

# **Polk County Organizational Study**

Findings and recommendations by the  
Organizational ad-hoc committee

**Report on County Board Size**

December 2010

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

On November 17<sup>th</sup>, 2010, the County Organizational Committee agreed by consensus to recommend to keep Polk County Board at 23 members.

### **Background Information:**

- Committee examined board size based on: decennial census, WI Act 100, board effectiveness, and referendum petition submitted in 2009.
- Factual information was gathered in relation to board structure, size, and costs. Other counties were interviewed. Additional information was gathered by on-line survey, direct mailing, and three listening sessions within Polk County.
- Wisconsin counties operate by New York model of larger county boards (vs. Pennsylvania model).
- Wisconsin counties provide services on behalf of state government (such as record keeping, courts, health and human services, road maintenance, emergency services, and land conservation).
- County Board's basic functions include representation and accountability to the public; set policies; provide services; develop and approve budgets; levy taxes; oversee county operations; regulate and cooperate with other government agencies.
- County Board of Supervisors is the governing body of the county. They are elected from geographical districts.
- Polk County can have a maximum of 31 supervisors per state statute.
- Per Wisconsin Department of Administration Demographic Service Center, Polk County's 2010 census is showing a current population of 46,171, which is a growth rate of 11.7%. This is nearly a 5,000 person increase since 2000 census.
- Cost of County Board - over the last 12 years the average budget for 23 supervisor districts was \$152,000 total per year.
- Polk County Supervisors each represent 1,995 citizens. Statewide average is 2,700.

### **Key Considerations to Keep 23 Members:**

- Any financial savings from reducing the Board are insignificant.
- Likely increase in costs with fewer Board members.
- Average County Board size in Wisconsin is 25 members.
- Average annual compensation per member is about \$3,000.
- A smaller Board would likely require members to be full-time.
- A smaller Board is more likely influenced by special interests.
- A smaller Board may cut rural voting power.
- A larger Board is more conducive to participating in town/village/city board meetings.
- A larger Board is more likely to be diverse in backgrounds and experiences. They may offer broader perspectives to decision making.
- A larger Board allows controversial issues to be debated by broader perspectives.

- A larger Board allows for a strong committee system (active participation and detailed work).
- A larger Board lessens time constraints/duties per supervisor.
- A larger Board allows constituents to personally know their supervisor and hold them accountable.
- Survey results: 48% of respondents felt that the current ratio is sufficient and nearly 30% felt that 1 County Board Supervisor to every 2,000 residents is ideal.

Concerns:

- Reducing Board size is complicated because of state mandates.
- A smaller Board could be more accountable on particular decisions and would be accessible in an office location with regular hours.
- Full-time Board members may be able to spend more time on major complex issues.
- A smaller Board may create more competition and access for special interest 'politicians'.
- A smaller Board may reduce number of residents able to run for office and deter interest because of increased workload.
- A smaller Board would necessitate committee reorganization to smaller number of committees.
- Smaller number of committees increases risk of walking quorums.

**Organizational Committee Assignment:**

On March 26, 2010, the Polk County Board of Supervisors passed a resolution (**Resolution-Appendix A**) that authorized the formation of the ‘County Board Organizational Committee’ to study and provide recommendations on the organization and structure of the Polk County Board of Supervisors, including, but not limited to, Rules of Order, County Committee/Administrative Board Structure and Responsibilities, Duties and Responsibilities of the Chairperson; County Board Size and Staggered Terms. Thereafter, the Organizational Committee began to examine the issue of County Board Size based upon four rationales:

1. Once every 10 years following the Census, the process of redistricting begins in Wisconsin. This requires realignment of districts based on population shifts. This gives the County the opportunity to change the number of districts.
2. In 2005, Wisconsin Act 100 was enacted which allows counties to redistrict one time between the decennial census. The Act allows for a reduction in the size of the County Board of Supervisors by County Board action or petition and referendum.
3. A Statement of Intent to File Petition for Referendum to Reduce County Board Size from 23 to 7 Supervisors was filed to the County Clerk (July 16, 2009) and later withdrawn (July 29, 2009) by Joey Monson.
4. Polk County’s Organizational Committee has been informed that sometime in 2010 the county board must decide the number of supervisors necessary to operate effectively. The Census Bureau will provide the new census figures in April, 2011 with the county deciding the preliminary redistricting plan within 60 days. By September of 2011 the county board must approve the final redistricting plan.

