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The Elected Official as Expert: Governing Boards in Rural Communities

Most rural local governments cannot afford to hire consultants or full-time professionals to solve local problems. Instead they rely on their own board members. That usually produces satisfactory results, but local governments must also realize its limits. Some problems are just too technical for most boards to grapple with. In those cases, they need outside help.

Getting sufficient skill and knowledge to manage programs and develop policy is a persistent problem in rural government. While municipal and county governments in rural areas have many of the same basic responsibilities as their city counterparts, they have much less capacity to fulfill them. Typically, rural governments have small staffs and no full-time CAO's, professional chief administrative officers like city managers and county executives. Most general-purpose governments—counties, municipalities, and townships—in small communities have tiny bureaucracies. Municipal governments under 5,000 population averaged only 9 full-time equivalent (FTE) employees in 1977, township governments of the same size averaged only 2 FTE employees, while counties under 10,000 averaged 74 FTE employees (table 1).

From where, then, comes the expertise to run these governments? A major source is the people elected to lead rural local governments, the members of county, municipal, and other governing boards. Of necessity, these part-time elected representatives are much more involved in the daily job of operating their agencies than their compatriots in larger governments. They are both legislators and administrators, responsible at the same time for making policy and managing programs.

While they rely greatly on many others—city and county clerks, department heads, attorneys, engineers, community volunteers, and State agencies—for advice and information, they are frequently their own best sources of expertise. Many bring to office useful skills and knowledge acquired through occupational and community experiences.

What is the nature of this expertise and how is it applied by rural governing boards? We examine here its use and limits, based on some initial findings of the Rural Capacity project, a USDA-sponsored study of nonmetropolitan municipal and county governments in two States. Conducted in 1981–84, the study involved extensive field research on the organization and performance of 12 Illinois and California rural governments (four municipalities and two counties in each State).

Bringing Expertise to Public Office

The 12 municipal councils and county boards had 71 members (including four separately elected mayors in the Illinois municipalities). A composite picture of the group as of 1983 suggests a male official in his early 50's or late 40's, who is a native or almost lifelong resident of the community, with a high school education, and serving his first 4-year term in office. There were some exceptions in the sample: eight women, a couple of board members over 70 (but only one under 30), several newcomers (local residents for less than 10 years), 22 officials with undergraduate, graduate, or professional degrees, and a small number who had been in office for three or more terms.

Council and board members in the 12 jurisdictions are elected to 4-year terms. They are selected in nonpartisan local elections, with the exception of the Illinois county board members who are elected on party tickets as Republicans and Democrats. As part-time officials, all of these small-town legislators have other occupations, are retired, or depend on other sources of income. Part-time status, however, includes considerable variation in time spent on the job and in compensation received. The officials received annual stipends of between $400 and $15,000 in 1983. They reported that they devoted between 2 and 35 hours per week to their public office. The higher compensation and work weeks were reported by the California county officials, while legislators in several Illinois municipalities and one Illinois county received the smallest stipends (generally based on the number of meetings attended) and spent the least time on the job. This variation closely approximates differences in the size and scope of the governments in the two States. The two California counties have

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Table 1—Employees of general-purpose local governments, by population, 1977

Population	Units of government	FTE[1] employees	
		Total	Average
		Number	
County governments			
Under 10,000	785	58,039	74
10,000–24,999	981	158,124	161
25,000–49,999	595	193,028	324
50,000 + over	679	1,173,002	1,727
Municipal governments			
Under 5,000	15,295	132,296	9
5,000–9,999	1,459	108,604	74
10,000–24,999	1,216	209,331	172
25,000–49,999	515	232,875	452
50,000 + over	393	1,484,862	3,778
Township[2] governments			
Under 5,000	14,996	35,955	2
5,000–9,999	870	32,731	37
10,000 + over	961	172,541	179

[1]Full-time equivalent.
[2]In 21 States with town and township governments.
Source: 1977 Census of Governments, Vol. 3, No. 2, *Compendium of Public Employment,* Tables 17, 18, 19.

relatively large organizations, each spending about $20 million annually and employing about 400 workers, while two municipalities, one in each State, each have yearly budgets of less than $1 million and work forces of eight employees.

Previously acquired expertise that could be applied to local public service was apparent in the occupational and community experiences of many of the 71 officials (table 2). Business, agricultural, governmental, and professional backgrounds were well represented among both actively employed and retired officials. Generalizing from the list of specific backgrounds, three major forms of personal expertise—the products of occupation, or community activity—are useful to the rôle of the elected legislator in rural governments.

