

RMJ

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Taking the Helm:
How rural Minnesota's next
generation sees the future

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Shaping the Future of Local Government:

How I See It

Jessica A. Beyer

My story began in rural America growing up seven miles outside of a small northeastern Iowa town. As with many families, my ancestors pursued a better life by establishing farms in northern Iowa and southern Minnesota. Rural life is something I have been a part of and surrounded by my entire life. Today, my mom and step-dad operate a small family farm near Hanska, Minnesota, and many of my family and friends make a living through agriculture or reside in rural communities.

When I was ten, my parents relocated to Mankato from Iowa, and even though by most urban standards Mankato is considered a smaller community in itself, it felt like I was moving to a metropolis. To me, any town that had a McDonald's was surely a big city. It took me a long time to adjust, and even then, throughout the years I felt that my heart still belonged in the country and in particular rural northeastern Iowa, where my roots run deep. However, as life ventured on, I realized that Mankato wasn't such a big place after all.

I ended up staying in Mankato and pursued a B.A. in communications and a B.S. in business management at Minnesota State University, Mankato. After college, my journey took me to the suburbs of Minneapolis and St. Paul to work for a publishing company. I traveled across the country to numerous cities and enjoyed my position, the experiences that came with travel and my time in the Twin Cities. In the end, though, I longed to eventually get my master's degree, be

part of a smaller community and have the opportunity to live closer to family.

I had hoped and thought that my path might lead me back to rural Iowa, but a job came about unexpectedly with Blue Earth County. I applied, and found myself planted back in my second home, southern Minnesota, which brought me closer to rural issues through my career. I was fortunate enough to be able to accomplish my short-term goal of obtaining my master's degree along with the long-term goal of establishing a life with a career, home and involvement within a smaller community.

Based on my experiences, I believe that rural America has a lot to offer younger generations, especially when it comes to certain quality-of-life aspects. These might include simple things like smaller class sizes in schools and a significantly shorter or less stressful commute, but working in rural America also provides young people opportunities in terms of access to career moves and experience much earlier than they might in a larger urban scene.

Opportunities

When I look back, I would never in my wildest dreams have thought I would be working in county government. It has been an eye-opening experience that has helped shape my interests, skill goals, and leadership skills. It has transformed me from thinking about rural issues in personal terms to thinking about them in a much different and larger context within the realm of public policy.

As Public Information Director at Blue Earth County, my main focus is to manage all internal and external communications for the organization. I oversee and develop newsletter publications, web sites, media and public relations, event planning and all other functions related to communications. Part of my role allows me to work closely with the County Administrator, commissioners, department heads and other staff on legislative issues and various projects. Each day is a learning experience and keeps me busy juggling many responsibilities and projects at once.

The largest project I have been involved in during my

time with Blue Earth County is the construction of the Blue Earth County Justice Center, the first public facility in south central Minnesota to receive the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) green certification.

The Blue Earth County Justice Center is just an example of a project I might not have been able to be involved in if I had been working in a larger population center or bigger organization where my duties may have been much more limited. It might have taken me years longer to have a chance at these kinds of roles. Smaller organizations and jurisdictions often allow people to gain experience and additional skill sets beyond the more narrowly focused types of positions often found at larger agencies. From this specific experience, I was able to interact with a variety of people within my organization and with a number of outside agencies assisting with the project, including community members, contractors, vendors, LEED consultants, officials from the state court system and representatives from the National Institute of Corrections. Expanding networks is vital toward relationship building and the success of individuals and organizations.

Another example of where I've been able to have a larger role is in developing the Blue Earth County Citizens Academy. One of my greatest interests since joining Blue Earth County has been to create more effective public awareness campaigns to educate citizens about government, county operations and the many services provided to citizens. Often, citizens have a hard time distinguishing the differences between various local governments and how their roles differ from one jurisdiction to the next. Counties outside of metropolitan areas work to serve rural populations with services such as law enforcement, road maintenance, ditch management, planning and zoning permits, and environmental protection. They also provide different services outside of what cities do for their residents, such as social services, prosecution of felonies, elections, licenses and vital statistics, jails and probation, recording of legal documents, storage of property documents, property assessments and veterans' programs.

