RMJ

Rural Minnesota Journal

January 2006

Minnesota County Government: A History of Accomplishment, A Commitment to the Future

James Mulder

Association of Minnesota Counties

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Center for Rural Policy and Development
600 S. Fifth Street, Suite 211 • Saint Peter, Minnesota 56082
(507) 934-7700 • (877) RURALMN

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James Mulder

Minnesota county government has a long and venerated history that can be traced back to the original thirteen colonies and further back to England and France. With a few Minnesota counties established before Minnesota statehood, county history is a story of accomplishment and an ability to meet service delivery challenges throughout our state's history. What began as a county "local government" function and role has evolved into a joint responsibility of being both a "local government" and an "administrative arm of the state."

Counties have traditionally been the hidden level of government. County services are primarily delivered to those most in need and those who have run afoul of the law. The average citizen would know that the county collects property taxes, manages land records and does something or other with welfare. Generally, the list of things that counties do that the citizen is not aware of is much longer than the know list.

But even with a long history of success and achievement, Minnesota county officials have determined that county government, as it operates today, is not sustainable. The public is demanding greater efficiencies and the elimination of redundancies in how local government services are delivered. In fact, many county officials have come to the conclusion that without reinventions of what counties do and how counties deliver services, there will be a breakdown in the ability of counties to provide and deliver needed services to county citizens.

To meet this challenge, the Association of Minnesota Counties, a voluntary association of Minnesota's 87 counties, is sponsoring the Minnesota Counties Futures Project, a project that is asking a group of county officials, led by Anoka County Commissioner Margaret Langfeld, to explore how Minnesota county government can change to meet the demands of the 21st century. This paper attempts to outline the history and challenges county government has faced and sketch out a direction for the future of Minnesota county government.

A brief historical background of the Minnesota county

County and other local government units in the Unites States can trace their origin to the original thirteen English Colonies established in America. Not surprisingly, the colonial form of local government was developed by early Americans along lines similar to the local government institutions existing in England at the same time. Therefore, a historical background of Minnesota Counties must include a short discussion of English local government as it developed in the 16th and 17th centuries.

The history of English local government has its beginnings at the end of the first millennium and the beginning of the second. During this period of time, the English rulers organized their kingdoms in what were called shires. The creation of shires was often a result of political or filial patronage as the Crown would reward particularly loyal knights or give the third cousin on their spouse's side a home far from the central palace. Within each shire, the Crown would appoint a 'reeve.' In some cases the appointee was known as the 'shire reeve' but then contracted to the name 'sheriff.' The sheriff was responsible for carrying out the administrative fiats of the Crown. These fiats often centered on collecting taxes and recruiting/drafting/conscripting boys and young men into the service of the Crown.

During the first half of the second millennium the English Crown appointed additional local officials such as constables, justices of the peace and coroners. By the early 1600s, the Crown permitted the election of a surveyor of highways. Although local roads were generally maintained by a labor tax that required the citizenry to work on the roads, provision was made for the levying of a highway tax.

A second part of English history that had an impact on the formation of American counties was the separation of the English government from the Roman church. As the government of England separated from the Roman church, church officials lost their power and control over local governments. Civil courts became common but the church maintained responsibility for matters such as marriage and divorce, proof of wills and the administration of estates and guardianships. By the early 1700s, most of these duties had also been shifted to civil courts and administrations.

A third event of note was the passage of what became generally known as the Elizabethan Poor Laws, the first of which was passed in 1601. Poor relief was originally identified as the responsibility of the church, but a series of acts by the Crown were adopted and poor relief and welfare became a responsibility of the state.

Colonial history and county development

Not surprisingly, the English Colonies were established using many of the institutional structures and titles that had been found in England. In 1643, the Massachusetts Colony was divided into four shires. Within a few years of their founding, representatives from the towns located within each shire came together to establish the parameters for governing the shires. Among other powers, the shire governments were given the power to equalize taxes among the shires. The term county, a French word used to describe colonial regional government, first showed up in the Colonies of New York and Virginia. In these colonies, county supervisors were appointed by the colonial governor to serve on county boards.

