

# SO YOU WANT TO BE A COUNTY COMMISSIONER?

*Are you the right person for the job?*

*Do you know what you're getting into?*

*Could you be the one to make a difference?*



Association County Commissioners of Georgia



**Today, citizens depend on county government more than ever before, which makes it more important that qualified, dedicated people run for the office of county commissioner.**

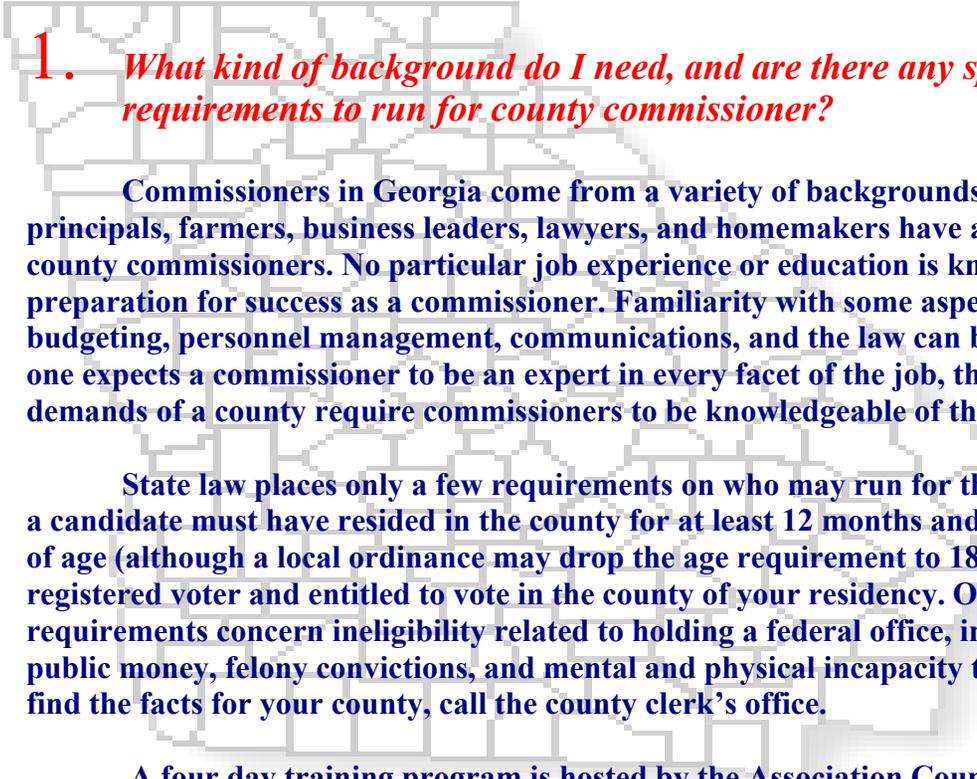
**The intent of this booklet is to explain some of the responsibilities of a county commissioner and to help you decide whether you want to be one. The following pages answer some of the questions that probably come to mind as you think about the job of a county commissioner.**

**But first, here is a question to ask yourself:**

***Why do I want to become a county commissioner?***

**Check the answers that apply to you. Then read the booklet to help you decide whether running for county commissioner is a good idea.**

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|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Concern over a particular issue                  | <input type="checkbox"/> Opportunity to advance my career   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Others are urging me to run                      | <input type="checkbox"/> Use the skills that made me successful in business to run the government |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Meet more people of influence                    | <input type="checkbox"/> Supplement my income   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Achieve a level of prestige                      | <input type="checkbox"/> Address problems facing the county                                       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Stepping stone to higher office                  | <input type="checkbox"/> Provide a voice to constituents  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Desire to build a better future for my county    | <input type="checkbox"/> Desire to make some needed changes in the community                      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Not satisfied with the current county government | <input type="checkbox"/> Other  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Gain a level of control                          |   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Have prior experience in government              |   |

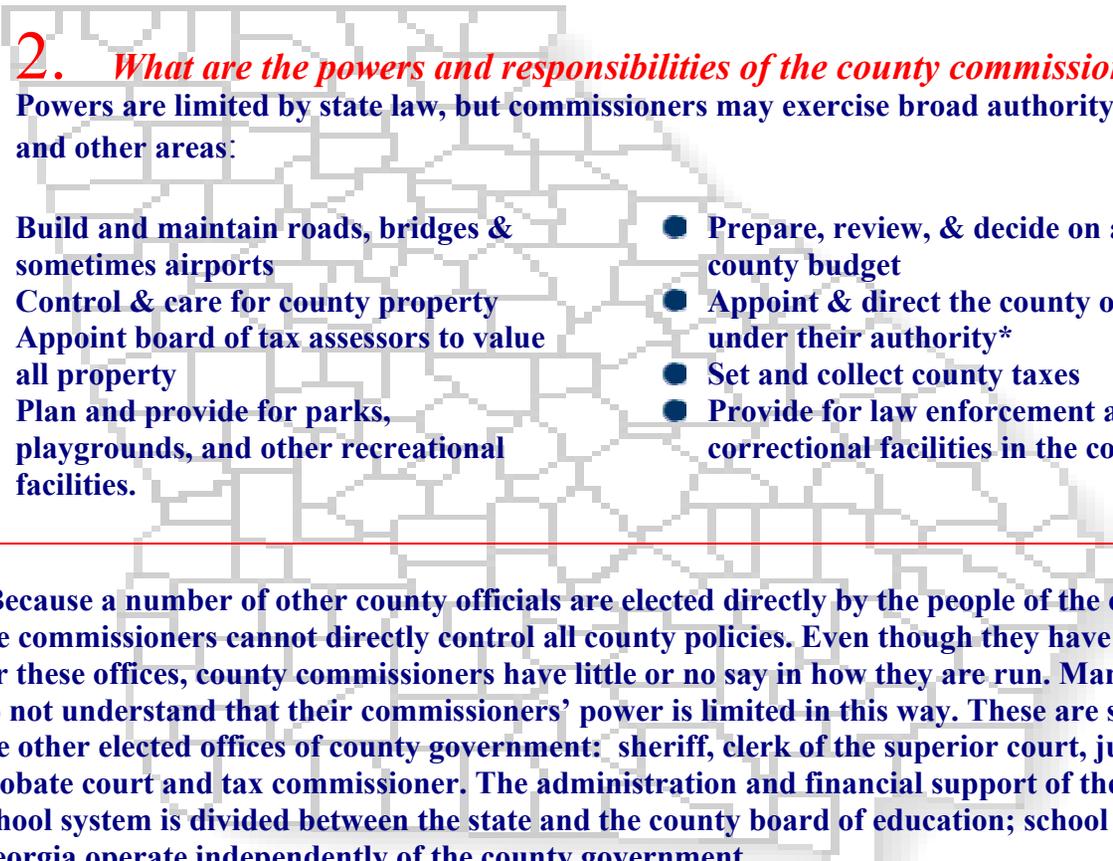


**1. *What kind of background do I need, and are there any special requirements to run for county commissioner?***

Commissioners in Georgia come from a variety of backgrounds. Teachers, school principals, farmers, business leaders, lawyers, and homemakers have all been elected county commissioners. No particular job experience or education is known to be the best preparation for success as a commissioner. Familiarity with some aspects of politics, budgeting, personnel management, communications, and the law can be useful. While no one expects a commissioner to be an expert in every facet of the job, the continuing demands of a county require commissioners to be knowledgeable of the various issues.