Three years ago, I was able to initiate a highly successful program known as the Citizens Academy to engage county

residents and give them a hands-on approach to learning about county government while providing them with a better understanding of what services and programs are provided for their tax dollar. The Citizens Academy approach has mainly been used by cities to focus on learning about law enforcement. At the time I was establishing the program, there were only a handful of counties throughout the country with such a program. It has been a rewarding experience to facilitate the program, and I hope it creates more opportunities to showcase the issues rural counties and all counties in general face.

Since I started working with Blue Earth County, I have learned a great deal about government through experiences working with individuals and agencies at the local, state, and national levels. I was fortunate to take part in learning about a variety of issues at the international level as a Marshall Memorial Fellow in June 2010 through the German Marshall Fund. My journeys to Berlin and Frankfurt, Germany; Bilbao, Spain; Skopje, Macedonia; and Brussels, Belgium, allowed me to learn about policy in European countries on a variety of issues that included sustainable technologies, transportation infrastructure, and economic development. Building relationships and networks as a way to share information and learn from best practices in other places has been invaluable. The experience from this program and the ongoing forums afterward have given me a broader perspective on government outside of local issues and caused me to become more informed and engaged outside of my daily work.

The coming change in local government

All too recently, citizens and local jurisdictions throughout Minnesota have dealt with and are continuing to deal with the repercussions of a state government shutdown that has left a bitter taste for many. Moving forward from this experience, I think young people can lead the charge for us all to have greater impacts on decision-making by becoming more aware and actively involved in what's happening in government. By utilizing technology, people can choose to be informed and go on to voice their opinions and be heard by elected officials.

Involvement is key to getting the attention of elected officials and holding people accountable for their actions.

It is no secret that currently all levels of government are facing budget shortfalls, but in particular local governments are experiencing a stream of significant reductions in funding from federal and state sources. Even though the majority of the services that counties provide are mandated, inevitable shortcomings in funding have and will continue to extend the burden of tough decisions on local policy makers. These shortfalls will increasingly cause jurisdictions to change the way they do business. On the forefront of these changes will be a new generation of citizens who carry diverse expectations for government and a workforce of government employees who will need to find innovative solutions outside the traditional scope of what government has looked like.

In my experience as a local government employee, I have seen Blue Earth County use a combination of strategies to cope with a loss of state funding that started back in 2003 and is still deepening with additional actual and anticipated cuts from the current state budget crisis. Some of those strategies include a reduction in workforce through early retirement incentives, hiring freezes and voluntary furlough programs. Other jurisdictions are implementing these same strategies, along with reduced hours of operations. Another way our organization was able to keep property tax levies relatively steady this past year was by tapping into reserves, but this is only a short-term strategy that cannot sustain a long-term solution for keeping services at the level citizens expect. In any case, most jurisdictions do not have the luxury of avoiding layoffs or further cuts to service by dipping into reserve funding. This is where more traditional leaders and agencies may need to look at organizational structure and think in a completely different mindset. Rather than some leaders being hesitant about change and seeing collaboration and the sharing of services as a threat to job security and organizational structure, in the appropriate situations it should foster the ability to streamline systems and save resources.

When I think about the future of local government, it is scary to think about how jurisdictions (in particular smaller

population bases) are left to deal with program aid cuts when they are already working on shoestring budgets in trying to provide quality services for their citizens. I especially worry about smaller communities and how they will be able to retain, let alone attract, people when basic services and needs may have to be compromised due to funding cuts. It is easy to feel discouraged and think that the economy will never recover, that budget deficits will continue, and that all the important issues will never get solved.

Despite the doom and gloom, though, there are opportunities for local governments to look at ways to partner with other jurisdictions, non-profits and private organizations whenever possible. I get discouraged when people assume that local government is bureaucratic, collaboration is an unfamiliar term, and that there is an abundance of “wasteful spending” to be eliminated. I’m convinced that if critics take a closer look at most jurisdictions, they will find that local governments have been running lean operations for quite some time and are often held more accountable because taxpayers live, work and associate with local government leaders on a daily basis.