The colonists who pushed westward into what became the Northwest Territory brought existing government systems with them, along with a number of innovations that formed the basis for county government in the mid-western states. The first county officials in these territories were appointed by the territorial governor to what was often called the county court. By 1800, the typical county was electing county boards, sheriffs, coroners, justices of the peace, treasurers and clerks of court.

It should be noted that there is no cookie cutter symmetry in county development across the country. There are county supervisors in New York and California, county freeholders in New Jersey, county commissioners in Ohio, Minnesota and many other states, county jurymen in Louisiana, county judges in Texas, etc. Just as there are many titles for persons who serve on a county (or parish in Louisiana) board, the roles and responsibilities also can be markedly different.

A few examples may be helpful. There are no county roads in Pennsylvania. North Carolina county boards are responsible for adopting the county public school budget. In about a dozen states, including Minnesota, counties are responsible for the delivery of social services, while in the majority of states, these services are delivered by the state. On a continuum of level of service measure, Minnesota counties are considered full-service counties.

Just as there is no identical set of responsibilities for counties, the geographic and demographic makeup of counties in each state also varies greatly. In total there are 3,033 counties across the United States. Two states (Connecticut and Rhode Island) do not have counties. Texas has the largest number of counties with 254. In Texas you will find the county with the smallest population (Loving County) and in California, Los Angeles County has the largest population, with over 9 million inhabitants. In physical size, Arlington County, Virginia, is just 26 square miles as compared to North Slope County, Alaska, with a land area of over 87,000 square miles.

Minnesota county development

The Minnesota Territory was established in 1849 and included a portion of the Northwest Territory (Wisconsin Territory) and the northern portion of the Louisiana Purchase west of the Mississippi River. Stillwater, for instance was once part of St. Croix County, Wisconsin. Alexander Ramsey, the first territorial governor of Minnesota, proclaimed that the new territory would be governed by the same laws as those existing in Wisconsin. This, combined with the fact that the majority of migration to Minnesota came through Wisconsin and America's northern tier of states, encouraged the development of a strong county and town form of government similar to that found in Wisconsin, Michigan and New York. This tradition of strong local government continues to this day.

The first Minnesota counties established by the territorial legislature on October 27, 1849, were Benton, Isanti, Ramsey, Wabasha and Washington. Three additional counties, Mankahto, Pembina and Wahnata were also established in law but they were neither organized nor abolished. Fifty-seven counties were established during the territorial period, which ended with statehood in 1857. The youngest of Minnesota's eighty-seven counties was created by a popular vote of citizens in 1926 from the area that had been Beltrami County. The vote split Beltrami County in half and created Lake of the Woods County to the north.

Thomas Jefferson would have been proud of how Minnesota was established both philosophically and physically. Jefferson believed in lots of governments and high levels of participation in those governments. The physical establishment of Minnesota counties came after President Jefferson's order to survey the Louisiana Purchase. As one looks at the southern third of a county map of Minnesota, you see the results of that survey. County boundaries are symmetrical and in most cases follow that survey. It was Jefferson's belief that the size of counties established should be no larger than an area that would allow a citizen to travel on horseback to and from the county seat in one day.

The physical size and shape of Minnesota counties in the central third of Minnesota, although often having straight lines as boundaries, are strongly influenced by the physical characteristics of the land. Rivers such as the Minnesota and Mississippi were critically important determinants for the establishment of county boundaries. Often, there were no easy ways to cross natural boundaries and they became county borders. Determinations of county boundaries in the northern third of the state were strongly influenced by the regional economics of the fur trade, large tract agriculture, mining and the lumber industry.

The original organizational structure of Minnesota counties was also very Jeffersonian. While electing only a few officials in their early years, Minnesota counties added numerous elected offices over the next sixty years. Each was given very independent authorities. Not only were five-member county boards elected, other county elected officials included the county sheriff, county auditor, county treasurer, county recorder, county attorney, county court administrator, county judge, county coroner, county surveyor, county assessor, county engineer, county superintendent of schools and more. Some have speculated that if it had been proposed to the state legislature in the early 1900s, counties would have elected the "building maintenance engineer/janitor". An interesting historical side note is that the auditor, treasurer, recorder, etc., were often called row officers as their offices were often lined up in a row in courthouses. The challenge of this structure was that each of these offices was given statutory responsibilities and each was independent of the others. The only connection between the "row" offices and the county board was the county board responsibility and authority to levy property taxes. It should also be noted that during the early years of statehood, county boards met only one or two times a year.