State law places only a few requirements on who may run for this office. Generally, a candidate must have resided in the county for at least 12 months and be at least 21 years of age (although a local ordinance may drop the age requirement to 18). You must be a registered voter and entitled to vote in the county of your residency. Other state requirements concern ineligibility related to holding a federal office, improper handling of public money, felony convictions, and mental and physical incapacity to hold the office. To find the facts for your county, call the county clerk's office.

A four day training program is hosted by the Association County Commissioners of Georgia and the Carl Vinson Institute of Government at the University of Georgia prior to newly elected officials assuming office in January. The conference aims to provide participants with valuable resources that will help them face the challenge of being a county commissioner.



## **2. *What are the powers and responsibilities of the county commission?***

**Powers are limited by state law, but commissioners may exercise broad authority in these and other areas:**

- **Build and maintain roads, bridges & sometimes airports**
- **Control & care for county property**
- **Appoint board of tax assessors to value all property**
- **Plan and provide for parks, playgrounds, and other recreational facilities.**
- **Prepare, review, & decide on annual county budget**
- **Appoint & direct the county officials under their authority\***
- **Set and collect county taxes**
- **Provide for law enforcement and correctional facilities in the county**

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**\*Because a number of other county officials are elected directly by the people of the county, the commissioners cannot directly control all county policies. Even though they have to budget for these offices, county commissioners have little or no say in how they are run. Many citizens do not understand that their commissioners' power is limited in this way. These are some of the other elected offices of county government: sheriff, clerk of the superior court, judge of the probate court and tax commissioner. The administration and financial support of the public school system is divided between the state and the county board of education; school systems in Georgia operate independently of the county government.**

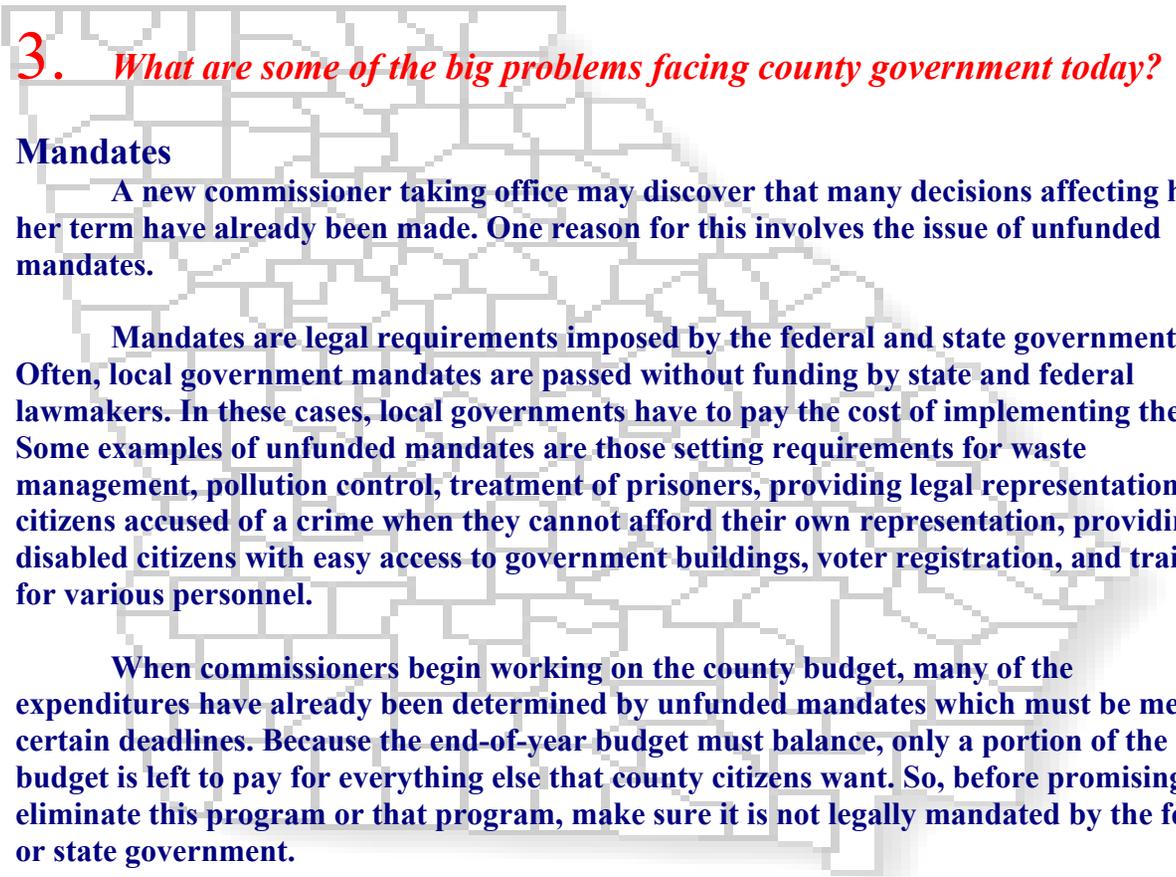
**Other responsibilities and powers of the county commissioner include:**

- License and tax businesses within the county
- Store, purify, and distribute water
- Build and maintain storm water and sewage system
- Provide for solid waste collection and disposal
- Develop and enforce building codes
- Provide for jails
- Provide for the protection of the general health and welfare of county residents
- Promote economic and industrial development
- Undertake comprehensive planning, zoning, and development controls
- Provide emergency management (sheriff, law enforcement, fire response)

**Additional powers are available to county governments as may be specified by the General Assembly. Sources for more information on this topic are given on page 16.**

**No two counties provide exactly the same set of services. When you look at the types of services that counties choose to provide, you see a broad range. For some counties, providing certain services is relatively new and reflects the shifting responsibilities of formerly rural counties that must now meet the demands of growing suburban populations. Likewise, suburban counties now must meet the needs of urban counties. The role of commissioner has expanded in those counties.**

