
PRESENTATION

“BOARD/COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR RELATIONSHIP”

VIRGINIA ASSOCIATION OF COUNTIES' COUNTY SUPERVISORS FORUM
JANUARY 3, 2014

Good Afternoon:

I have been asked to speak briefly to you today regarding relations between individual Supervisors, the Board as a whole and administrators from the perspective of a County Administrator. The perspectives I will share come from about 18 years total as County Administrator for Washington Bedford Counties, serving seven-member, district-based Boards. During this time I have had the opportunity to work with nearly two dozen individual Supervisors, all very remarkable and unique individuals with a common, strong interest in wanting to make the best decisions possible for the citizens of their communities.

As you know, Virginia is a 'Dillon Rule' state, and the majority of the counties in the Commonwealth operate under what is known as the 'general form' of county government, meaning the legal framework for how county government is supposed to work is dictated largely by Virginia law, specifically Title 15.2 of the Code of Virginia. Within Title 15.2 there are many references to the authority and responsibilities of county administrators, but reading the relevant provisions of 15.2 will by no means impart a complete understanding of the true role of county administrators within Virginia county government, and is completely silent as to how individual Supervisors, the Board as governing body and the County Administrator should relate to one another. **The nature of individual Supervisor/administrator relationships and the Board/administrator relationship is heavily influenced by the individual personalities involved and the established customs, practices and traditions of the various Boards of Supervisors across Virginia.** Each county government as an institution has a different 'take' on what those relationships have been and should be, based on its own unique history. One of the most important tasks of a new Supervisor is to develop a understanding of the established, accepted practices within their locality regarding how individual Supervisors can and should relate to and communicate with their County Administrator.

What I would like to pass along to you today in very brief form are some of the most important elements of what I have learned over the years about establishing and maintaining positive working relationships between individual Supervisors, the Board and myself. To your County Administrator, his or her relationship with you as an individual is among the most important in their professional life. There are many facets and

dimensions to this relationship as it will evolve over time, and I have tried here only to condense what I consider the most important of these into five (5) fundamental concepts. Your County Administrator may disagree as to the order of importance I have placed these in, but I think all would agree as to their overall importance in helping to define a proper and productive working relationship between individual Supervisors, the Board and themselves. In my experience, individual Supervisors, the Board and County Administrators should be guided by these five (5) concepts with regard to how each should relate to and interact with the other:

First, and perhaps most importantly, individual Supervisors must understand that their County Administrators are responsible to the Board of Supervisors as a whole. As such, administrators are often put in the very difficult position of having to interpret and act upon Board decisions which the Board itself may not have clearly articulated nor thoroughly understand the ramifications of. In many cases these decisions may be made with the barest of majority votes, but such decisions nevertheless represent the will of the governing body which the County Administrator is responsible for carrying out to this best of his or her ability and means. The Board to which you have been elected may be proceeding in a direction which runs counter to what you as an individual Supervisor believe to be in the best interests of your community. Whether your County Administrator agrees with your position or not, it is his or her role to execute the decisions of the majority of the Board and to avoid becoming embroiled (if they can possibly help it) in the decision-making process and dynamics among individual Board members.

Second, to have a positive working relationship between Supervisors, the Board and County Administrator, all must constantly work at establishing, fostering and maintaining that relationship. Clear and frequent communication is critical. In my experience, the Boards I have worked with have had a history of using committees as the typical first step in the process of formulating policy proposals, charting possible new directions and in framing recommendations which may ultimately go forward for consideration and action by the Board as a whole. This committee structure affords frequent opportunities to talk with Supervisors both individually and in small groups outside the context of regular Board meetings. Your respective Boards may do things a bit differently, but the underlying principle remains the same: Both individual Supervisors and their County Administrators need to establish and maintain mechanisms outside of the framework of formal Board meetings to talk with one another, to use each other as 'sounding boards' for issues and ideas, and to develop and understanding and 'feel' for the positions and perspectives held by the other.

