

Sonoma County Administrator's Office

Managing a County in Transition

Sometime in the last decade, Sonoma County transitioned from being mostly rural to being mostly urban.

That's the impression of Sonoma County Administrator Bob Deis, the person with the most responsibility for running County government. With the support of the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors, his office is in the midst of transforming the way all County agencies operate. In recent years, the Board of Supervisors has made the County Administrator's Office (CAO) responsible for more of the day-to-day operation of county services. This allows Supervisors to spend more time working to achieve the county's long-term strategic goals.

Centralizing power in the CAO can improve the efficiency of County operations, which is key to meeting the County's goals during times of shrinking agency budgets. Making a single office responsible for so much of the people's business increases the risk of voices inside and outside County government not being heard by the ultimate decision-makers, the Board of Supervisors.

The CAO is doing a good job overall of handling the added responsibilities and managing the changes underway inside County government and generally throughout the community. However, more must be done by the CAO to ensure that all voices in the County—whether agency managers and employees or the citizens they serve—have the ear of the Board of Supervisors and the County Administrator.

Reason for Investigation

The Grand Jury is required to review agencies operating within the County on a regular basis to ensure that the people are being served by those entrusted to look out for their best interests. The 2004-2005 Grand Jury Reports required responses from the CAO, but dating back to 1992, there is no record of the Sonoma County Grand Jury conducting an investigation specific to the CAO.

Background

The CAO manages all aspects of County government. The County Administrator is hired by the Board of Supervisors to oversee the budgets of all County departments and special districts. The current County Administrator has served since 2003 and recently had his contract renewed by the Board of Supervisors for another five-year term. He has been employed by the CAO in various capacities since 1996 and has nearly 30 years of experience in government service.

Under the County Administrator are an Assistant County Administrator, three Deputy County Administrators, six Administrative Analysts, one Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO) Division Executive Officer, an Executive Secretary, and two Secretaries. Two Public Information Officer positions in the CAO have been approved by the Board of Supervisors but haven't been filled.

CAO analysts work with managers of all County agencies to determine the annual budgets of departments, requisition new positions, and plan other expenses. The CAO is also charged with developing and implementing the County's strategic plan. The County Administrator and the Clerk of the Board of Supervisors oversee the agenda of the weekly Board of Supervisors meetings.

Investigative Procedures

Interviews conducted:

- Two members of the Board of Supervisors
- One County Administrative Aide
- One County elected official
- Three former Sonoma County employees
- Two County Administrative Analysts
- Three County Budget Analysts
- One County department head
- County Administrator

Documents reviewed:

- Sonoma County Budget, 2007-2008
- CAO organization chart
- Sonoma County website

Findings

- F1** The Board of Supervisors is pleased with the County Administrator's performance.
- F2** The Board of Supervisors conducts an informal performance review of the County Administrator annually.
- F3** County employees at all levels are generally satisfied with the performance of the CAO.
- F4** The Board of Supervisors, County Administrator, and other department heads and managers in County government believe they are accessible to all County employees.
- F5** Some County employees believe they are unable to share their concerns about the operation of their specific departments and County government in general with the County Administrator or the Board of Supervisors.
- F6** Some County workers believe morale has suffered in recent years because County management doesn't address the problems that staff members bring to their attention.
- F7** The County Administrator is perceived by many County employees and managers as being less accessible than his predecessors in the position, and less likely to consider their suggestions.
- F8** The County Administrator exercises near-unilateral control over the agenda of the weekly Board of Supervisors meeting.
- F9** In recent years, most open positions have been filled by external candidates rather than through internal transfers or promotions. This requires more spending for recruitment and often results in higher salaries being offered to attract the most qualified candidates. Since this often means an entire salary range has to be increased, existing staff members in those positions may also receive raises above what they would have merited otherwise.
- F10** The County's five-year strategic plan is expected to be finalized this summer. According to the County Administrator, it focuses on matters not currently being addressed adequately by County departments. The County Administrator indicates that the plan will focus on five areas:
1. Improving roads
 2. Maintaining the criminal justice system
 3. Enhancing the visibility of County agencies to the communities they serve
 4. Adapting to demographic changes occurring in the County
 5. Upgrading County facilities

Commendations

The Grand Jury commends the CAO for devising and beginning the implementation of a strategic plan for the County. The office has also begun internal audits of County agencies in an attempt to make them more efficient.

Conclusions

The transitions now underway in the County have affected staff at every level. Some County employees believe there is no one to whom they can express their concerns about the problems they perceive in County operations. There is also concern about how well County employees are being prepared to assume greater responsibility through internal promotions. Relying on outside hires to fill department-head and other management positions as they open up increases salary ranges throughout the affected agencies at a time when salaries already account for a growing percentage of overall agency budgets.

The County's future is in the hands of the CAO. The office has made great strides in recent years toward developing and implementing a long-overdue strategic plan. The CAO has begun to remake the way County government operates. These changes can be difficult for County employees, as well as for the citizens they serve. It is imperative that during the transition the CAO make an extra effort to keep the lines of communication open with Sonoma County residents and all county workers.

Recommendations

- R1** The Board of Supervisors and the County Administrator should ensure that Sonoma County residents and County employees have a way to get their concerns heard by the people who are deciding the County's future.
- R2** The CAO should plan and implement programs to encourage career development for County employees. Grooming internal candidates for top management positions saves the County money in recruitment and helps control salaries and other personnel costs.
- R3** The CAO should continue to audit County agencies to help them operate more efficiently and identify ways to offer County residents more and higher-quality services during times of shrinking County budgets.

Required Responses to Findings

Board of Supervisors	F5, F6, F8
County Administrator	F5, F6, F7, F8, F9

Required Responses to Recommendations

Board of Supervisors	R1
County Administrator	R1, R2, R3