Occupational specializations. A number of the small-town legislators brought to office specific skills and knowledge obtained by virtue of their occupations and training. Examples were:

Council members in two Illinois municipalities who were general contractors in private life.

Several officials in both States who were familiar with personnel practices by virtue of their jobs in Federal agencies.

A California county supervisor who specialized in planning and public works issues because of his private practice as a surveyor.

An Illinois veterinarian who took on the animal control assignment for his city council.

Persons with professional and managerial experiences were most likely to possess such expertise, but some blue-collar workers also had specialized skills of particular application to local government. The clearest example was the California council member who knew a great deal about public works operations because of his position as a foreman for the State highway department.

Professional experience in Federal, State, and other local government was important. Thirteen of the 71 local officials had such backgrounds, 9 of whom were employed as of 1983 and 4 of whom were retirees. Others had served as elected officials in other local posts, including school and township boards and municipal governments. A good illustration of expertise developed through prior preparation was the Illinois council member who previously had served his municipality as its attorney and continued to represent other local government clients.

Problem-solving skills. A less specific but also job-related form of expertise was represented by officals who had a reputation for getting things done. Best categorized as problem-solving or organizational skill, this was a characteristic of many of the business people and farmers in the sample. As entrepreneurs who had been successful in their risk-taking ventures, they had confidence in their ability to transfer the lessons learned about logical thinking and hard work to the problems of local government. Various members of the 12 governing boards described this kind of expertise as "knowing how to deal with people," "being decisive in difficult situations," and "applying common sense." Analytical skill was attributed to one Illinois county board member, a successful farmer, by a fellow official:

> He's got a good mind, he will logically work things out. He doesn't just listen to slogans—he has a real analytical process. And he's also an original thinker; he's not afraid to make suggestions. He's not afraid to suggest that maybe the (county) hospital should be sold. Nobody before thought of that.

Some commentators thought that successful business people and farmers brought more competence and interest than others to the work of rural governing boards because of their conservative fiscal concerns ("We handle the city's money like our own"), their ability to see different sides of issues, and the time

they could give to public office since they had flexible work schedules.

Others, however, felt that small-town business people and family farmers were not especially well equipped to deal with annual municipal budgets that approached or exceeded $1 million. One municipal official put it:

> . . . You start putting a few zeros behind those dollars and it's way out of most of our scope. If you don't understand taxation and appropriations, it takes you awhile to learn.

Community activity. A third form of expertise originated with long-term local residence and involvement in major community organizations and activities. Compared with job-related skills and knowledge, the expertise developed in this fashion was more general and concerned with people and solutions. Often this involved a long-term participation in a local program, acquired through membership on citizens' advisory groups (such as planning or park commissions) or through activity in voluntary groups (volunteer fire department and library programs, for example). Satisfying experiences in such community work led active citizens to seek elective office and, once in office, to continue their special interest in the area of their voluntarism. About a quarter of the 71 elected officials in the sample came to office directly from or shortly after serving on appointed advisory boards or in volunteer activities.

Table 2—Occupations of governing board members in rural research sample, 1983

Type of occupation	Four Illinois municipalities[1]	Two Illinois counties	Four California municipalities	Two California counties	Total
Business owners and managers	10 furniture store pharmacy (2) gunsmith bldg. contractor TV store restaurant banker	1 farm equipment	3 rock company manager building supplies cable TV	2 garage owner developer	16
Craftsmen and operatives	5 electrician (2) factory worker janitor carpenter	0	1 auto shop foreman	0	6
Professionals	3 attorney chiropractor veterinarian	2 HS teacher	2 teacher physician	1 surveyor	8
Government employees	3 postmaster mailcarrier U.S. Dept. of Labor—wage enforcement	1 State employee	5 State highway dept. foreman State human resources dept. Corps of Engineers—facility manager postmaster county deputy sheriff	0	9
Sales and clericals	2 engineering sales salesperson	0	2 office manager farm equipment sales	0	4
Farmers	0	6	1	3	10
Homemakers	3	1	0	0	4
Retired persons[2]	2 grain dealer tax consultant	2 farm store owner business owner	6 utility manager HS principal and county supt. sheriff's deputy grocer realtor state employee	4 newspaper owner refrigeration business owner U.S. marshall and local judge U.S. Navy and teacher	14
Total	28	13	20	10	71

[1]Includes separately elected mayors for the Illinois municipalities. All other presiding officers (county board chairmen and California mayors) were elected governing board members, selected by their colleagues to preside.
[2]Former occupations of retired persons are indicated.

