

Kootenai County
Optional Forms of Government
Study Commission

Meeting Minutes
August 3, 2021
5:30 p.m.

451 N. Government Way
Administration Building, 1st Floor Room 1A/B

Commission Members Present: Kristen Wing, Tamara Bateson, Dave Botting, David Levine, Kurt Andersen, Bryant Bushling, Phil Ward, and alternate Joan Genter. Bob Fish, Brian Cleary and alternate Bruce Mattare attended via phone. Alternate Cheri Zao was not present.

I. Call to Order

Chair Botting called the meeting to order at 5:30 p.m.

II. Pledge of Allegiance

Joan Genter led the meeting participants in the Pledge of Allegiance.

III. Approval of / Changes to the Agenda

There were no proposed changes to the agenda. A motion to approve the agenda as presented was made by Kurt Andersen and seconded by Phil Ward. The vote was taken; the motion passed.

IV. Announcements

Chair Botting reminded the meeting participants to activate their microphones prior to speaking.

V. Approval of Minutes – July 21 2021 and July 28, 2021

July 21, 2021:

No changes to the minutes were requested. A motion to approve the meeting minutes of July 21, 2021 as submitted was made by Phil Ward and seconded by Kurt Andersen. The vote was taken; the motion passed.

July 28, 2021:

No changes to the minutes were requested. A motion to approve the meeting minutes of July 28, 2021 as submitted was made by Phil Ward and seconded by Kurt Andersen. The vote was taken; the motion passed.

VI. Reports

This agenda item was not required for this meeting.

VII. Old Business

This agenda item was not required for this meeting.

VIII. New Business

- a. Interview Kootenai County Coroner Warren Keen and Prosecutor Barry McHugh

Dr. Warren Keene, Kootenai County Coroner, introduced himself to the group. He clarified that the role of the Coroner is to determine the manner and cause of death for any person who was unattended by medical personnel during their last illness, as well as signing off on all cremations. He provided some statistics for the Kootenai County Coroner's Office and gave some information regarding his experience and that of his employees. He noted that all coroners must take part in continuing education on death investigations and trends, as well. Dr. Keene said he uses his professional experience to determine when forensic autopsies are necessary, stating that reviewing all information to determine when a full autopsy is needed is one important aspect of minimizing costs for the office. He felt the cost is likely higher when coroners do not have some medical background and he reviewed the costs associated with conducting autopsies. He opined that the current form of government is efficient and works well for taxpayers.

Prosecutor Barry McHugh began by disclosing that Study Commission member Bryant Bushling was a former employee of his office, who still worked for the Prosecutor's Office part-time, and that Mr. Bushling's daughter would be working for his office as a deputy prosecutor in the coming months. He went on to summarize the duties and staffing of each of the divisions of the Prosecuting Attorney's Office, including the criminal and civil divisions, juvenile diversion, and human resources. He noted that three of those divisions – civil, juvenile diversion, and human resources – at various times, had been under the supervision of the Board of County Commissioners (BOCC), but were moved under his authority for various reasons. He felt that each county elected official has a vision for the direction of their office, but that the county commissioners have significant control over the programs and projects of other officials because they have budget authority. He said that some strengths of the current form of government included: elected officials being accountable to the voters; BOCC budget authority serving as a method to slow budget growth; encourages collaboration among the various elected officials. Mr. McHugh identified some weaknesses of the current form of government, as well, including: the complete budget control of the BOCC makes other officials less directly accountable to voters and may be unfair to officials in some ways; it results in frequent turnover of commissioners; and results in some lack of continuity. He said he would prefer to have authority to set the salaries of his employees. He went

on to describe the management structure and hiring processes of various positions in his divisions.

Mr. McHugh said that the decision-making of the Prosecuting Attorney needs to be autonomous, not under the BOCC, because of the weight of some of the decisions made (such as in capital cases) and because of the need to understand the legal considerations of the decisions made. He felt that the administrative work of the BOCC would grow as the county grows. He said that he spoke with Jan Bennetts, the Ada County Prosecutor, to discuss their Chief Operating Officer position, and shared her views of that role. She stressed that a person in that position can have significant input in decisions and needs to be someone that everyone trusts.

Phil Ward asked how much impact elections have on doing the job. Mr. McHugh said he felt that campaigning was similar to having a part-time job and that it is important to keep it separate and actively work to not let it have an impact. Tamara Bateson asked how appointing a coroner would change the checks and balances between the Sheriff and the Coroner. Dr. Keene responded that, while the county coroner can technically arrest the sheriff, that would probably be unlikely to happen and was instituted in different times. He felt that the checks and balances under the current system are working and provided autonomy to the elected officials. Kurt Anderson asked how credibility might be affected if the elected officials were hired rather than elected. Dr. Keene felt credibility has more to do with ability and knowledge of the job. Mr. McHugh thought one difficult question that might arise is how he would handle times when his boss(es) disagreed with his handling of specific cases. Mr. Levine asked how situations were handled if the commissioners set a policy that another elected official disagrees with. Mr. McHugh explained that there was no way to require any elected official to enforce any particular policy. Mr. Levine asked Dr. Keene how important qualifications are to the role of coroner and if he had any concerns about getting qualified candidates in the future. Dr. Keene thought hiring a coroner would be difficult, noting that his predecessor had good qualifications but was not good at managing the budget. Bruce asked if either of the guests had experienced elected officials not working well together

b. Interviews- Set Additional Interviewees & Schedule

The following interview schedule has been confirmed:

August 11th: Sherriff Robert Norris and Assessor Bela Kovacs; August 18th: Former Chief Deputy Treasurer Laurie Thomas and Former County Assessor Mike McDowell; 9/1: Chief Deputy Treasurer Jill Smith. Chief Deputy Lynn Acebedo and Chief Deputy Prosecutor Art Verharen will not be interviewed.

The study group reviewed and discussed the remaining list of potential candidates to invite for additional interviews. Nancy Jones was asked to extend an invitation to the following individuals:

County Employees: Senior Business Analyst Nanci Plouffe, Human Resource Director Sylvia Proud, Leighanna Keiser, Community Development Director David Callahan and Airport Director Steven Kjergaad.

Other Invitees: Coeur d'Alene City Council member Dan English, Post Falls Mayor Ronald Jacobson, Coeur d'Alene City Administer Troy Tymesen and a representative from the Coeur d'Alene Tribe.

Kristen Wing will include Ada County in her research on how different counties around the country operate. Nancy Jones will ask the county insurance provider if different forms of government could have an impact on the county's liability insurance costs.

A meeting to allow public comment will be conducted on September 29, 2021. The meeting will start at 5:30 pm. and the public comment period would begin shortly after. The meeting will end at 8:00 pm. Speakers will have three minutes to speak and will also be able to provide written comments. The meeting will be carried on YouTube but no public comments will be accepted during this meeting. Nancy Jones will establish a process to track when people arrive to determine the order in which people will be asked to speak. Comment cards, information about how the comment period will be conducted and FAQs will be provided to the public.

The August 25, 2021 meeting has been cancelled due to room constraints.

IX. Items for Next Meeting Agenda

- a. Confirm Current Commissioners Availability
 1. Follow Meeting -Discussion
 2. Following Meetings
 - A. August 11, 18; September 1, 8, 15, 22, 29

This item was covered under new business item b.

X. Adjournment

A motion to adjourn the meeting was made by David Levine and seconded by Kurt Andersen. A vote was taken and the motion passed. Meeting adjourned at 8:13 pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Nancy Jones, Deputy Clerk