

Trying to Understand County Government

Recently, I had a conversation with a constituent which dealt with how your county government is organized and who is responsible for what services. This is not my first conversation related to how county government operates. To many citizens, the organization and authority structure, can be very confusing.

The County Executive (some counties use the title County Mayor) does not have as much authority as some Executives/Mayors would like or what residents expect. I was fortunate as a former county employee and consultant to be aware of the limited authority of the position. Not only do the employees of the school system not fall under direction of the County Executive, but neither do Highway Department employees, Sheriff and Jail employees, nor any elected or appointed official's employees.

From an organizational standpoint, the School Board hires the Director of Schools. All employees of the school system work under the direction of the Director of Schools. The Road Superintendent, Sheriff, and other elected officials hire and supervise their respective employees. We could say we have a decentralized organization, as related to hiring and management of the respective offices, county governments are decentralized.

The County Executive's office supervises specific departments that are noted in Tennessee law and other departments which have not been specifically named to an elected or appointed official. Some of the departments under the authority of the Executive's office are: Accounting, Ambulance Department, Animal Control, Building and Codes, Building Maintenance, Emergency Management, Planning, Zoning, GIS, Solid Waste, Purchasing, Records Management, Recycling, Park and Recreation.

To add to the complexity even though it appears we are decentralized as an organization, we are considered a centralized county from the financial management stand point. This "centralization" is due to the Accounting, Budgeting, and Purchasing Department's being under the direction of the County Executive, who provides these services to all departments, and officials. This centralization has been in place since the 1970's.

The primary function of the County Executive's office outside of departmental supervision, as noted above, consists of short and long term financial planning. Financial planning embraces a wide spectrum of activities, issues, and challenges related to all department operations, which include, operational budgets, debt management, and short and longer term capital planning.

As your County Executive or any future County Executive, we are required by law to be on various regional boards such as the East Tennessee Human Resource Agency, East Tennessee Development District, as well as engaging with additional boards and organizations which interface with our citizens. These other organizations will vary from county to county.

Roane County must be engaged in activities related to the United States Department of Energy and the Tennessee Valley Authority, both organizations are large land owners, employ large numbers of residents, and house facilities in our county and adjacent counties that impacts our government and residents' livability. The Department of Energy and the Tennessee Valley Authority both generate large amounts of revenue that support our local county government.

The Executives' office stays engaged with our business and larger government agencies with the East Tennessee Economic Council (meetings held Friday mornings at 7:30am), The East Tennessee Community Reuse Organizations which was established based on federal law, the Energy Communities Alliance a national organization (www.energyca.org), the Association of Tennessee Valley Governments (atvg.org), and the Rural Planning Organization of Tennessee Department of Transportation.

The basis for involvements in these organization is the necessity of being involved in the establishment of regional and national policy which affects our community and in understanding what these organizations are doing that might require policy or positions statements from Roane County. Here are some examples: regional airport at the old K-25 site, cleanup up activities at K-25 and potential reuse of the government facilities, Manhattan Project National Historical Park, Small Modular Reactor, completion of Watts Bar Unit II, water reservoir management, Payment In Lieu of Taxes both from DOE and TVA. The list goes on and on. Roane County is engaged and must continue to be engaged. As it is in our best interest.

The organization and leadership of the county is heavily based on planning, establishing, and implementing policies and programs which help make us a more livable community. The livable community concept will be touched on in a future article.

The County Commission is the legislative body of the county that helps set the direction of the County. The Commission works alongside with the County Executive to establish policy to govern the direction of the County, and adopt budgets which provide services to the citizens.