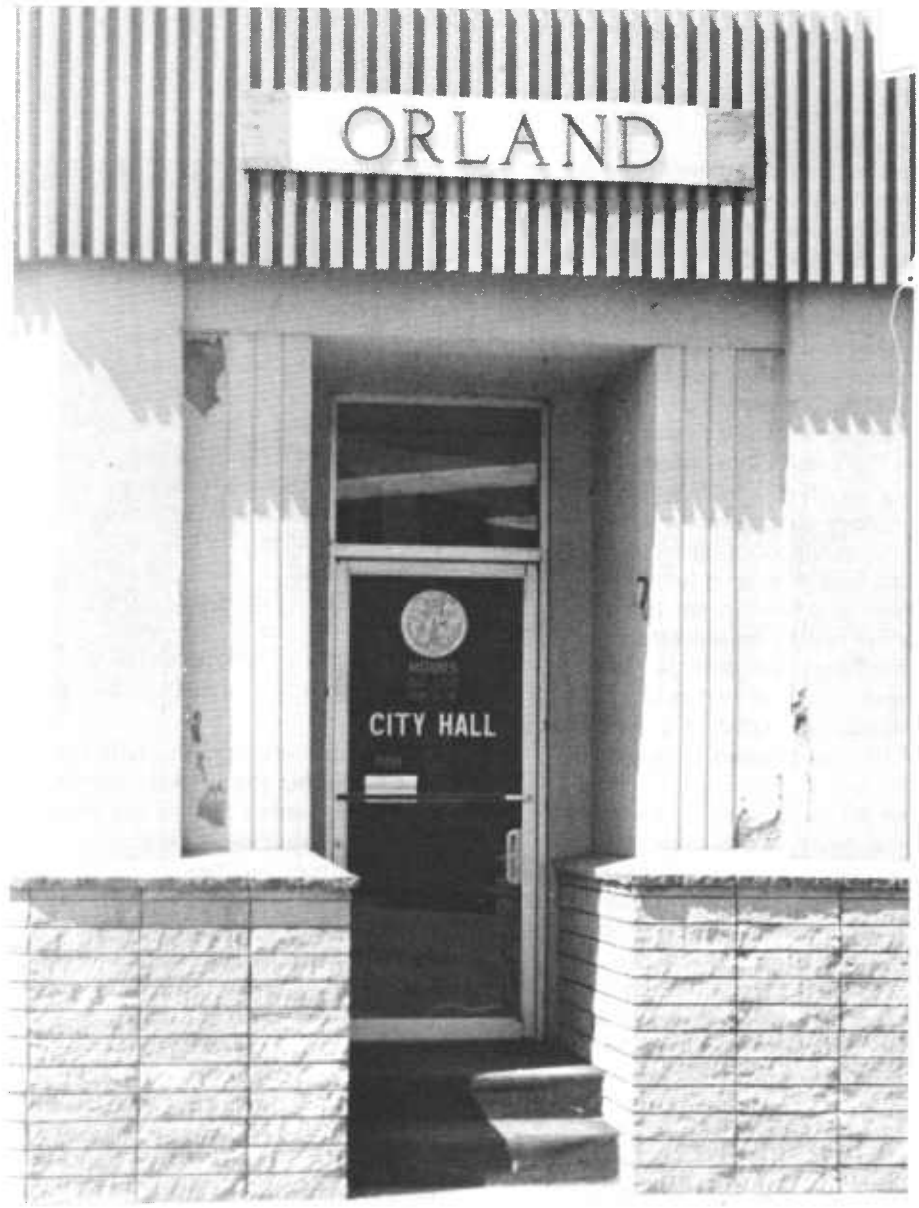
Generalist Background Works Best on Routine Matters

Such skills and knowledge were less evident on some of the governing boards of the sample than on others. Furthermore, the ability to apply their expertise varied greatly from one type of issue to another, even for rural legislators who came into office with relevant occupational and community backgrounds. Prior experience was applied most easily to routine, largely administrative tasks. It was far less useful in dealing with complex and new policy issues.

The most visible applications of personal expertise involved administrative assignments. Functional responsibilities (finance, personnel, streets, water-sewer, county buildings, parks-recreation, etc.) were divided among committees or individual members. Considerable responsibility often accompanied these assignments, especially for the municipal councils whose members directly supervised employees or exercised lesser degrees of departmental oversight on fiscal, personnel, and purchasing matters. Council members in most of the eight municipalities of the sample in fact were informally called "department chairmen" or "commissioners" of particular functions.