Since the 1930s, the legislature has moved to streamline the organizational structure of county government, and most of the elective offices are now appointed. The offices that still remain elected in all 87 counties are the county board of commissioners, the county attorney and county sheriff. In addition, most counties still elect a county recorder, county auditor and a county treasurer, although the offices of county auditor and county treasurer have been combined in a majority of counties.

Minnesota county government

Minnesota counties are creatures of the state. Established under Minnesota statute, counties face the daunting task of serving in two distinctly different roles with a distinction that is often muddied and muddled. The first of those roles is as a local government providing local services at the behest and demand of county citizens. Traditionally, this role centers on services such as roads, bridges, jails, public safety, preservation of land records, etc. But even these services are not just local in nature and are not limited exclusively to county government. Roads may, for instance, serve both a local function but may also have regional and national utility. Roads may be the responsibility of a town, city, county or the state. It is a rare, observant citizen who understands and recognizes when they are driving on which type of road.

The second role of county government is to serve as an administrative arm of the state and federal governments. As an extension of these other governments, counties are mandated to deliver services that are determined not by the county board but by Congress and/or the state legislature. This administrative role is as equally challenging as the local government role, and it is often hard to distinguish where the state or federal mandate ends and where local administrative authority and discretion begins. An additional role twist centers on the fact that Minnesota counties each developed unique structures, policies and practices to carry out their joint missions.

The Dillon Rule

A key element for understanding the workings of local government is to have an understanding and appreciation of the extent which cities and counties can make independent decisions and the extent to which they are extensions of state government. Just as Hamilton and Jefferson, two of our nation's founders, played tug of war over whether the federal or state government was the supreme power in the land, so too have local governments struggled to establish an independence from state authority.

As the reader is aware, the United States system of governance has multiple different levels. These levels (federal, state and local) each have a specific role to play in providing public services. At times, the authority to provide services is redundant with more than one level of government providing the same services, and at times there are gaps in the delivery of services. While the challenges of jurisdiction are at times still evident, two defining decisions made by the Iowa Supreme Court in the 1880s clearly outlined the relationship between local autonomy and state supremacy. These decisions have commonly been titled "Dillon's Rule."

Early state constitutions gave local governments direct representation in state legislatures, which allowed local governments a large degree of local autonomy. By the mid-1800s, widespread corruption in municipal government was extremely prevalent and a broad debate ensued over local government autonomy. Local government corruption most often manifested itself in two forms: patronage-based, awarding jobs, contracts, licenses and franchises; and the deliberate creation and extinction of municipalities to avoid accumulated debt. These actions prompted litigation in various state courts over the appropriateness and rationale for local government independence. Judge John Dillon of Iowa was one of the nation's premier authorities on municipal law at the time. His decision in Clark v. City of Des Moines (1865) first set forth the rule of judicial construction that would later be named for him.

Judge Dillon wrote: "It is a general and undisputed proposition of law that a municipal corporation possesses and can exercise the following powers and no others: First, those granted in express words; second, those necessarily or fairly implied in or incident to the powers expressly granted; third, those essential to the declared objects and purposes of the corporation, not simply convenient, but indispensable. Any fair, reasonable doubt concerning the existence of the power is resolved by the courts against the corporation, and the power is denied." Most state and federal courts quickly adopted the rule.

While this ruling generally silenced those who championed far-reaching local autonomy, a national movement to provide for stronger municipal authorities began in Missouri in 1875. The home rule movement convinced several western states to adopt state constitutional amendments expanding the scope of municipal independence. The home rule doctrine allows a municipality to exercise any function so long as it is not prohibited by state legislation or in conflict with the state constitution or state statute. In Minnesota, limited home rule authority has been granted to "charter cities"; the legislature granted Ramsey County limited home rule authorities through charter legislation in early 1987. Although home rule may appear promising to those desirous of expanding local autonomy, the state legislature still controls the scope of power held by local governments. At their discretion, a state legislature may repeal the home rule doctrine or employ a laundry list of exemptions and exceptions that prohibit counties from exercising specific powers. The courts have ruled that if there is any uncertainty of who has power or jurisdiction, state government is granted those authorities.