There is always room for improvement, however, and for thoughtful approaches in researching ways to achieve greater effectiveness that break with tradition. Younger generations, for example, may have an easier time with implementing collaborative strategies among government agencies because they may not have a traditional outlook on department organizational structure. Times like these offer a great opportunity for the next generation of citizens to step in and shape the future of their communities. New strategies may be as simple as enhanced communication among departments, eliminating silos of services and information. The increased number of ways that citizens can provide public input without physically coming to board meetings or other public events can help allow people to participate whether they watch a streamed video of a public hearing from home, receive automatic e-mail notices with meeting agenda items, attend in person, or post public comment on a social media site. People now have options and can choose the form of involvement

they prefer and take part based on the mechanism that works best for them.

The challenge will be in coordinating all of this. With new technology come different challenges, particularly with social media, blogs, and the abundance of information sharing as a whole. There is a risk associated with people being able to decipher multiple sources of information, but they can also become well educated on the issues and filter facts from fiction.

Government is at an interesting juncture, and I expect there to be a paradigm shift on many levels. From my experience, local government is definitely shrinking, and with that there will come a variety of challenges, including the expectation to meet and exceed constituent needs with fewer resources and staff. A new transformation in government is going to call for new ways of looking at issues and flexibility in finding innovative solutions, rather than using strategies that don't get to the core of the issues but simply rob Peter to pay Paul.

Younger generations have the power to get engaged and have an impact on how local government redefines itself moving forward, whether it means getting involved on citizen committees, staying informed via web technologies, running for office, or considering a career path in government. There are many career options in local government beyond the typical roles of social workers or snow plow drivers. Careers include areas like information technology, nursing, finance, geographic information systems, engineering and much more. Despite budget shortfalls, local government, in particular county government is an area that will continue to have many people retiring with key positions to fill. As demographics continue to change across Minnesota, younger and more diverse populations are needed to serve and will have opportunities to make real impacts. I strongly believe that generations younger than my own will continue to transform the way we communicate and will take government interaction and service delivery outcomes to a new level.

As we move forward, current and future generations will be forced to look at local government services from a different perspective and determine what the value of those

services are to them. In the fall 2010 edition of the *Blue Earth County Communicator*, the county's semi-annual publication for residents, we provided an article to residents on this very topic. The idea was sparked by a recent *Rochester Post Bulletin* opinion piece by Olmsted County Chief Finance Officer Robert Bendzick. He states, "People join together and form a co-op to obtain some goods or services that they can't as effectively do on their own." In our publication, examples were given on what the county does to provide value to its residents based on the property tax levy divided by the population of Blue Earth County. The total cost of the service, often reduced by the presence of other revenue streams, was also presented. One example was the breakdown in cost of law enforcement, which was valued at \$113.56 per resident per year at the time of the article, which in comparison is far less than what many people pay for home security systems.

The idea behind this theory is that when people choose to live in a state or community, they are choosing to join a co-op based on the community's quality-of-life ideals and priorities. Reasons vary and can include types of jobs, quality of schools and recreational opportunities, but the question will really come down to what core areas people want to make investments in. Current and future generations will need to take into consideration topics such as how important it is to have safe roads to travel on each day or the prioritization of clean drinking water compared to other essential services.

With the responsibility of becoming more actively involved in the process, people's attitudes toward government will need to shift as part of this transformation. It is easy to lay blame on others and to overlook problems associated with policy. I'm hopeful that as we progress, young people and people in general will take more ownership of government and not only look at the value of services from a different perspective, but take ownership and pride in local government systems. I'm not saying this isn't happening now. In recent years, however, I have noticed a trend in media stories and public perceptions toward being very critical of public servants and government agencies in general. I realize that systems aren't perfect and that some of that distrust was earned. I am hopeful, though,

that as future generations take the helm, there will be a realization that government is a system that was created “by the people, for the people,” and that we all have ownership and can make positive contributions.

