

Governing bodies: being responsible is job one!

As a manager of one of the larger rural water districts in Kansas, I know that the district I work for has been fortunate to have board members who always place the interests of the district before any other concern. As President of the KRWA, I also know that KRWA staff members deal with scores of situations where city council members or RWD board members are often at odds with their staff members. It should not be nor does it need to be that way.

The governing body of any organization, whether a Fortune 500 company or the smallest RWD in Kansas, is the decision-maker. It's the governing body that sets policy. The governing body should set goals. The

governing body should work to ensure compliance with applicable laws. In many ways, the governing body is "the face" of the organization. If the governing body is dysfunctional, then the public perception of the entity will be no more than that. If the governing body does not demonstrate leadership, then there is little chance that patrons or members will have much confidence in the decision-making process.

Good boards and councils anticipate needs; they meet challenges and ensure quality service for their members and constituents. When there is

inappropriate board action – or inaction, the result can lead to problems. Sometimes, when the issue is large enough, errors or misjudgments by boards or councils can lead to the introduction of legislation to address a problem that should have been taken care of locally.

Board/councils need training too

There have been innumerable announcements that public water systems are required to have a properly trained, and certified operator. However, those who make the decisions are not held to the same standards. While many board and council members seek

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Such legislation may or may not be in the overall best interest of all systems. This happens at local, state and national levels.

out training opportunities and check on additional resources, others may not be so willing to devote any more attention to a



*Dennis Schwartz
KRWA President*



At the left, Cathy Tucker-Vogel, KDHE, Topeka and next to Cathy, John Haas, Ranson Financial Consultants, Wichita, answer questions during the financial segment of KanCap training for board members taught at the Douglas RWD 3 office building south of Lawrence.

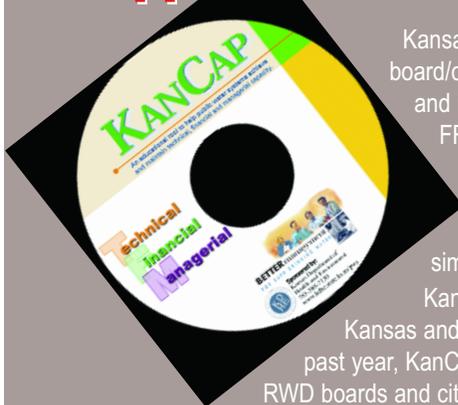
discussion than they determine is absolutely necessary. Boards and council members however should not be selective in what they are interested in. Their interest should be how to improve and sustain services to their constituents.

In addition to being a member of the KRWA board of directors, I have served on many church and civic organization boards. I am also a member of the National Rural Water Association (NRWA) board of directors. At KRWA and NRWA, we advocate for well-trained boards of directors for public water systems.

Some states require training for board members. Oklahoma, Mississippi, Louisiana and New Mexico have passed laws requiring minimum training for board members within a period of time of being elected. Why? Because it is important that a skilled board sets policy and acts on behalf of the patrons that the system serves. Training for boards/councils is not about showing up possible inefficiencies on the particular board/council – but instead, working to help ensure that customers receive high quality service, and that the water system is safe and dependable.

Obviously this is not a one-size-fits-all proposition. Some small boards actually have operational responsibilities and share duties without the benefit of paid staff. Boards and councils of larger systems set policy, but they are generally not involved in day-to-day operations. The training requirements will vary with the board members' responsibilities. In the ideal world, a board or council will have full-time professional staff. That clears the way for board members to lead. But if you travel across Kansas, you will meet hundreds of public water systems (cities and RWDs) that operate with volunteers or part-time workers. These utilities

KanCap training opportunities to expand



Kansas has a unique board/council training program and it's available and it's FREE! It's called KanCap. KanCap training is available to any board/council, simply for asking.

KanCap is an acronym for Kansas and Capacity. Over this past year, KanCap has been providing RWD boards and city councils information to help them with the technical, financial and managerial issues associated with owning, operating and maintaining a public water system. KanCap is the board/council training program funded by the Kansas Department of Health & Environment (KDHE) and developed by KRWA. KanCap is truly a "one of a kind" board/council training program aimed at helping sustain and improve management for better drinking water.

KanCap was developed by KRWA under contract with KDHE with input and dialogue from organizations and stakeholders including the League of Kansas Municipalities, Kansas Section AWWA, Midwest Assistance, various organizations, associations, state and federal agencies, city council member focus groups and RWD board members. KanCap comes on an interactive CD and an accompanying hard copy companion guide in a 3-ring binder. KanCap contains 51 videos, 216 additional resource files (PDFs), links to Web sites, quizzes and much more. Using Acrobat Reader, it's a breeze to search for any topic such as "meter replacement" or "open records." You name it and the topic pops up in the 270 pages.