The decades of the 1980s and 1990s: A growing schism between state and local governments

The second half of the twentieth century could be described as both the "best of times and worst of times" for county government in Minnesota. In response to federal programs such as Medicare and Medicaid, the Johnson Great Society initiatives and even the Nixon Federal Revenue Sharing program, the responsibility to provide services and the role of county government grew at a phenomenal pace. Mandates from both the federal and state governments became both the boon and curse of local government officials. On the one hand, the role of county government expanded with new responsibilities for providing welfare services, environmental services, health services, etc. Mandates, as defined by county officials grew to a point where nearly 80 to 85 percent of county services are mandated by the state or federal governments. New local aid programs were created that partially paid for these new mandates, and property tax relief programs were created to cushion the blow to property tax payers, particularly homeowners.

On the other hand, new mandates were created that generally were un- or under funded, leaving local governments scrambling to meet their mandate responsibilities while at the same time being asked to control the growth of local spending and property taxes. The management of solid waste is a good example of this challenge. In the late 1980s, counties were given the legislative responsibility to manage solid waste in their communities. Local dumps and burn pits were outlawed. The mandate created a hierarchy of waste disposal options, and counties were charged to develop county plans that would best meet this hierarchy. Generally, the state goal for county plans was to reduce the total amount of solid waste being disposed of in landfills and encourage alternative strategies for waste disposal such as recycling, waste-to-energy burn facilities, composting, etc. In addition, the state extended the state sales tax on garbage disposal to provide a revenue stream to subsidize these local government activities.

While the theory and start up of the solid waste management mandate went well, there has been an ongoing erosion of state support for local waste management programs. The mandate for solid waste management has continued and grown, but the state financial support has dwindled as state sales tax monies collected on solid waste has been diverted to other state priorities, and counties have had to subsidize solid waste services with locally raised taxes and fees. This lack of ongoing partnership between state and counties has worn thin the willingness of local officials to support state programming.

In addition to the funded/unfunded mandate debate, local governments have had an ongoing battle regarding how much legislative control should be imposed on local government revenue-raising capacity. For the most part, Minnesota counties have an extremely limited capacity for raising revenue. Counties are allowed to levy property taxes, charge fees and in addition receive intergovernmental revenues from the state and federal governments. The decades of the ’80s and ’90s saw a new wrinkle in local government revenue-raising capacity: the imposition of state imposed levy limits on cities and counties.

Levy limits as imposed by the state on local governments are used to control the ability of local governments to increase property tax revenues and more recently to control spending growth. While the nuance and detail of levy limits is quite arcane, the fundamental underpinnings of levy limits come from a legislative belief that the public blames legislators for property tax increases and a common legislative belief that local government officials are wild spenders and cannot be trusted to contain local spending.

The two levy limit proposals introduced in the 2005 Legislative session were a proposal for an absolute freeze on property taxes and a proposal to impose what was titled "Turbo-Charged Truth in Taxation." While neither of these proposals ultimately was adopted, the fact that the proposals were even considered created deep concern among county officials. In addition to these proposals, a third legislative remedy for local revenue and expenditure control continues to be discussed at the Capitol. The most recent addition to the levy limit debate is a proposal that is called the Taxpayers Bill of Rights (TABOR). The Minnesota TABOR is modeled after similar legislation in Colorado and would constitutionally establish levy limits and spending controls on local governments.

Is county government, as we know it today, sustainable?

A renewed county officials' focus on the future of county government can be traced to the fall of 2002. The state was faced with a projected shortfall in the state budget. Candidates had promised no new taxes and dire consequences were at hand for county government. In January of 2003, AMC organized an association-wide meeting to discuss what was titled the Minnesota County Restructure Act. Its goal was to spin the county/state relationship 180 degrees and establish a county/state relationship in which counties would be granted home rule authority. After long debate, the association membership chose not to propose radical change but rather work with the administration and the legislature to seek solutions to the state fiscal crisis.

The budget, as passed by the legislature, had dramatic effects on counties as there were cuts in state aid, new state mandates and cost shifts from the state to counties.