**Georgia is unique in that counties can exercise the same powers as the cities.**



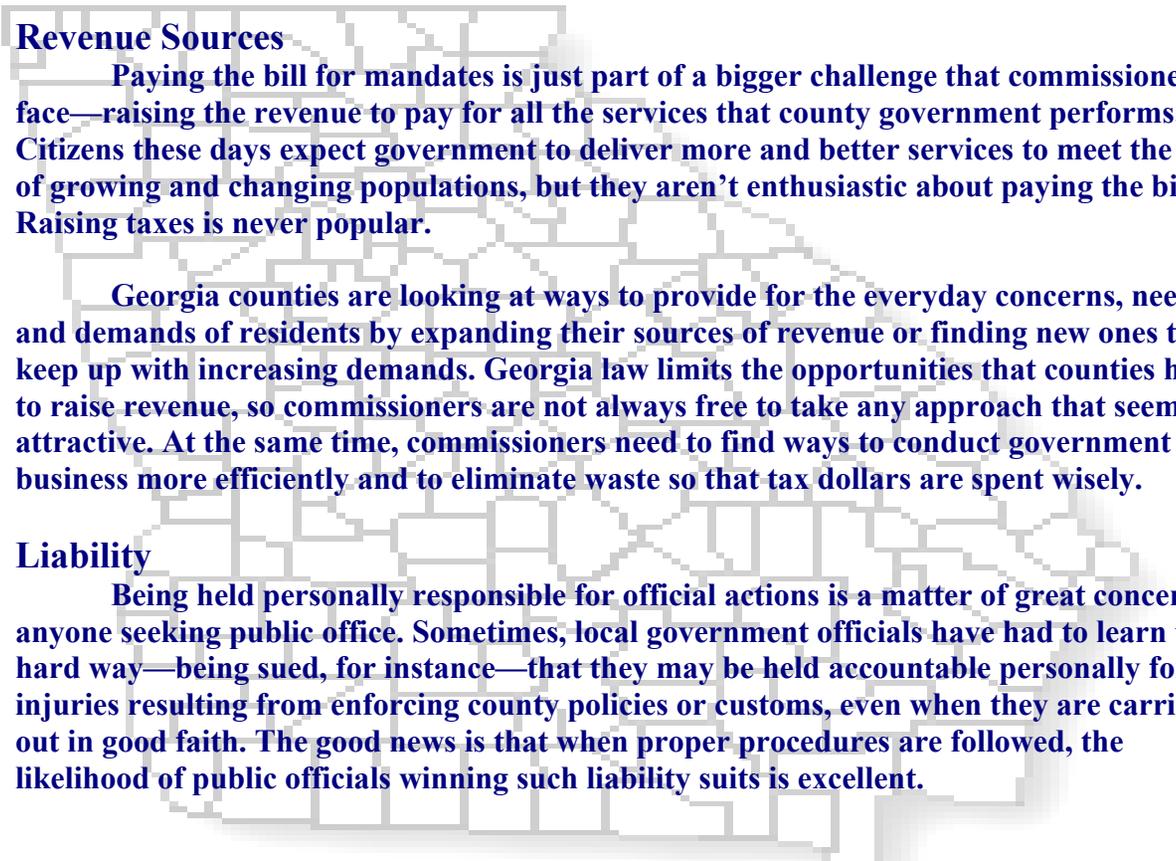
**3. *What are some of the big problems facing county government today?***

**Mandates**

A new commissioner taking office may discover that many decisions affecting his or her term have already been made. One reason for this involves the issue of unfunded mandates.

Mandates are legal requirements imposed by the federal and state governments. Often, local government mandates are passed without funding by state and federal lawmakers. In these cases, local governments have to pay the cost of implementing them. Some examples of unfunded mandates are those setting requirements for waste management, pollution control, treatment of prisoners, providing legal representation to citizens accused of a crime when they cannot afford their own representation, providing disabled citizens with easy access to government buildings, voter registration, and training for various personnel.

When commissioners begin working on the county budget, many of the expenditures have already been determined by unfunded mandates which must be met by certain deadlines. Because the end-of-year budget must balance, only a portion of the budget is left to pay for everything else that county citizens want. So, before promising to eliminate this program or that program, make sure it is not legally mandated by the federal or state government.



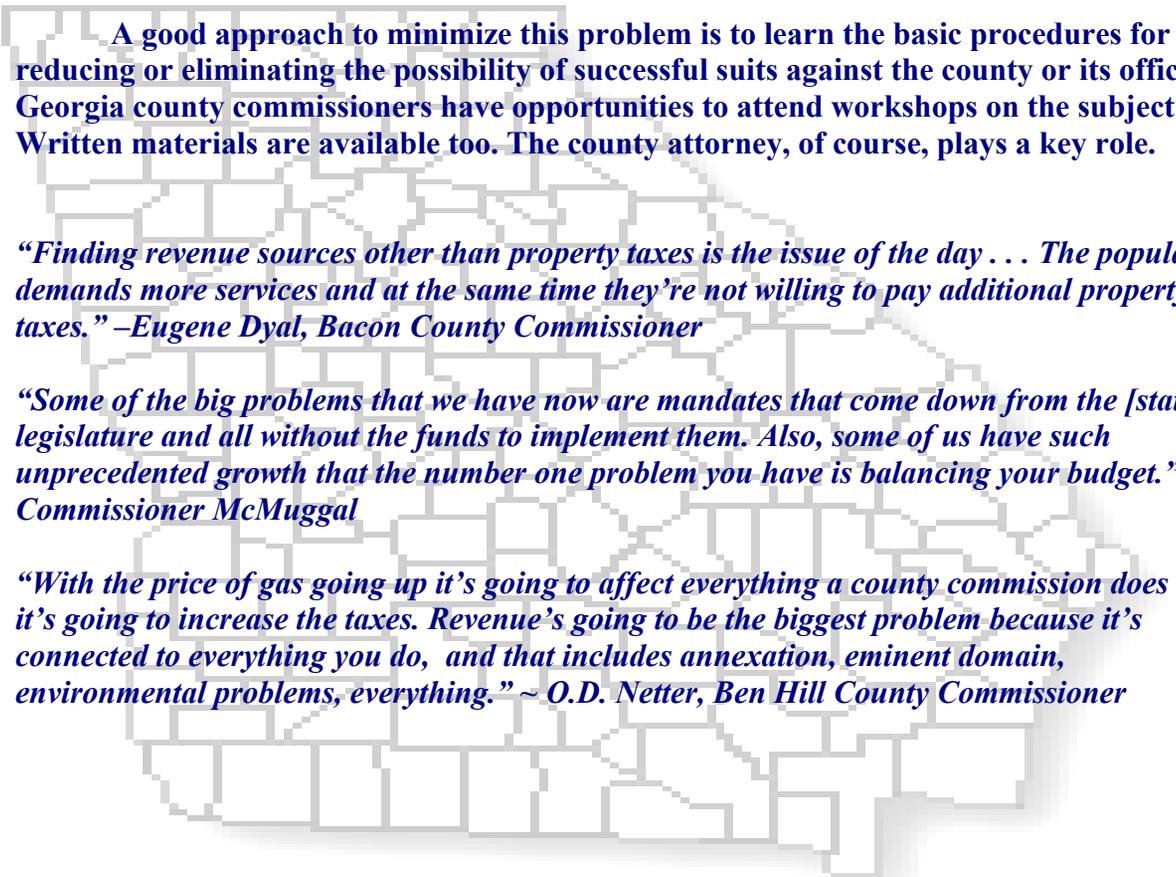
## **Revenue Sources**

**Paying the bill for mandates is just part of a bigger challenge that commissioners face—raising the revenue to pay for all the services that county government performs. Citizens these days expect government to deliver more and better services to meet the needs of growing and changing populations, but they aren't enthusiastic about paying the bill. Raising taxes is never popular.**

**Georgia counties are looking at ways to provide for the everyday concerns, needs and demands of residents by expanding their sources of revenue or finding new ones to keep up with increasing demands. Georgia law limits the opportunities that counties have to raise revenue, so commissioners are not always free to take any approach that seems attractive. At the same time, commissioners need to find ways to conduct government business more efficiently and to eliminate waste so that tax dollars are spent wisely.**

