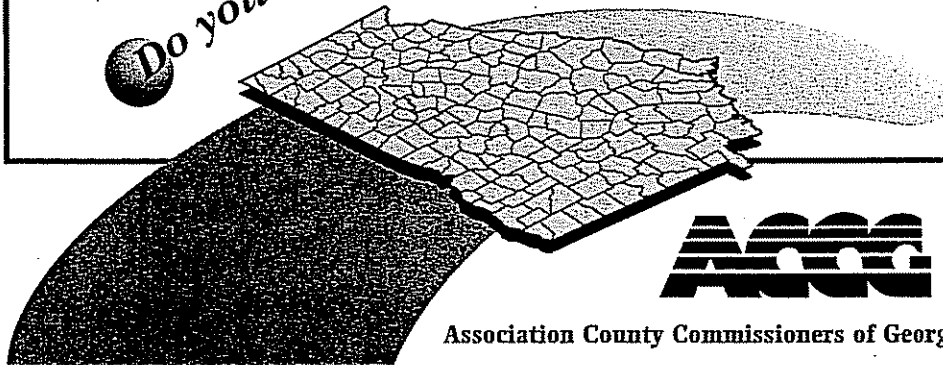




SO YOU WANT TO BE A COUNTY COMMISSIONER!

- *Are you the right person for the job?*
- *Do you know what you're getting into?*



Association County Commissioners of Georgia

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

The intent of this pamphlet 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 pamphlet to help you decide whether running for county commissioner is a good idea.

- Concern over a particular issue
- Others are urging me to run
- Would like to apply the ability that made me successful in business to the business of running the government
- Supplement my income
- Opportunity to advance my career
- Prestige
- Stepping stone to higher office
- Desire to build a better future for my county
- Other _____



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 people, 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. But no one expects a commissioner to be expert in every facet of the job.

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). Other state requirements concern ineligibility related to holding a federal office, improper holding 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.

Once elected, Georgia county commissioners are required to take at least 18 hours of training to become familiar with the job. The Association County Commissioners of Georgia and the University of Georgia offer a program that provides this training in early December following the election.



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, and sometimes airports
- control and care for county property
- appoint board of tax assessors to value all property
- prepare, review, and decide on the annual county budget
- appoint and direct the county officials under their authority*
- set and collect county taxes
- provide for law enforcement and correctional facilities in the county
- plan and provide for parks, playgrounds, and other recreational facilities

*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 elective offices of county government: clerk of the superior court, judge of the probate court, tax commissioner, sheriff, coroner, surveyor, county treasurer. Also, school systems in Georgia operate independently of the county governments. Except in Bibb County, the county commission does not exercise control over its local school districts.

- ✓ license and tax businesses within the county
- ✓ build and maintain storm water and sewage collection and disposal systems
- ✓ provide for solid waste collection and disposal
- ✓ develop and enforce building codes
- ✓ store, purify, and distribute water
- ✓ 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

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 15.

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, including street maintenance, garbage pickup, landfills, hospitals, libraries, parks and recreation, police and fire protection, and water and sewer facilities. For some counties, providing such services is relatively new and reflects the shifting responsibilities of formerly rural counties that now must meet the demands of growing suburban populations. The role of commissioner has expanded in those counties.

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



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 spread the tax burden 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 commissions 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.

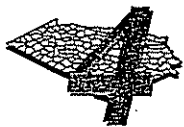
A good approach to minimize this problem is to learn the basic procedures for reducing or eliminating the possibility of successful suits against the county or its officials. Georgia county commissioners have opportunities to attend workshops on the subject. Written materials are available, too. The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

Waste Management

One of the toughest problems facing local governments is how to dispose of waste. Land area for dumping wastes is running out, and environmental and health problems related to waste disposal

make landfill operations more of a problem than ever before. Meanwhile, Georgians generate about four and a half pounds of waste, on average, every day! Complicating this, many counties have to cope with disposal of hazardous wastes as well. Federal and state requirements about waste disposal are forcing local governments to develop solutions to these problems.

Despite what the public thinks, the county commissioner cannot do just anything. There are some things that out of ignorance . . . could get you into a lot of trouble. . . . I was in office less than a week, and we had an incident that was awful to be faced with. . . . We eventually were sued because we terminated an employee. . . . The firing of the employee I will defend to this day. . . but had I known some things then that I know now, about the legal ramifications and that there are certain ways you handle things, I would have done it in a different manner. . . . That was a trap I was not aware of.
Lillian Johnson, former Columbia County commissioner



How will I spend my day if I'm elected to be a county commissioner?

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.

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.

Building consensus among you and the other commissioners (unless you are a sole commissioner) takes time and skill. A county

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 through 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.

Every county commissioner needs to establish communications with every county department: the tax office, the sheriff, probate judge and clerk of court. If you are going to avoid treading on each other's turf, you need to know something about each office and how it operates. Charles Kent, Tift County Commission Chairman



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.

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 learning how to juggle all the new activity in the context of family and job demands.

The most important thing you can do is have a good working relationship with the media. If you don't, you might as well pack it up and go home, because you're beat before you get started.

Joyce Blevins, McDuffie County Commission Chairman