In the spring of 2003, the AMC Board of Directors came to the conclusion that as county officials, it was vital that they look at county government and re-examine its traditional roles. The Board recognized that county government will change tomorrow, the next day, and the day after that. With the massive reductions in state aid, the cost shifts, levy limits and the demands for new services, Minnesota counties had no choice but to become more agile and more creative in the delivery of county services. The Board took the first steps in developing the Minnesota Counties Futures Project when they approved the hiring of the Himle/Horner public affairs firm. They were hired to begin the process of collecting and analyzing data about the public's perception of county government and were asked to assist AMC in developing strategic long- and short-range options for counties. These options could include service delivery changes, structural changes and public relations and public information strategies. Recognizing the importance of getting out front and managing and directing these changes was the vision for this project.

The Minnesota Counties Futures Project

The first requirement of the project was to solicit broad participation from AMC members and county officials during all phases of the project, from data collection and the development of strategic options to carrying out project initiatives. Key objectives of the project included the following:

- Obtain candid, unfettered insight from audiences that are essential to the future success of county government.
- Identify current strengths/weaknesses and future opportunities/challenges for county government.
- Develop recommendations/strategic options to assist AMC in effectively positioning county government for future years.

Also influencing the County Futures Project in its drive to rethink county government and how counties provide services was work done by noted author and consultant Carl Neu. Neu identified what he called five mega-trends redefining the future of county government. In his work and writings, he noted that at a national level, county and local governments are experiencing challenges that are painful, frustrating and unsettling, and that many county officials hope, that in better financial times, everything will return to "normal."

In an article written for AMC, Neu wrote that "the evidence strongly suggests that local governments, and especially county governments, are entering a period of profound transformation. Potentially and dramatically redefining or reframing their role, operations, and relationships with other governmental entities and the publics they serve."

Neu's five emerging mega-trends that indicate change is coming are:

1. *The state-local government partnership is waning.*
2. *There is a substantial erosion of local governments' fiscal health, which, if continued, threatens their long-term fiscal sustainability/viability.*
3. *People now perceive local government entities to be redundant, fragmented, competitive and inefficient.*
4. *Citizens are not engaged with/by their local governments; in fact, they are becoming anti-government.*
5. *There is an erosion of grassroots government.*

Minnesota county officials agreed with Neu that the relationship between Minnesota counties and the state were at the very least strained, but evidence suggested that the concept of a state/local partnership either no longer existed or existed only when it was convenient to the state and the legislature. In fact, legislative debate often displayed an open hostility to local governments in both speech and action.

As Minnesota state budget challenges grew, state budget solutions included the shifting of state costs, the reduction of state aid and revenue sharing and the imposition of additional new mandates on counties and other local governments. These decisions in turn forced counties to raise taxes, cut programs and reduce both short-term and long-term reserves. While many legislators would argue that these state budget decisions were made as a result of an economic downturn, the decisions were not made jointly as state/local partners but appeared to more clearly fit into a state/local government indentured servant relationship.

In addition to the budget phenomenon, Minnesota county officials recognized that current service-delivery models are not sustainable fiscally, politically or logically and that citizens do not have confidence that that tax dollars are being spent responsibly or reasonably. Minnesota county officials agreed with Neu as he wrote that the "public — taxpayers — do not feel connected to local government, do not understand local government, sense reform or change is needed, but lack faith in local governments' will and ability to work together to shape a reform/change agenda."

Finally, like Neu, Minnesota county officials recognized that with the societal changes that were happening, the public was becoming less engaged with local government and was tuning out the needs of their communities unless there was a direct connection to their lives and properties.

At the December 2003 AMC Annual Conference, Himle/Horner reported the results of their research about Minnesota counties and the public perception regarding the services that counties provide.

The following summarizes their findings:

1. Counties are generally well respected for their work.
2. Core county functions are not well understood by the public.
3. The political environment for tax increases is poor and the public is looking for reform in government.
4. The public is supportive of change, but they doubt that counties will be change agents.
5. Counties can lead a reform agenda if that agenda
    - Prioritizes county functions;
    - Reduces state mandates and increases incentives for innovation and creativity;
    - Encourages cooperation and joint service delivery between counties and with other levels of government;
    - Develops a strong public information campaign with residents within counties; and
    - Changes service delivery systems before asking for new revenue from taxpayers.

