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JOHNSON COUNTY CITIZENS ARE INVOLVED WITH LOCAL GOVERNMENT

*Johnna Lingle
2nd District Commissioner, Johnson County Kansas*

“There is one thing better than good government, and that is good government in which all people have a part,” nineteenth century American journalist Walter Hines Page once said. I am pleased, on behalf of Johnson County government, to welcome you to one place where the people do have a part. Local government, especially Johnson County government, may be the exception to the rule that people feel removed from their governments. That occurs for a variety of reasons.

We have a history of citizen involvement. Johnson County won an All-American Cities award from the National League of Cities in 1984 for its citizen-led reorganization of government. The citizens of Johnson County were recognized by the League for:

- An unsuccessful charter campaign that nevertheless paved the way for the existing professional government;
- A successful effort to expand the county board from three to five members, to better represent districts; and
- A redrawing of county commissioner districts that involved everyone from the League of Women voters to the political parties.

We are a direct service provider, which ensures us of a great deal of feedback at meetings, classes and clinics.

- Even when elected officials are not present, staff members have been trained to be customer-oriented, and to pick up consumer signals during the provision of service.
- In Johnson County’s case, that includes special populations, such as persons with handicaps, elderly residents or low-income families.
- Our departments offer special programming and support groups for those individuals and families, which keep us in touch, as government, with their needs.

We are otherwise accessible; or, as the real estate agents say, location, location, location.

- It’s far easier for a constituent to pick up a phone or come to our office than it is to contact Washington, D.C., or even Topeka.
- Virtually every locally elected official I know has his or her number listed in the phone book, and people find them—sometimes at 6 a.m., especially if they’re angry.
- People know our names better because we receive local coverage as individuals more often than do distant figures at the capitols.

Our Johnson County population is well-educated, which means our people know how to access the services and the people they need. Ninety-three percent of Johnson County's residents have at least a high school education, and 40 percent have a bachelor's degree, or higher, according to the 1990 census.

We welcome comments, and we communicate that to citizens.

- Twice a year, we publish a citizen newsletter that is mailed to each Johnson County residence, and it invites comments on ways we can better serve the public.

- We conduct an annual scientific survey to determine how citizens view the government and what services they desire.

Johnson County residents have the opportunity to be involved with the government as advisors and service providers, as well as consumers.

- Nearly 200 people are appointed by the Board of County Commissioners to provide advice on everything from A to Z—from how to operate the airport to how to handle zoning.

- It was estimated, in 1990, that volunteers in Johnson County government contributed services worth \$2.4 million if those services would have been purchased.

- Volunteers perform tasks that they find rewarding, and that link them to the staff and their fellow citizens. Just a few of the many examples include:

1. The Extension Council, which uses elected members to help set up and evaluate projects, as well as to provide services, such as our Master Gardener program. Last year, extension volunteers contributed 350 hours for the agricultural program, 900 hours for home economics, 4,790 hours for 4-H and youth, and 7,506 hours for horticulture and Master Gardener programs.

2. Our environmental department, which asks volunteers to help with monthly household hazardous waste collections, and with advising us on creation of a recent solid waste management plan.

3. Our human services and aging department, which utilizes volunteers as young as high school age to be a companion to a lonely, older person, deliver meals, rake leaves, etc.

Still, even the best-working system needs an occasional tune-up, so this fall, the Board of County Commissioners will launch a renewal effort to encourage citizen support and involvement. This will include a group of residents who will look at what services the county should provide into the next century. It is also hoped that this group will involve even more residents in the process, and report the results to us.

Henry Clay said that, “Government is a trust, and the officers of the government are trustees; and both the trust and the trustees are created for the benefit of the people.”

We, in Johnson County government, and many of our fellow elected local officials across the nation, are pleased that trust still exists between us and the people we serve. We are trying very hard to maintain that relationship.

***Renegotiating The Social
Contract***