**Reasons why the County Board needs to understand this issue:**

- This is an issue that directly effects local county government and, as a consequence, you may need to discuss this with your constituents
- Reviewing issues will provide Supervisors the opportunity to understand, plan, evaluate and have input on the issue before vs. after the fact

**Organizational Committee Members:**

Herschel Brown, Chair  
Wendy Rattel, Vice Chair  
Harry Johansen, Secretary  
Patricia Schmidt  
William Johnson IV  
Russell Arcand  
Larry Jepsen

**Advisors:**

Dana Frey, County Administrator  
Bob Kazmierski, UW-Extension  
Carole Wondra, County Clerk  
Jeff Fuge, Corporation Counsel

**Organizational Committee Functions:**

The Organizational Committee developed and approved the following roles and responsibilities matrix at their first meeting on May 25<sup>th</sup>, 2010.

<b>Polk County Organizational Committee</b>					
<b>Who are we?</b>	<b>Ad hoc committee comprised of seven (7) County Board of Supervisors (Resolution 2010-09-10)</b>	<b>Herschel Brown- Chairman Wendy Rattel- Vice Chair Harry Johansen- Secretary</b>	<b>Research and data gathering committee</b>	<b>Advisory committee that makes recommendations for organizational (Polk County Government) change</b>	<b>Resource for County Administrator</b>
	<b>Transparent in all recommendations. Shares information and involves stakeholders of all findings</b>	<b>Works within all state statutes/county policies</b>			
<b>What do we hope to accomplish?</b>	<b>Make Polk County Government more effective and efficient</b>	<b>Within County Administrator Form of Government-define roles and responsibilities of County Board Chair</b>	<b>Within County Administrator Form of Government-evaluate committee structure</b>	<b>Determine options for committee size, number of committees and roles and responsibilities</b>	<b>Research and recommend number of supervisors on county board</b>
	<b>Examine topic of staggering terms</b>	<b>Examine/update Polk County Rules of Order</b>	<b>Examine current policies/evaluate the effectiveness of policies</b>		
<b>What are our concerns?</b>	<b>Process may be slow</b>	<b>Open communication of our work to other board members and to public</b>	<b>Staff support</b>	<b>Other County Board members may not be willing to accept our ideas</b>	<b>Our recommendations may not be conveyed accurately/without bias from the press</b>

**Organizational Committee Meetings:**

The Organizational Committee met regularly on May 25<sup>th</sup>, July 8<sup>th</sup>, August 12<sup>th</sup>, September 16<sup>th</sup>, October 6<sup>th</sup>, November 3<sup>rd</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup>. The Committee also hosted three ‘listening sessions’ to elicit public input on the subject on October 14<sup>th</sup>, 21<sup>st</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup>.

**Organizational Committee Research Process:**

The Polk County Organizational Committee was tasked with the responsibility of gathering factual information in relation to board structure, size and costs associated with providing service and to address the needs and desires of the citizens of Polk County. The Organizational

Committee sought out reliable information from existing organizations and agencies. Agencies and organizations providing data and assistance included: Wisconsin Counties Association, Wisconsin Towns Association, Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance, UW-Extension, Wisconsin Legislative Reference Bureau, Wisconsin Law Library, Shawano County (Appendix B-**Options to Reduce the Size of the County Board**), and the Polk County Clerk's Office. They took advantage of research conducted by the Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance, a non-partisan, non-profit research based organization. The group also conducted some of their own research by interviewing other counties that included St Croix County Board Chairman; Daryl Standafer. Input was sought from the public by utilizing three separate survey instruments. The Organizational Committee gathered information from an online survey, a direct mailing and three 'listening sessions' that were held throughout the County. Data collected from these public input methods provide the Organizational Committee with the direction to make an informed recommendation on board size to the Polk County Board of Supervisors. Contained in this report are the compiled results from the public input processes.