Key to the decision to move forward on the Futures Project was a resounding “no” when county officials were asked if the current model of service delivery was sustainable. A resounding “no” when asked if the model was sustainable if there was just more money, and a resounding “no” when asked if they as county officials were willing to let others (the state legislature) control and shape the reform agenda (Figure 1).

AMC members recognized the importance of getting out front to manage and direct change, which became the vision of the Minnesota Counties Futures Project. Renowned author Graham Greene said it very eloquently: “There is always one moment in childhood when the door opens and lets the future in.” County officials recognized that that moment had arrived.

As stated earlier, Minnesota counties play two important roles: a local government role and a role as the administrative arm of the state. Understanding the context of the two roles of county government has been a key consideration of the Minnesota Counties

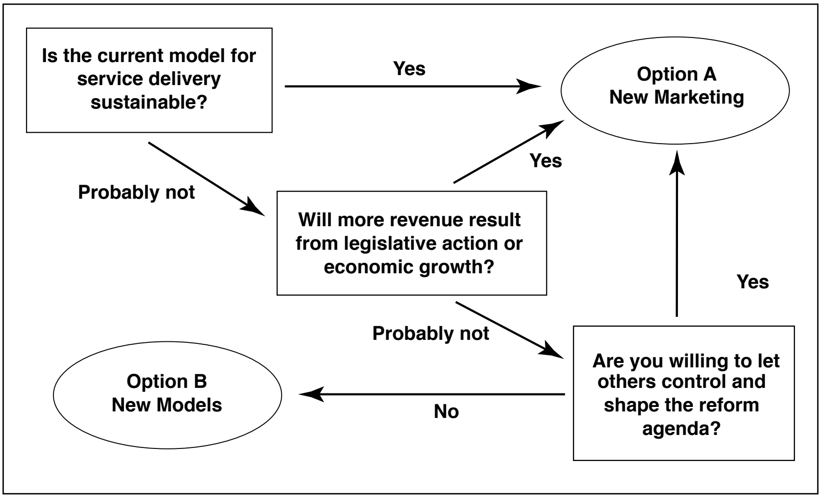


Figure 1: *Critical questions to determine direction.*

Futures Project. The project has identified three realities of county government in Minnesota. These realities include:

1. Each Minnesota county is facing uniquely different challenges based on its geography, demographics, economics and culture. Whether a citizen lives in Jackson, Grant, Lincoln or Washington County, the demand for services and expenditures are great while resources and revenues are limited.
2. Counties cannot face future challenges in a vacuum. Solutions will require internal county teamwork, cooperation between counties, new partnerships between counties and the public and new collaborations between counties and other levels of government.
3. Government service delivery systems must keep their focus on the delivery of services at the consumer/client level and be less concerned about structures and process. When a citizen needs a service, the citizen is not concerned about the color of uniform, the emblem on the side of the truck or title of an individual providing the service. In the end, the public wants the service delivered as effectively and as efficiently as possible.

The goal of the project as determined by the committee is to "Discover and Promote Opportunities for Dynamic Change." The committee recognized that there were certain core services that must be delivered at the local level and:

a. That change is inevitable;
b. That change happens more from leadership than from management;
c. That the current service delivery models are not sustainable in long term; and
d. That county boundaries on maps are artificial and service delivery systems should not be constrained by these artificial boundaries.

The ultimate outcome of the Futures task force will be for counties to use decision processes and service delivery systems to assure:

- High quality public services that are effective, efficient and sustainable, and
- Continuous systems improvements that create wholesale sustainable change

A Change Work Plan and Agenda

To achieve these ends, the Futures Project is embarking down three paths. The first of those paths is to create a culture among county officials in which county officials seek out opportunities to retool the traditional models of service delivery. The Futures committee has discussed the dynamics and forces of change and how change happens. Within those discussions, we recognized that successful change occurs when key elements for change are present and clearly identified. Often these elements are unpredictable and non-controlled, but I would contend that these elements can be nurtured, and through training and education, the opportunities for change can be enhanced.

