

PRELIMINARY REPORT FROM THE AD-HOC COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT TRANSPARENCY AND ACCESSIBILITY



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Jeff Redick, Chairman
Don Puchalski, Vice-Chairman
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INTRODUCTION

In an effort to expand the transparency and accessibility of County government, as well as remain accountable to the taxpayers, DuPage County Board Chairman Robert J. Schillerstrom created the Ad-Hoc Committee on Government Transparency and Accessibility on Wednesday, January 14, 2009.

In forming the Committee, Schillerstrom requested that the Committee “work to reaffirm and expand the County’s commitment to transparency by examining what new practices and tools are available to provide greater accountability to the public.”

On Tuesday, January 27, 2009, Schillerstrom appointed County Board Members Don Puchalski (District 1), Jeff Redick (District 2), John Curran (District 3), Grant Eckhoff (District 4), Tony Michelassi (District 5) and Jim Zay (District 6) to serve on the Committee. Jeff Redick was asked to serve as Committee Chairman and Don Puchalski as Vice Chairman.

Chairman Schillerstrom asked the Committee to ensure County information is readily available to the public; examine the feasibility of streaming county board meetings online; explore the posting of more financial information online; and discuss the potential need for a new County ordinance to ensure the County’s ethics policy is on par with new State law, and if necessary advocate for changes in State law.

As the only Committee of its kind in Illinois County government, the Ad-Hoc Committee on Government Transparency and Accountability set out on a month-long review of current County department practices to identify transparency issues and recommend appropriate improvements.

In examining the efficiency and transparency of current DuPage County practices, the Committee met with DuPage County Auditor Bob Grogan, Chief Financial Officer Fred Backfield, Human Resources Director Cara Perrone, Information Technology Director Rhonda Warren, DuPage County Ethics Officer Barbara Preiner, State Representative Michael Connelly and representatives from DuPage County State’s Attorney. Further, testimony and information regarding transparency best practices was provided to the Committee from representatives for American’s For Prosperity, the Illinois Policy Institute, The Sam Adams Alliance, The Civic Federation and Illinois Alliance for Growth. Each of these groups provided testimony to the Committee on what their organizations would like to see DuPage County do to be more transparent.

After completing its meeting schedule and examining the issues relating to transparency, the Ad-Hoc Committee on Government Transparency and Accessibility hereby submits this preliminary report, which sets out the Committee recommendations that are intended to improve accessibility and transparency of DuPage County government. These recommendations are being submitted to the County Board Chairman and Finance Committee for review, consideration and appropriate implementation of the goals and initiatives contained herein.

FINANCE & BUDGET

The primary discussion regarding the DuPage County Finance Department was the posting of budgetary information online (via www.dupageco.org) so that the public has a clear understanding of where County money is going and where it is being spent. Currently, the budget is available online for viewing (after it is approved by the Board) and is accompanied by an extensive executive summary explaining the strategic initiatives that are the County's funding priorities.

Upon reviewing the current practices of the Finance Department, this Committee recommends the following:

BUDGET

The Finance Department should post, online, a budget calendar that provides the public a timeline from which they can follow the County's budget process. Said budget calendar should include dates for individual committee budget reviews, Chairman's budget presentation, public meetings and hearings, County Board review, deliberations and voting. Posting this calendar online will also allow for greater public input on the budget, which is paramount to transparency.

The Committee recommends a more user-friendly executive summary that provides the public with a budget snap-shot that is easy to understand and follow. Said executive summary should continue to be accompanied by the full line-item budget on the internet. This will provide the needed detail for a full and complete review of DuPage County budgets and spending priorities. Additionally, it is recommended that the budgets for the DuPage County Health Department, ETSB, DuPage County Airport Authority, and all other government bodies over which the County Board Chairman and/or the County Board have appointment authority be added to the DuPage County website for public review.

The Committee suggests the scheduling of district public budget hearings, held throughout the County to provide greater budget input and obtain a higher level of public participation in the development of the DuPage County budget, which will increase trust and confidence in County government.

The Committee further recommends that the Finance Committee and Strategic Planning Committees work with departments and agencies to develop and monitor activity and performance measures for inclusion in budget and strategic planning documents. Additionally, long-term income and budget projections should be maintained, communicated and continually updated.

EXPENSE DISCLOSURE

The DuPage County Auditor currently posts the County’s “checkbook” online. The Committee recommends the Finance Department work with the Information Technology Department to explore the IT infrastructure improvements needed to begin posting a more detailed accounting of County spending by vendor and project, as well as a full listing of all expenditures, including a listing of employee salary payments by job title.

The Committee recommends that the County explore the feasibility of investing in a new Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) system, which would provide the public with a searchable database for contracts, expenditures and budget; provide a contract life cycle (inception in committee through close-out), linked to spending for the contract; automatically create financial statements meeting modern audit methodologies; improve report creation and compliance; and streamline budget submission and development process.

This will take a significant commitment by the County Board in terms of monetary support and should be examined in greater detail by the Technology Committee, Finance Committee and the County Board.

Furthermore, the Committee recommends that the Finance Department, Auditor, and Treasurer conduct a review of funds held outside the Treasurer. This will help increase transparency and accountability, and improves County oversight. Further, the County’s external auditor should provide an annual reporting of its findings and recommendations to the County Board’s Finance Committee.

PROCUREMENT

The DuPage County Procurement Ordinance provides for increased scrutiny and levels of review on County spending activities, which ensures a high level of integrity.