In handing out administrative assignments, the municipal mayors and county board chairpersons paid particular attention to their colleagues' interest and experience. So board members who were contractors or had other construction experience were usually given the street or water-sewer department assignments, and the park-recreation assignment was often given to a member who had done community work in this area. The important job of finance chairperson or commissioner—a key job in rural government budgeting—in most cases went to board members with business experience. Federal and State employees were often given the personnel assignment on the assumption that their experiences in large bureaucracies had prepared them to deal with employee grievance and compensation issues, although most were not personnel specialists.

For the most part, the rural officials relished these assignments. They devoted extra hours outside of regular council and board meetings to working with department heads and employees, listening to citizen complaints, and doing research. It was not unusual for a water-sewer commissioner to be called out in the middle of the night to oversee the repair of a utility line break, or for the member with the park-recreation assignment to help run the summer softball and pool activities.



Entrance to the city hall of Orland, Calif. (1980 population, 4,031). Photo by Virginia Webster, Glenn–Colusa Newspapers, Inc.

. . . But Isn't Enough for Non-Routine

Giving such personal "hands on" attention to nonroutine issues—especially those involving unfamiliar and complex questions—was less possible for the part-time legislators. Such issues in the form of State and Federal mandates have become more common among rural governments in recent years. Since the mid-1970's all eight municipalities in the sample have been required to improve their wastewater treatment and collection systems to meet national and State clean water standards, several of the county governments have been forced by State agencies to construct new jails, and all 12 municipalities and counties have had to deal with other program and fiscal mandates.

Reactions of uncertainty, helplessness, and anger prevailed among the rural boards when first confronted by such complex mandates, and eventually they turned to outside specialists for expert assistance. In some cases the initial period of ignorance and inaction was lengthy, thereby delaying and making more costly the eventual resolution of the problem. When residents of one Illinois municipality first complained about an unlicensed chemical waste dump that had opened on the outskirts of town, the council refused to act, believing that the environmental fears were ungrounded and that the municipality lacked any legal power in the matter. Both initial conclusions were disproved about 2 years later, when the council belatedly obtained some pertinent advice from its attorney and the State environmental regulation agency.

Obviously, generalist officials in small-town governments—or in *any* local government—are not equipped through background and experience to deal with such complex matters. General construction experience does not prepare a rural board member to choose among options for correcting a wastewater pollution problem (although some city council members become quite familiar with the technology of wastewater operations after many years of working with this municipal department). Only outside experts—engineers, attorneys, planners, bankers, and others—can supply the specialized work and advice

that rural governments need for such complex issues. There is always a role for local expertise in these matters, however, if only to provide some general direction to the specialists and absorb and use their advice and information. As well as having sophisticated technological aspects, the wastewater projects, for example, involved major decisions by the small city councils—siting the new facilities, acquiring property, employing engineers and other consultants, negotiating with State agencies, and arranging for the local share of project costs. Elected officials had to draw on their own knowledge and skills in making these decisions and in interpreting to their constituents the consequences of the environmental mandates.

Not all nonroutine issues faced by rural governments demand more specialized skills and information than elected legislators can provide. Their personal expertise plays a greater part in less complex and more local matters, especially in policy and program changes that they initiate themselves. Board members become closely involved in their own proposals. Frequently the ideas for change come from prior occupational and community experiences. After achieving public office, the new board member becomes a persistent advocate of the proposal, using personal knowledge and interest in the issue to convince colleagues and others. If the change is difficult to accomplish and requires much new information, the proponent eventually becomes even more of an expert on the area by tapping other sources of information.

Examples of personal commitment to policy and program changes were numerous among our 12 rural jurisdictions. Members of municipal and county boards sought to reorganize their small bureaucracies, stimulate local economies by annexing territory and improving downtown parking, put certain programs on a self-funding basis, start an ambulance service, consolidate court services, and upgrade street maintenance. While the experience and interest of board members were the critical factors in getting these issues moving, board members were not the sole source of expertise. Complex and difficult matters also required the use of more specialized information and advice. When the local undertaker informed one Illinois municipality that he was abandoning the ambulance business, the council—led by the chairperson of its health committee—moved quickly to recruit a group of volunteer drivers, purchase a new vehicle, and start a municipal service. But the council also obtained the assistance of the regional coordinator of the State emergency services agency in arranging emergency medical training for the volunteers and drawing up specifications for the ambulance. A council member in a California city, in establishing a new administrative position, consulted with the personnel office of his Federal employer to help define the responsibilities of the new job. In these and other policy and program changes tackled by the rural governments, the mix of local and outside expertise varied according to how difficult and complex the issues were perceived to be by board members.