## **Liability**

**Being held personally responsible for official actions is a matter of great concern to anyone seeking public office. Sometimes, local government officials have had to learn the hard way—being sued, for instance—that they may be held accountable personally for injuries resulting from enforcing county policies or customs, even when they are carried out in good faith. The good news is that when proper procedures are followed, the likelihood of public officials winning such liability suits is excellent.**



**A good approach to minimize this problem is to learn the basic procedures for reducing or eliminating the possibility of successful suits against the county or its officials. Georgia county commissioners have opportunities to attend workshops on the subject. Written materials are available too. The county attorney, of course, plays a key role.**

*“Finding revenue sources other than property taxes is the issue of the day . . . The population demands more services and at the same time they’re not willing to pay additional property taxes.” –Eugene Dyal, Bacon County Commissioner*

*“Some of the big problems that we have now are mandates that come down from the [state] legislature and all without the funds to implement them. Also, some of us have such unprecedented growth that the number one problem you have is balancing your budget.” – Commissioner McMuggal*

*“With the price of gas going up it’s going to affect everything a county commission does and it’s going to increase the taxes. Revenue’s going to be the biggest problem because it’s connected to everything you do, and that includes annexation, eminent domain, environmental problems, everything.” ~ O.D. Netter, Ben Hill County Commissioner*

#### **4. *What types of assignments should I expect to undertake regularly?***

*Talking with constituents* is a big part of the job. They may call you at home hoping to influence your vote in an upcoming zoning controversy, collar you at the movies or at the hardware store to complain about the property tax, or expect you to help them solve a drainage problem in front of their house on a Sunday afternoon. Besides responding to constituent requests, most elected officials want to be out and about, where they stay informed on what is happening in their county. You will soon learn that on controversial issues you seldom hear from supporters but are certain to hear from opponents. As an elected representative, you have to make a decision that is in the best interest of the entire county.

To be effective and make good decisions, a commissioner needs information. *Gathering information* requires time. Regardless of what sources you choose, you can be sure that gathering reliable information will take a good chunk of your time.

*Attending meetings* will take time too. Your schedule will have to allow time for regular commission meetings, work sessions, executive sessions, special meetings, and public hearings. Also, as an elected official you will be expected at many unofficial gatherings—from pancake breakfasts to fish fries. Open meeting laws require that whenever a quorum of the board of commissioners gathers at a designated time to conduct business or discuss public or official business, it must be open to the public

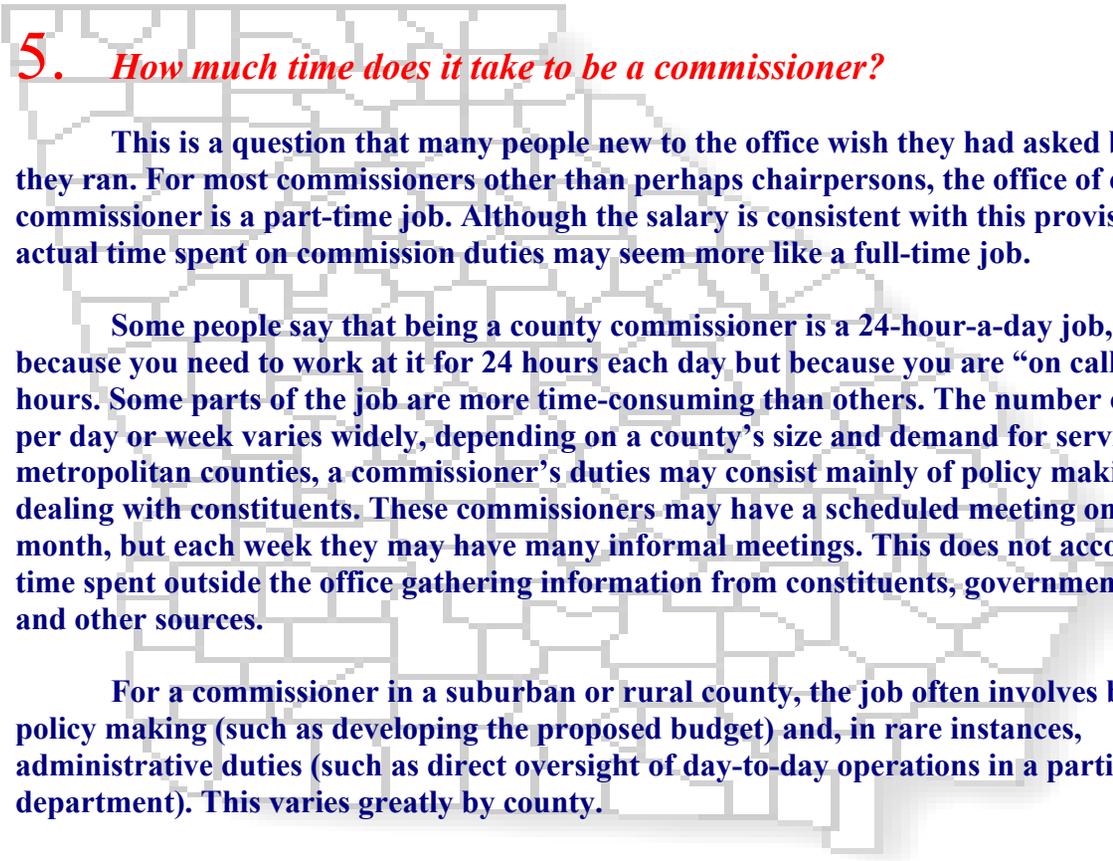
and comply fully with the requirements of the open meetings law. A quorum of commissioners may attend social gatherings without violating the open meetings law so long as no county business or other public matter is discussed.

Building consensus among you and the other commissioners (unless you are a sole commissioner) takes time and skill. A commissioner is a member of a team: the board. As a commissioner, you cannot get much accomplished without the support of others on your team. The magic number is one more than one-half the members of your board.

Your life will be much easier if you are communicating with other county officials. Making the effort to know other county officials and what they do is worth the time. These relationships will help you get things done and provide knowledgeable leadership. You have to approve the budget for all these offices, and knowledge of their functions and responsibilities will help you in your decision making.

Communicating with and educating your constituents will be a high priority. Time will be spent on working with the media, holding public hearings, maybe even issuing a newsletter to make sure the public knows what you are doing and *why*. For example, often the public doesn't understand state and federally mandated programs, and part of your job will be to explain what these programs mean.

Stress relief will be very important during your term as county commissioner. It is vital that you take time out for both you and your family. Be sure to set aside some personal time for you.



**5. *How much time does it take to be a commissioner?***

This is a question that many people new to the office wish they had asked before they ran. For most commissioners other than perhaps chairpersons, the office of county commissioner is a part-time job. Although the salary is consistent with this provision, the actual time spent on commission duties may seem more like a full-time job.