#### **Background Information:**

During the time of statehood, the New York model of larger county boards of supervisors was chosen for Wisconsin, based upon a series of court decisions. The other popular model (Pennsylvania model/constitution) for county government was a commission of small boards that are part-time or full-time paid commissioners; a model that is used in Minnesota (Appendix C-**Why Large County Boards**).

Originally, in Wisconsin, counties served a mostly administrative function. Today, counties in Wisconsin provide services on behalf of the state government, such as record keeping, courts, health and human services, road maintenance, emergency government, and land conservation.

Polk County operates under a County Board/County Administrator form of government. The County Board represents and is responsible to the public. Basic County Board functions include: to involve/represent and be accountable to the public; set policies; provide services; develop and approve budgets and levy taxes; oversee county operation; regulate and cooperate with other government entities.

The governing body of the county is the County Board of Supervisors. Supervisors are elected from geographical districts, not at large. After each decennial census, county boards are required to draw up new districts based upon a uniform number of residents per district. The maximum number of supervisors allowable for each board is prescribed in Sec. 59.10 (3) Wisconsin Statutes and is based on the latest census population for each county. (Appendix D-**History of the Polk County Board of Supervisors**).

Many counties in Wisconsin are looking at the size of their county board, considering whether or not they should downsize. It is an appropriate time since this is a census year and counties are required to redraw county board supervisory districts according to decennial population changes. Currently, Polk County is below its maximum of 31 supervisors established by State Statute. (Appendix E-**Other Wisconsin County Boards**).

Since Wisconsin 2005 Act 100 was enacted in 2006, giving counties the option to change their board size one time between decennial census years, several counties have reduced their board size. Fond du Lac reduced from 36 to 18; Green Lake reduced from 21 to 19; Waukesha reduced from 35 to 25; Waushara reduced from 21 to 11; Winnebago reduced from 38 to 36; Wood reduced from 38 to 19; Douglas reduced from 30 to 28; Grant reduced from 31 to 17; St. Croix reduced from 31 to 19. Some reduced by board action while others reduced because voters passed referendums requiring board size reduction.

Two counties had referendums to reduce board size fail to pass. Jackson county voters rejected a proposed size of 11, staying with their 19 member board. Rusk county citizens also rejected a referendum to reduce their board to 13, preferring a 21 member board.

Two county boards attempted to reduce board size by county board resolutions that failed. Dane County stayed at 37 members and Marinette stayed at 30 members.

Price County voters rejected a referendum to reduce their board from 21 members to seven, but the county board then took action the following year, 2007, to reduce to 13 supervisors. Walworth County reduced their county board via voter referendum from 25 members to 11; however their county board is considering increasing their size to 15 during redistricting following the decennial census.

**Demographics:**

Currently, supervisors are elected in 23 districts to two-year terms. The maximum allowed number of supervisors for Polk County is 31. Chapter 59 of the Wisconsin State Statutes contains the laws affecting county government. They specify that counties with a population of less than 500,000 but at least 100,000 shall have no more than 47 supervisors. Further, counties with a population of less than 100,000 but at least 50,000 shall have no more than 39 supervisors. Counties with a population of less than 50,000 but at least 25,000 shall have no more than 31 supervisors. According to the Wisconsin Department of Administration Demographic Service Center, Polk County's population is estimated to be 46,171. This is a

growth rate of 11.7 percent and represents an increase of nearly 5,000 people since the 2000 census and has been proportionally equal over all parts of the county (Appendix F-**Polk County Has Even Growth/Department of Administration 2010 Population Estimates**). If we continue to grow at this rate and the law remains the same, the county board will be eligible to move into the next category of supervisory numbers; 39 members, following the 2020 census.

**Redistricting:**

The Polk County Organizational Committee has reviewed Wisconsin Act 100 (Appendix G) in relation to downsizing the Polk County Board of Supervisors during a decade following the enactment of a decennial supervisory district plan. They have found that the following rules apply to redistricting between censuses:

- a) Districts must be based on the most recent countywide federal census
- b) Contiguous whole wards in existence at the time which the redistricting plan is adopted must be used
- c) Districts shall be “substantially equal” in population; maintaining communities of interest and municipalities in their entirety to the extent possible

The law also allows citizens to seek a reduced county board size through a referendum process after the county board has set the board size for the first election after the redistricting. The referendum must state the size of county board that is sought by petition. It can be any number the petitioners choose, as long as it is less than the current size. The referendum must have signatures of 25 percent of the voters who voted in the last supervisory election. County Clerk Carole Wondra calculates this to be 1,028 signatures.