The first of the identified elements that embrace change agendas is "the time for change is at hand," or what Anoka County Commissioner Margaret Langfeld called the "strategic moment." During the Futures discussions, committee members often used an exercise where they identified services that in their judgment were ripe for reform and placed them on a grid that identified both what was doable/not doable and what counties were willing to/not willing to do (Figure 2). Once these identified services were placed on the grid, committee members had a better sense of whether the item was ripe for reform or whether the timing was wrong, and they needed to search for other change opportunities. It was clear during our discussions that there had to be agreement regarding the need for reform and the willingness to take on a reform agenda.

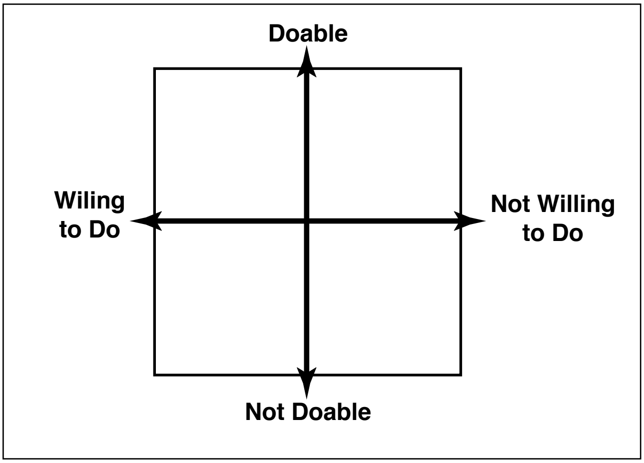


Figure 2: *Discovering and promoting opportunities for dynamic change.*

A second identified element was the need to have the right person, change agent, champion or leader leading the change agenda. This individual needed the energy to motivate others and move the reform effort forward. The challenge for counties and rural communities is that these individuals, those with the skills necessary to guide a change agenda, are often already over-burdened with both leadership and management responsibilities. This leaves them with little time to provide the guidance needed to successfully carry out substantive paradigm shifts.

A third element for encouraging a successful reform agenda is that a common vision, mission and goal for making change must be embraced by the decision-makers. In many ways, this is the most challenging of the elements needed for change as visions are often colored by personal agendas and political realities. Personal and political agendas carved on rhetorical stone tablets are extremely difficult to overcome.

One need only review a few historical change moments to identify how these three elements, in a simplistic way, were vital to the success or failure of a change agenda. The establishment of this nation is an example of the coalescing of a shared vision for a new nation, committed leadership coming together and the right time for action. A classic example of how the strategic moment was not part of a successful change agenda was the Clinton health care reform agenda. While there was broad agreement that reform was needed and there was committed leadership, the nation did not have a shared vision for where health care reform should go.

A more local example of a successful change agenda is the Red Rock Rural Water System, which is located in the south-central part of Minnesota. Watonwan County Commissioner John Baerg speaks eloquently about how he and other key individuals identified the challenge of needing a new high-quality water source for farmers and rural homeowners. Most of the wells being used by residents produced both low volumes and poor water quality, so the time was right to act. The shared vision to develop a rural water system was accepted by the community and a dedicated group of champions ultimately were successful in establishing the Red Rock system.

A second local example of a successful change agenda is found in the Scott County Association for Leadership and Efficiency (SCALE) project. In this project Scott County leaders recognized the value of working together to meet public service demands for one of the fastest growing counties in Minnesota. A commitment to delivering high quality services both efficiently and effectively became the vision of the group and through the dedicated leadership of a broad range of public officials and staff, Scott County governments are being consistently recognized for their innovation and citizen satisfaction.

A concrete goal for the Futures Project is to enhance the relationships between counties and state agencies to improve service delivery systems and outcomes. A convoluted concept at the least but as written earlier, the state/county relationship is at worst non-existent and at best perilously tenuous. Under the direction of the committee, an Association of Minnesota Counties/Department of Human Services Work Group has been created to review current human service delivery models with the assumption that the group discussions are open and unconstrained by past practices or preconceived agendas. Discussion participants, who include the nine top DHS Administrators and a combination of county commissioners, county social service directors and other county officials, are committed to setting aside their parochial interests and working to craft service delivery systems that first meet the needs of citizens and then meet the needs of the agencies and departments delivering those services.

The Futures committee expects to create additional work groups to deal with the relationship between counties and the state judicial system, between counties and the Minnesota Department of Health regarding food, beverage and lodging functions, and other service delivery systems and state/county relationships.