Some people say that being a county commissioner is a 24-hour-a-day job, not because you need to work at it for 24 hours each day but because you are “on call” at all hours. Some parts of the job are more time-consuming than others. The number of hours per day or week varies widely, depending on a county’s size and demand for services. In metropolitan counties, a commissioner’s duties may consist mainly of policy making and dealing with constituents. These commissioners may have a scheduled meeting once a month, but each week they may have many informal meetings. This does not account for time spent outside the office gathering information from constituents, government officials, and other sources.

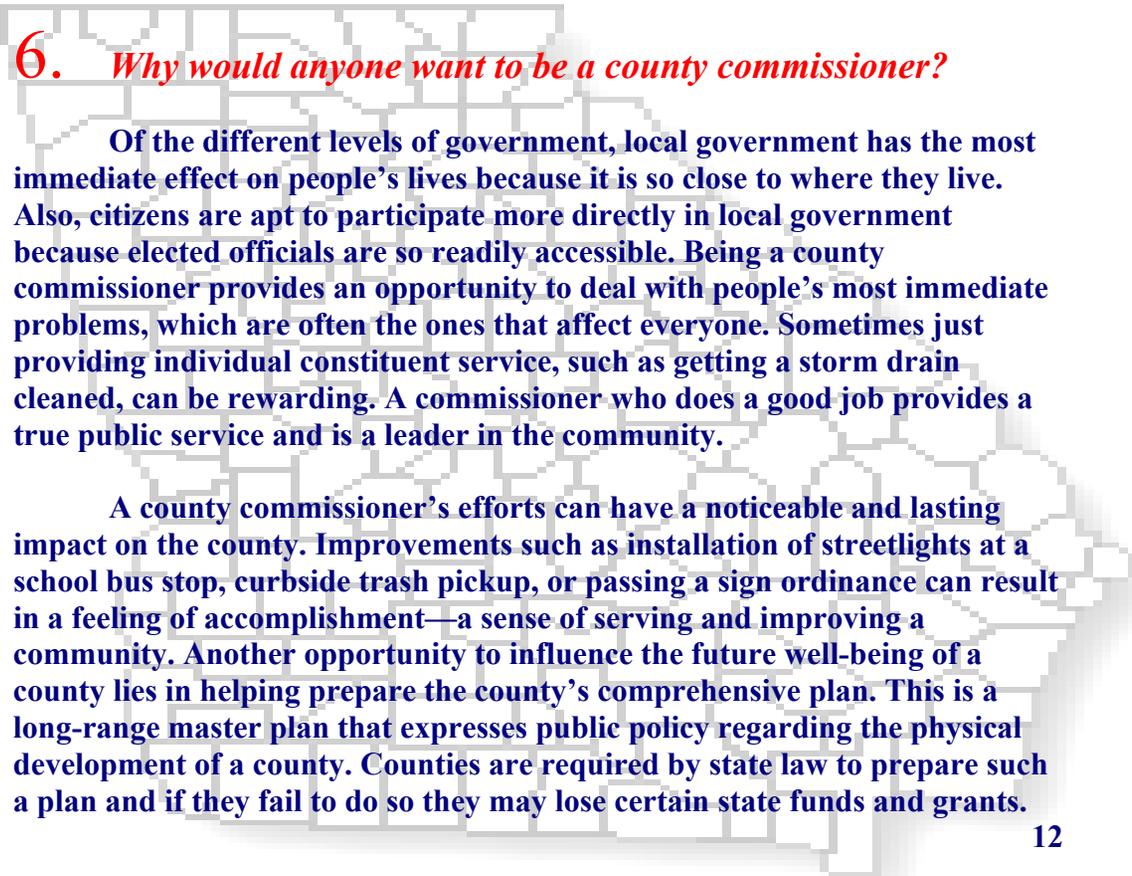
For a commissioner in a suburban or rural county, the job often involves both policy making (such as developing the proposed budget) and, in rare instances, administrative duties (such as direct oversight of day-to-day operations in a particular department). This varies greatly by county.

**One thing is certain; those first six months in office will be a period of adjustment—getting acquainted, learning about the issues as well as the day-to-day process, and discovering how to juggle all the new activity in the context of family and job demands.**

*“The first thing you got to understand is how much time it takes to be a county commissioner. It’s not sitting in the commissioner’s meeting or work sessions 2-3 times a month for a few hours. It’s an ongoing, 24-7 job.” – Commissioner McDuggal*

*“One needs to really have a broad view of what takes place in county government. There is a variety of issues, many, many different viewpoints or many different perspectives that have to be taken into consideration before a decision is made on a particular issue. One decision that you may make may affect many others in the county so you need to have a broad perspective on what’s taking place. Be willing to study, be willing to commit the time.”~ Melvin Davis, Oconee County Commissioner*

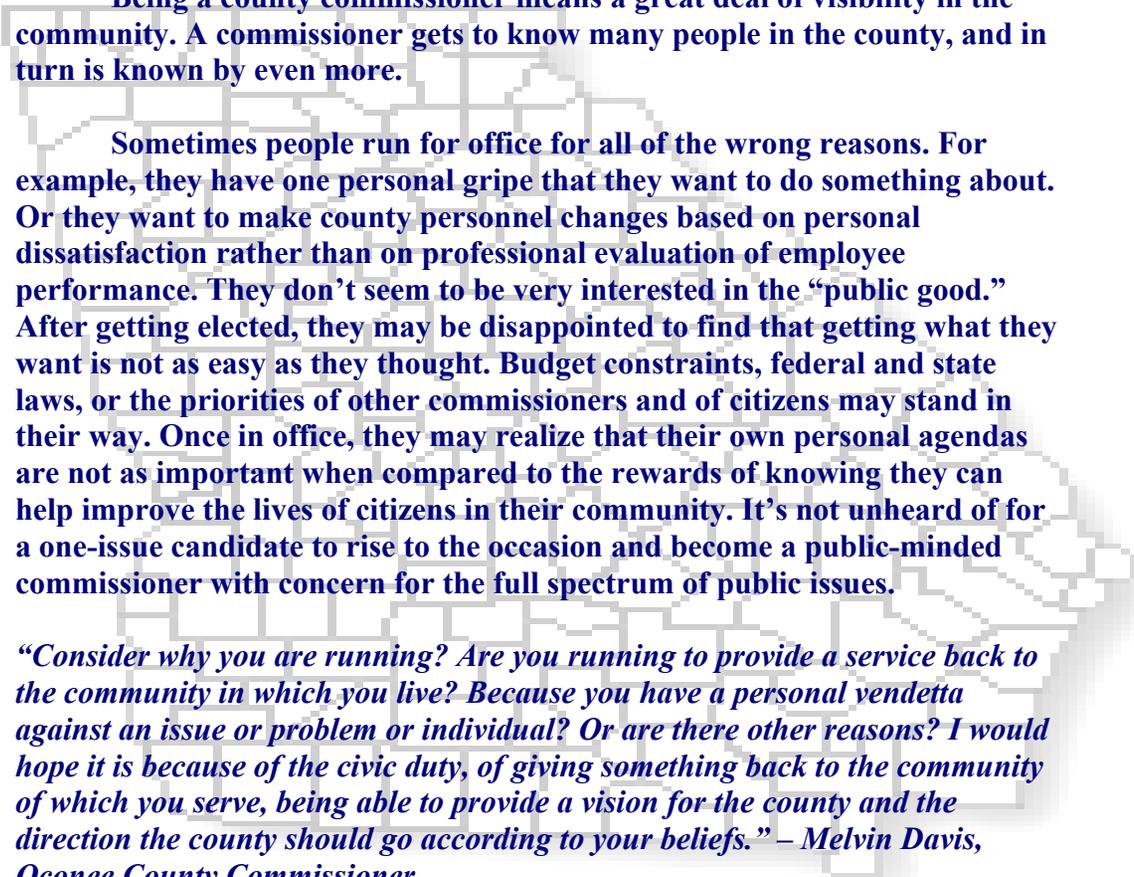
*“Make sure you have time to do the work. It’s a position of tremendous local responsibility and you need to have the time to meet with the appropriate people and to listen for the input from the community to make sure that you are in tune with their needs. The fact is, it requires more than just an hour here and an hour there. It requires sufficient time to really get the pulse of the community and to respond to that pulse by working with the appropriate agencies and the community. My advice would be to have a genuine interest in civic responsibility and make sure that you have the time.”~ Sam Hart, Bibb County Commissioner*