The Committee reviewed the Polk County District Map adopted in 2001 following the 2000 countywide federal census. The District Map with the rules for redistricting was shared with the public at ‘listening sessions’, public displays and the media.

The redistricting process for establishing county supervisory districts is outlined in the Wisconsin state statutes. The Wisconsin Legislative Reference Bureau and Polk County Clerk’s Office have both developed guidelines for redistricting (Appendix H-**Redistricting Basics**).

Redistricting at a county level would include:

- a) Establishment of a local committee
- b) Tentative supervisory maps developed
- c) A public hearing held on proposal
- d) County Board of Supervisors adopts tentative supervisory map



- e) Municipalities receive tentative maps (during decennial redistricting new wards are adopted)
- f) County holds a second public hearing and adopts a final supervisory plan
- g) Plan is filed with the Secretary of State

### **BASIC TIME-LINE FOR REDISTRICTING**

**December 2010** – Establish or Re-affirm the size of the County Board

**February 2011** – Final Determination of Board Size/Appoint Redistricting Committee

**March 2011** – Committee Establishes Guiding Principles

**April 1, 2011** – Draft plans created

**May 2011** – Resolution Approving Tentative Plan, act on at May County Board

**June and July 2011** – Municipalities Divide into Wards and Adopt Ward Plans

**August 2011** – Committee Approves Final Supervisory Plan

**September 2011** – Ordinance on Final Plan Enacted

### **The Cost of County Board:**

Over the last twelve years, the average county board budget is \$152,000. This includes the small salary for the county board chairman and first vice-chair as well as the per diems paid the 23 supervisors. Supervisors are paid \$100 per monthly county board meeting plus \$60 per standing committee meeting and \$40 per appointed committee meeting. It also includes other expenses such as mileage reimbursement, conference costs and office expenditures. The difference in a per diem payment system and a salary system is an important distinction. A salary system, such as in Waukesha County, WI or Chisago County, MN, means that the county pays regardless of how much work a supervisor performs. The per diem system, such as in Polk County, means the county pays only if a supervisor attends the committee meetings he/she is assigned to (Appendix I- **Cost of the County Board**).

While people think a smaller County Board will save taxpayers money through efficiency, the opposite generally occurs. An October 2003, “Wisconsin Taxpayer” report published by the Wisconsin Taxpayer Alliance (Appendix J- **Options for County Organization, 2003**) indicates that increased board size saves taxpayers an average of \$8 to \$10 per capita for every additional board member. Research performed by this report shows that a supervisor with fewer constituents is held more accountable by the taxpayers and concluded that “the nearer the county board is to its legal maximum, the lower the county spending is relative to similar-sized counties.” A large amount of county spending is mandated or “passed through” by state and federal programs.

### **Workload of County Board:**

County supervisors are each expected to serve on two committees and/or boards. Committees meet once or twice a month. According to UW Extension, the average Wisconsin county has 17 standing committees, Polk County has 11. Each of the 11 standing committees and boards has five county board members, plus some also have citizen members (Note: GAM, L&W, Health have less than five county board members). There are also about 40 appointed committees and boards on which the supervisors serve and represent Polk County. Frequency of the meetings varies from monthly, bi-monthly, quarterly, to semi-annually. Some are held in other areas of the state. Occasionally ad hoc committees are appointed for special purposes. (Appendix K- **Should Polk County Have a Smaller Board?**). Meetings last from one to five hours. And on rare occasion, some committees meet all day. The County Board meets one night per month. In addition, supervisors are expected to spend time preparing for meetings by reading materials and researching in advance. They also handle concerns and inquiries from constituents. Hence, a supervisor can expect a substantial workload.

Polk County supervisors each represent 1,995 citizens. The statewide average for county supervisors is 2,700. Of the state's seventeen counties with similar population size to Polk County, eleven have larger county boards and six have smaller county boards than Polk County (Appendix L-**Wisconsin at a Glance**).