The third goal of the Futures Committee is to nurture partnerships with and among local governments and local government associations. Too often local governments have become, out of both necessity and as a result of state and federal rules and regulations, bureaucratic silos in which they do not coordinate the delivery of local services. Many citizens perceive elected officials and government employees as a collection of Keystone Kops characters that are inept or potentially a bunch of crooks. Public sector officials should not be surprised by this perception when we overhear coffee shop "how many highway workers does it take" jokes, the Defense Department $100 hammer stories and political candidates and office holders railing on all the bad stuff that governments and government workers do. Even those of us who work in the public sector often go to great lengths expounding on public sector deficiencies.

The Futures project goal is to create environments where elected officials and public employees seek out opportunities for partnerships between neighboring counties and between the various local governments within communities. It is through these partnerships that citizens can share both the reality and perception of effective and efficient service delivery systems.

At the same time, the statewide Associations are working to create a relationship where association leadership and staff coordinate activities and efforts. In particular, the Executive Directors of the League of Minnesota Cities (LMC), Minnesota School Boards Association (MSBA), the Minnesota Association of Township Officers (MATO) and AMC are meeting regularly to discuss issues of mutual concern and to coordinate responses to legislative initiatives that affect local governments. In addition, the LMC, MSBA and AMC Executive Committees are meeting to explore additional opportunities for collaboration and cooperation between the Associations.

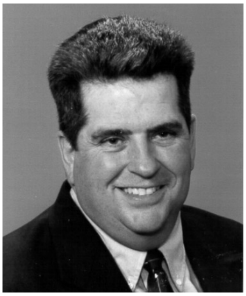
The Road Less Traveled

Efforts to create a change culture, enhance the state/county relationship, and to nurture partnerships have not been a simple stroll through the good government public policy park. It is my belief that public officials accept and resist change in ways similar to the general public. Their reactions to a change scenario mirror the reaction of the private sector. "What did I do wrong?" and "Am I going to lose my job?" are typically the first two questions asked when change is announced. Classic concerns about turf, power, control, competence, etc., are common challenges for collaborations and partnerships. Who is directly benefited and who pays are often barriers to effective partnerships for elected officials.

I believe that county government in Minnesota must change and that change in county government is necessary. The state and federal government appear to have lost their ability to govern as they become more and more mired in the partisan political syrup of large P politics. County government and local governments can no longer expect great new ideas, programs or revenues from the feds or from the state. The current local government models will not be able to sustain themselves in the future as times, conditions, and citizen expectations change. County and local governments have an opportunity to meet the challenges of citizen wants and needs as we build new communities and prosper through partnerships and collaborations. These concepts are particularly true in the rural areas of our state. Rural Minnesota is taking body blow after body blow as communities age and more and more young people are exported to urbanizing areas.

"Civic laboratories of democracy" was how Thomas Jefferson envisioned local government. He saw a future where local governments would innovate, test, succeed and fail. I suspect that he would hold in contempt those who would refuse to discuss innovation or reject the need to explore the new frontiers of county government. I imagine that he might have paraphrased Gene Roddenberry of Star Trek fame and asked county officials "to boldly go where no man has gone before."

Minnesota local government officials have the ability to redefine Minnesota's service delivery systems and to reconstruct how services are delivered. Minnesota county officials should heed the advice of Robert Frost as he wrote, "I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference." Carl Neu used the term "refounders" in describing the need for county officials to grab control of their own destinies. County officials can sit back and let life happen but I have confidence that the leadership skills are there and that the passion and desire to meet the challenges of the day exist to shape a new tomorrow for Minnesota County government.



Jim Mulder is the Executive Director of the Association of Minnesota Counties. He graduated from the University of Minnesota with a Bachelor of Science degree and has earned a master's degree from the Hubert H. Humphrey School of Public Affairs. Jim has been the Executive Director for AMC for sixteen years. Prior to holding this position, Jim served as the County Coordinator for McLeod County and worked for the Minnesota House of Representatives as a researcher and as a committee administrator for the House Tax Committee.

The Association of Minnesota Counties is a voluntary association of all of Minnesota's eighty-seven counties. AMC provides a broad range of services that include lobbying the Minnesota Legislature, working with state departments and agencies, and providing training and information to Minnesota county officials.