**6. *Why would anyone want to be a county commissioner?***

Of the different levels of government, local government has the most immediate effect on people's lives because it is so close to where they live. Also, citizens are apt to participate more directly in local government because elected officials are so readily accessible. Being a county commissioner provides an opportunity to deal with people's most immediate problems, which are often the ones that affect everyone. Sometimes just providing individual constituent service, such as getting a storm drain cleaned, can be rewarding. A commissioner who does a good job provides a true public service and is a leader in the community.

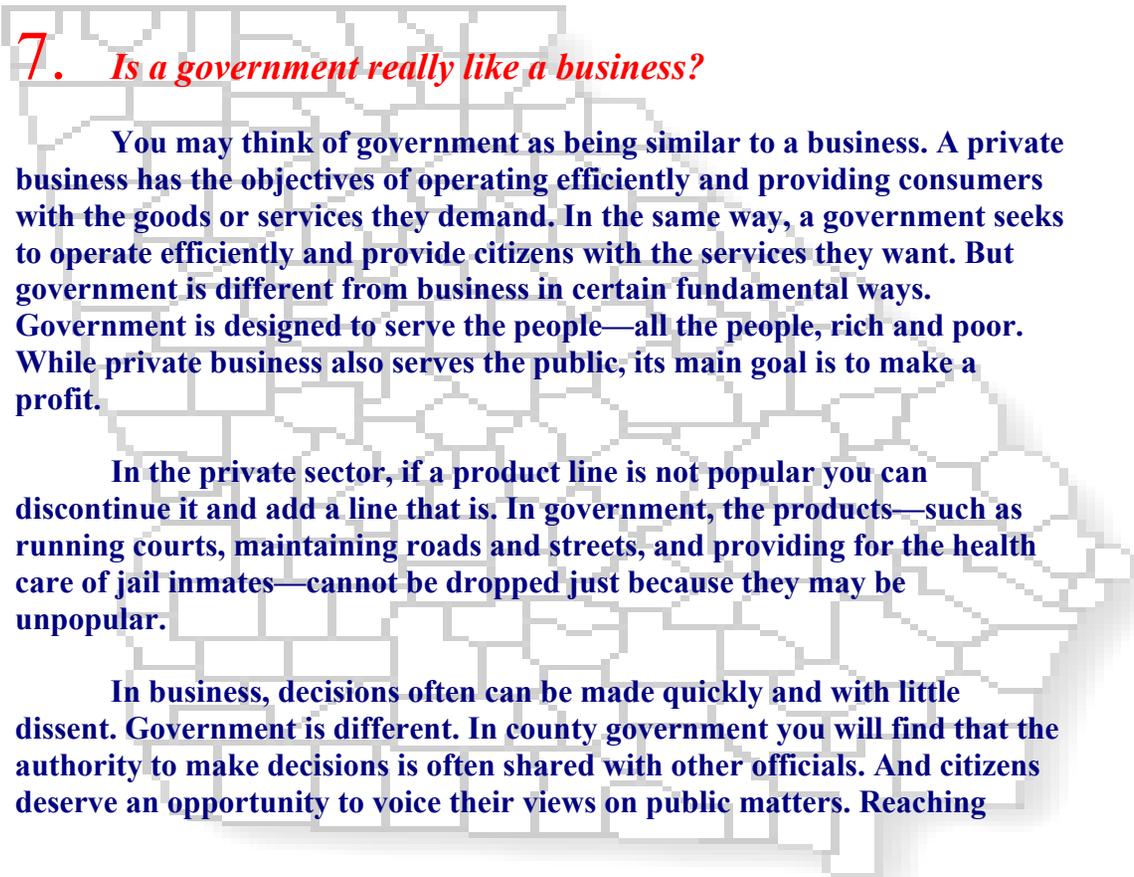
A county commissioner's efforts can have a noticeable and lasting impact on the county. Improvements such as installation of streetlights at a school bus stop, curbside trash pickup, or passing a sign ordinance can result in a feeling of accomplishment—a sense of serving and improving a community. Another opportunity to influence the future well-being of a county lies in helping prepare the county's comprehensive plan. This is a long-range master plan that expresses public policy regarding the physical development of a county. Counties are required by state law to prepare such a plan and if they fail to do so they may lose certain state funds and grants.



**Being a county commissioner means a great deal of visibility in the community. A commissioner gets to know many people in the county, and in turn is known by even more.**

**Sometimes people run for office for all of the wrong reasons. For example, they have one personal gripe that they want to do something about. Or they want to make county personnel changes based on personal dissatisfaction rather than on professional evaluation of employee performance. They don't seem to be very interested in the "public good." After getting elected, they may be disappointed to find that getting what they want is not as easy as they thought. Budget constraints, federal and state laws, or the priorities of other commissioners and of citizens may stand in their way. Once in office, they may realize that their own personal agendas are not as important when compared to the rewards of knowing they can help improve the lives of citizens in their community. It's not unheard of for a one-issue candidate to rise to the occasion and become a public-minded commissioner with concern for the full spectrum of public issues.**

*"Consider why you are running? Are you running to provide a service back to the community in which you live? Because you have a personal vendetta against an issue or problem or individual? Or are there other reasons? I would hope it is because of the civic duty, of giving something back to the community of which you serve, being able to provide a vision for the county and the direction the county should go according to your beliefs." – Melvin Davis, Oconee County Commissioner*

