

# Commissioner Responsibilities FAQ

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT RUNNING FOR THE OFFICE OF COUNTY COMMISSIONER

### QUESTION:

Do you really know what you're getting into?

Why do i want to be a County Commissioner?

What are the legal requirements in Oklahoma to run for the office of county commissioner?

What kind of background do I need to run for County Commissioner?

What are the duties and responsibilities of a County Commissioner?

What is the make-up of county government?

What are some of the big problems facing county government today?

How will I spend my day if I'm elected to be a County Commissioner?

How much time does it take to be a county commissioner?

Why would anyone want to be a Commissioner?

Is a government really like a business?

How can i find out more about county government and the Association of County Commissioners of Oklahoma?

What are the objectives of the Association of County Commissioners of Oklahoma?

Questions to ask yourself.

### ANSWER:

**"Do you really know what you're getting into?"**

Citizens in Oklahoma depend on county government more than ever before which makes it more important than ever before that qualified, dedicated people run for the office of county commissioner.

The intent of this pamphlet is to explain some of the responsibilities of a county commissioner and to help you decide whether you want to be one. The following pages answer some of the questions that probably come to mind as you think about the job of a county commissioner.

But first, here is a question to ask yourself:

**"Why do I want to become a county commissioner?"**

Check the answers that apply to you. Then read the pamphlet to help you decide whether running for county commissioner is a good idea.

\_\_\_\_\_ Concern over a particular issue or complaint

\_\_\_\_\_ Others are urging me to run

\_\_\_\_\_ Would like to apply the ability that made me successful in business to the business of running the government

\_\_\_\_\_ Supplement my income

\_\_\_\_\_ A retirement plan

\_\_\_\_\_ Prestige

\_\_\_\_\_ Stepping stone to higher office

\_\_\_\_\_ Desire to build a better future for my county

**What are the legal requirements in Oklahoma to run for the office of county commissioner?**

Oklahoma Statute 19 § 131.1. Registration requirements for candidates for county offices

To file as a candidate for any county office, one must have been a registered voter within the county for the six-month period immediately preceding the first day of the filing period prescribed by law.

Oklahoma Statute 19 § 132. Eligibility

No person shall be eligible to any county office unless he shall be, at the time of his election or appointment, a qualified voter of the county.

Each county in Oklahoma is divided into three districts, and each district elects its own county commissioner. Each district's county commissioner is a member of the Board of County Commissioners which administrates the county. Therefore, county commissioners have a responsibility to the entire county and not just their own district.

**What kind of background do I need to run for county commissioner?**

County commissioners in Oklahoma come from a variety of backgrounds. Teachers, farmers, ranchers, and business people have all been elected county commissioners. No particular job experience or education is known to be the best preparation for success as commissioner. Familiarity with some aspects of road construction, budgeting, personnel management, communications, and the law can be useful. But no one expects a commissioner to be expert in every facet of the job.

Once elected, county commissioners and other newly elected county officers are requested, prior to taking office in January, to attend two-day orientation training program conducted by the Association of County Commissioners in order to become familiar with the job. In addition, the legal aspects of hiring and firing will be discussed during this orientation program.

### **What are the duties and responsibilities of a county commissioner?**

County commissioners exercise the administrative powers given to them by the Oklahoma Statutes and the Oklahoma Constitution. County Commissioners:

The governing body of the courthouse

Exercise direct control over the county highway system

Audit the accounts of all officers handling county money

Make general financial plans for the county including the county budget

Audit and approve claims against the county

Issue calls for bond elections and other special elections

Organize and direct "911" services

Approve the county payroll

Approve bids for major purchases or construction projects

Develop personnel policies for the county

Responsible for appointments to various county boards and positions

Supervise affairs in small communities

Organize solid waste management districts

Selling or purchasing public land or buildings for the county

Responsible for improving efficiency of county government.

### **What is the make-up of county government?**

There are 77 counties in the State of Oklahoma. Counties and county government are created by the Constitution of Oklahoma. Counties are a subdivision of state government. The powers it exercises are primarily delegated by the State as a quasi-municipal corporation.

All the county officials are elected to staggered four year terms except for the Election Board Secretary who is appointed by the local state senator. Counties are made up of the following elected officials:

District 1, 2, and 3 County Commissioners

County Assessor - Have the duty and responsibility to determine the true worth of real and personal property for the purpose of taxation.