Third, it is imperative that Supervisors work through their County Administrator in dealing with issues which may come to their attention involving county personnel. It is almost evitable that at some point in your tenure as a Board member one of your

constituents will voice a complaint concerning an employee of your county. One of the most damaging and counterproductive things that can happen within a county government organization is the direct involvement of a Supervisor in trying to investigate and/or resolve such matters on their own. Issues involving management of County personnel is purely an administrative function - it is the job of the County Administrator or the human resources office or department under the County Administrator to handle these matters. As an individual Supervisor, your responsibility is to report such matters to the appropriate party within your county government, and in turn it is their responsibility to look into and take the appropriate steps to deal with it, including disciplinary action if warranted. The direct involvement of a Board member in personnel matters invariably makes the situation more difficult to resolve, and may result in legal ramifications as well. Your county has personnel policies, rules and procedures which serve to govern how its administration is to handle such matters. Within the constraints of Virginia law and generally accepted public employment practices, your Board establishes the personnel system and policies within your county - it is the responsibility of county administration to operate within that system.

Fourth, County Administrators must constantly keep in mind that while they may be expected to provide advice, input and guidance with respect to Board decisions, they are not the one to try to make decisions for the Board. I have always believed administrators should try to provide several viable options for their Board to consider on issues where possible and let their Boards debate and decide the option to pursue. That deliberation and decision process is the job of the Board as the governing body. Of course, there will also be many matters where there is only one truly feasible option or course of action to take. Administrators should avoid the temptation of 'steering' the governing body toward a personally preferred decision or direction when multiple, equally viable options may present themselves. Likewise, individual Supervisors should reframe from using the County Administrator as an advocate or champion for his or her position on an issue, or to use the administrator's office and influence to interfere with or oppose the position of other Board members.

Finally, it cannot be expected that you as individual Supervisors and your respective County Administrators will always see things from the same perspective, or even always agree as to what the issues are to be addressed. No two individuals will ever consistently agree 100% of the time, and that is certainly true within the personal and political dynamics of institutions of government at all levels. Supervisors and County Administrators very often see and perceive matters and issues from very different vantage points. That is to be both expected and welcomed as a necessary input and balancing agent for both the administrative and political decision-making processes. However, in order for the Board as a governing body to function properly, both Supervisors and County Administrators as individuals must be respectful of the position and perspectives of the other. It has been often said that the 'art' of representative

governance lies in the ability to strike compromises. While the 'art of compromise' has been much criticized of late and seems to be a fast-disappearing art form within the world of politics, within representative government it is and will remain the fundamental grease which keeps the machinery of government turning. It is essential that both Supervisors and County Administrators understand that they can and will disagree from time to time, but that they can and need to do so without becoming 'disagreeable' on a personal level.

In closing, I have been asked to speak a bit about other roles and responsibilities of County Administrators with respect to relationships with your County Constitutional Officers, with other County boards, authorities and commissions, with other local governments and with elected state and federal officials. In many counties, because County Administrators are often more immediately accessible on a day-to-day basis than Board members or Board officers, we are the individuals first and most frequently contacted by elected and appointed officials of these other governmental organizations and offices. Depending on the practices of your particular county, your County Administrator may play either a large role, minor role or have practically nothing to do at all with these other players on the local government stage. However this liaison role may be filled in your locality, **it is imperative that there be a regular line of communication and coordination established between the Board of Supervisors and these other governmental organizations and offices.** The Board of Supervisors is but one of many entities involved with the local governmental affairs of your county. As the governing body of the county and the controller of its purse strings, Boards of Supervisors play a pivotal, but not a unilateral, role in the direction of your community and in the delivery of services to its citizens. Boards of Supervisors often must work in concert with other governmental organizations and locally elected officials to achieve its goals and objectives.

My congratulations on your recent election or re-election, and good luck to each of you as you begin your tenure as a member of your county's governing body. Thank you!