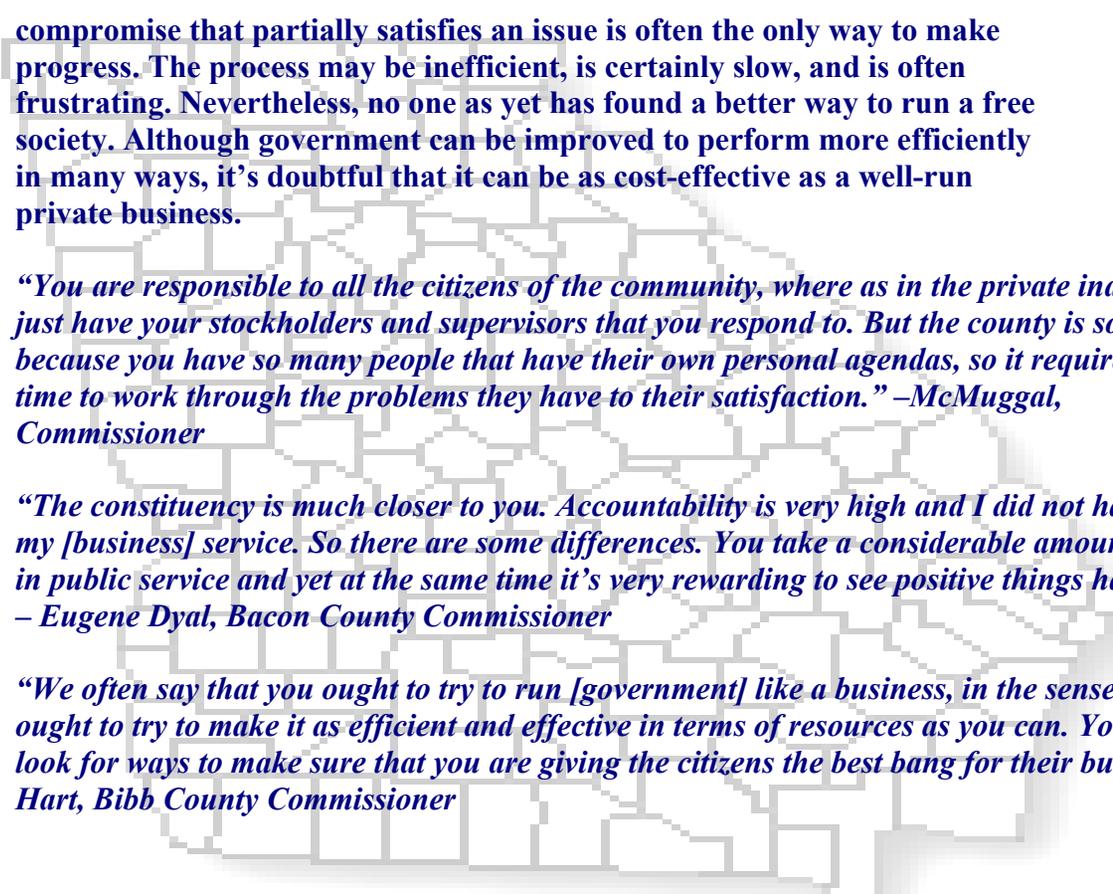


**7. *Is a government really like a business?***

**You may think of government as being similar to a business. A private business has the objectives of operating efficiently and providing consumers with the goods or services they demand. In the same way, a government seeks to operate efficiently and provide citizens with the services they want. But government is different from business in certain fundamental ways. Government is designed to serve the people—all the people, rich and poor. While private business also serves the public, its main goal is to make a profit.**

**In the private sector, if a product line is not popular you can discontinue it and add a line that is. In government, the products—such as running courts, maintaining roads and streets, and providing for the health care of jail inmates—cannot be dropped just because they may be unpopular.**

**In business, decisions often can be made quickly and with little dissent. Government is different. In county government you will find that the authority to make decisions is often shared with other officials. And citizens deserve an opportunity to voice their views on public matters. Reaching**

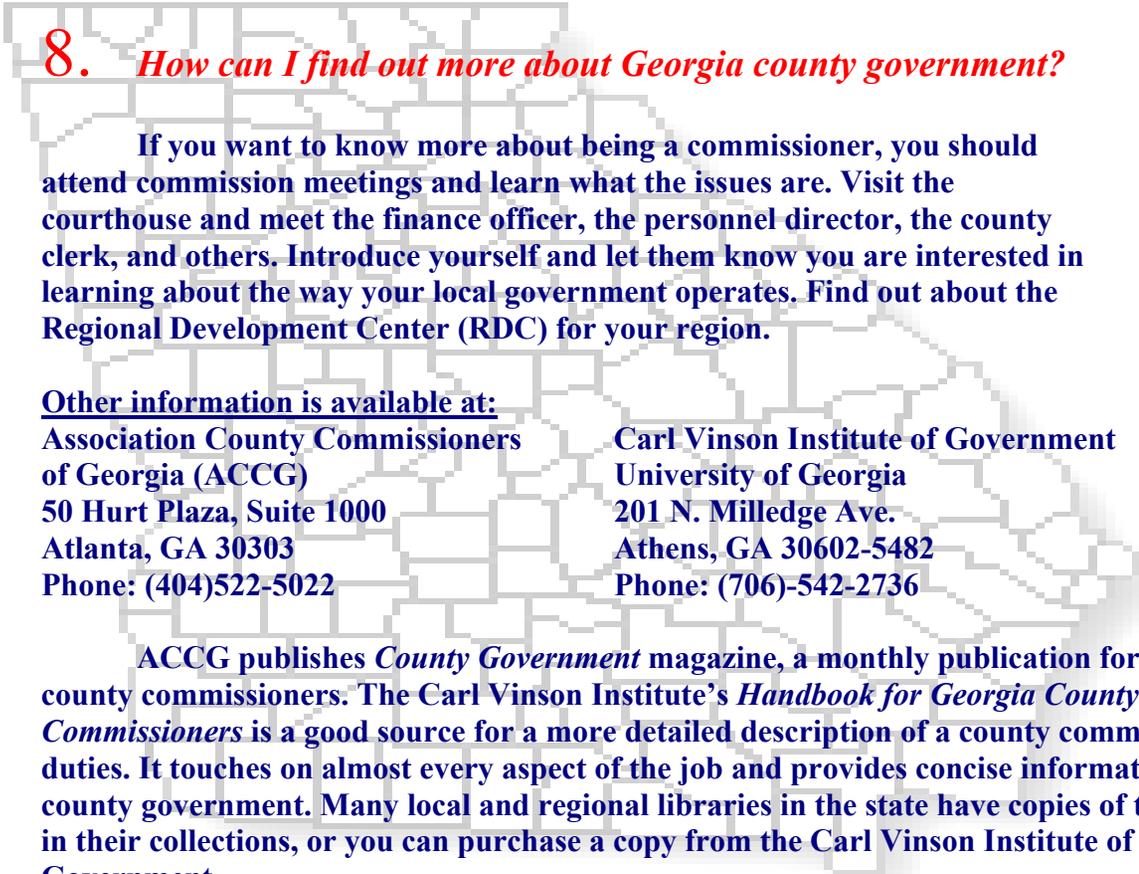


**compromise that partially satisfies an issue is often the only way to make progress. The process may be inefficient, is certainly slow, and is often frustrating. Nevertheless, no one as yet has found a better way to run a free society. Although government can be improved to perform more efficiently in many ways, it's doubtful that it can be as cost-effective as a well-run private business.**

*“You are responsible to all the citizens of the community, where as in the private industry you just have your stockholders and supervisors that you respond to. But the county is so different because you have so many people that have their own personal agendas, so it requires a lot of time to work through the problems they have to their satisfaction.” –McMuggal, Commissioner*