### **Committee Structure:**

Reducing county board size requires reducing the number and size of county board committees. Supervisor Larry Jepsen conducted an analysis of county board committees and identified several options for the committee to consider (Appendix M- **Restructure of County Board and Committees, Jepsen**). Reducing committee size and number raises policy issues about open and transparent government. Does the new committee size make it harder to obtain quorums? Does it inadvertently increase chances of violations of the Open Meetings Law because fewer supervisors make a quorum and run into each other in the community and engage in informal chats that touch on county business? Will committee meetings run longer, thus reducing the pool of candidates willing or able to meet the time commitment of the office? How will departments share information about their programs to their governing boards?

### **Summary of Public Input:**

In order to measure constituent attitudes regarding the topic of County Board size, the Polk County Organizational Committee took a proactive approach and elicited public input regarding this topic. Utilizing three separate survey instruments, the Organizational Committee gathered

information from an online survey, a direct mailing and three ‘listening sessions’ that were held throughout the County. A total of 208 people participated in one or more of the surveys. (Appendix N-Polk County Size of County Board/Redistricting Survey).

- **Mailing Sample Size: 257 surveys were sent by mail, and 72 were completed and returned- Response rate: 28 %**
- **Online Survey Sample Size: 124 surveys were completed**
- **Listening Sessions Sample Size: ~28 participants**

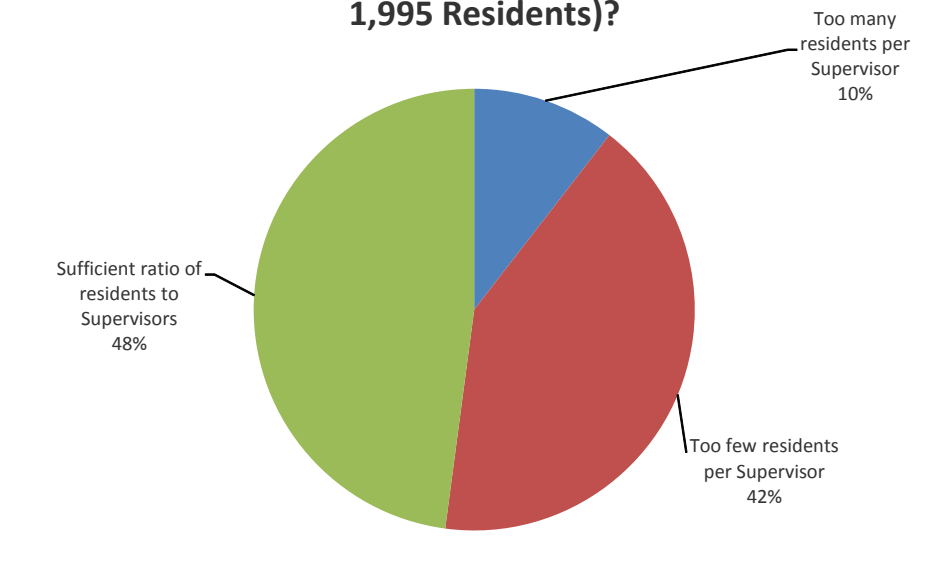
**Question 4:**

**Size of County Board**

Currently, there are 23 Supervisors in Polk County, each representing 1,995 residents per district. In area, the smallest district is less than 2 square miles (District 14-Amery)

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Too many residents per Supervisor	10.5%	20
Too few residents per Supervisor	41.6%	79
Sufficient ratio of residents to Supervisors	47.9%	91
<i>answered question</i>		<b>190</b>
<i>skipped question</i>		<b>18</b>

