

County panel reviews departmental audits

By Amy Smith, Union staff writer | Posted: Monday, February 16, 2015 9:37 am

JEFFERSON — The Jefferson County Task Force on County Operations and Organization reviewed several departmental audits Friday.

The audits reviewed by the task force, created to find solutions to Jefferson County's growing operational expenses and falling revenues, included administration, highway and management information systems (MIS).

The Jefferson County Administration and Rules Committee recommended in 2014 forming an ad hoc committee tasked with finding a solution to rising operational costs. The full Jefferson County Board of Supervisors approved the panel on Nov. 12, 2014.

The task force took its first step in achieving its goal earlier this month when it reviewed an audit of the Human Services Department. It continued Thursday with its review, which helps the group determine what suggestions in the past were made to improve operations and what, if any, actions were taken.

Administration

On the administrative side, the committee heard from the county administrator, finance department and human resources departments. One large change for the administrative department was the entire budget process and how it is reported. The budget was revamped based on a set of guidelines established by the state.

Committee structures also were altered by combining the Legislative Committee with Rules and Administration. The Health Board reduced the number of county supervisors from five to three, and the number of Safety Committee meetings held per month was reduced. With the demolition of the old Countryside Home, another committee was eliminated this year.

County Administrator Ben Wehmeier also touched on the department's need to create a system for succession planning because the county expects many retirements within the next few years as the large population of baby boomers retires.

The finance team discussed at length the need for a new operating system, which ultimately would improve all aspects of the department. The current system was created in 1984 and installed in Jefferson County in 1996. The license for the system initially was purchased with Dodge and five other surrounding counties, according to finance director Brian Lamers.

Lamers added that Dodge and Jefferson counties are the only two that remain on the system, and Dodge County has been considering moving to a new operating system. The cost of a new system is about \$400,000 to \$500,000, but Lamers said immediate cost savings could be seen if Jefferson County were to make the switch at the same time as Dodge County.

"If we were to do a combined switch with Dodge County, there would be immediate savings because we could share training costs and a commitment to purchase," he said.

Lamers also noted that if Dodge County were to drop the current license, Jefferson County's costs would go up to cover the entire licensing fee.

The finance department also shares the operating system with the human resource department. A switchover is not a simple process, however, as it would take about a year, Wehmeier added.

The human resource audit was completed in 2007. One big change since the audit was the ability to hire a new staff member in 2010 that was able to fill many of the needs addressed in the audit, following a retirement. Last year, the department hired a safety coordinator shared part time with Walworth County.

Human Resources Director Terri M. Palm-Kostroski said they have yet to be able to hire another part-time staff member who would be able to handle the training process full time.

Palm-Kostroski also touched on implementation of a new recruitment software last year that had been in the works since 2009. The online system allows the department to track recruitment advertisement for efficiently noting where new hires actually are coming from. She said the department also updated its application process by going all online, which significantly improved the initial screening process.

Previously, department heads were required to comb through stacks of paper applications at the end of the application deadline, but now Palm-Kostroski is able to screen out applicants who do not meet the proper qualifications before passing them on to department heads.

MIS

The MIS audit was completed in 2008 with 23 recommendations.

Information technology manager Roland Welsch said that throughout the past eight years, all of the recommendations have been met except one, which suggested that the county create one department head to oversee both sides of the MIS department.

Welsch oversees the networkings and hardware side of the department and systems and applications manager John Rageth oversees the software and programming side.

Welsch noted that they have not followed the recommendations as the two departments are so different.

One large change for the department is their increased outsourcing for expertise, he said.

"With our ever-changing field, it is difficult to hire an employee with the most up-to-date knowledge," Welsch said.

The department also created a help desk and switched the county's telephone system from an integrated services digital network to voice-over, saving about \$38,000 per year.

In addition, it is in the process of customizing a set of security policies to fit the county's operations. One recommendation the department regularly struggles with is implementing a strategic long-term plan as the field is constantly changing.

Highway

Much has changed since the Highway Department's audit, which was completed in 2004.

It was noted that a significant recommendation that the department has seen achieved over time is the downsizing of the department from 81 employees.

The department also eliminated its hot-mix and gravel-crushing operations, as the materials could be purchased for less than it cost to create themselves.

It was reported that another large shift was the amount of work the county does itself. Before 2004, all projects within the county were completed fully by the Highway Department. Highway Commissioner William Kern said now, about 75 percent of projects are outsourced to a subcontractor.

In a recent resurfacing of County Highway G, for instance, the county completed the grading and prep work of the road and hauled the paving materials to the site. The remainder of the project relied on the private sector.

He said that the reliance on outside work allows the department to focus on additional county projects and keep employee numbers down. Kern added that employee numbers also were reduced with a reorganization of the staff and its titles.

One recommendation the Highway Department hopes to achieve in the near future is the requirement of advanced certificates for the shops mechanics. Kern said that with the upcoming retirements of nearly of all the department's current mechanics, the department is in a good position to require an advanced level of mechanic when replacing the current staff.

Over the past few years, he noted, the department has cut costs by downsizing its equipment by 25 percent and creating a five-year replacement plan, he added.

Following Thursday's audit reviews, the task force next is set to review an audit of the Jefferson County Sheriffs Office.

Duties of the task force also will include conducting research and making policy recommendations to reduce operational costs while maintaining high-quality services for the citizens of Jefferson County.

A need for the task force comes as the county continuously struggles with operational costs that are rising at a faster rate than revenues.

In the 2015 budget, Wehmeier challenged department heads to reduce operating costs by 2 percent, ultimately resulting in a slight increase of the county's overall expenditures by \$47,552.

Instead of making further cuts, the Administration and Rules Committee members felt it in the county's best interests to create a task force focused on finding alternative solutions to heavy cuts in the county's services and determining how to operate more efficiently without reducing or eliminating the services it currently provides.

Following the audit review process, the task force plans to hear from department heads with their own ideas on cost-saving measures. In addition, throughout the process, it would like to discuss possible ways to collaborate and share resources with area villages, towns and counties.

The task force will report its findings and recommendations to the county board by May 12, at which time it will be dissolved unless additional research is needed.

Members of the Task Force on County Government Organization and Operations include: Jefferson County Human Services Director Kathi Cauley; Jefferson County Supervisors Jennifer Hanneman, George Jaeckel, Russell Kutz, Steve Nass and Jim Schroeder; Jefferson County District Attorney Sue Happ, citizens Timothy Smith and Ron Krueger; Jefferson County Parks Department director Joe Nehmer, and Jefferson County Administrator Benjamin Wehmeier.