*“The constituency is much closer to you. Accountability is very high and I did not have that in my [business] service. So there are some differences. You take a considerable amount of abuse in public service and yet at the same time it's very rewarding to see positive things happening.” – Eugene Dyal, Bacon County Commissioner*

*“We often say that you ought to try to run [government] like a business, in the sense that you ought to try to make it as efficient and effective in terms of resources as you can. You have to look for ways to make sure that you are giving the citizens the best bang for their buck.”~ Sam Hart, Bibb County Commissioner*



**8. *How can I find out more about Georgia county government?***

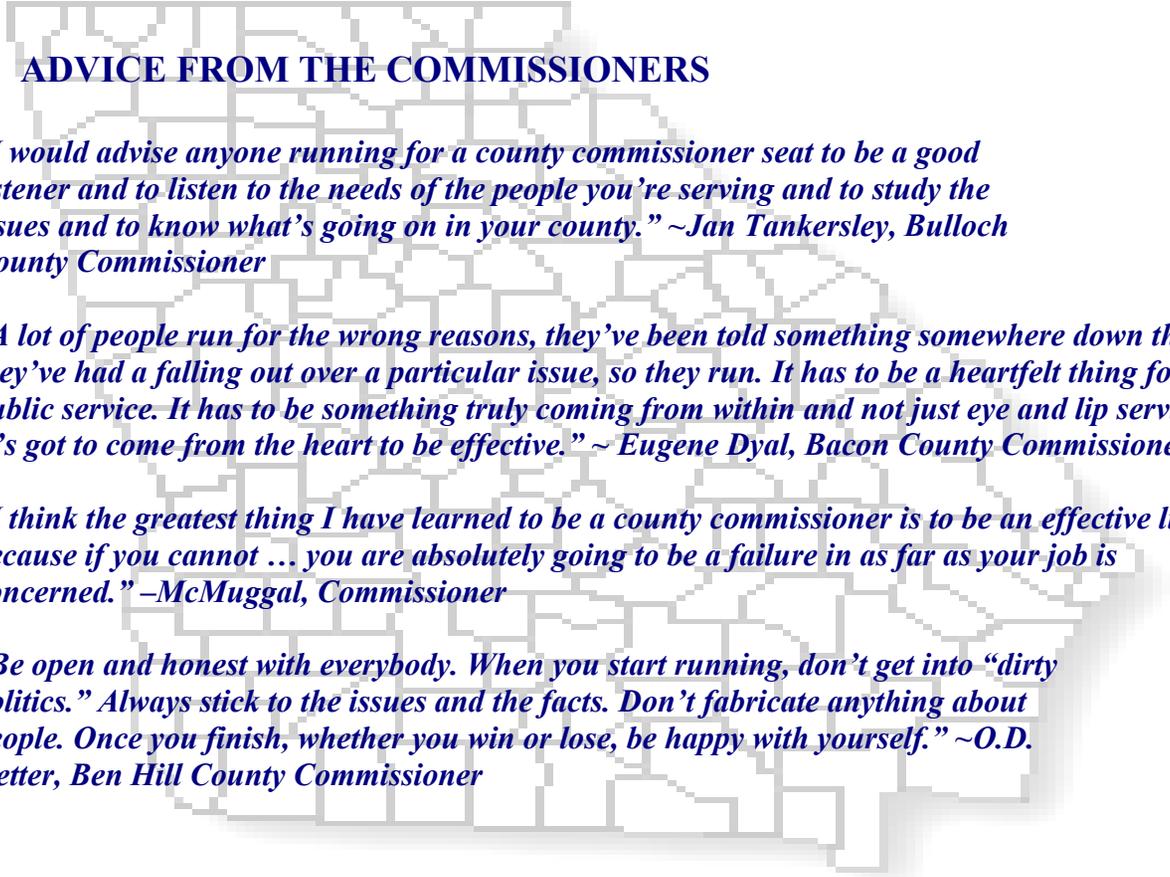
If you want to know more about being a commissioner, you should attend commission meetings and learn what the issues are. Visit the courthouse and meet the finance officer, the personnel director, the county clerk, and others. Introduce yourself and let them know you are interested in learning about the way your local government operates. Find out about the Regional Development Center (RDC) for your region.

**Other information is available at:**

**Association County Commissioners  
of Georgia (ACCG)  
50 Hurt Plaza, Suite 1000  
Atlanta, GA 30303  
Phone: (404)522-5022**

**Carl Vinson Institute of Government  
University of Georgia  
201 N. Milledge Ave.  
Athens, GA 30602-5482  
Phone: (706)-542-2736**

ACCG publishes *County Government* magazine, a monthly publication for Georgia county commissioners. The Carl Vinson Institute's *Handbook for Georgia County Commissioners* is a good source for a more detailed description of a county commissioner's duties. It touches on almost every aspect of the job and provides concise information on county government. Many local and regional libraries in the state have copies of the book in their collections, or you can purchase a copy from the Carl Vinson Institute of Government.



## ADVICE FROM THE COMMISSIONERS

*“I would advise anyone running for a county commissioner seat to be a good listener and to listen to the needs of the people you’re serving and to study the issues and to know what’s going on in your county.” ~Jan Tankersley, Bulloch County Commissioner*

*“A lot of people run for the wrong reasons, they’ve been told something somewhere down the line, they’ve had a falling out over a particular issue, so they run. It has to be a heartfelt thing for public service. It has to be something truly coming from within and not just eye and lip service. It’s got to come from the heart to be effective.” ~ Eugene Dyal, Bacon County Commissioner*

*“I think the greatest thing I have learned to be a county commissioner is to be an effective listener because if you cannot ... you are absolutely going to be a failure in as far as your job is concerned.” ~McMuggal, Commissioner*

*“Be open and honest with everybody. When you start running, don’t get into “dirty politics.” Always stick to the issues and the facts. Don’t fabricate anything about people. Once you finish, whether you win or lose, be happy with yourself.” ~O.D. Netter, Ben Hill County Commissioner*

## **SOME GENERAL ADVICE**

**Before you decide to run, think about your answer to the overriding question, “Why do I want to become a county commissioner?” Discuss the job with your family to give them an idea of the responsibilities involved. Decide whether you have the time to do a good job for the county.**

**If your choice is to run, become familiar with the issues. Get to know the elected and appointed government officials with whom you will work if you are elected. Cooperate with the media and make sure the voters know what you stand for.**

**Even a lifetime in government cannot prepare you for every curve ball the political world will throw you. To be ready for the challenges, you should:**

- **Have a vision for the county’s future**
- **Keep an open mind**
- **Maintain high ethical standards**
- **Know the issues**
- **Know your constituents and the people who will work with you**
- **Focus on what is best for the county**
- **Be honest with the public, the media, and other officials**
- **Have confidence in your qualifications**
- **Separate your emotions from your responsibilities**

**If you feel that you're up to the job, then it's time to get on your journey to making a difference in the lives of your county constituents!**

*Additional copies available from*  
**Association County Commissioners of Georgia**  
**50 Hurt Plaza**  
**Suite 1000**  
**Atlanta, GA 30303**  
**Phone: (404)522-5022; Fax: (404)525-2477**