How technology shapes the future of service delivery

Technology is already changing government and the ability for a variety of different segments of the population to obtain information. More than fifteen years ago, the Internet revolutionized how information was shared and the way people conduct research. Today, Facebook and other social media technologies allow information to be pushed to people and keep subscribers connected automatically. Many local government agencies are still apprehensive about the use of social media and are only slowly signing on. However, social media tools have proven themselves (in particular Facebook) to be effective information-sharing sources that are here to stay. They have the power to deliver information to segments of the population that may not use traditional media outlets to get their news. Social media adds another dimension to public awareness, and in my mind is another tool that in conjunction with all other mechanisms allows local governments to attempt to reach as many people as possible. Technology will certainly be at the forefront for whatever development is next and guide how government can stay connected to the public and keep citizens engaged. The more local governments can utilize technology, the more successful they will be in reaching out to those who cannot attend public meetings and foster inclusion among diverse populations and non-traditional audiences.

Since I first began working in local government I have seen a number of indicators that there is a paradigm shift happening with citizens and their expectations of government agencies and the services provided by those agencies. Governments have already started emulating how companies use websites to conduct business, and as the pressure mounts to do more with less, technology will certainly play a big role in assisting with serving customers. Many counties are already using technology to process forms, reserve campsite

reservations in parks, and make payments for various services with credit cards.

People have theories about how government organizations should function, and I often hear comments about how government should operate more like a business. Government is not meant to run like a business, though; it needs to operate differently because of all the obligations to citizens. However, that doesn't mean that government can't take a few pointers from highly effective business strategies and practices. A favorite that comes to my mind is customer service. As a person who used to work in customer service, I believe that government should practice strategies (if they don't already) that implement the best customer service possible to constituents. In my mind, this is the biggest difference between private and public sectors and will increasingly be important for constituents. In general, people just want an answer to their question or help getting the service they need. They aren't interested in being transferred from department to department or from organization to organization to find what they are looking for. Information needs to be accessible and easy to obtain.

The future could bring changes like complete virtual centers for some government operations, which would eliminate the overhead costs of maintaining brick and mortar facilities that have high operational costs. The ability to work from home using new technology could also alleviate high transportation costs and reduce the number of staff commuting each day to an onsite office.

Technology will be the biggest asset, especially in helping smaller communities and rural areas be connected and part of a global marketplace. Rural communities need to be at the forefront to ensure they are included and have the same abilities as urban areas. In the multitude of issues that will have an impact on younger generations in either how solutions are sought or how they will be funded, it is apparent that we will need to reinvent ourselves, support innovation, and foster open-minded development.

Another important factor in determining how local governments will operate in the future lies in the workforce

itself. Different generational expectations can change the way an organization operates. Younger generations may implement the change for more flexible schedules, seek options to work off site and have new expectations from the government as an employer, as opposed to traditional seniority-based systems. New expectations may include merit-based pay, which focuses more on the quality of work rather than years of service. Workforce demographics are changing, and with that comes a number of other issues, including succession planning and the transfer of information as people change jobs more often than in the past. If government wants to retain the best employees, they, too, will need to adapt to social pressures and look to the private sector to evaluate how organizations have evolved since the time when the majority of employees worked for the same company in the same department for 30 years. The new workforce will most likely work much longer due to issues like increasing Social Security age requirements, high insurance premiums and rising life expectancies.

Nothing is certain but change

From my perspective, younger generations will have the burden of dealing with a wide range of issues that won't see much progress in the near future due to budget deficits, but will extend out the burden of the situation.

As we look ahead, it is uncertain what local governments will look like in the coming decades. Each community, area and region is different, and while many jurisdictions share similar issues, a cookie-cutter approach will not yield the greatest outcomes in delivery of effective and efficient services. Flexibility will be essential for local communities to solve problems and create mechanisms that work best for their needs. I believe local governments will continue to downsize and that pressure from tighter budgets will cause jurisdictions not only to share services, but consider consolidation of some areas and rely more heavily on technology to connect jurisdictions, especially in rural areas. In some cases, regionalization of services may occur. The important caveat is that decisions cannot be based solely on immediate needs driven by line items on a budget — policy makers must look at

the entire picture, trying to be strategic and future-oriented.

One thing is certain – change is inevitable. My hope is that current and future generations will be able to reside in the communities of their choice and be able to obtain jobs, opportunities and services without having to relocate to more densely populated areas. Younger generations and all generations working together have the power to shape change utilizing new strategies and become engaged with local government, non-profits and businesses to keep rural (and all) communities strong and connected while providing services that align with citizen needs and values.