County Clerk - Functions as the custodian of records for the county, acts as registrar of deeds, and acts as the county's purchasing agent.

County Court Clerk - Maintains all proceedings of the Court of Record in the county.

County Treasurer - Acts as the tax collector and banker for the county.

County Sheriff - Preserves the peace and protects life and property and suppress' all unlawful disturbances.

### **What are some of the big problems facing county government today?**

#### *Mandates*

A new county commissioner taking office may discover that many decisions affecting his or her term have already been made. State and federal law mandates many of the activities of county government. Often, local government mandates are passed without funding by state and federal lawmakers. Some examples of unfunded mandates are those setting requirements for waste management, treatment of prisoners, providing disabled citizens with easy access to government buildings, drug and alcohol testing for commercial driver's license holders, environmental requirements for road and bridge projects, and training for various personnel.

So, before promising to eliminate this program or that program, make sure it is not legally mandated by the federal or state government.

### *General Fund Revenue Sources*

Paying the bill for mandates is just part of a bigger challenge that commissioners face-raising the revenue to pay for all the services that county government performs. Citizens these days expect government to deliver more and better services to meet the needs of growing and changing populations, but they aren't enthusiastic about paying the bill. Increasing taxes in any way is never popular.

Counties in Oklahoma are looking at ways to spread the tax burden by expanding their sources of revenue or finding new ones to keep up with increasing demands. Oklahoma law limits the county general fund from receiving more than 10 mills of the counties ad valorem dollars. The general fund is used to pay the administrative expenses of county government and is the primary source of funding for the courthouse offices and the sheriff's office. This limitation requires commissioners to find ways to conduct county business more efficiently and to eliminate any waste so that tax dollars are spent wisely. However, many counties in Oklahoma must find other tax bases such as county-wide sales taxes to adequately fund courthouse operating expenses.

### *County Road Revenue Sources*

County commissioners receive road funds primarily from the state and federal fuel taxes, motor vehicle excise taxes and gross production taxes. County commissioners are responsible for 86,820 miles of road and 15,000 bridges that are 20 feet or longer. Local and federal funds replace 100 bridges that are 20 feet or longer per year in Oklahoma. Road funds are divided up among all 77 counties based on a formula which considers the number of bridges in each county, population, road miles and terrain. County road funds have not grown with inflation since the "oil bust" in the 1980's. With the rising cost of construction equipment and materials, county road funds must be planned, prioritized and stretched in order to adequately maintain county roads and bridges.

### *Liability*

Being held personally responsible for official actions is a matter of great concern to anyone seeking public office. Sometimes, county officials have had to learn the hard way-being sued, for instance-that they may be held accountable personally for injuries resulting from enforcing county policies or customs (for example wrongful termination) when they are carried out in good faith! The good news is that when proper procedures are followed, the likelihood of public officials successfully defending such liability suits is excellent.

A good approach to minimize this problem is to learn the basic procedures for reducing or eliminating the possibility of successful suits against the county or its officials. The Association of County Commissioners of Oklahoma (ACCO) provide opportunities to attend workshops on the subject. Written materials are available, too. Legal advice from the District Attorney, ACCO staff, and attorneys representing the ACCO insurance programs plays a key role.

**How will I spend my day if I'm elected to be a county commissioner?**

Some people say that being a county commissioner is a 24-hour-a-day job, not because you need to work at it for 24 hours each day, but because you are "on call" at all hours. Some parts of the job are more time-consuming than others.

Talking with constituents is a big part of the job. They may call you at home hoping to influence you in an upcoming bridge or road project, collar you at the local hardware store or at a local restaurant to complain about potholes in their road, or expect you to help them solve a drainage problem in front of their house on a Sunday afternoon. You will soon learn that on controversial issues you seldom hear from supporters but are certain to hear from opponents. As an elected representative you have to make a decision that is in the best interests of the entire county.

To be effective and make good decisions, a commissioner needs information. Gathering information requires time. Regardless of what sources you choose, you can be sure that gathering reliable information will take a good chunk of your time.

Attending meetings will take time, too. Your schedule will have to allow time for regular board meetings, work sessions, executive sessions, special meetings, budget meetings and public hearings. Also, as an elected official, you will be expected at many unofficial gatherings-from pancake breakfasts to fish fries.