Little or no outside expertise is ordinarily needed to deal with a different kind of issue common in rural communities, the resolution of neighborhood or other personal disputes. Instead, board members are called upon to apply their knowledge of the community and their conflict-management skills to conflicts involving land use, property nuisances, and other, often emotional, conflicts. Although small in scale and lacking the complexities of major policy changes, such issues are not necessarily easy for small town officials to resolve. One reason is that the same type of personal expertise useful in mediating the conflict can also be an obstacle to taking decisive action, simply because of the reluctance of elected officials to antagonize friends and neighbors in the small town. At times they may also be uncertain about their legal tools, as in one Illinois town where council members were stymied in their efforts to eliminate a large group of dogs kept by an elderly woman in her residence because of a weak and inconsistent animal control ordinance.

The Research

The research for this article was carried out by the Institute of Government Affairs, University of California, Davis, in cooperation with USDA. The Illinois portion of the field research was housed at the Institute of Government and Public Affairs, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. The Illinois field research associates were John Hamman, Kent Williamson, and Elizabeth Norville. Keith Snavely and the author conducted the field research in California.

The Uses and Limits of Personal Expertise

In many ways, rural elected officials are their own major source of expertise. As this study of 12 municipal councils and county boards in Illinois and California shows, rural legislators bring to office a range of valuable skills and knowledge from personal life. The forms of personal expertise that can help local government include professional and occupational specialties, more general problem-solving skills derived from business and farming experience, and knowledge and experience in community organizations and programs.

How was such personal expertise used by the rural governments in the research sample? The most direct application was in routine, largely administrative work. Lacking sizable staffs and professional administrators, the elected legislators served naturally as the managers of programs and personnel, primarily through the functional assignments given committees and individual board members. Personal expertise was also applied, although much less consistently, to nonroutine problems and policy issues. The more complex the issues and the greater the need for technical information and advice, the more the rural boards had to

turn to outside experts—engineers, attorneys, State officials, and others. There were definite limits as to how far the personal expertise of the board members could extend. In knowledge and experience, these part-time citizen officeholders were generalists trying to deal with problems that demanded more sophisticated forms of expertise.

But even as generalists, they could effectively handle difficult and complex issues if they understood the limits of thir own expertise and knew how to acquire and use the work of specialists. Because of background, experience, and continued learning, some board members were able to define problems, ask pertinent questions, and employ outside expertise to map out solutions. Often they were successful political leaders and brokers, bringing together the contributions of others to develop policy and solve problems. Unfortunately, even these generalist skills are distributed unevenly among rural communities. Some of the governing boards we studied in 1981–84 contained energetic, insightful, and innovative persons; members of other boards were relatively listless, passive, and uninspired as legislators and administrators.

In the interest of expanding the policy and administrative capacity of rural governments, how does one improve the skills and knowledge of these governing boards? Little of course can be done to enhance the personal expertise that elected officials bring to office; this is the product of unique and changing community conditions. But once in office, the potential for expanding their governing skills through training and information is great. The educational techniques that seem to work best for part-time officeholders include orientation sessions by their State associations, regional workshops on topics they suggest, informal visits from State technical advisers, and periodic gatherings with officials from other rural communities for socializing and information exchange. RDP

J. Norman Reid and Patrick J. Sullivan

Rural Infrastructure: How Much? How Good?

Many rural areas, like their urban counterparts, face problems with their local infrastructure (public services and facilities). The challenge for rural areas, though, is different—that of building and financing new bridges, roads, waterworks, and the like rather than repairing deteriorating facilities. Such problems are especially acute during periods of high population growth because of the additional demands placed on the system. This article describes the findings of a recent survey of rural facilities in order to:

- *Give a national quantitative perspective to a problem that had previously been defined only by local anecdotal evidence.*
- *Establish a benchmark level of public services and facilities against which future progress can be charted.*

Our Nation's public infrastructure has received a great deal of attention in recent years, with reports of its decay and disrepair commonplace in the press and in debate. Infrastructure—the buildings, facilities, and equipment needed to produce and deliver public services—helps determine a community's level of well-being and its future growth potential. Not only is infrastructure important for public health and safety, but the services it supports can affect a community's economic vitality. Basic services like transportation and water supply and

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Old narrow bridges with weight limits may need to be replaced to bolster some rural areas' economic vitality. Such bridges cannot carry most commercial trucks nor modern farming equipment.