

# Why Are People Reluctant to Serve on Water District Boards?

We really have it pretty easy in Kansas, compared to some other states. You can serve on a rural water district board of directors if you are a participating member of the district. So basically, you probably have to live in the district and get water from the district. Other states have much more complicated statutory requirements for board member eligibility. These can include length of residency requirements, age, location within a subdistrict, and land ownership. It's

also easy to fill vacancies in Kansas. If a board member is unable to serve out his/her three-year term, the remaining board members simply appoint someone to serve until there is an election. I can definitely see how it's difficult to find people to serve on a board when you have to meet very specific eligibility requirements. But what I cannot understand is why Kansas rural water districts complain that they cannot find anyone to serve on their boards, when the basic qualifications are so simple.

Actually, I blame the customers AND the boards for a lack of interest in serving. Many water district board members have become complacent, even lazy, and they have forgotten how important it is to serve on a rural water board. They basically show up once a month, flip through some financials, vote to renew a CD, and consider it a job well done. There is so much more to being a board member. Board members need to be constant cheerleaders for their water district and make sure that district issues are on every single customer's mind. Because the customers have gotten complacent and lazy too! The average water district customer cannot remember a time when clean drinking water wasn't available at the turn of a tap. I grew up on a farm with a well and we worried about droughts and water quality. We also ran out of water if the power was out or the well pump got hit by lightning. We hauled buckets of water from the pond in order to flush our toilets. We did not take an ample supply of clean drinking water for granted. However, this is exactly what customers do today. The average water district customer probably doesn't even know when the board meets, let alone has no idea what the current rates are. They call the office if there is a problem with their service or dispute of a late charge and that is the extent of their participation.

So, what can you do about that? How can you motivate your customers and get more of them to serve as board members? I have been observing some unbelievably contested school board elections lately that made me wish that water boards were more like school boards. There have been lawsuits over whether or not a school board member's new house was still inside the school district. And one school

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# Examples Where RWD Boards Try to Maintain Involvement of Customers and Themselves

There are several examples that KRWA is aware of where local rural water districts work to maintain interest in the system by patrons and among districts in the area.

The first is the annual meeting of membership that is held at the Community Center in Angola, Kansas for the users of Labette RWD 6. Bookkeeper Jackie Gilstrap reports that typically 65 to 80 people attend the annual meeting. Before the meeting a delicious meal is prepared and served by the Angola United Methodist Women. The district serves approximately 550 rural patrons in the district located east of Coffeyville.

In 2019, the district honored original board member Noel Moore. Having served 52 years on the local water district board was an accomplishment.

Generally, the district also invites an outside presentation. In 2013 for example, the sheriff departments from Labette and Montgomery counties presented a program on Neighborhood Watch, the manufacture of meth and security issues associated with posting personal information on social media.

Labette RWD 6 makes its annual meeting a “patron event”. In 1989, the district celebrated its Silver Anniversary in a special way; the district’s mortgage was burned with 168 people attending the meal and meeting. Since then the



**Noel Moore with his award for 52 years of dedicated service with Labette County RWD 6.**

district’s annual meeting has always included a meal. Since 1974, the district also gives the self-read system members 12 postage stamps; more recently, pens with the district’s contact information are also given.

Besides being a business meeting, this is a social event for many of the patrons.

## Butler County RWDs Gather Annually

Another group that is noteworthy is the annual “Butler County Nite” where all of the rural water district boards of directors and staff gather for a meal and an exchange of information about their systems. The city of El Dorado also attends, and frequently county commissioners as well. A speaker sometimes provides information to the group or they have entertainment such as a local musical group.



**Butler County RWD boards gather for their annual “Butler County Nite”.**



**Labette RWD 6 makes its annual meeting a “patron event”.**



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board member rented an apartment and put an air mattress in it in order to qualify for residency and keep his board seat. Then his opponent drove by the apartment and took pictures in order to prove that he wasn't sleeping there! WOW! When was the last time you had anyone care that much about a water district board seat?