**What do you think of the current ratio of Supervisors to Residents (1 Supervisor for every 1,995 Residents)?**

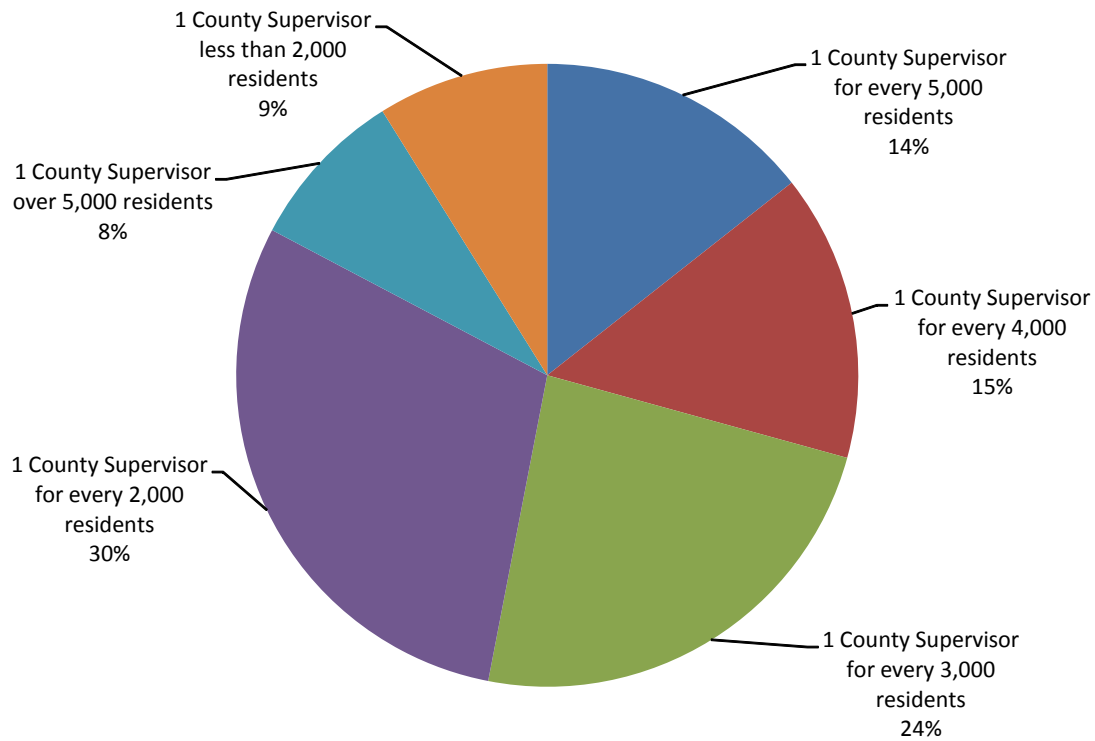


Nearly 48% of respondents felt that the current ratio was sufficient.

**Question 5:**

1 County Supervisor for every 5,000 residents	14.4%	29
1 County Supervisor for every 4,000 residents	14.9%	30
1 County Supervisor for every 3,000 residents	23.8%	48
1 County Supervisor for every 2,000 residents	29.7%	60
1 County Supervisor over 5,000 residents	8.4%	17
1 County Supervisor less than 2,000 residents	8.9%	18
<i>answered question</i>		<b>202</b>
<i>skipped question</i>		<b>6</b>

**Every 10 years, the process of redistricting takes place. All district lines are erased and we begin with a 'clean slate'. What is the ideal Supervisor to constituent ratio?**



Nearly 30% of respondents felt that the 1 County Supervisor to every 2,000 residents is ideal.

### **Polk County Board Size Recommendation:**

At the November 17<sup>th</sup>, 2010 meeting, the County Organizational Committee arrived at a recommendation of keeping the Polk County Board at 23 members. Key considerations of this recommendation include:

#### **'Pros':**

- Financial savings from reducing the Board of Supervisors are insignificant. A reduction will more than likely increase the need to raise per diems and/or the hiring of additional administrative staff which may force a reduction of other county services under the current levy caps.
- Expenditures for the Board of Supervisors as outlined in the cost of county board section of this report are minimal and the research from the Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance indicates a savings in a larger board size, cost savings is not a factor in downsizing.
- Based upon *Wisconsin at a Glance; 2006 Report*, the average county board size in Wisconsin is 25. The average constituency level per county board supervisor in Wisconsin is 2,282. In 2010, Polk County Board of Supervisors each currently represents an average of 1,995 constituents.
- The average annual compensation for a Polk County supervisor is about \$3,000. This amount includes meeting per diems, travel, membership and registration costs. Comparing Polk to Chisago County, MN, each of the latter's five commissioners averages \$50,000 per year. The difference in compensation arises from the much greater time commitment required of the Minnesota board members. In addition to their compensation, Chisago County Board members also get single-coverage health insurance and retirement benefits. Mileage reimbursement for both boards is the same, the current federal rate of 50 cents per mile. Chisago County also provides offices for their board members.
- A small county board would likely require full time supervisors who would be full time 'politicians' and more likely influenced by special interests. This can make campaigning and elections much more expensive, more political, and more prone to pressure by interest groups (e.g. labor, business, agriculture, environmentalists, etc.)