Your life will be much easier if you are communicating with other county officials. Making the effort to know other county officials and their operations is worth the time. These relationships will help you get things done and provide knowledgeable leadership. You have to approve the budget for all these offices, and knowledge of their functions and responsibilities will help you in your decision making.

Communicating with and educating your constituents will be a high priority. Time will be spent on working through the local newspaper, public hearings or gatherings, maybe even a newsletter to make sure the public knows what you are doing and why. For example, often the public doesn't understand state and federal road and bridge programs and funding formulas, and part of your job will be to explain what these programs mean.

### **How much time does it take to be a county commissioner?**

This is a question that many people new to the office wish they had asked before they ran. For most commissioners other than the chairman of the board, a majority of the time is spent in the road districts. The chairman of the board spends more time working at the courthouse solving administrative duties than the other two commissioners and must rely more on their county road foreman to carry out supervisory duties in the road district.

The number of hours per day or week varies widely, depending on a county's size and demand for services. One thing is certain. Those first six months in office will be a period of adjustment-getting acquainted, learning purchasing laws, road fund accounts, general fund budgeting, as well as day-to-day road maintenance, and learning how to juggle all the new activity in the context of family and job demands.

### **Why would anyone want to be a county commissioner?**

Of the different levels of government, local government has the most immediate effect on people's lives because it is so close to where they live. Also, citizens are apt to participate more directly in local government because their elected officials are so readily accessible. Being a county commissioner provides an opportunity to deal with people's most immediate problems, which are often the ones that affect everyone. And sometimes just providing individual constituent service, such as regularly grading their road, can be rewarding. A commissioner who does a good job provides a true public service and is a leader in the community.

Sometimes people run for office for all the wrong reasons. For example, they have one personal gripe that they want to do something about. Or they are out to make county personnel changes based on personal dissatisfaction rather than on professional evaluation of employee performance. They don't seem to be very interested in the "public good." After getting elected, they may be disappointed to find that getting what they want is not as easy as they thought. Budget constraints, federal and state laws, or the priorities of other commissioners and of citizens may stand in their way. Once in office, though, they may realize that their own personal agendas are not so important compared to the rewards of knowing they can help improve life for the citizens of their community.

### **Is a government really like a business?**

You may think of government as being similar to a business. A private business has the objectives of operating efficiently and providing consumers with goods or services they demand. In the same way, a government seeks to operate efficiently and provides citizens with the services they want. But government is different from business in certain fundamental ways. Government is designed to serve the people—all the people, rich and poor. While private business also serves the public, its main goal is to make a profit.

In the private sector, if a product line is not popular you can discontinue it and add a line that is. In government, the products are mostly service—such as running the courts, maintaining roads and bridges, and operating the county jail and cannot be dropped just because they may be unpopular. Although government can be improved to perform more efficiently in many ways, it probably can never be as cost-effective as well-run private business.

### **How can I find out more about county government and the Association of County Commissioners of Oklahoma?**

If you want to know more about being a county commissioner or county government, please contact the Association of County Commissioners of Oklahoma, 429 N.E. 50th, Oklahoma City, OK 73105. Phone: 405-524-3200; FAX: 405-524-3700. [Click here for staff contact information.](#)

### **The objectives of this Association shall be:**

To assist county government in lessening the burdens of government by cooperating with federal, state and local agencies

To provide research and research support to county government

To provide assistance to county government in performing the functions designated by law including, but not limited to, the erection and maintenance of public works

To conduct public discussion groups, forums, panels, lectures, and other similar programs

To present courses of instruction by correspondence and television

To obtain, develop, and present scientific and all other types of information relative to the operation of county government relating to central and intergovernmental relations, public facilities, public records, taxes and money management, health and safety, legal system, employment and human services, schools and libraries, agriculture and conservation.

### **QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF**

Before you decide to run, think about your answer to the over-riding question, "Why do I want to become a county commissioner?" Discuss the job with your family to give them an idea of the responsibilities involved.

To be ready for the challenges, you should:

Have a vision for the county's future;

Keep an open mind;

Maintain high ethical standards;

Know the issues;

Focus on what is best for the county;

Be honest with the public, the media, and other officials;

Have confidence in your qualifications; and

Separate your emotions from your responsibilities.