So, in the light of the school district board model, here are a few suggestions:

### 1. Start acting like politicians.

If you loved sitting on the board and you knew that you were going to run against a highly motivated opponent when your term was up, what would you do? You would campaign! Board members are members of the community and have the perfect opportunity to recruit customers to attend board meetings and serve on the board. Act like a politician or a school board member running for re-election. Start campaigning. Get some inexpensive business cards printed up with the date of the board meeting and hand them out. Everyone who sees you should know that you are on the water

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board and that the decisions the board makes are important. How do you know if someone is running for school board? They'll tell you! School board campaigns are some of the most hotly contested battles in local politics, because people are passionate about their kids. We need to be as passionate about the water our kids drink.

### 2. Start taking your job seriously.

Board members have it too easy! They have forgotten that 50 years ago, board members actually performed all the functions of starting the district. Brand new rural water districts didn't have employees and managers. Oh wait. They did actually. They were called board members! It was board members who went door to door to get easements. It was board members who

sat with USDA (FmHA) folks and engineers and decided where the initial water lines would run and who would and wouldn't get water. It was board members who went out in the middle of the night to fix well pumps, track down leaks and take calls from neighbors/customers. They showed up for meetings, reviewed documents in advance, made tough decisions on rate increases, and put the mental energy into planning short and longer term for the future of the district. School board members get called out by parents all the time for failing to attend meetings or not being knowledgeable about the issues.

### 3. Start educating your customers.

When a new customer stops by the office to sign up for water service, does the office staff invite them to the monthly/annual board meetings? Tell them that there will be two board members elected at the annual meeting? Ask them if they have any interest in serving on the board? Give them a copy of the flyer "Serving on Your Rural Water District Board"? WHY NOT? This is the perfect time to educate and recruit new board members. You should also consider sending out monthly or quarterly newsletters announcing board vacancies, discussion of rate increases, etc. and inviting customers to attend meetings. Educated customers equal future board members.

### 4. Start embracing dissension.

You know that customer who shows up at every meeting and complains? Maybe its rust on their laundry, water pressure, rate increases. Yes – THAT guy. The one who makes you want to scream because he is dragging out the

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board meeting and clearly doesn't understand how the water district runs? He is your next board member. Not only does it silence the complaining because it forces him to understand that there are bigger issues than his water pressure, it gives the district a motivated individual. He is already passionate and comes to the meetings. Why not make him part of the solution?

### 5. Start grading yourselves.

The water district board is really only answerable to itself (and ultimately the customers). But does any present board member ask anyone how you are doing? I know a few districts who ask their manager to rate them. This can be sobering. How does your staff perceive you as a board? Are you too intrusive? Too hands off? I know boards who send out emails the day of the meeting in order to make sure that everyone is attending. And boards who call members who fail to show up for meetings. If boards hold themselves accountable, they can improve morale and board involvement. And here's a question? Could you pass a pop quiz about your district? How many customers do you have? What are your rates? When was your last rate increase? How many wells do you have? What year was your district formed? As I have discussed in other articles, every district should have an onboarding packet for new board members. If you do not, then you are not committed to having educated board members.

### 6. Ask for homework.

Boards should also commit to working with staff and the many free resources from Kansas Rural Water Association to develop mid-term and long-term plans. If you think that all you have to do is show up once a month then you shouldn't be serving on a rural water board. Boards should ask the manager for read-aheads and should have reviewed all the documents presented at the meeting in advance. You have no business voting on approval of documents that you

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haven't read in advance. Boards also need an annual retreat where they plan for the future and the large-scale projects like line extensions, rate increases and system upgrades. Again, look to the local school board model for a guide about what highly motivated board members look like. Every board member should commit to attending the KRWA annual conference and all the fantastic training that is available. You should have a list of every board member and when they last attended the KRWA annual conference. And the board members who attend should bring back materials and update fellow board members.

Rural water districts are under increasing pressure and expected to do more and more with less money. In an age of increasing un-funded regulation (look at the furor over PFAS regulation), increasing pressure to consolidate or in some states, to sell to for-profit water companies, and large-scale repairs to aging systems that have reached the end of their useful life, rural water boards need motivated, informed board members more than ever. Clean drinking water is the single most important thing for a healthy life in rural America (apologies to my friends at electric co-ops). Consider these steps as a start towards recruiting better board members and improving the ones that you have. Act like a school board!

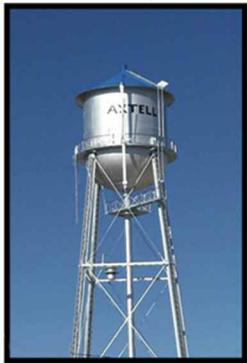
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