

“Successful Commissioner-Administrator Partnerships”

Lee Merkel, ICMA Senior Advisor, Southeast Colorado

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It is a pleasure to be with you all! My presentation deals with county administration “in the trenches,” and I expect that it will relate to most of you, but especially those in the rural counties.

After 25 years in local gov’t and 16 years w/DoLA as SE Regional Manager in Pueblo. Retired last summer, now serving as ICMA/CCCMA Senior Advisor)

BRIEF COMMENTS ON PERSONAL LIFE:

- Raised in Northeast Ohio
- B. A. from Wittenberg University, 1972
- Masters in Public Administration from University of Colorado, 1977
- Orientation toward serving local governments in Colorado
- Senior Advisor for ICMA and Colorado City & County Management Association (CCCMA) since Fall 2017

I prefer to call it by the former title... “Range Rider.” Just seems more appropriate for Colorado!

CCCMA Senior Advisor Program is a joint activity with ICMA to provide the counsel, experience, and support of respected, retired Managers of the profession available to members. Currently there are 90 Senior Advisors in 22 states to serve by volunteering their time to offer confidential professional and personal support and advice. Colorado has six senior advisors, located in Denver, Breckenridge, Grand Junction, Pagosa Springs, Colorado Springs, and Pueblo.

GARFIELD COUNTY

My only experience working for a county was in Garfield County during the Oil Shale boom and bust almost 40 years ago when I served as planning director and assistant county manager from 1981 to 1985. It was quite a time, with large energy development projects proposed and under development in a number of West Slope Counties, and of course on the Front Range as well. And natural gas development was beginning at the same time, which later increased exponentially in the 1990s and 2000s.

The high level of activity created a lot of excitement and investment in Colorado, and it was a time when special efforts were being made to build partnerships among energy companies, federal, state, and local governments, citizens, and all stakeholders to minimize conflict and enable energy projects to be considered for permitting in a relatively open environment. The Cumulative Impacts Task Force was a special effort by Colorado’s energy corporations, state government, and local governments to foster cooperation in developing socioeconomic data that could be accepted by all parties, based on common

We are all familiar with the sort of pressure that can be experienced in rural county environments when controversial land use issues are presented in public hearings... imagine what it was for three county

commissioners and their staff when huge oil shale projects were being considered for land use permits and the changing face of a rural county with a population that was going to double or triple in a decade with large scale energy development that was proposed.

Commissioner/administrator relationships become more important when the levels of development activity increase in a county.

SUCCESSFUL COMMISSIONER/ADMINISTRATOR PARTNERSHIPS

ROLES

The United States is recognized as THE model for democracy in the history of civilization, and Colorado's local government environment ranks among the strongest in the nation for local government management. The Colorado City & County Management Association (CCCMA) has been growing in membership for the past fifty years with more than 300 members - about 260 are in municipal administration and 40 are in county administration.

MISSION

I want to describe our primary mission as being "to conduct our local government business as effectively as we can."

In doing so, a partnership between a county's administrator and county commissioners will help that mission to be successful.

ROLES

An administrator's role presents requirements and opportunities to work together in unique ways:

- Each administrator position is defined in some way initially
- It's important for the BOCC and administrator to be clear about duties and expectations
- Duties usually include roles in administration, with varying levels of responsibility, depending on the size of the county.

As appropriate, I recommend that BOCC examine and update or clarify the job description and expectations for the administrator. We live in a fast-paced environment, where times change, issues arise, and outside influences can change the lay of the land in our neighborhoods with little notice.

Impartiality and separation from politics is important for county administrators since political parties have a role in defining County election processes. Clearly, the times and issues in various communities determine how important these issues may be to the county organization.

STAFF MEETINGS

Depending on the size of the county organization and geographic makeup of the county and its offices, staff meetings are important. Regular meetings for exchange of information and updates from various managers can build teamwork and optimize efficiency of the organization.

It's easy for us to feel like everyone is too busy to take the time for regular meetings, especially in this day of being so connected by e-mail, cell phone, and social media... but it is important to have face to face

meeting where questions and common issues can be handled in a group setting. It keeps staff members on the same page and feeling as though they are valued and included on the county's team.

ADMINISTRATOR/BOCC TIME TOGETHER

Time spent together in regular, special, or closed door meetings can be perceived by others as appropriate, inappropriate, or unnecessary by others in the county organization, citizens, or by members of the public at large. Taking care of business, doing our jobs, and exchanging information is time consuming, necessary, and part of our world in local government together, but perception can be everything. Be mindful of public perceptions and the potential for misunderstanding of roles or activities when going to restaurants together, seeing each other socially, or talking on the street.

We all know about requirements of CORA, the "Sunshine Law," and statutes limiting discussion by elected officials regarding the board's decision making, but what people BELIEVE to be true is often AS important, or more important, than what is actually true! So, it is critically important to conduct transparent processes for the county's diverse business activities. Many decisions in budgeting and land use public processes require public hearings prior to a final decision, but in general, I recommend that business be conducted in an open manner, with easy access by members of the press and citizens.

One important aspect of the "commissioner-administrator partnership," and one that is less transparent, is to schedule an evaluation process of the county administrator's performance. The process should be agreed upon in advance, and conducted regularly... many are done annually, and may be required by County Human Resources departments, but if not, I recommend that commissioners and administrators agree on a process with agreed-upon performance objectives and an opportunity for frank discussion about performance expectations and potential improvements to maximize the effectiveness of their working relationship.

War Stories!

- flying to CITF with Flaven out of Aspen Airport in 1981...
- County staff picnics

RETREATS & STRATEGIC PLANNING

Most local governments adopt goals periodically to guide their activities and allocation of resources. If your county does not have a strategic plan or a set of adopted goals, it may be worth considering a process to develop a document that will help guide your organization.

Retreats or meetings for strategizing or goal setting are important prior to beginning a budget process, but do not have to be reserved for the budget season. Frequency for setting goals can be determined periodically, but I recommend that you not neglect issues until you determine that the county's current set of goals is completely irrelevant before scheduling a time to examine successes, challenges, and opportunities in a relaxed setting. After an election or the arrival of a new team member can offer a good chance to revisit or update the current set of goals.

Once adopted or revised, share the goals to guide activities, priorities, and the annual budget process.

INTERGOVERNMENTAL RELATIONS

Many counties hold meetings regularly with commissioners and municipal or special district representatives in a relaxed setting to discuss common issues. It helps build relationships and familiarity in advance of emergencies or complex matters, and it is certainly more comfortable working together in a tense situation when representatives of the county and its municipalities already know each other and have a mutual understanding of roles and each other.

Sharing what is learned at these meetings helps county administrators or commissioners stay abreast of issues, and to determine when it may be prudent for all commissioners to attend a meeting or suggest a larger forum for discussion.

ETHICS

County commissioners and administrators are familiar with ethical issues to some degree. In our current “connected” environment, with today’s digital media and social platforms, county business is increasingly exposed to input from many sources which can polarize communities. It is more important than ever to conduct ourselves ethically, and to set high standards for ourselves and our county organizations at a time when we can expect community discussion about our local government processes and decisions.

Commissioners and administrators have access to articles and CCI’s policies on ethics, and it helps to spend time learning about the current issues in that arena. Administrators seek to remain impartial and serve the BOCC with integrity, implementing the policies and decisions of the BOCC, they may want to refer to the ICMA Code of Ethics, which is a good resource for local government managers as they carry out their duties in a professional role.