KanCap training is being offered at the 2007 KRWA conference on Tuesday, 3/27. Be sure to mark that session on the reverse side of the registration form if you are interested in attending. The management and financial sections will be presented at the conference training. For those who cannot attend the conference, KanCap training is also available at your local water system by contacting KRWA. This training has been very successful where two or three neighboring systems (cities or RWDs) combine to attend. KRWA is also placing additional focus and resources for training boards and councils by dedicating staff to providing these sessions across the state.

Board/council members' Code of Ethics

Every board/council must be accountable to itself for its conduct. And ethics begin with each individual member!

If your board hasn't already adopted a code of ethical standards for board members, I recommend that you do so now. Review the following points, taken in part from National Rural Water Association's Board Training Manual, customize them to fit your needs. Members should read and understand and act accordingly.

BOARD MEMBER CODE OF ETHICS

As a member of this board, I will:

- Represent the interests of all people served by this organization.
- Not use the organization or my service on this board or my own personal advantage or for the individual advantage of my friends or supporters.
- Keep confidential information confidential.
- Approach all board issues with an open mind, prepared to make the best decision for the whole organization.
- Do nothing to violate the trust of those who elected me to the board or of those we serve.
- Focus my efforts on the mission of the organization and not on my personal goals.
- Never exercise authority as a board member except when acting in a meeting with the full board or as I am delegated by the board.

How do I do my job?

- There is a big difference between "governing" and "managing".
- The Board/Council sets policy; staff implements policy.
- Formulating policy is a joint effort.
- Monitor and evaluate policy.
- Often there's one employee, the manager.

do not serve high-growth areas – yet they share many of the same problems and regulatory responsibilities as their larger neighbors. These smallest of utilities are no less important than Water One is to the residents of Mission Hills or Shawnee RWD 8 is to residents around Tecumseh. Regardless of size, the fiduciary responsibilities of boards/councils are critical – in fact, in the smaller systems, good financial management may even be more critical. It's all relative, so to speak.

Obligations unending

Most state associations provide varying amounts of board training for their own board and for local boards. But how can board members be encouraged to attend the training seminars? That's often a large challenge – and that's why those states I mentioned earlier have made it mandatory.

With all this talk of training, it's worth asking: training for what? Perhaps it's nothing more than how to keep minutes of a meeting, or how to comply with *Roberts Rules of Order*.

Those are important aspects of good meetings – but the training goes much further. Board/council members need to be better versed on the requirements of the federal Safe Drinking Water Act, applicable state laws, employment law, and so on.

As a RWD manager, it's my responsibility to ensure that the board of directors is aware of state and federal laws that affect the district. So that the board can establish and apply policies, it's critical that the board be fully versed on the bylaws, ordinances, rules and regulations.

Good board/council members at a premium

While training is important, there's another factor that must be addressed: identifying and recruiting new board members.

I often suspect that many people are elected to boards or councils, not because they wanted the job but because someone decided that "it's his or her turn." I advocate a nominee

selection process to proceed the elections. How do you accomplish this? In rural water districts, for example, it involves having an informed nominating or selection committee.

At the state level, board members ideally will be involved, informed people who have served at the local level and have an interest in statewide issues. In the nearly 30 years of my service on the KRWA board of directors, I cannot recall ever a single vote where any director did not advocate for the betterment of all systems vs. one specific member.

Being an ambassador

Any time anyone serves on a governing board, a significant role is to be an ambassador on behalf of the organization. The last thing any water system or community needs is for example, to be considering a rate increase and to have a board/council member going down to the local

coffee shop and questioning the wisdom of the group's decisions.

Now, that doesn't mean board members can't have their own opinions on such subjects. But those sentiments should be expressed at the board level. Then after the vote has been taken, if everyone cannot advocate for the position that prevailed, then it's best to at least try to do no harm.

As I mentioned earlier, some local boards of smaller systems have operational responsibilities. But for those that don't, the hiring and guiding – but not micromanaging – staff is critical.

Smaller utilities may try to recruit younger people, but it's difficult to retain them. Younger people may desire to go to a bigger town or system, or perhaps just move to a job where they have more colleagues and not as much pressure as being "the only" employee.

No matter what the staffing situation, it's critical that boards

work closely with staff to ensure quality service to the customers. The board/staff or the staff/board relationship should not be adversarial.

Thanks to technology, boards/councils are growing in knowledge and ability. Information gathering and sharing is so much easier. It's always preferable for a governing body to have too much information instead of not enough. They can't make good decisions unless they have good information.

The key is to keep the board you're involved with, whether at the state or local level, engaged and moving forward.

Remember, public water systems touch more people's lives on a daily basis than the medical field does. We all work to provide and improve public health, welfare and safety. Every board/council and staff needs to see that as their primary responsibility.

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