

**Kootenai County
Optional Forms of Government
Study Commission**

Meeting Minutes
September 8, 2021
5:30 p.m.

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

Commission Members Present: Kristen Wing, Tamara Bateson, Bob Fish, Dave Botting, Kurt Andersen, Bryant Bushling, Phil Ward, and alternate Bruce Mattare. David Levine and alternate Cheri Zao attended via Zoom.

Commission Members Excused: Members Brian Cleary and Joan Genter were excused.

I. Call to Order

Chair Botting called the meeting to order at 5.38 p.m.

II. Pledge of Allegiance

Bryant Bushling 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 indicated that he planned to submit a proposal to change the bylaws to limit deliberation to the nine commission members. The alternates would continue to participate in the fact-finding phase. Mr. Botting said he would distribute the proposal shortly and planned on putting the topic on the agenda for either the September 29th or October 6th meeting.

V. Approval of Minutes –August 3, 2021 and August 18, 2021

Tamara Bateson suggested the following two corrections on page 3 in the draft August 3rd minutes:

Correction of the word 'person' to position (page 3, paragraph 1, last sentence) and moving the word 'impact' before instead of after 'elections' (page 3, paragraph 2, sentence 1).

A motion to approve the amended meeting minutes of August 3, 2021, was made by Kurt Andersen and seconded by Kristen Wing. The vote was taken; the motion passed.

Tamara Bateson suggested the following one correction on page 3 in the draft August 18th minutes:

Correction of the spelling of Laurie Thomas' last name (second section, bullet point 2).

A motion to approve the amended meeting minutes of August 18, 2021 was made by Kurt Andersen and seconded by Kristen Wing. 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 former Kootenai County Sheriff Ben Wolfinger and current Kootenai County Assessor Bela Kovacs

Retired County Sheriff Ben Wolfinger shared his personal and professional background with the group. His background included almost 38 years with the Kootenai County Sheriff's Office (KCSO), serving under three sheriffs and acting as the departmental public information officer for about 20 years and acting as a registered lobbyist for KCSO for about 10 years. He spoke to the diversity of counties in Idaho (as there is a vast difference in population in different counties), but noted that all have the ultimate responsibility to carry out mandates set by the state. He gave examples of the administrative decisions he had carried out as sheriff where he felt autonomy from the Board of Commissioners was vitally important. He shared his opinion that the existing checks and balances afforded by the current system were working and that he supported the continued election of 'row' officials. He noted the differences in city and county structure, as well as their obligations. He opined that a manager position for the Board of Commissioners (BOCC) might provide consistency and leadership, allowing commissioners to focus on statutory duties, not day-to-day operations. He made numerous arguments in

favor of the creation of some type of administrator or manager position under the BOCC, with benefits that included increased efficiencies, more stability, better consistency, and some decreased politicization of decisions. He ended by noting that, since the law changed in 1996, no county in Idaho has chosen to change the structure of government.

County Assessor Béla Kovacs spoke next, starting with a summary of his education, experience, and background. He went on to give a presentation on the duties of the county Assessor's Office and finally answered ten questions that were provided by the commission members in advance. His educational experience included holding a B.S. in Economics. Most recently, Mr. Kovacs (while also being a licensed real estate agent) served as the purchasing director for Spokane County – a position he held for nearly twenty years.

Mr. Kovacs shared that he reached out to the other assessors throughout the state to discuss the questions that had been supplied by the study commission. Across the board, those he spoke to were in favor of keeping the position of assessor as an elected position. Mr. Kovacs presented a PowerPoint presentation that detailed the duties of the five divisions of the Assessor's Office, which includes oversight of the Department of Motor Vehicles as well as statutory duties related to property assessments. He spent a significant amount of time answering the commission's questions, including the following points:

- Having 'row' officials (those elected offices other than the commissioners) diffuses authority and provides for checks and balances.
- He shared his view that the current structure of county government works the way it meant to and is the correct form to use. He noted that any change in structure would not change the statutory obligations of the offices. He felt it would have a negative impact on public input and participation.
- Strategic planning and creation of clear processes and procedures is an important aspect of effective county government.
- Mr. Kovacs was not in favor of instituting an administrator or manager position, saying that would separate commissioners from the people. He felt commissioner positions should be full time. He supported limiting the board size to three commissioners to maintain the protections of the Idaho Open Meeting Law.
- He reviewed aspects of Idaho law that he felt were pertinent to the research being done by the commission, including the Open Meeting Law and a description of Dillon's Rule.
- He spoke about his personal experience working with and in other government organizations, giving examples of the challenges inherent with managerial structures.

After a brief recess, the group asked additional questions of the guests. In response:

- Mr. Wolfinger spoke about the period when Tom Taggart served as an administrator under the BOCC. He felt efficiencies were gained and that it was when that person stood up to a commissioner that the position was eliminated. He spoke again in support of reinstating such a position. He also compared city and county government structure.
- Mr. Kovacs noted that final budget decisions were ultimately the responsibility of the Board of Commissioners but felt that a comprehensive process and good communication, along with consideration of statutory obligations, generally would result in a feasible budget.
- Mr. Wolfinger and Mr. Kovacs both noted that input from the public and outcry when services were cut or negative impacts were seen can be a powerful drive toward improvements when programs or departments are insufficiently funded. Both guests also gave additional arguments to support their views, including impacts regarding wages, coordination among departments or divisions, personal examples, the role of public interaction, and more discussion of the importance of strategic planning.

b. Conflict of Interest Discussion

Chair Botting questioned if the decision by Bruce Mattare to announce his candidacy for County Commissioner would present a conflict-of-interest concern or further politicize the work of the study group. Bruce Mattare responded that he did not believe his candidacy presented a conflict of interest. He indicated that he would not use this commission to boost his candidacy and, if anything, felt it might limit what he could do. Some study group members felt that Mr. Mattare's candidacy was not an issue and others expressed some reservations. It was determined that Mr. Mattare would continue to serve in his role as alternate member.

IX. Items for Next Meeting Agenda

Following Meetings

September 15, 22, 29 (Public Comment Meeting)

September 15th: Sherriff Robert Norris; September 22nd: Jill Smith (Current Chief Deputy Treasurer), Dan English (Former County Clerk/Current City Council Member), Sylvia Proud (Current County Human Resources Director) and potentially Nanci Plouffe (Current Sr. Business Analyst); September 29th: Public Comment.

It was discussed that, if necessary, the October 6th meeting could be reserved for additional public comment. On October 13th, Kristen Wing was scheduled present her report on how individual counties around the country are organized; on October 20th commission deliberations were set to start.

Nancy Jones will start the public outreach process to provide details on how the Public Comment session will be conducted. A process is being developed for sign-up and speakers will have three minutes to address the commission and will also be able to provide written comments. The meeting will start at 5:30 p.m. and the public comment period would begin shortly thereafter. The meeting will end at 8:00 p.m. The meeting will be carried on YouTube but no online public comments will be accepted during this meeting.

X. Adjournment

A motion to adjourn the meeting was made by Phil Ward and seconded by Tamara Bateson. A vote was taken and the motion passed. Meeting adjourned at 8:57 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Nancy Jones, Deputy Clerk