning	3.09	1.24	49.80%
23	Corporation Counsel	1.87	0.97	50.10%
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25	Highway: Road construction	2.26	1.1	53.10%
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41	Information Center	3.35	1.61	77.70%
42	Economic Development Corporation	2.78	1.59	91.30%

As these data show, the highest ranked programs in the County Board's interpretation of constituent priorities tend to be those deemed essential and the lowest ranked programs tend to be those that are viewed as more discretionary. Criminal justice programs tended to rank near the top, and traditional county services such as Human Services, Land information, basic Public Health, and Aging near the middle. The greatest disagreement in priority was for optional services as well, including Solid Waste and Recycling, the Economic Development Corporation, and the Information Center. The two – rating and dispersion – are not well related to each other, however, with a correlation of only 0.26 (1.0 being a perfect relationship, 0 no relationship).

CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

In the County Board's interpretation of constituent priorities, programs were found to rank between crucially important to somewhat important. Given the rigors of the annual budget process, that is not surprising: unimportant programs would have lost funding years ago, or never have been created. There is a fair amount of diversity in opinion, however, with a number of programs being deemed not important or just important by some while being interpreted as very important or critically important by others. This is reflective of the diversity in the population, and also indicative of the difficulty in reducing funding for any program: one person's low priority is another's high priority.

These data provide early input into the budget process and, like the 2011 survey, will be used to inform the budget preparation itself. Both high and low priority programs will be given special attention, with options prepared for County Board consideration for each. High priority programs will be reviewed to determine whether there are options to increase service level (and at a minimum maintain current service level) for Board consideration and, similarly, low priority programs will be reviewed to determine whether service delivery can be reduced, providing the Board with options to do so. These options will be discussed over the coming months and provided to the County Board along with the annual budget in September.

In conclusion, I would like to thank Bob Kazmerski for his exceptional work in assembling the survey instrument and in facilitating the prioritization session. I would also like to thank the County Board for their patience and thoughtfulness in undertaking the survey itself.