State Representative Michael Connelly presented the committee with legislation he has introduced in the State Legislature that would allow for a “reverse auction.” It is the recommendation of this Committee that DuPage County examines this process and work on legislation that would allow counties to initiate similar policies.

The Committee recommends that review of the DuPage County Procurement Ordinance be made to evaluate use of no-bid contracts and expand the use of competitive bidding in County procurement.

ETHICS

The Committee heard testimony from the DuPage County Human Resources Director, the County’s Ethic’s Officer, and members of the community-at-large related to issues of ethics in government.

ETHICS ORDINANCE

In discussing the County's Ethics Ordinance it was brought to the Committee's attention that those governmental bodies, whose members are appointed by the DuPage County Board Chairman and approved by the County Board, do not fall under the authority of the DuPage County Ethics Ordinance. This Committee recommends that any required legal authority be sought in order for the Ethics Ordinance to be expanded to apply to all appointed bodies in order to maintain the highest ethical standards.

Furthermore, the DuPage County Ethics Ordinance does not govern the activities of the offices and employees of independently elected County-wide officials, although many said officials have implemented an ethics policy that governs their operations.

This Committee recommends each County-wide Elected Official consider adoption of the DuPage County Ethics Ordinance and submit to jurisdiction of the DuPage County Ethics Commission, which would promote uniform and comprehensive ethical standards throughout County government.

ETHICS COMMISSION

The Committee recommends that information regarding the County's Ethics Commission be posted online in a format that is easily accessible by the public and county employees. This should be in the form of a link clearly visible on the County's website. The information contained online should include instructions and forms to file an ethics complaint, provide the ability to track complaints through the system, give full detail of all "whistle-blower" protections in order to encourage reporting and provide information about members of the Ethic's Commission

Furthermore, the Committee recommends that the Ethics Commission engage in a critical review of County's Ethic's Ordinance including possible changes to time limitations for complaints and consideration of anonymous complaint reporting. Following said review, a report to the DuPage County Board should be issued with the Ethics Commission's findings and recommendations. Thereafter, annual reports of Ethics Commission activities should be made to the County Board.

CAMPAIGN FINANCE

There was discussion about what is currently allowable through State Law and County policy regarding the limitations on campaign finance. Through these discussions it was discovered there are limitations on what DuPage County can and cannot do as a non-home rule county.

According to the DuPage County State's Attorney's Office, the County could limit or eliminate campaign contributions to the County Board Chairman, County-wide Elected Officials and County Board Members from vendors who do business with the County by amendment to the County Procurement Policy.

Therefore, this Committee recommends that a full review of the County Procurement Ordinance be made with the intent of instituting changes to limit campaign contributions by vendors doing business with DuPage County in order to avoid any appearance of impropriety and maintain objectivity in the procurement process. To fully reach those goals, the Committee further recommends that said campaign contribution limitations be extended to include professional groups representing County contractors and organizations representing County employees and/or performing work on behalf of vendors on County projects.

All DuPage County elected officials' County website profiles shall include a link to the Illinois Campaign Disclosure website to access said County officials' campaign disclosure filings.

Also, all statements of economic interest that are required to be filed by DuPage County Elected Officials, candidates and employees should be available for review on the DuPage County website.

INFORMATION DISCLOSURE & SHARING

The Committee heard testimony from the public about greater accessibility of County Board meetings as well as technologies available to improve communication between the County and the public.

AIRING OF BOARD MEETINGS

Currently, meetings are taped and aired by Comcast Cable with limited viewership. However, with the ever-evolving advances in technology, this Committee recommends that the County examine the feasibility of putting meetings online. This will provide two tangible benefits. First, it will provide residents with easy access to County Board meetings that they can view at any time, and secondly it will allow the County to archive its board meetings so that they are always available for public review.

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION (FOIA)

The Committee recommends a review of FOIA compliance and copy charges be conducted with the goal of ensuring issued costs are consistent with actual costs to the County. Further, the County should expand the listing of available information online to eliminate said copy charges and activities for all County departments and appointed bodies.

SOCIAL NETWORKING

The Committee recommends that the County explore using new social networking applications that will allow it to communicate directly with residents. Networking sites like Facebook and Twitter would allow the County's Communications Office to provide

the public with real-time news updates related to issues and meetings. Such activities would increase accessibility and further the County's strategic planning goal of improving communications with DuPage County residents.

WEBSITE

The Information Technology department made a presentation to the Committee regarding its current undertaking of a website redesign. The goal is to provide citizens with access to information in an easy manner.

The Committee recommends that the Information Technology Department and Technology Committee examine tools necessary to make the County's website visually appealing and user-friendly. The Committee also recommends that the website include a mechanism which would allow for residents to enter their contact information (email) in order to receive regular news releases and meeting alerts.

On an immediate basis, the Committee recommends that creation of a web link detailing the names and contact information for all lobbyists employed by DuPage County and a full listing of the County's legislative agenda.

CONCLUSIONS

The Ad-Hoc Committee on Government Transparency and Accessibility encourages an aggressive agenda for implementation of these recommendations. Further, we request passage of a resolution accepting these recommendations and formalizing the commitment of the DuPage County Board to the continued pursuit of government transparency and accessibility. This committee further suggests that all County offices, as well as all government bodies over which the County Board Chairman and/or the County Board have appointment authority, adopt and follow the recommendations contained herein.

Respectfully submitted,

Jeff Redick, Chairman
Don Puchalski, Vice-Chairman
John Curran
Grant Eckhoff
Tony Michelassi
Jim Zay