- A large county board is more conducive to participating in activities such as town/village board meetings, and is more likely to be diverse in backgrounds and experiences. They may bring broader perspectives to decision making than smaller boards.
- Diversity of backgrounds and experiences is often lost with smaller boards.
- Concerns have been expressed by the Wisconsin Towns Association over reducing the size of county boards. There is fear that the motive of some seeking to downsize is an attempt to concentrate political power of the urban population. Re-drawing the supervisory district lines has the potential for less representation of small communities. Wisconsin has seen past redistricting attempts which try to cut rural voting power on the county board by proposing districts that contain 60% of the electors from cities and villages and 40% or less from towns. If enough districts are drawn with this type of voter mix, the reduction in total supervisory districts will result in more political power under city and village supervisors on the county board (**Appendix O-Wisconsin Town Association February 2006 Report**)
- Reduction in County Board size would require combining of committees and streamlining of administrative duties. Additional time required for committee meetings may prevent some from seeking election, causing less competition, not more. Time constraints have already been reported as a major reason for incumbents not seeking re-election. This is amplified for those in the workforce. With less numbers to share the workload, board members will be required to put in more hours.
- The 23 member board allows for a set of active committees, as there are enough members to be engaged in each committee's work. A benefit of a strong committee system is the opportunity for specialization, for detailed examination of areas of governance and policy analysis and oversight. A number of board members can become knowledgeable in a given area, with benefit for overall policy development.
- A strong committee system means that there is opportunity for oversight by elected officials to see if the policy they set is being followed – to hold departments accountable for policy implementation.
- A strong committee system also means that a resolution can be reviewed several times before it is brought to the full board for adoption

- With more board members, duties can be spread among more people, meaning less chance for burnout and the opportunity to do more coordination with other governments.
- The sheer number of supervisors in Wisconsin means that the debates on controversial issues are more diverse and can represent broader interests. (Appendix P-**Comparison of County Boards in Minnesota and Wisconsin**)

Alternatively, the County Organizational Committee discussed and considered the following ‘cons’ of the recommendation of keeping the Polk County Board at 23 members. Key arguments include:

**‘Cons’:**

- Reducing the County Board size is a complicated process because of state mandates regulating the structure of supervisory districts and the number of committees mandated to oversee county government.
- The committee agreed that a primary consideration for any resizing of the county board is the necessity to reorganize committee structure and size as well as how meetings are conducted.
- A smaller number of county supervisors could be more accountable on particular decisions. A smaller board may be more accessible because of regular office hours and office location.
- Full-time supervisors may be able to spend more time on major complex issues compared to part-time board members.

Lastly, the County Organizational Committee identified the following points to be both ‘pros’ and ‘cons’ when making this recommendation:

**‘Pros’ and ‘Cons’:**

- Lack of competition for county seats is a concern. With smaller boards there may be more competition. Alternatively, reducing the number of supervisors would increase the workload on each supervisor and could deter more people from running for office.
- The higher the number of constituents in a district, one might assume the greater the representation and accountability by the county board member. Alternatively, the less

population per district, the more likely constituents are to personally know the elected official and hold them to higher standards.

**Conclusions:**

In conclusion, the County Organizational Committee arrived at a recommendation of keeping the Polk County Board at 23 members. The County Organizational Committee will research and recommend strategies to increase cost effectiveness and efficiency by combining committees and administrative operations. Lastly, considering Polk County is in the early stages of transitioning into the County Administrator form of government, the County Organizational Committee would like to reexamine appropriate board size adjustments within the next five years.